

Sid Chaplin: A Writer with a Cause

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to recover the radical subtext of both the life and work of Sid Chaplin by reasserting the essentially political dimensions of his writing. Chaplin devoted the whole of his career as a writer to documenting not only the decline of the coal mining industry in the north-east of Britain where he lived, but he also traced the impact this process had on the working-class communities that were dependent on the pits. In his two later novels set in the city of Newcastle, *The Day of the Sardine* (1961) and *The Watchers and the Watched* (1962), Chaplin went on to dramatize similarly troubled changes in urban working-class life in the 1950s and 60s. The article not only argues that it is this nexus of class, politics and literature that translates so convincingly into his Newcastle novels, it also claims that it is the fundamental radicalism of his own literary project that explains the problematic neglect of his work by both critics and readers.

Keywords

Sid Chaplin, *The Day of the Sardine*, *The Watchers and the Watched*, Working-Class Politics and Literature

Sid Chaplin: The Critical Debate

In the two comprehensive collections of his writings, *In Blackberry Time* (1987) and *Hame: My Durham* (2016), Sid Chaplin (1916-1986) is not only seen as a unique and wide-ranging author in his own right, but also a defining source of inspiration to the group of northern working-class writers that emerged in Britain's postwar decades. Thus, in the foreword to the first anthology, *In Blackberry Time*, Stan Barstow recalled Chaplin's leading role in this resurgence of working-class literature: "Sid was already the senior figure, the veteran. We all acknowledged his example. *The Leaping Lad* had shown us all it was possible to write without meretriciousness from the inside of working-class life" (1987, p.12). A similar tribute is included in *Hame: My Durham*, paid by Chaplin's son, Michael, who reasserted the particular significance of Chaplin's two 'Newcastle novels' as portrayals of working-class youth on Tyneside caught in a turbulent urban transformation from tradition to modernity: "Sid entered a golden period as a writer of novels, including *The Day of the Sardine* and *The Watchers and the Watched*, his matchless evocations of young men trying to find themselves in the brave new world of Newcastle of the 1960s, both popular and critical successes" (2016, p. 229).

Together with novelists like Alan Sillitoe, David Storey, John Braine, Barry Hines and Keith Waterhouse, Chaplin belonged to a generation of working-class trailblazers that included the critical theorists Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart; playwrights such as Shelagh Delaney and Brendan Behan; film director Ken Loach; folk singers and musicians Ewan

McCull, Peggy Seeger and A. L. Lloyd; and the sculptors and painters Henry Moore and L. S. Lowry.

However, despite the apparent appeal of Chaplin's work, his novels, stories and essays have remained sadly neglected by readers and critics alike. Thus, the subtitle of D. J. Taylor's otherwise positive retrospective of his work begs the question: "Why was Sid Chaplin not more celebrated, or his books better selling?" (2016, p. 18). In another response to Chaplin, his friend and colleague, John Mapplebeck made a similar critical observation: "[W]ith the exception of a perceptive publisher like Flambard, Sid's work is no longer common currency. He seems the chronicler of a lost world" (2016, p. 2).¹ In what remains the most rigorously theoretical discussion of Chaplin's two Newcastle novels, Michael Pickering and Kevin Robins return to this same issue in order to identify more specifically the reasons for Chaplin's inability to gain the wider recognition he deserved: "This neglect seems to have come about not only because they have not enjoyed the greater public visibility resulting from adaptation into film, but also, and more importantly, because certain aspects have made them seem incompatible with the more celebrated working-class novels of their period" (1989, p. 357).

The recurring theme of several of the so-called 'kitchen sink realist' depictions of working-class life at the time was a young man's struggle to escape the constraints of class. This was done by distancing themselves from their social roots through a love relationship with a woman from the middle classes. It is this depiction of social migration that is more than problematic, however. Novels such as Alan Sillitoe's iconic, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), end up reproducing a stereotyped image of macho working-class heroes on the make. Ian Haywood also reacted to this reductive gender image of Sillitoe's main character: "Arthur's determination not to conform to standards of respectability manifests itself primarily in a vigorous sexual life. At one stage in the novel he is involved with three women" (Haywood, p. 100). A more personal denial of the working class can also be found among the writers themselves. Sillitoe is again typical in this respect. Once he had become a successful author he rejected the essential aspect of class in his own fiction. As Nigel Gray comments: "Sillitoe is like a man who uses a ladder to climb out of a pit and then asks 'What ladder?'" (Gray, p. 20). Moreover, novelists not only turned their backs on the traditional representation of working-class exploitation and struggle, they also abandoned "the world of working-class family and community in which the youth of these novels grew up" (Pickering & Robins, p. 358). In contrast, however, Sid Chaplin chose himself to remain true to his ties with the working class as well as the political causes associated with it. Once again, Ian Haywood notes: "Chaplin kept the vital issues of labour movement politics and class betrayal on the literary agenda" (Haywood, p. 119). This, I would argue, is a key to understanding Chaplin's underestimation as a writer, something that has been downplayed or ignored in the discussion of his work. It is this fundamental critical issue I want to address here. In doing so, I want to show that Chaplin's social engagement was not only grounded in his own working-class experience, it remained the ideological subtext of his whole writing career.

