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TV GUIDE PAGE 20

Women pickets, photographed by Jane Bown, outside the phurnacite plant at Abercwmboi. 'This time men who wanted to cross a picket line would have to deal with their women as well as with the union.'

NO SURRENDER IN THE VALLEYS

Why are the Welsh miners so determined to hold out, despite the hardship, while elsewhere there

THE Bruce Hotel in Mountain Ash is a bar of picturesque shabbiness at made at the Bruce might surprise Mrs Margaret Thatcher and Mr Peter Walker, her Energy Secretary, as much as it surprised me.

Its customers are striking miners of all ages; retired miners, some of whom fought in the last war and young miners who play rugby for the local team or pass the time, in the hills above the town, shooting squirrels and roasting them to make sandwiches for the picket line.

Many of them, I soon learnt, either knew the contents or had their own grubby photocopies of the *Economist's* leaked version of the Ridley report — the Tory Party study drawn up in 1978, which mapped out its policy to dismantle the nationalised industries. Headed with a 'political threat' from 'the enemies of the next Tory government.' The battleground should be chosen by the Government, it says, and it was likely to be the coal industry.

The Government should prepare itself, the report says, by building up coal stocks at power stations, planning coal imports, encouraging haulage companies to recruit non-union drivers, and adapting all the power stations to burn oil as well as coal. As a deterrent, money should be cut off to the strikers and the union should be made to finance them. Finally, a large mobile force of police should be equipped to deal with the inevitable violent picketing. As the *Economist* predicted,

It has all, however, come true. From the point of view of the Bruce Hotel's customers, the blueprint has been put into effect with extraordinary efficiency. Given the vulnerability of the South Wales coalfield, it means one thing to them: an attempt to destroy their church, the National Union of Mineworkers.

They are convinced of the seriousness of the threat. You need hardly look further for an explanation, in this inbred coalfield, with its bitter history and its loyalty to the union, of the fact that fewer than 100 men out of 20,000 have crossed the picket line since the drift back to work began.

And despite the charges of 'intimidation' or 'lawless violence for its own ends,' the facts do not match the rhetoric. The Home Office calculated last week that out of 1,200 policemen injured since the strike began (the miners' figure is over 3,000) only 13 were injured in South Wales.

Already in July, as I discovered by pure chance, the miners and their families in the valleys were digging in for a protracted guerrilla war, oiling their defence machinery. It was, as they saw it, the last stand.

As they saw it too, arch enemy Ian MacGregor was a foreign reincarnation of the vanished coal owner, a throwback, who did not disguise his feelings, and who, in America, had brought coal unions to their knees.

My contact with the valleys began with the river Usk near Brecon, where I was fishing for trout that month beneath an intensely beautiful landscape — similar to that which existed in mining valleys like the Rhondda before the pits were sunk in the 1870s.

Over the hill that separated us by 15 miles came Beryl Fury, a woman in her forties, with two children, to pick blackcurrants for the striking miners. Her father and grandfather had been miners in Abertillery. The local pit in the adjoining town of Llanhilleth had been closed for four years, emptying the community of tradesmen, services, banks, doctors and filling it with young unemployed.

She had been a Liberal voter, but not any more. 'I never thought I'd call myself a militant,' she said, 'but that's what I am now.' As she walked through the fruit trees, cigarette dangling, radio playing, answering my questions, I could see that the South Wales coalfield would not give an inch to Mrs Thatcher and that they were prepared for great sacrifices. Here, unlike situations caused by wage disputes, or individual closures, men who wanted to cross a picket line would have to deal with their women, this time, as well as the union.

In the weeks that followed Beryl Fury's Gwent Food Fund turned into a highly successful operation, families in 14 collieries. She had travelled three times to Amsterdam to raise money and to persuade the unions there to black coal to Britain. She had established collecting posts all over the country. The women's support groups — and there were many others — had prevented the strike from collapsing.

