COMMUNIST WOMEN IN SCOTLAND

RED CLYDESIDE FROM THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION TO THE END OF THE SOVIET UNION

NEIL C. RAFEEK

TAURIS ACADEMIC STUDIES

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
AGM	annual general meeting
AJA	Andrew Jackson Archive
ARP	Air Raid Precautions
BHC	Bob Horne Collection
BRS	*British Road to Socialism*
BSP	British Socialist Party
BUF	British Union of Fascists
CCP	Czechoslovakian Communist Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CLP	Communist Labour Party
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
COMECON	Council of Mutual Economic Assistance
CP	Communist Party
CPB	Communist Party of Britain
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPL	Clydebank Public Library
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CSM	Ceskoslovenský Svaz Mládeze (Czechoslovak Union of Youth)
CSS	Catholic Socialist Society
DLSA	Democratic Left Scotland Archive
EC	executive committee
EPC	elections preparation committee
FPC	Frieda Park Collection
FSL	Fife Socialist League
GCA	Glasgow City Archive
GDR	German Democratic Republic
GDSSSU	Glasgow and District Socialist Sunday School Union
ICI	Investment Company Institute

ILP	Independent Labour Party
IPD	inner party democracy
IRIS	Industrial Research and Information Service
IWW	International Workers of the World
MHC	Marion Henery Collection
MLGR	Mitchell Library Glasgow Room
NAC	National Abortion Campaign
NCBSSS	National Council of British Socialist Sunday Schools
NCP	New Communist Party
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NEC	national executive committee
NLF	National Liberation Front
NLR	*New Left Review*
NMM	National Maritime Museum
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUSS	National Union of School Students
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers' Movement
NWAC	National Women's Advisory Committee
PCI	Partito Comunista Italiano
PPPS	People's Press Printing Society
SDP	Social Democratic Party
SLP	Socialist Labour Party
SRA	Strathclyde Regional Archive
STUC	Scottish Trades Union Congress
SWAC	Scottish Women's Advisory Committee
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UCS	Upper Clyde Shipbuilders
WGML	William Gallacher Memorial Library
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WAC	women's advisory council
WIDF	Women's International Democratic Federation
WLM	Women's Liberation Movement
WTC	Willie Thompson Collection
YCL	Young Communist League

Preface and Acknowledgements

In April 2007 Neil Rafeek passed away after a lifelong struggle with poor health. Anyone who knew him knew of his single-minded and often stubborn nature. It may be that the ongoing struggle he had with his health added to his determination. He was self sacrificing in his service to his ideals. The organizing and collecting of oral testimonies can be demanding and arduous work. Yet, against the impact on his own health, he would simply cite the hardships that those he was interviewing had often had to endure.

Neil was the first person to achieve an oral history Ph.D. in the history department of the University of Strathclyde. This book is the product of that work and reflects his passions as a social historian, demonstrating how history is not only made by 'ordinary' people, but just how extraordinary their lives really are.

Privately he was proud that the indispensable contribution of women to the Communist Party in Scotland and their experiences had been recorded. As well as being an enormously important record it is also (we feel) an illuminating analysis of the party throughout its history and its changing composition.

Maybe it is always the case with very driven people that they are their own harshest critic and often dismissive of what they ought to pride themselves on. Neil would have been the last to congratulate himself on his insight or his decency – those qualities that made him such an ideal oral historian. Nevertheless, it is for this – his deep rooted humanism – that we will remember him. Below we have included the original preface and acknowledgements he wrote before his death.

***

There are many more people who have been of great help and encouragement, principally my supervisors Arthur McIvor (especially for his stamina

and support) and Jim McMillan, both of whose tolerance and understanding were essential. Thanks also to members of the History Department at the University of Strathclyde for their help, contacts and inspiration, Graham Smith from Dundee who gave essential advice on the practicalities of an oral history (though all faults with technique are my own) and to Catriona Burness at St Andrews University for interview and publication information.

The writing of this study took four years. Since starting it I have got to know many former members of the Communist Party of Great Britain very well. I must thank all those who agreed to be interviewed and whose contributions were essential. For knowledge of communist politics I must thank foremost Audrey Canning at the William Gallacher Memorial Library/Democratic Left Archive for continuous help in finding material, Bob Horne a former CP industrial organizer, party official and a founder of the Communist Party of Scotland, Willie Thompson at Glasgow Caledonian University and Douglas Chalmers Scottish Secretary of the Democratic Left and John Foster Scottish Secretary of the Communist Party of Britain.

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Finally a special mention for Rose, May, Mabs, Katherine, Effie, Mary and Marion H., whose contribution to socialism is now over and all those Party women not mentioned in history.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Where are Women in Communist Party History?

> It is possible for historians with a bad conscience about mentioning women (and in Scotland the bad conscience is understandable) to fall into the trap of representing women only as oppressed victims – burying them with full honours so to speak. It is surely more accurate (though it means a lot more work), to try to see relations between the sexes as more complex than a simple oppressor/victim model.[1]

In this study I address the neglect of women in the historiography of the Communist Party of Great Britain. I seek through oral evidence to show to what extent women were involved in the CPGB in Scotland, what their political influences were and their level of involvement in the party structure. Most of all I redress the imbalance in CP history by relating the experiences of ordinary members, their political activities and their developing political outlook. In this way I seek to reveal branch and party life over the seven decades of its existence through the experiences of women in the party. Specifically, I aim to trace the practical and ideological development of women members in Scotland from their earliest experiences in the party, often in the Young Communist League, up to their departure from the CPGB or indeed up until its demise in 1991. I aim to give a comprehensive account of lives in the CP; how typical they are will be discussed later in the chapter.