Sid Chaplin: His life and work

Sid Chaplin was a coal miner for 20 years, as well as an industrial reporter for the National Coal Board for a further 20 years. He remained from the beginning to the end a committed spokesperson for working people. As a young man, he was politically radicalized by the

¹ Flambard Press republished Chaplin's two 'Newcastle' novels in 2004. The publisher closed down in 2014.

outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, where he tried unsuccessfully to volunteer to fight on the Republican side. Working as a miner, he joined the National Union of Mineworkers and was member of the Labour Party, both organizations seeming to offer Chaplin a more ambitious political career within the Labour movement. His post-war years as a Methodist preacher also left a strong didactic streak that can be discerned in his later writing:

In the late 30's Sid became radicalised by the bitter hardship endured by his parents, their six children and the mining communities of south west Durham during the Depression. His first ambition was political – to fight in the Spanish Civil War, become a trade union official or even a Labour MP. But when these dreams were scuppered by the need to earn a wage and then the outbreak of war, Sid began to think seriously of another apparently unattainable goal – to become a published writer. (Michael Chaplin, 2019, p. 2)

Once he had established himself instead as a journalist and writer, Chaplin sought to give a voice to those who were “hidden from history”, in particular the miners, their families and local communities. It is within this context of historical recovery that he produced a body of work recording their lives, from the highpoint of coal production in Britain when over one million people were employed in the pits, to the final decline of the whole industry, which he foresaw. The span of his writing also covered some of the most defining struggles of the British working class – the General Strike of 1926, the Hunger Marches of the 1930s and the Great Strike of 1984-5, which signaled the death knell of coalmining in Britain.² In his novels and short stories he traced the closure of the mines, a process that had such a devastating impact on towns and villages throughout the northern counties of Durham and Northumberland. While writing his two most ambitious novels set in the regional capital of Newcastle, *The Day of the Sardine* (1961) and *The Watchers and the Watched* (1962), he also depicted the demolition of large parts of the inner city and the suburban displacement of working-class families. It was the social breakup of Britain that left a trail of fragmentation that still characterizes society today.

In an interview carried out by Peter Pickering and Kevin Robins, Chaplin was asked about the political dimensions of his own writing. The reply he gave is revealing: while he didn't believe in either “agitprop” or waiting for “the ideal socialist state to come”, he nevertheless saw as his prime task to create a fictional record of the world of work (Hawthorn, 1984, p. 149). As an example of this kind of writing, he suggested documenting the experience of working in a car factory. This focus on modern assembly line production clearly appealed to Chaplin as part of a literary challenge to capture the condition of workers who, like the miners, were on the receiving end of job mechanization, rationalization and long-term unsustainability:

What I do believe in is sensible writing about things that count. And I think there are great big gaps – it appalls me that there has never been a novel about life in a motor car factory. I'd love to see it [...] I've got to record as well, and I try to do that. (1984, p. 149)

Another major writing project in this context, one that was unfortunately never finished, was an epic work depicting the history of the Durham miners. It was a book perhaps only Chaplin could have written, himself a miner, trade unionist and radical local journalist. It would not only trace the rise and fall of the coal industry in the area, but also the whole way of life that

² For a comprehensive background to these historical events, see further, Huw Beynon & Ray Hudson, *The Shadow of the Mine: Coal and the End of Industrial Britain*. (2021).

supported it. The extraction of coal has moreover always been a political act in Britain. This was perhaps one of the foremost examples of Chaplin's avowed mission to place his writing at the service of ordinary people, both present and future:

Somewhere in those scattered notes there is an epic story: who knows I may be the right man in the right place, and the miner in the distant north and this forgotten county may live in a book long after the last ton of coal has been drawn to the surface, when curious sightseers may find the ruins of pit-head and pulley-wheel as quaint and historical as Pele Tower and Roman Wall? (Sid Chaplin, 2016, p. 243)

The Day of the Sardine

There is a significant political presence in Chaplin's two Newcastle novels, a form of consciousness of class, race and gender that I want to explore in more detail here. From the outset in *The Day of the Sardine* (1961), the reader is struck by the influence, both private and public, the figure of Uncle George has on Arthur, the main character in the novel. As a Labour councilor, Uncle George has a patriarchal finger in many pies, usually involving some form of corporate graft. Workers are at the mercy of his small-scale nepotism in order to keep their jobs. Uncle George's network of personal ties has evolved over time through different levels of building contracting and a local council that keeps a firm political grip on a working-class city like Newcastle.³ In Chaplin's novel, *The Day of the Sardine*, Uncle George is without doubt meant to personify two sides of the same bent coin: a Labour chairman who pulls the town planning strings while also promoting the electoral interests of a Party that is meant to stay true to the traditions of the workers' movement: "'Who was this Ernie Bevin?' [Arthur] asked. 'Ye never heard of Ernie Bevan? The Dockers' KC? The greatest Labour leader of all time – the man that did more to win the war than Churchill! It only goes to show what the modern generation is ...we've toiled an' moiled - they ask us who Ernie Bevan was...'" (Sid Chaplin, 2004a, p. 46). Despite Arthur's feigned ignorance, the young man's reply nevertheless shows him to be already aware, not only of radical trade union leaders like Frank Cousins, but also some of the more threatening existential issues of the time: "'Give me Cousins every day. I chipped in, knowing his prejudices. 'There's a man that sticks to his principles on that stinkin' H-bomb and everything'" (Sid Chaplin, 2004a, p. 47).

Arthur is a working-class youth whose prospects are initially thwarted by the need to help out with the family income. When he starts work as a building labourer, a job arranged by his Uncle, this places him both physically and symbolically at the centre of urban development in Newcastle itself. A city makeover that also opens up new opportunities for backhanders, perks and payoffs in which Arthur is at first more than willing to participate:

She knew as well as me that the old faker could put by with all the extras he got from union business, committees, sitting on this and that; and I won't go any

³ It was in the 1960s that this local power relationship in Newcastle was personified by the Labour councilor, T. Dan Smith, who conflated his own interests as a politician and city developer. See further: Chris Foote Wood, *T. Dan Smith "Voice of the North" Downfall of a Visionary: The Life of the North-East's Most Charismatic Champion* (2010).

further because everybody knows that in this country nobody ever makes anything on the side out of public service. Ah, Ah, Ah! ‘When do I start.’ (Sid Chaplin, 2004a, p. 49)

At the same time society is moving towards a consumerist lifestyle that seems to offer more social mobility, especially among young people. Chaplin’s key “Teddy Boy” figure of Arthur epitomizes this new, individualistic identity.⁴ Working-class “teenagers”, (another subcultural label invented at the time), were at the forefront of a counterculture of rock-and-roll music, juke boxes, coffee bars, drain-pipe jeans and brylcreem, denoting a ‘generation gap’ that caused moral panic among many parents. Teddy Boys were also linked to gang violence and sexual promiscuity. It is a mixed-up world of material self-gratification under the Cold War shadow of atomic annihilation.

Chaplin’s troubled working-class hero, Arthur, is very much a product of these shifting social and sexual tensions. On the one hand his involvement in Saturday night fights with other teenage gangs sustains his macho reputation also when it comes to the seduction of young women. At the same time, his loyalty to the gang is challenged by the very different worldview he comes into contact with on the building site. Here in the conversations he has with his older workmates, a more critical understanding of class formation and consciousness begins to emerge:

‘Everybody knows there’s different classes’, I said. ‘Everybody knows,’ he snorted. ‘And that makes it so. But it’s just imagination. You and your pals could get together and make a caste and get as much satisfaction as the nobs among yourselves. Know that. Gang of Teddy Boys or whatever they call them now are no different from the nobs that keep themselves – and the cushy jobs – to themselves. (Sid Chaplin, 2004a, p. 122)

There is without doubt a level of frustrated ambition in Chaplin’s image of working-class youth at this time, of young men and women who want to change their lives, but have no clear idea how or into what. The conclusion is moreover that those with privilege and power are never really threatened by unruly working-class youths like Arthur who remain rebels without a cause. The metaphor in the title of the novel’s title also reflects this illusory freedom of small fry that have their day in the sea, before being caught, tinned and sold:

