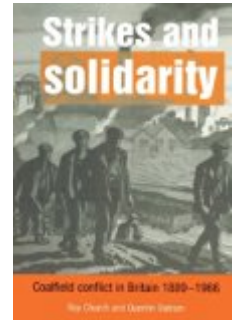


Roy Church, Quentin Outram. *Strikes and Solidarity: Coalfield Conflict in Britain 1889-1966*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xx + 314 pp. \$69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-55460-2.



Reviewed by Judith Wale

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The British economy was dependent in the extreme on its coal industry as a source of fuel for all but the final decade of the period covered by this book. Exports, moreover, comprised a significant proportion of output throughout the earlier part of the period and especially before 1913. The numbers employed in coalmining rose from around 620,000 in 1890 to almost 1.1 million in 1913, before peaking at 1.25 million in 1920. Employment levels had fallen to 780,000 by 1938, a figure never again reached, but were still over 700,000 in 1957, though they then dropped to around 450,000 by the final year covered by this study, 1966. The size of the industry alone justifies this new look at the high strike propensity of the industry by Roy Church (University of East Anglia, UK) and Quentin Outram (University of Leeds, UK), who have both previously published extensively on coal. An important benefit of the long period they examine is their coverage of both the pre-1947 era of private ownership of coal production, when the industry was fragmented operationally among several hundred independent enterprises, and the post-1947 era of nationalisation of production under a single National Coal Board.

The book encompasses a wide-ranging survey of existing literature not only on coal but also on strikes and industrial conflict more generally, as evidenced by the extensive bibliography. In building on earlier work and developing new approaches, Church and Outram are purposefully interdisciplinary, not only combining quantitative and qualitative methods as historians, but also bringing together theoretical concepts in industrial relations and actual practices as handled by labour historians. One innovation of the book is its concentration on strikes at the local level, mostly at the level of the colliery, in contrast to earlier tendencies to focus on nationwide or at least coalfield-wide strike activity. In consequence, though the long national strikes of 1912 and 1926 receive appropriate attention, it is not the well-studied causes of these strikes but the hitherto little-understood factors behind the large numbers of local strikes which form the main subject of this book. Data on the number of strikes were collected annually by the government from 1889; these provide a firm foundation for the study of strike patterns and causation. The key question which Church and Outram seek to an-

swer is why some collieries or localities were so markedly more strike-prone than others and why, in an industry notably strike-prone by UK standards, some localities were virtually strike-free. In attempting to provide answers, the strikes are examined not only as conflicts between workers and employers, but also as instances of co-operation among workers. This co-operation is the "solidarity" of the book's title.

After setting out their objectives and methodology in the first chapter, Church and Outram spend three chapters setting the context of the strikes, providing an incisive and fresh analysis of the organisation of the coal industry, as well as of relations between employers and employed together with their respective attitudes and outlook. There is much here to interest the historian of business and management, since the functions and attributes of the "coalowners" -- the owners and senior managers of the colliery operating companies down to 1947 -- are examined in depth. Chapters five through nine form the core of the book. Analysis of strike activity leads to the perhaps surprising conclusion, given the reputation of British miners for militancy, that local strike action frequently recruited few followers; in other words, solidarity was often limited. The precise nature of solidarity in this context is then investigated. Turning to the causes of the enormous variation in strike activity, Church and Outram test the frequently stated hypothesis that high strike activity arises from the crowding together of miners in isolated communities (in which many, though by no means all, of them lived). The results partly substantiate this hypothesis, but also suggest that the massing of miners in their workplace -- underground or on the surface at larger mines -- as well as in the wider community was an important factor in increased strike propensity. Interpretation of the size effect of mines is however difficult, since it is not clear whether the relevant factor is the overall size of the workforce or the larger number of separate work groups which a larger mine will contain. There is some

evidence that solidarity arose within groups of miners working together, such as teams extracting coal on an advancing longwall face. At the end of chapter nine, Church and Outram find that they have partially explained variations in strike propensity, but that they must also seek causes other than the structural ones so far examined. Accordingly in chapter ten they investigate statistically the types of local organisation and policies of both management and trade unions for their impact on the level of strike activity. Certain characteristics on both sides which tended towards higher levels are identified, but the mechanisms which linked the characteristics to actual strike outbreaks remain somewhat obscure. Still unexplained is the fact that collieries apparently alike in structural and organisational respects could vary markedly in strike activity. Chapter eleven, which attempts to explain this fact, is however the one weak section of the book. It compares for the interwar period nine pairs of neighbouring collieries (representing seven major coalfields) which have been matched for similar structures. Within each pair one colliery was notably strike-prone and the other notably strike-free. The problem is that, while Church and Outram admit to a shortage of information on some pairs, they nevertheless draw conclusions on the attitudes of managers and miners which are not justified, given the lack of essential details or lack of a coherent story of events over time. (This is not to say that their conclusions are necessarily wrong.) Though the evidence for many collieries is fragmented, further archival research on company records should reveal data which would allow additional and more accurate pairing of collieries and hence better substantiated conclusions.

The issue of continuity and change before and after nationalisation in 1947 is raised in chapter twelve. Change of ownership seems to have had remarkably little effect on labour relations, with the high level of local strikes which began in the late 1930s persisting through to the mid-1960s. The forces of continuity at the colliery level ap-

pear to have been strong. The same combination of structural and organisational factors with the occurrence of particular events is needed both before and after nationalisation to explain variations in strike propensity. Chapter 13 makes a valiant attempt to draw comparisons with coalmining strikes in France, Germany and the United States. The attempt is however, as Church and Outram admit, largely defeated by the inadequacy of the statistical base, though they tentatively conclude that the British experience was exceptional. In the final chapter, entitled "Myths and Realities," they emphasise that some of the conclusions they have reached challenge received views regarding coalmining strikes and so-called militancy of miners. This book, despite one significant drawback, should be read with benefit by a wide range of economic, social and cultural historians.

Judith Wale's current project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, is entitled: "Management Strategies and Business Performance in the British Coal Industry, 1914-1946."

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