It is necessary to look at the CPGB, which, despite having a smaller impact than many on the continent, played a noticeable and arguably a critical role in the British labour movement.[2] We also have to address the nature of the CP and the place it occupied in the political spectrum and the implications this has had for the resulting material.

By challenging capitalism and questioning social values at all levels,

the CP attracted fierce loyalties from members and supporters, or conversely hatred and scepticism from its opponents. The political line always determined the CP's actions. This was effectively disseminated through the rigours of democratic centralism whereby once an issue had been debated and a decision made, all would abide by and argue for it on a unified basis. Because of its continual exclusion from, and dominance by, the Labour Party, the party became an effective political machine, though its attempt to become a mass party failed. This is not to dismiss the CP as irrelevant. In labour and industrial activity it has had an important influence, often limited to certain areas or to distinct unions but still enough to affect the policies of organizations, especially where communists gained a foothold. This included local-level activity in housing schemes, voluntary organizations and specific-issue groups. As Hinton states: 'The essence of communism as it developed in Britain was the focusing of socialist political life outside the "legitimate" arena of electoral politics, in the politics of the street, the housing estate and, above all, the factory.'[3]

Hence, if the CPGB was not a major political force, it was an active political pressure group capable of propagating its views in the areas within which it operated. This needs to be stressed because although the party failed electorally, it is wrong to presume that this was reflected socially and that its members were isolated and marginalized. On the contrary, in this study I shall show how communist women worked in their communities, were often respected and *still effected* changes, however small, in the political activities they pursued. It is to the credit of the CP's organizing skills that it has always been taken seriously and was treated as a threat by Conservative governments, which arrested CP activists during the period leading up to the General Strike[4] and, under a national coalition, banned the *Daily Worker*[5] in 1941. The cold war, which started in the late 1940s, saw increased discrimination against communists in trade unions, most notably in the Transport and General Workers Union.[6]

Few CP histories are impartial. Because the authors are often politically aligned, CP history in Britain is divided not just between right and left but among the left as well. Many authors outside the party are unsympathetic, while party historians are inevitably biased, first because they have sought to redress the balance against the party as given by the establishment and often the media, and second because they have sought to explain, usually in a narrative, the party's history in a positive light. It is inconceivable that

the party would have sanctioned a critical history when it faced hostility from so many sections politically. This does not excuse any neglect of criticism: 'It is one of life's ironies that an organization that has produced so many brilliant historians has, until very recently, had the greatest difficulty in coming to terms with its own history'.[7]

This explains why communist historians tended to concentrate on Marxist theory, as popularized by Burns and Cornforth,[8] interpretations of history, notably by Jackson, Morton and Hutt,[9] and autobiographies and biographies. Klugmann's[10] 'standard' work was the first major attempt at a party history and it filled a historical gap the party felt was still missing after 46 years of existence. While fascinating, it consisted of rather uncritical narrative, whereas Branson,[11] who carried on the task, was more critical of *certain* past policies. His most recent volume,[12] however, seems to be in danger of undervaluing the post-1945 history of the party and this could be a mistake. In this study I rely heavily on material from 1945 onwards, which reveals, at least in Scotland, the extent to which the party was still active and in some areas very relevant.

The lack of a history of the experiences of party members must be associated with party discipline. Disillusioned members had always criticized the party's internal methods, though these were often too subjective to be reliable.[13] In 1964 Newton[14] attempted a detailed sociological study of the party and of the diversity of its membership. It was highly original and partially successful, yet cooperation was withdrawn and the amount of respondents he intended to interview, originally to be 100, was in the end severely limited.[15] Also, the suspicions of party members and their complete anonymity casts doubt on the authenticity of the participants and on their answers. The study, which sought to obtain the respondents' political views on a wide range of subjects as well as an introspective analysis of their background, social occupation and views of themselves in society, produced some worthwhile testimony. There are some interesting views on Hungary, the attitude of people generally towards communists and the high level of white-collar and professional workers in the party.

Newton felt that the participants he managed to interview were completely honest, but because party officials chose them he could not say they were representative. Despite the restrictions, the work was original in its use of oral testimony. Newton estimated that 'only about 15 per cent of British Communists are women',[16] which was a drop from 26 per cent in 1944.[17] 'More than half of all British Communists in 1932

lived in the Scottish and South Wales coal fields'[18] and Newton also states that 'Glasgow can be regarded as the most important city in the British Communist Party's history.'[19] Yet, accepting the centrality of the mass theory developed by Cole, Newton states 'as a rule women are not as politically radical as men' though he accepts that the textile industry 'does not form a clear exception to the mass theory of radicalism'[20] and points to the lack of radicalism in mining communities in the northeast of England. The 1950s saw more open criticism in the party, with many leaving over Hungary and the lack of internal democracy, yet loyalty and *belief* in the leadership continued: 'Those in the British Party who are not submissive to the *elite* tend to defect sooner or later, and in the main the rest believe that the Party is democratic ... and that even if there were an *elite* they would not submit to it.'[21]