I watch the sardines moving along the little conveyor; a silver stream from the sea bound for the place where they’re shuffled tail to head and head to tail and slid into the boxes. There I go. Stiff and straight and swimming in the gravy, but that’s no consolation when the lid’s clamped down. (Sid Chaplin, 2004a, p. 291)

At one significant point Arthur gets involved with Dorothy, the idealistic daughter of a local Methodist minister, both of whom exert a strong emotional influence on him, not least because of the father’s first-hand experience of class oppression. Chaplin’s own conversion as a radical preacher can also be detected here, where religion is not so much an escapist “opium of the people”, but an accusatory “sigh of the oppressed, the heart of a heartless world”, to quote Karl Marx, (p. 41):

⁴ See further: Jon Savage, “The invention of the Teddy boy”. (2024).

He'd taken a five-quid passage to Canada and had slaved for a maniac farmer for two or three years; and worked in a West Virginia coalmine where the hand of the Lord had preserved him from the company cops during a strike and stretched out into the mine when it blew up to save him and three more. He'd ended up in a Bronx Mission where the idea came to him to take the trip home and start away for himself preaching the Gospel. He'd lost his wife. His stipend wouldn't have kept a sparrow but he sang like a thrush. He'd been born kind but stayed kind. (Sid Chaplin, 2004a, p. 206-7)

In his own semi-delinquent way, Arthur helps to create the conditions for a more precarious urban environment, one without the ties that previously kept people together as a community. Chaplin sensed himself the negative cultural and psychological implications of unfettered shopping based on the 'never-never' installments of hire purchase debt. Thus, the story ends on a note of radical alienation, looking back on a previous way of life that served ordinary people well, despite the hardships. In his novels, Chaplin contrasts the social cohesion of village communities with the plate glass anonymity of the big city.⁵ Thus, symbolically, the novel concludes with Arthur imagining himself sailing away on one of the oil tankers leaving the river Tyne for "Persia and sunshine". In reality, however, this temporary escape only offers another locus of petty cronyism to which he will eventually have to return:

It's the same the whole world over, they say, and sometimes worse; I wish they'd give everybody a chance to find out for themselves. All they give you is a decko at the TV or pictures. And meantime you're supposed to be making a living on a dead-end site under a pack of phonies like Uncle George and Sam Sproget, or other characters that think they're doing well for themselves by bearing down on the lambs and shearing the sheep. It makes you sick. It's all a dirty rotten trap. (Sid Chaplin, 2004a, p. 197)

The Watchers and the Watched

Chaplin's second novel set in Newcastle, *The Watchers and the Watched* (1962), produced conflicting responses from contemporary critics. Michael Chaplin characterized the work as "matchless" as the first (*Hame*, p. 229). Melvyn Bragg was more hesitant, suggesting in his forward to the reprint that "It may be his best novel" (2004, p. 6). Anthony Burgess described it in his review as "gloriously comic and moving" (*Blackberry*, 1987, p. 197). In contrast, dissecting the sociopolitical aspects of the novel, Pickering and Robins voiced the following reservations:

Despite its confrontation with important social issues and the question of working-class culture, *The Watchers and the Watched* is ultimately a flawed novel because Chaplin retreats from the challenge to the comfort of an older,

⁵ In his later novel, *Sam in the Morning* (1965), Chaplin ends on a note of complete urban desolation: "I have a vague impression of walking down below in streets which are valleys. I travel the city, looking for a friend whose name I do not know. The streets are long and its buildings are as high as the sky. So high that you must not look up while you ring door-bells which bring no response and knock at doors that stay shut. It is the valley of dry bones. I never look up. Up there makes you and ruins you. It is a barren land where winners lose all as well as losers. Sometimes you doubt your own identity. Something is missing and it is still missing when you reach out and touch a living woman in the dark. Something is always missing." (Sid Chaplin, 1965, p. 275)

idealized working-class order. The novel narrows into a spurious narrative resolution where a more open, questioning, and unforced form seems to be appropriate. (1989, p. 365)