On 20 November I arrived at Pontypool, at night, in the orange glow, unfamiliar to Londoners, that lights up the grimness of the economically dispossessed. I had crossed the border.

Elsewhere the return to work in the central coalfields was still accelerating; 2,000 men apiece had returned to work in Scargill's and McGahey's own coalfields in Yorkshire and Scotland. In South Wales until the previous week, not a single miner had returned to the pits.

But the NCB's Christmas offer had changed the picture. Beryl arrived to collect me at 4.30 a.m. She was exhausted by her day which had begun at the picket line at Marine colliery, near Abertillery. The return to work of a single miner had brought out hundreds of riot police, unseen before in Gwent. The colliery lies between a river and a high bank which carries the coal 'drams.' After the miner had crossed the line, and the pickets had begun to disperse, the police had turned on them, driving some men into the freezing river. Transport workers in a nearby yard were mistakenly roughed up, women herded against the wall. The police had lost control. A television crew had recorded both the attack and the inspector in charge, searching for an explanation; later the police conceded an inquiry. Orgreave had reached the valleys.

As we drove I asked Beryl how she reacted to Scargill's Libyan initiative. 'I was shocked at first,' she said. 'Then I thought, "If you have a baby that needs milk, and there's a farmer across the road with a cow, and he's evil, he mistreats his animals, you wouldn't want to have anything to do with him — if he'll give you the milk, you have to take it".'

She described the effects of the strike. Most houses were heated with solid fuel and there was no coal. But if they could get beyond Christmas they could last for many months.

At Mardy, the last pit in the Rhondda, a town once twinned with Karpov and known to this day as 'Little Moscow' the women were also up in arms. 'Thatcher,' said one, 'has made the biggest mistake of her life. She's woken us up and we won't go back to sleep. She doesn't know what she's done.'

But the threat to the pits is real. Despite the fact that South Wales has superb fuels — the best anthracite in the world, the last reserves of prime coking coal in the UK — the ment and destined for shutdown. The NCB was asked to keep a level of production of 100 million tonnes, mostly from automated superpits like Selby in the central areas. Within five years, unlike any other coalfield in Europe, it would cease to have a subsidy and be required to make a profit.

This was a traumatic prospect for the valleys. It meant centralisation and the rapid closure of peripheral coalfields. Despite their bitterness towards the NCB, the miners retain their respect for Philip Weekes, the area director who, they recognise, fought for their coalfield, to get investment, and to ward off the worst effects of the MacGregor plan.

Weekes admired the discipline of the local NUM, headed by Emlyn Williams which, he says, gives it a strong voice in the executive. 'These are men,' he said, 'who care about coalfields.'

The miners' view is that there are seven-and-a-half billion tonnes of coal left in Wales, that the superpit reserves might last no longer than 50 years, and meanwhile communities, skills and the reserves themselves would disappear for ever. Reopening mines is prohibitively expensive. They claim they have been deliberately starved of investment and have a list of marginal pits that with a little money would be profitable. South Wales can always sell more than it produces.

'We knew from '72 and '74,' said one official I spoke to 'that sometime we would have to pay for fetching Ted Heath's government down. So they set out then to plan the destruction of the union — by closing down all the peripheral areas.'

These were critical days. The Coal Board had instructed local NCB managers to produce results in South Wales, which was lagging behind the return to work. Letters were sent directly to miners, to the fury of the union, offering £1,000 for Christmas — in one case claiming that the pit was deteriorating. Letters were backed up by phone calls to potential strikebreakers. On at least one occasion, for which the police later apologised, two plain-clothes officers visited a man with a record of absenteeism and a history of difficulty with the union, to persuade him to cross the picket line.

In the central area, riot police turned out to take a handful of men into work. Some were men in their middle fifties — the prime age for redundancy payments, after which the graph falls rapidly downwards — returning to a colliery destined for closure.