One can see the problems of a study like Newton's because, especially before the 1990s, many members would speak with caution rather than enthusiasm. This is a vital point when attempting to understand the loyalty of ordinary members. Newton's study was original because, as a sociologist, he naturally tried to understand the motivating factors of ordinary members; he had no interest in policy formulation or the inner workings of the leadership. It is unlikely that a broad representative group would have been willing to speak out about all aspects of their lives in the CP. The formal change of the party's name in 1991 and the events in the Eastern Bloc changed the whole nature of access to former party members. The historical link from 1920[22] and the loyalty to the party that existed was far less important, if not redundant; what had been living socialism for many was now gone. Although ex-members still often react with caution, they are more 'open' and less suspicious. I felt that some were even proud and positive that their participation in events was now being recognized. Sadly, many former activists have passed away having never been recorded – a loss of which CP historians are all too aware.

The memoirs of communist activists naturally describe their personal history and their route to political involvement. The classic non-theoretical party works by Pollitt,[23] Gallacher,[24] Hannington,[25] Stewart,[26] and Piratin[27] are propagandist and deliberately rousing. Their purpose was twofold: to describe individual development and to show the historical perspective of the CPGB over two to three decades. In this respect, these biographies and numerous others serve a worthwhile purpose. They relate the experiences of those whom even the labour

establishment distrusted and are good descriptive works of *activists*' experiences in the party since 1920. They are also inspirational socialist classics written both for contemporary activists and for encouraging new members. Yet, although the authors were often from the shop floor and their activities involved continuous work at grassroots level, these works are 'leadership' histories and this can present problems. The party and organizations they supported are taken as a cohesive body and there is little analysis of the actual organization *per se*. So, despite the main communist leaders *leading* from below, there is inevitably a structure that leads to a hierarchy that relates party experience broadly. Therefore, one has to go deeper to find the involvement of women in the CP and fellow organizations. The authors were still better-known male activists who had usually served an apprenticeship or worked in industry. Even if many party members had industrial experience, were they all labour 'aristocrats' in industry as their leaders were? Therefore, these works often reflect an activist's history from the view of skilled male workers who came to form the leadership of the CPGB or its satellites.

Croucher[28] has shown the level of women's involvement in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM), the distinct part they played and, mentioning Maud Brown and Lillian Thring (who were not in the CPGB), the type of women who took a leadership role. They were 'confident, assertive women … able to make their mark in a milieu which women of more proletarian origins seem to have found more difficult'.[29] Also, Brown, 'since her appointment as national women's organizer, made the NUWM the principal focus of Communist women's agitational activity'.[30] These details and revelations of women's contribution counter the *perceived limited* view of events through autobiographies, recollections and the *actual* events as uncovered by historians. Croucher, especially in his conclusion, does great justice to the NUWM and sees its role as vital in changing government policy.[31] By showing the precise involvement of women and their role in hunger marches,[32] their organizing skills and militant activity, he adds weight to this argument. By revealing the gender role in working-class history and specifically communist history we may add to the true level of involvement and influence on working-class people, institutions and communities. It may show a wider political consciousness among women rather than their isolation from and neglect of political movements. In this study I try to show how political consciousness can develop through practical political activity.

We may define an 'ordinary' member as one who did not hold a full-time or paid job in the party and who was not on the district or executive committees. One would categorize those on such bodies as the leadership, at least in their area. Yet, a long-term member may briefly have served or worked in this capacity and then continued being an ordinary member. It is precisely this experience that has been missing from CP history, the ordinary views of those active in their local branches and implementing policies that came from the district and area committees. Women have been neglected in both areas. As early as 1921, Helen Crawfurd Anderson, who wrote an as yet unpublished autobiography, was 'appointed onto the executive committee and she held this position for many years',[33] as well as editing a 'page for women' in the *Communist*.[34] There is, however, a lack of published material on the experiences of women party members active since 1945, a period covering 45 years of party history compared with only 25 years preceding it. In *A Miner's Lass*[35] Mary Docherty relates the formative experiences of a young communist woman in Fife up to 1945. She recounts her practical experiences and everyday incidences of party life more than the developing ideology of a party member. More revelatory material might have been brought to the surface had it been a collaborative work with a historian who may have contributed a structured thematic discipline, as McShane succeeded in doing with Smith.[36]

Helen Crawfurd Anderson's memoirs[37] sadly lack detail of her communist work and more importantly her views on the party's development from its beginnings. Although written in the late 1940s, there is much narrative on her formative years and, importantly, mention of the suffragettes, but no real depth to her later political beliefs despite mentioning her visit to the Soviet Union and impressions of Trotskyism.[38] While Crawfurd was the most renowned Scottish communist woman in the party, achieving national status and a place on the EC, she failed to develop her experiences beyond a broad chronological history. A more intense and deep political work would have revealed the nature of communist politics from a unique point of view, namely a Scottish woman at British level in the party who had been politically active for women's enfranchisement, active in the anti-war movement and in the period on Clydeside prior to the formation of the party in 1920. It is also coloured by its moral tone and the discipline of religion, in this instance her Presbyterian upbringing.