Ostensibly, the novel revolves around the domestic tensions that the main character, Tim “Tiger” Mason, experiences during the first few months of being married to his pregnant girlfriend, Jean. However, *The Watcher and the Watched* is also without doubt Chaplin’s most sustained political interrogation of the lives working-class people facing social and economic upheaval. Melvyn Bragg sums up Tiger’s development as a trajectory that “follows the initiation into manhood through marriage of a man who is thwarted by circumstances” (2004, p. 2). It needs to be added however that these circumstances also include his active involvement in combatting rackrenting slum landlords and racism. In both cases, Tiger draws strength from an older man, this time his politically radical father, who helps him understand these issues in a wider context of immigration, poverty and crime.⁶ The political becomes more personal when Tiger and his wife, Jean, choose not only to confront their landlord for their own sakes. They also support their neighbors who are the victims of the same criminal gangs who threaten them with eviction. Tiger’s relationship with his father is at the core of this narrative, embodying as he does different ways of living against the grain, as though society were already on the cusp of radical change. Thus, their family home represents a utopian space, not least for fellow travelers who pass through, sharing different visionary ideas about a better world:

Sometimes he wondered if he’d ever known his father. Then out of the past would come that picture of a lithe, active young feller who was always good for an argument, always ready to bring company home, especially the kind of company that gives food for thought in return for a cup of tea and something to go with it. Local councilors, union men, itinerant preachers of religion or socialism, traveling actors, extraordinary tramps. (Sid Chaplin, 2004b, p.108)

In *The Watchers and the Watched*, Chaplin returns to the theme of slum clearance and its replacement by apartment blocks made of brutalist concrete. However, in this second novel, he also projects an alternative image of resistance, where people choose to remain in their ramshackle homes that nevertheless allow them to stay close to family and friends. Tiger and Jean are also directly affected by the threats when they openly support the occupation of houses by their neighbors. Moreover, it is through their encounter with Two Step, an Asian ex-boxer turned local activist that they experience more organized grassroots struggle:

‘Who’s the little chap?’ ‘Ye don’t know him!’ said the conductor. ‘That’s the laddo!’ ‘That’s ol’ Two Step, the ol’ flyweight He’s fighten’ their case for them.’ ‘So that’s him!’ said Tiger. Everybody knew of Two Step, the fly little ex-pug, who was always in the storm centre: evictions, street fights, or elections. His name was legendary along the Road. (Sid Chaplin, 2004b, p. 171)

⁶ In his later novel, *Sam in the Morning*, Chaplin includes a portrayal of yet another politically radical family member, Uncle James, who is an avowed anarchist. A case could perhaps be made for Chaplin being sympathetic to anarchism. In a letter from Uncle James to Sam Rowlands, the hero of the novel, Chaplin shows just how politically informed he himself could be: “You will be glad to hear that I still get along to the Bigg Market and my gang of Old Faithfuls; you’ll doubtless laugh but I feel that the Time is Always Ripe; that the bottom is dropping out of the old-style unions and the Parliamentary wangle; and that one day the people (there are no longer workers, but then none of our Founders were workers) will come to their senses and see the big sell-out for what it is worth. [...] It’s all right you laughing, but the evidence is all against you. One day you’ll find out that it’s anarchism or bust; death or glory; and that your muddled old uncle was right all the time.” (Sid Chaplin, 1989, p. 113).

The shortage of cheap housing and the ensuing friction between ethnic groups also make them the object of racist attacks with the landlord playing one family against another. When tenants start to act together, racist slurs are spread to confuse and cloud the issue. It is one of the strengths of Chaplin's novel that he does not underestimate the influence of racial prejudice among working people. He makes it clear however that the ultimate function of racism is to divert tenants away from their common interests. It is against these everyday problems of racism that Chaplin sets his own more complex view of the liberated "Swinging Sixties". Chaplin also reiterates that it is only through class solidarity that such divisions can be overcome. This unequal and combined level of class and racial consciousness is expressed succinctly by Angus, one of the local residents: "We've got to have these folk. We need them. Otherwise, no buses, no trains, no caffs, no expansion. No, ye've got to fight Finch an' ye've got to fight prejudice an' ye've got to fight natural processes: and ye've about as much chance as a cat in hell 'They'll never shift me outa my place'" (Sid Chaplin, 2004b, p. 286).

One of more powerful collective symbols that are highlighted in the novel are the trade union banners that were paraded on marches, demonstrations and strikes. It is a tradition Chaplin clearly thinks needed to be upheld. These lodge banners were lovingly embroidered with portraits of famous Labour leaders and slogans going back to the beginnings of the Labour movement: "Workers of the world unite", "The future is ours through socialism", "Organise, Agitate, Educate".⁷ The radical reputation of mining villages like Chopwell in County Durham, known as "Little Moscow" during the 1926 General Strike, is still remembered because of its revolutionary banner. Not as an act of mourning, but as a collective celebration of battles fought, lost and won. Moreover, these banners also contained iconic representations of the mutual cooperation on which miners depended every day working underground.