The most notorious case, the subject of local myth and folklore, is that of Paul Watson, who goes each day to the phurnacite plant at Abercwmboi, often for as little as three hours. His wife, Joy, a very vocal Government supporter, had alone in the canteen, he rejoined the strike. Mrs Watson publicly denounced him in the local Press. The cashiers at Tescos are inclined to switch off their tills when she appears.

The 86 men who returned at Cynheidre, in the west, were led by Tony Holman, a member of the National Working Miners' Committee, who had been voted down as lodge chairman after 13 years. He openly declares his opposition to the union leadership, and vows to remove them after the strike with a moderate vote. He went back on principle, he said, because of the refusal to hold a ballot.

At the start of the dispute 18 out of 25 lodges voted not to strike; a series of meetings clarifying the know all about the 1926 strike and the scab unions. Dai Smith, author of 'The Fed,' a history of the union in South Wales, recently came across an old woman who went to the funerals of working miners, saying, in front of the grieving relations, 'There's another of the bastards gone.'

I went to many meetings, normally barred to the hated media, convened by the leadership to test the temperature of the coalfield. They were often angry, and showed the stress and, occasionally, the desperation of the miners. Emlyn Williams, despite the dust on his lung, giving him that characteristic

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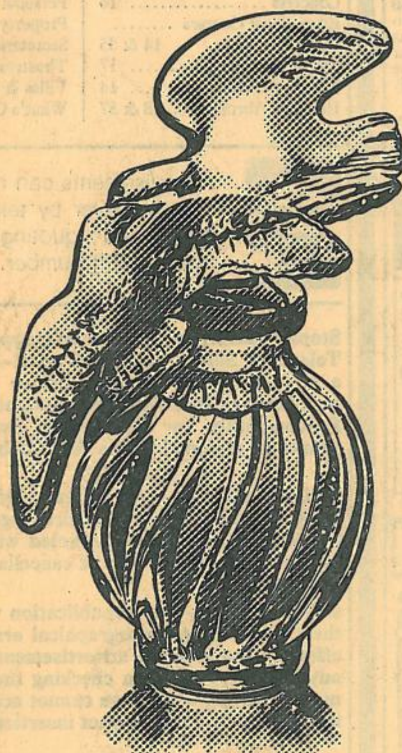
The most romantic gift of fragrance a man can give a woman.



L'Air du Temps
NINA RICCI
PARIS

If you were deaf and blind...

. . . you could be totally dependent on someone else for the rest of your life – and probably you would never even speak.

RNID's Deaf/Blind Centre in Bath cares for Stephen and other youngsters like him. It gives them a home, for the present at least, but such care costs a fortune – with more staff than residents to meet their needs.

We urgently want to do more for more deaf/blind young people. Please help us to do so by giving what you can.

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RNID. The Royal National Institute for the Deaf.

Please send what you can afford to RNID, Room OR, 105 Gower Street, London WC1E 6AH. For details telephone 01-387 8033.

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NO SURRENDER IN THE VALLEYS

pouting puff of older miners, spoke powerfully. Never had the union been subjected to such a vicious attack, he said, but if anything was conceded now, after all these months of struggle, Wales would be the one to lose. There was therefore a greater need of solidarity there than anywhere.

'Let me tell you this, boys,' he said, 'we go back not in anarchy but with leadership.' The miners seemed happy with this. These ritual gatherings are enough to restore the faith.

I talked afterwards to Ernie Way, a lodge official, 34 years in the pit. 'Say Arthur Scargill did a deal,' he said. 'What can he concede? That economic pits close? Then goodbye South Wales. And if that happened, what would be the opinion of the workforce of Arthur Scargill? They'll be screaming.'

On the first day of the strike Ernie Way received instructions to send 50 pickets to the Midlands. When he hired a bus, the company called back within a few minutes and said the police had restricted it. He arranged cars. The police called almost immediately and said they would be confiscated on the M4. So he rang British Rail and booked 50 seats. Within half an hour the police were screening the passengers at Newport station. Only a call to Neil Kinnock's agent cleared the police from the station — on the grounds that they were restricting public transport.