Polemical works against the CP came mainly from its opponents on the ultra left. These works, theoretically and analytically approached from a strong Trotskyist angle, attack the CPGB for its loyalty to the Soviet Union and hence, in their terminology, its defence of Stalinism and all that this entails. Dewar, Woodhouse and Pearce,[39] and Bornstein and Richardson[40] are typical in that they come from three different Trotskyist sects but agree on their overall criticism of the CP. These histories justify the Trotskyite line yet fail to acknowledge the CPGB's achievements, most notably why it still managed to attract politically conscious workers in noticeable numbers compared with the comparative (even absolute) failure of other left-wing parties that espoused revolutionary politics. Calling such works 'monodimensional', Kevin Morgan is rightly critical:

> Trotskyist historians give little idea of the 'motivations' of those who joined the Party, of the nature and complexity of their allegiances or of the practical and political pressures to which they were subjected. All we get is a critique of the Party line, and usually a very poor one.[41]

Until Willie Thompson[42] covered the whole of the party's history from 1920 to 1991, little had been written about the party internally from the 1950s onwards. With a lot of inside information and personal experience, he dismantles the monolithic structure and shows the conflicts and personalities behind the party's demise.[43] It is weighted towards the effects of party policy on members and, importantly, we see how the party organization operated and the central importance of the power structures when used to circumvent or squash dissent and attacks on the leadership.

Thankfully, CP women have not been totally neglected. Sue Bruley[44] balances a political history with women's history. The level of commitment to women members was limited and links with the Communist International in its early days are shown. Bruley concentrates on giving a pre-CPGB history of the suffrage movement and its splits and then includes an industrial case study towards the end. This is as much an investigation of the importance of women's issues as it is of the political experience and ideological development of women in the party. Therefore, unlike this study, it fails to relate the political experiences and consciousness of women; it is more concerned about

the party's approach to women members and is informative on important policy developments affecting them. This is done from a feminist angle with fundamental criticisms of the party's lack of commitment to women and for failing properly to address these faults; 'the revolutionary party needed a subordinate sex to service its male revolutionaries so that they could fight capitalism.'[45] Bruley shows the level of female members, 16 per cent at its high point (2500 women members),[46] and the limited influence of women's sections. In the period studied, women were never more than one-fifth of the membership and usually only one-tenth. Gender divisions in society are therefore mirrored in the party.[47] There was a limited amount of oral testimony in the text and this could be because the thesis was written at a period of major differences in the party and so details may have been less forthcoming.

C. M. Gabbidon's 'Party Life'[48] is another important work for CP scholars. Having interviewed 55 people, of whom the testimonies of 33 were used, branch life between the wars in Brighton, north London and Glasgow are covered. Crucially, Gabbidon comments on how documentary evidence can conflict with oral evidence[49] and this is an important point in dispelling the myth of a compliant and permanently obedient membership. There is brief mention of the Socialist Sunday School[50] and the importance of Irish immigration in the make-up of the Glasgow branches. There are good quotations of Glasgow members' criticisms of the Labour Party and how there was little or no consideration of joining that party in preference to the CP.[51] National and cultural differences within the CP that gave the party in Scotland a distinctly strong working-class base are discussed: 'Glasgow Party branches appear to have had more contact with each other with the leadership on Glasgow District being more familiar and accessible than those intellectuals on the London District.' This is a remarkable quote when one compares it with the experience of Irene Swan in Chapter 7 of this book. Once again there is criticism that women in the party were not treated as equals and the party 'failed to institute a departure from established norms in society and the Party itself'.[52] Gabbidon sees sexual division condoned in the party and epitomized by women running the *Daily Worker* bazaars. Covering many areas of branch life such as education and including oral testimony on Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the work is seminal in addressing branch life and the view from below. The only criticism is that the three geographical examples show diversity but also make for

uneven reading and comparison, no doubt unavoidable as the party was uneven in its spread.

Some works have rightly concentrated on activity in communist strongholds and the reasons for their dominance in certain areas. This has resulted in more revealing material: 'And in fact, the most enlightening works on British Communism have been studies, not of the party "line", but of specific areas of Communist politics or particular industries and communities in which its members were firmly embedded.'[53]

To explain the dominant political ideology and its birth, development and continuing effect on workers' political consciousness, Nujam[54] concentrates on one industry, mining, and one area, Fife. She is critical of aspects of Marxism[55] and of Foster's[56] case study of workers' ideological evolution to a vanguard body. She rightly states that studies on labour movements and trade unions tell us nothing about the participants. There is a chapter on the CP in Fife and its crucial role in the pit communities and miners' union. Here there is much use of oral testimony from 40 'formal, semi-structured'[57] interviews. The oral content describes work in the industry and the role of the CP. The dialect of the participants is retained in the quotes, which are of a good length and introduce much vitality to the study. It is also contemporary with much information on the background and events during the miners' strike of 1984–85. Nujam states that: 'Communists express their beliefs within a more coherent politicized framework which provides them with a structural body of theory within which to place their ideas and arguments.'[58]

Macintyre[59] shows how the two Scottish 'Little Moscows' (two of the three were in Scotland), where the CP gained strong enough influence to elect members onto the district and county councils, were exceptions and unrepresentative of working-class communities in British society. In Maerdy in South Wales, women and children were involved and 'in some cases the wife was more committed than the man'.[60] The two mining villages, Maerdy and Lumphinnans in Fife, suffered discrimination from the labour establishment in the miners' union and this strengthened the party.[61] It would be apposite to discuss the importance of the labour process in determining ideology, for here we have both the ingredients – poor social conditions and factories or pits with production lines – that led Price[62] and Savage[63] to emphasize different areas of importance of working-class life in determining political commitment.

Price emphasizes the centrality of the work process in determining the *lack of ideology* in the British working class compared with Europe. 'Whereas French workers could be seen to possess a radical, even revolutionary, ideology and orientated their class action towards politics, British workers were more militant at work but supine when it came to politics.'[64] Price rightly sees the dominance of economism as retarding the growth of more radical politics than that of 'labourism'. But the postwar period from 1945 saw an entrenchment of 'traditional structures' in British society. Price shows the increasing strength of the trade unions in organizing effectively in the workplace, and increasing the number of shop stewards and local bargaining power, especially in engineering.[65] This led to less effective interventions from full-time union officials and centred the debate on the strength of unions in society and the possibilities of an industrial democracy.[66] Also, controversially, it limited the unofficial strikes that had become regular items in the national press and at the main party conferences. Strong unions and local bargaining power, if it led to standard agreements, had more economic pull at the shop-floor level. 'What was peculiar about the 1950s and 1960s was the way it shifted beyond the local workshop level to become associated with national militancy.'[67]

Industrial militancy benefited the CP because it could organize effectively at the workplaces in industries where unions were strong. The party could influence the national policy of unions through CP members who were often branch officials, shop stewards and convenors. The intentions of purely industrial struggles can also be exaggerated, as Price, who is not guilty of this, points out. 'The encroachment of the informal system of industrial relations were localized, transient, and received no institutional representation in politics or wider culture, presented no generalized challenge to conventional power and authority relationships.'[68] This obviously shows the *limitations* of industrial militancy in radicalizing people unless it is tied to an overall understanding of the role of labour in society.

Savage goes further and seems intent on proving that at least in Preston, which is the focus of his study, political activity for the Labour Party increased for reasons *other than* industrial activity. Tapping female and neighbourhood 'bases of support' 'also generated unprecedented levels of electoral support'.[69] This is not the place to discuss the intricacies of Labour politics, but Savage attributes a growth in women's organizations to neighbourhood activity. The industrial worker is *de-*

emphasized in importance and the social environment is promoted to being a primary cause of electoral growth. One feminist group (the Women's Citizens Association) links electoral support for the Conservatives to the Labour Party's reluctance to develop policies for women. The Labour Party gained more support when it emphasized statist policies. Savage, coming from the opposite direction of Price, states: 'We must recognize the disconnectedness of various social practices: because militancy exists in one arena we must not infer it in another. Industrial conflict is not a primordial experience which necessarily affects wider political allegiances.'[70] The latter part is true but 'which necessarily' does not mean 'does not' or 'cannot'.

Savage argues unconvincingly against the radicalizing effects of the labour process. He sees the growth of the Labour vote when there was a halving of trade union membership in the 1920s as proof of a non-connection. Might it not show the shift from industrial to political spheres *precisely because of those connections*? Perhaps the loss of economic muscle left the Labour Party as the only avenue to political change. One might also argue that the period Savage covered coincided with the Labour Party's ascendancy and that much of its growth was due to the national alternative it presented to local or industrial considerations. It seems a giant leap from the isolation of women from the Labour Party because of its lukewarm policies towards them, to then say that the 'ability of the local Labour Party to join in struggles over public services, often related to the mobilization of women, was a critical factor behind the Party's fortunes [in Preston]'.[71] Price and Savage are mutually exclusive in their theories and one has to point to the commonality of the industrial and social struggle. The industrial struggle is neglected to explain Labour's rise in Preston. Yet in these communities some women will have been married to men working in industry or vice-versa and so, though not directly involved in the labour process, women were acutely aware of it because they serviced the family. This also goes for workers and their relatives who were active in the community at large.

Knox,[72] who is sympathetic to Savage, emphasizes the low level of trade union membership in Scotland compared with England and Wales in 1892 and the role that sectionalism played industrially on Clydeside, there being 100 unions in Scotland in 1900.[73] He points to the long dominance of the Scottish Liberal Party and social and political factors such as housing and Irish Home Rule being of more importance in determining political allegiances: 'experience of exploitation may define

membership of the working class, but consciousness is the outcome of a much more complicated web of experiences and relationships.'[74]

We now have to see the relevance of these two theories to our specific interest, namely women in the CP. Price's emphasis on the effect of the labour process is tempered by awareness that it did not *revolutionize* the working class politically. It was defensive. We should remember that the CP leadership is not the proletariat, which is the essential and vital body to win socialism, but the elite of full-time revolutionaries who lead the workers' party that develops and nurtures the political consciousness of the masses. This was the classic input of Leninism,[75] which shaped CPs internationally. Industrial workers are in direct conflict with capital at the major source of its wealth and so the actions of organized labour in the production process are more direct and can effect immediate change unlike any other. But work in other spheres was also important. No matter where communists were involved, by having a strong political ideology either from youth or through being involved in social or economic struggle before joining the party, they were committed to the same struggle no matter where they concentrated their work. Reminiscences of industrial workers like Arthur Exell of Coventry[76] may show the centrality of struggle in the factory but also that this is only one area of struggle.