'Within 10 days of the strike,' he said, 'we quickly realised that the agents of the Government had abandoned their impartiality — the DHSS, the police, the magistrates, the judges. It will take years to get this out of the mentality.'

The miners I spoke to had given up long ago on the police who, in the absence of parliamentary law, have had to fall back on statutes as obscure as 'watching and besetting' to justify arrest.

They saw it last summer, when 6,000 pickets were sent from South Wales, 'more as missionaries than mercenaries,' as one put it. The resulting violence has changed the lives of many of them, and it will certainly be less exotic going back down the pit. But it has also changed their attitudes to authority. 'There is no law in this country,' one of them told me, 'The policeman on duty determines the law of this country.'

It is seen as little different from the coercion of the 1926 strike, when the police sided with the coal owners, or the actions of the Glamorgan police, chosen for their size, at Tonypandy.

Police anti-riot tactics have now reached the valleys. I heard numerous tales about police violence, from the miner whose arms were wrenched so badly by two policemen —not wearing numbers—that he is declared unfit to work and wears a neck brace, to the more mundane business of stopping Terry Thomas, NUM vice-president, on his way to a picket, and asking him to produce his driving documents.

One picket who had travelled outside Wales in the summer told me of his surprise in the changed attitudes of younger men who had never before been in trouble with the law. Now they were getting satisfaction from inflicting damage on policemen. 'I never throw a brick myself in case it hits one of the lads,' he said. 'But if a policeman gets a brick in the face, a cheer goes up as if Botham had hit a six.'

Early one morning I climbed the hill to the Aberfan cemetery. Almost 20 years later most of the children's graves were furnished with fresh flowers. Earlier, at 5 o'clock, I had watched as rank upon rank of policemen marched through the narrow terraced street opposite Merthyr Vale colliery, like extras in some vastly budgeted remake of Tonypandy.

As the convoy taking one miner to work finally went through the crowd, after several minutes of mass rugby, breaking a policeman's leg, the expense, futility and danger of the operation was abundantly clear.

As the crowd dispersed I asked a miner what would happen to this working miner after the strike. 'Maggie says she'll protect them,' he said. 'They must be bloody mad. It'll be just like the Falklands. Thank you very much, boys, very good of you. Sorry you lost an arm and a leg.'

The death of the taxi-driver, David Wilkie, a few days later caused deep gloom in the NUM offices in Pontypridd. There was a sense that all the discipline of the union, a glimmer of an idea that their case was being heard, now that the NCB's accounting was in doubt, was about to vanish.

At Merthyr Vale the following morning it was pouring with rain. Before the taxi arrived, Bill King, lodge secretary and veteran of the 1930s strikes who had presided over the Aberfan disaster, stood above the police and pickets and asked for two minutes silence for all who had died in the strike. It was an extraordinary moment — the policemen, rain dripping from their helmets, their faces the colour of wax in the gaudy light. Nobody stirred. 'Thank you very much boys,' said Bill King.

Even if the rest of the coalfield returned, in Dai Smith's opinion, the Welsh miners would stand firm. 'Whatever the case, they have already won. No one else is standing up and fighting back in Thatcher's Britain. The victory comes through the support centres and the women's groups and a whole body of opinion —they've won that. It's so strong that it's a viable alternative. It's not a welfare system, but near enough to it.'

I finally consulted Tudor Watkins, retired headmaster of Caerphilly School, whose father was a miner and whose five sons and one daughter—one a friend of mine for many years — had moved into successful jobs, a long way from coalmines.

'Thatcher and Walker,' he said, after some minutes of talk, 'Do they realise the can of worms they've opened? I don't think they do. Take it from me, and knowing what I do about the Welsh miners, they will not accept it. Somebody should tell somebody somewhere, there's no giving in to be. I've got profound faith in the backbone of the miners, and I'm not arguing their case now. In 1926 they didn't give in in a hangdog fashion. They were still walking tall. History will record it.'