The employment of women could influence their political involvement, though they were still excluded from much public life. Women were involved in local battles and, in the Vale of Leven, 'at critical junctures the ties of class and politics overrode the divisions of gender.'[77] In two Scottish communities (Vale of Leven and Fife) CP members served as magistrates and on committees making it 'possible to implant the radical consciousness within the official order'.[78] This meant a socialist interpretation of statutory duties. Women were involved in the party's activities and 'The communists certainly had views on the position of women that were well in advance of general attitudes, but they were by no means immune themselves from assumptions of masculine supremacy.'[79]

Macintyre shows the CP putting over its views successfully. The three villages are an exception yet so was the CP as a party, distinct from any other. It is here that we must question the absorbing of revolutionary politics. In another work Macintyre attributes great importance to the Russian Revolution and the 'real theoretical need'[80] this fuelled, and the scientific nature of British Marxism until the early 1930s. The level of

communist education in the CPGB was criticized internationally,[81] which suggests that the advances the party made could have been even greater. Contrasting 'labour socialism' with 'Marxism', he shows that the communists had a theoretical advantage and its vital ingredient was the success of Bolshevism. Was this process dependent on the right circumstances and geographical area or the level of ideological awareness needed for such views to take root and produce an active CP member? Or was it both?

McKibbin reveals the contradictions in Britain that stifled the growth of a CP. There was a mass working class, the majority of whom worked in industry and were manual workers. The structure of the British economy and industry narrowed 'the base of political collectivism'[82] among the working class. Much of this was attributable to small-scale workshops. McKibbin concurs with Stedman Jones that political activity took up only a small part of working-class life. 'For some men politics was their hobby but for most it was not.'[83] Contractual as opposed to coercive politics, ideological dominance and the lack of an intelligentsia are essential points and McKibbin attributes much to the predominating character of British society in limiting communist influence and the development of Marxism.[84]

It is hard to compromise on any of the two theses and one feels certain that the most important element increasing socialist activity and drawing people into communist politics from the 1920s onwards was the presence of a genuine CP in Britain from 1920. Had MacLean or Pankhurst's alternatives taken root, it is questionable to what extent they would have stalled the CP's influence, but the party gathered momentum by attracting those sympathetic to its formation and retaining them through continuous education and activity. Macintyre seems to suggest that, notwithstanding the distinct characteristics of the towns and villages cited, it was political organization and ideology that produced success. This would then confirm the role of the vanguard party in attracting the most politically developed workers. The latter were both consciously active in the labour movement and those wrestling with the theoretical concepts that led to a distinct Marxist–Leninist party in Britain linked to the Soviet Union.

Pamela Graves's *Labour Women*[85] is a comprehensive and detailed study of the period from 1918 to 1939. She increases our knowledge of women in the Labour Party in the same way as Bruley did of women in the CP. It is strong in several areas. She clearly depicts the development

of women's aspirations and then their disappointments and disproves any suggestion that they were passively involved in Labour politics through sectionalism and by not pushing for major changes. Graves shows how determined some women were to fight for equal rights with men and for legislation legalizing abortion. She is also very critical of the reaction of the Labour hierarchy, including women such as Marion Phillips,[86] in their attempts to circumvent radical policies. The evolution of policy decisions in women's sections and at British conference level is well accounted.

Graves sees the women who joined the CP expecting to play a more equal role with men and not expecting to be siphoned off into women's sections[87] and much of the oral testimony in this study bears this out. Such expectations arose from the early influence of parents, especially fathers, from the Socialist Sunday School and later a natural affinity they felt with the Women's Cooperative Guild. Concurring with the above-mentioned works, the work process definitely seems less of an influence in leading women into Labour politics during this period.[88] Ironically, in this study one might also see similarities with Labour women, though more evidently after 1945, which might lead to criticism of the CP for designating a stereotypically domestic role to female members in the Scottish district of the party. The role of the Scottish Women's Advisory Committee (SWAC) can be seen as either perpetuating sexual division or nurturing and educating women members.

In the CP women were not confined to women's sections or the SWAC, so they were not ghettoized, but, however ironic this may be, it would be remiss not to mention the strong (indeed damning) criticisms that a feminist historian could raise when studying communist politics in Britain. Graves's claims to having a representative sample need to be qualified; 100 respondents took part, 50 women and 50 men, either through oral or written testimony. This included some people in the ILP and CP. The oral testimony is more anecdotal and is not really quantified or even contextualized. It is used mostly in Chapter 2 to good effect and relates what specific people thought without claiming them to be 'typical'. The 1930s raised concerns that were central to women's struggles such as fighting against the means test and the wider issues of fascism and Spain.[89] Here there were some sympathies with the CP's stance, though the leadership discouraged or purposefully severed any links.[90]

Finally, a criticism of Graves's work must be recorded. Although

claiming to be about women in Britain, this has to be qualified. The reports of women's conferences and policy decisions throughout the country justify the claim but none of the respondents was from Scotland or Wales. Therefore, while stating that 'geographical distribution matched the pattern of the movement's regional strength in the interwar period',[91] admitting that no examples from Scotland and Wales are a 'significant omission'[92] is an understatement. This is an important point for two reasons. First, it is important because of the crucial role the labour movement in Scotland played in the development of the Labour Party and specifically the ILP, of which some of Graves's respondents were members. Second, it is important because of the fundamental and continuing development of Scottish history from the late 1960s, which shows that it cannot be omitted from any British history through presumptions of automatic similarity or marginal importance to the English experience. The exclusion of regions in England might be acceptable in such a study due to marginality; the omission of one country with distinct national institutions negates a claim to any study being British.

I include testimony from women involved from the 1920s and 1930s to get some idea of their political development and early impressions of left-wing activity and life in the CP in its first 20 years. Originally, I only intended to involve women active from 1945, but it soon became apparent that this would exclude a number who were active in the 1920s who had not been properly recognized in any party history. It seems that the importance of children's organizations may previously have been *greatly underestimated* in relation to women's political development.

I begin with some of the participants' childhood experiences that led to political involvement. Some women were influenced by events prior to the existence of the CPGB. In Chapter 2 I reveal how a religious, agnostic or atheistic upbringing may have been influential or even critical in shaping a participant's communist life. Although there was not much oral testimony in this sphere, it quickly became apparent that the Socialist Sunday School and cooperative movement had influenced some children strongly, especially in Scotland, in the first three decades of the century. Much archive material suggested that its influence continued into the 1950s and even as late as the 1960s, though by this time it was nearly defunct. In the 1920s and 1930s women were very conscious of the leap they were making when they joined the CP and what effect it would have on their family and friends. Party membership

put such activities into perspective and enabled women to embrace a whole philosophy that met or came nearest to their ideals. It also allowed them to work closely and collectively with other members. To opponents it seemed that anything the leadership moved was accepted, yet this had serious effects in 1956[93] and had clearly broken down by the 1980s.[94] After bitter argument, the loyalty to democratic centralism was seen as an essential element of party membership and crucial to the CP's survival as *the* revolutionary party.

Recent communist histories covering the 1930s and events up to the Second World War by Morgan,[95] and by Attfield and Williams,[96] and especially transcripts of central committee meetings published by King and Matthews,[97] have been crucial. Far from showing a dictatorial party bowing to the needs of the Soviet Union, they confirm clear disagreements over tactics and changing the party line during the 1930s and up to the Second World War. Women involved in the party at the time remembered discussing these issues at branch and aggregate meetings; and some members definitely knew about the depth of the disagreements on the central committee and whom they supported during this period.

In Chapter 3 I provide original material, despite the political themes being over familiar. We know a lot about the CP's line in the 1930s on the unemployed and issues such as Spain. From this formative period, no views of women's early impressions on entering and working in a highly disciplined and centrally structured party appear to have been published. New to this study are women's views on the importance and effectiveness of the party structure from branch level through to area and Scottish committee level. The initial impressions of women who came into the party and had to get to grips with democratic centralism and a Marxist syllabus of education are conveyed.

These two aspects of party life seem to have taken some adapting to, for their central importance was unique to the CP. Party activity in the 1930s has often been described from a British perspective. In this study I present the views of an under-represented section, women, who entered communist politics mainly via routes other than industry. Thus, because we trace their party lives from the beginnings of the CPGB and not from the post-1945 period, as first intended, we get a complete picture of the party in Scotland from its birth to its death. The early years of party life related here lay the basis for understanding the development of women in the postwar period.

The Soviet Union had an enormous influence in the CPGB. Most of the women I interviewed had been there at least once and their impressions of the socialist countries are described in Chapter 5. They had seen the development of Soviet society first hand and, despite reservations, still stood behind the Eastern Bloc in the perceived advances that had been made. Few saw the collapse coming and many were genuinely shocked when it did. The criticisms of the socialist countries are more open now and yet many of the women who went to these countries admit that they were inspired. The experience of a living socialism compensated for the lack of a mass CP at home. This was not universally the view of the respondents as there were distinct criticisms of Soviet society that were not expected but were felt at the time.

A commitment to peace and international issues was a strong aspect of women's involvement and there is evidence that this often preceded their entry into the party. The view that CP members became involved in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament blindly to aid Soviet peace initiatives should be laid to rest, for there is ample evidence that they saw peace as much a moral demand as a uniquely socialist one. They supported the Soviet Union because they saw it as the promoter of peace initiatives and also because it had lost so many people during the war. However, it quickly became the enemy in the cold war.

Although there is evidence that the CP stood above others on the left for its pioneering view on women, its effectiveness here also sparked off strong party conflict. From the end of the 1960s feminist politics started to gain a foothold in the CPGB.[98] The split was not so much between men and women, young and old (though most of its advocates were young), or even geographical; it was a theoretical divide between those committed to the traditional communist politics of class struggle and those who now placed gender, sexual and social issues above the classic economic and political struggle. This new aspect is discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

More recent CP histories show a great breadth of party activity and numerous aspects of its work still to be uncovered. *Opening the Books*,[99] a compendium of new areas of research with a chapter by Bruley on communist women in Lancashire,[100] maps out many exciting dimensions of research that are in their infancy. Some chapters are by authors who have produced larger works on the party. Taking a specific time period and subject area, Srebrnik, in *London Jews and British Communism 1935–45*,[101] shows how extensive and important Jewish activists were to the

CP in the East End. His 84 pages of references and primary and secondary sources are impressive and intimidating to any new scholar of CP history. Likewise, Fishman[102] has produced an in-depth and concise study of the CP's work among unions and this thematic method will no doubt be repeated. Among the welter of research material, she has an impressive array of interviews for her study. The time spent in preparation and travel for what are only some of her sources should not be underestimated. Increasingly, there are more articles,[103] periodicals[104] and conferences covering the CPGB and more people seem willing to talk about their experiences. The amount of material available and the angles of CP history yet to be unearthed should convince most people of the level of commitment of the party membership in day-to-day political, economic, social and cultural activity over the 71 years of its existence.