The State, in the end, is stronger and cannot afford to lose. For the South Wales miners, however, to return united will, they believe, be a victory in itself. They know they can survive Christmas. Meanwhile the only real victory will depend on Arthur Scargill's ally, General Winter. But he has yet to appear on the battlefield.

LETTERS

8 St Andrew's Hill, London EC4V 5JA 01-236 0202

Pollution threat to water

SIR, — As a keen lover of wildlife and the countryside I have followed with interest *The Observer's* 'Save Our Countryside' campaign. But as a keen angler as well, I feel that more attention should be drawn to the widespread destruction of our country's aquatic habitats by water pollution.

This problem is often given no more than lip-service by conservationists and landowners alike, largely because in most cases its effects are not immediately obvious to the casual observer. Yet the aquatic environment plays an essential part in many food-chains and breaking or weakening this link can have far-reaching effects on large sections of wildlife, not just on aquatic creatures themselves.

It is thus a sad fact, but perhaps not surprising, that the only voluntary body set up to combat inland water pollution is one which is financed solely by anglers — the Anglers' Co-operative Association.

While I don't wish to indulge in the popular sport of 'farmer bashing,' agriculture is undeniably the most common source farmers or landowners, impose ridiculously small fines (seldom exceeding £500) on offending farmers. Such fines, coupled with a poor detection rate due to understaffing of water authority inspectorates, provide very little deterrent for would-be offenders compared with the costs involved in safe disposal.

Francis Kirkham,
Crediton, Devon.

★

Congratulations to Richard North and Geoffrey Lean on their excellent features in last week's 'Save Our Countryside' issue of *The Observer Magazine*.

In 'Who will stop the rot?' Richard North rightly points to the importance of rapprochement between conservation bodies (Nature Conservancy Council and the Countryside Commission) and the farming and landowning bodies (National Famers' Union and Country Landowners' Association). There is another small organisation which has been slowly but surely serving both these interests during the past 30 years, namely the Soil Survey of England and Wales North Kent Marshes which identifies those areas most at risk of drainage failure on ploughing out grassland to grow other crops, and Robin Masefield of the Coulsdon Woods Committee will be pleased to know that his *rus in urbe* has been 'put on the map' in the recently published quarter-inch-to-one-mile soil map of south-east England.

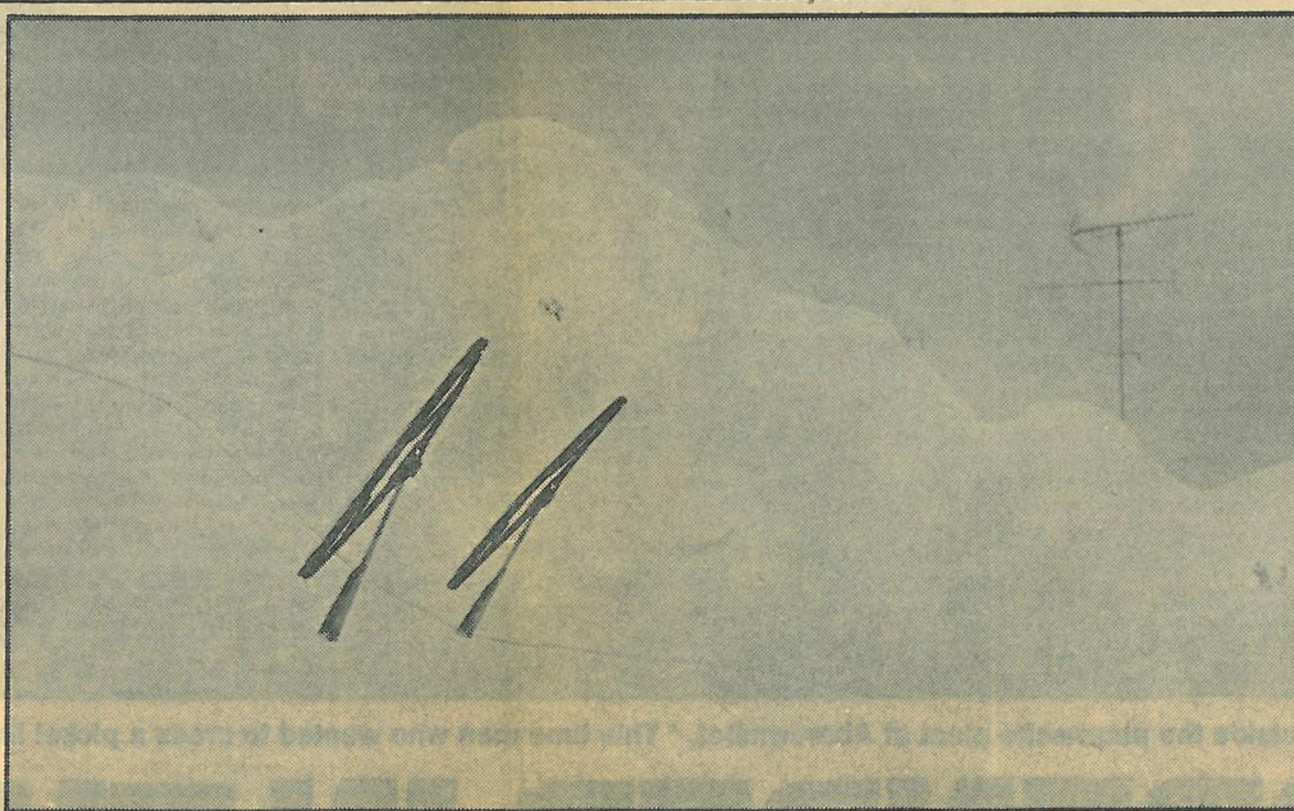
It is ironic, therefore, that at this very moment the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which pays for the survey should be hesitating about the level of funding to provide in the future. Now, more than ever, the £1.9 million it costs to run us must be seen as money well spent.

R. G. Sturdy,
Principal Scientific Officer,
Soil Survey of England and Wales.

★

Why limit your list of active conservation organisations to 10? If you had allowed 11 you could have included Britain's oldest national conservation body — the Open Spaces Society.

If it wasn't for us you couldn't now walk free on Hampstead



'White-out: Peter Cattrella of London wins £25 for this picture of a snowed-in car in Finland.

Stravinsky's third thoughts

piece there a few months ago. And in September 1968, Stravinsky finally agreed to performances of the 'first' version

The politics of energy

I wish to point out some

*** Dr Wolf Hafele, who was referred to in our report, was energy systems programme director of the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis from 1973-81.

Church door closed

The supposed allegation in your news report 'Church sells out the poor' (25 November) was that the Holy Trinity site may have been sold to a consortium of developers by the Church Commissioners.

We would like to thank Mr Kenneth Lamb for the information in his letter (last week) on how the Church authorities make decisions on redundant church sites. However, we, in Paddington, are all too aware how such decisions are made, although it took us about six months to elicit this, from behind the closed doors of the diocesan authorities.

We have requested a meeting with the Bishop of London several times over the last year but these requests have fallen on deaf ears. On 16 October the bishop and his council 'advised' the Commissioners on which offer to accept for this important community site. He has refused to tell us what this advice was.

The diocese say that the final decision rests with the Church Commissioners, but the Commissioners imply that the Diocese decides. In this situation what do the Church Commissioners expect people in Padddington to believe?

Liz Bresnihan,
Paddington Community Consortium.

Charitable act needed

I know it could be interpreted as sour grapes, but as a sometime actor-manager (totally responsible for making ends meet) and present secretary-general of a major national charity which receives an annual DHSS grant 30 times less than that bestowed upon the National Theatre, I find extra cash, from their monocular patrons. The regional theatres have, unhappily, not been so successful.

An estimated 2 per cent of the UK population visit the live theatre—and only a fraction of that 2 per cent wish to venture into the main subsidised halls. On the other hand, an estimated 12 per cent of the UK popula-