MacDougall's[105] interviews with activists in the NUWM and veterans from the Spanish Civil War are extensive. They include CP members (some of whom are women) who were involved in the hunger marches and who joined the CP in the late 1920s or early 1930s. These interviews tell us more about women in the party in Scotland than any other source since McCrindle and Rowbotham's *Dutiful Daughters*,[106] a work of the late 1970s, in which six of the fourteen women interviewed were active in Labour and CP politics in Scotland. More recently, Phil Cohen[107] has picked a specific period, the cold war, in which to collect reminiscences of a communist childhood. Jackie Kay recounts her communist upbringing in Scotland;[108] her adopted father was John Kay a Scottish organizer in Glasgow. Again, the importance of the Scottish party can be seen through other respondents. However, no attempt has been made to make a serious evaluation of events through opposing or variously diverse perspectives.

Oral testimony in this study

Oral testimony is central to this study. The testimony contains opinions on the CP in Scotland that are revealed for the first time. It would have been impossible to obtain such extensive interviews and revealing testimonies had the time not been right. This was due to the demise of the CP and a decisive change in international events that had shaped respondents' lives.

While meeting and interviewing former CP women I was made very aware that the questions I asked would not have been answered pre-

viously, not because of any vindictiveness or necessarily through distrust, but because of party loyalty. When these interviews were conducted, mostly between 1994 and 1997, one was painfully aware of the traumatic experiences for many of the women of two major events. One was the collapse of the Soviet Union and allied socialist countries, most symbolically through the physical destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and so the end of socialism for many CP members. The other was the decline, amid bitter recriminations, of the CPGB itself.

Many respondents felt despondent, not least because the Conservative Party was in its fifteenth year of government. Yet, once party lives were recounted and events recalled there emerged a fascinating and important history of women's activity, which I admit to having seriously underestimated at the start of my research. There was no indication in any of the literature of the true value of women party members in Scotland. The oral testimony illuminates areas of activity that publications and reports inevitably fail to reveal. I found a level of commitment and a variety of issues for which my reading of the party had barely prepared me.

As mentioned earlier, as children's organizations, the Socialist Sunday School and Woodcraft Folk had strongly influenced the political direction of many party members. Having been unaware of these organizations I became convinced that the Socialist Sunday School especially played a pivotal role in steering many women towards communist politics. There is much archive material on this organization and its roots were deep in the west of Scotland, yet it was small, indeed tiny compared with the religious organizations it sought to counter. If there was little written about women CP members in Scotland, there was even less on their formative influences. An emphasis on equality between girls and boys in the Socialist Sunday School, apparent from minutes and the *Young Socialist* newspaper, seems to have been vital in influencing some women towards expecting a more militant socialism than that of the Labour Party and ILP.

Finding women participants to interview was not difficult. I approached the three main groupings that had been part of the CPGB in Scotland – the Democratic Left, which had evolved from the CPGB, the Communist Party of Britain, formed in 1988 from splits in the CPGB, and the CP of Scotland, formed in 1992 just after the CPGB became the Democratic Left. All three organizations forwarded me names of people who might be interested in being interviewed. The women, of various

ages and differing political experiences, had been active at all levels of the CPGB. Most responded initially and I soon had more than enough respondents in the west of Scotland. Even though the party was stronger in the west, and that is reflected here, it was still crucial to show the experiences of communist women throughout Scotland. Some women were contacted through recommendations, through reading party literature and enquiries about people's whereabouts, a most important angle.

Since the majority of respondents interviewed supported the new draft of *The British Road to Socialism* in 1977 and the party EC's stand on the *Morning Star* dispute in the 1980s, there is no imbalance towards the CPB. I have tried to show the balance of ideas as they were in the party and what the majority of members decided in Scotland. I would state that these major policy issues are not a concern until Chapter 7.

I interviewed a total of 41 people and amassed over 800,000 words of transcription. Of these interviewees 34 were with women and 7 with men in the CP (the one exception being a woman involved in organizing the Socialist Sunday School as was her mother before her). Only the testimony of party women is used in the main text. Undoubtedly, many of the CP histories mentioned have relied on a greater number of interviewees or respondents. However, they are often on a British wide basis and so as a percentage or as in-depth interviews they may still be deficient. Prioritized are detailed interviews that cover women's lives and different aspects of their activities in the party. Scotland was covered because it is both a country with its own identity, culture and history and was, as a 'district', part of the CPGB and essential in its contribution to the party's strength in supplying members, industrial influence and political leadership.

By covering many geographical areas in Scotland and specific branches, I intend to show the diversity of women's activity in Scotland. Had the sample of women mirrored exactly the social and geographical composition of the majority of women members, then arguably I would have concentrated almost exclusively on the west of Scotland or, at most, the central industrial belt. Admittedly, the problem arises of an unrepresentative sample being overly reflected in this study. Through party literature, specifically Scottish CP circulars and minutes, there is an attempt to show how the views expressed by the interviewees were representative and reflect how women felt about certain issues. Here an important area was the way the party handled women's issues and how