There is also a direct reference in the novel to the annual "Big Meeting" of the Miners' Gala in Durham that still attracts thousands of workers and their families in a festival of solidarity and struggle. It is another radical core memory that is passed on to Tiger by Two Step:

'Some day we'll have the processions again,' said Two Step. We'll march through the streets with pomp and circumstance – ordinary people will! It'll be like Blaydon Races, only better. There'll be floats with folk dancin' on them, there'll be all the unions wearin' sashes and carryin' banners, there'll be bands – everythin', with noise an' colour an' music made by people [...] Give people a chance an' they'll flock together,' said Two Step. We've lost the art of catchin' people. An' that's the only way to get them outa their houses ... with a hell of a big procession, the biggest ever, and a procession with a meaning (Sid Chaplin, 2004b, p. 276)

In this second Newcastle novel, Chaplin re-engages with the function of the Labour Party as an established working-class domain that would allow Tiger to develop his talents as a community leader. At the same time, Tiger remains skeptical of its structural levels of bureaucracy that impinge on his chances of making things fundamentally better for the people of Newcastle. There is therefore an ideological clash in the novel between individual self-seeking and genuine political engagement. In the figure of Tiger, Chaplin is clearly revisiting

⁷ See further: John Gorman, *Banner Bright*, 1973.

some of the divided loyalties⁸ he himself must have felt during his years as a public relations officer for the employers' National Coal Board and ordinary miners themselves:

'Ah want to help folk,' said Tiger. 'And that's a dull job, said the old man. 'Ye'll have to go into politics. No use thinkin' ye can go dancin' around like old Two Step'. 'A've no fancy for politics.' 'Ye'll have less when ye get into them. But it's the only way a young feller like you can do any good. It's a painful job an' what it lacks is heart, lad, heart.' (Sid Chaplin, 2004b, p. 312)

However, despite Tiger's initial reluctance, it is the emotional pull of his father and his radical legacy that allows him to regain a sense of direction of where he comes from and where he is going, questions that lie at the radical heart of the novel:

How was he to know that in the walk up the street he had put the matter to rights? In some strange way he had become himself, and at the same time he had taken in his father. He was his father as well as himself. The wound was healed. He was complete. He had taken his father's hope on his shoulders. (Sid Chaplin, 2004b, p. 340)

Tiger's turn from individualism to group activism are two trajectories that remain intertwined. There is therefore no unequivocal conclusion to the novel. It is a story of its time, although not one of a lost generation. The youth revolt of the 1950s and 60s also paved the way for the welfare state, women's liberation, decolonization and a working-class cultural revolution in Britain. Chaplin's work formed an integral part of this radical sea change. It is also why he remained something of a political outsider, not one easily assimilated by the wave of postwar northern working-class writers that followed in his wake.

Conclusion

This article argues for a fundamental critical reassessment of the fiction of Sid Chaplin that situates his work more radically as a writer with a pronounced political direction. One that places Chaplin both at the heart of the resurgence of British working-class writing in the 1950s and 60s, while also maintaining a consciousness of class that was relatively unique at the time. Moreover, it is argued that this radical preoccupation explains why he remained more marginalised in the critical debate about the image of the working-class in the so-called "kitchen sink realism" of the then contemporary novel. This literary and political problematic is made particularly evident in Chaplin's two "Newcastle" novels which explore the clash between individual escape and collective resistance in the narratives.

A clearer biographical connection to this commitment to class is also claimed through Chaplin's working both as a coal miner and industrial reporter for the National Coal Board, roles that kept him in close touch with working people for more than 40 years. It was within this class context that Chaplin was able to critique the bureaucratic norms and careerism of the official Labour and Trade Union movement, a theme he returns to in the two Newcastle novels. This everyday point of social contact sustained his underlying belief in the democratic capacity

⁸ Chaplin's wife, Rene Chaplin, writes: "He became Coal's roving reporter, criss-crossing Britain during the early 50s in a little light aircraft piloted by his photographer Harry Smead. Many of the jobs were routine – profiling managers, writing features on new machinery and old pitmen. But he also came to expect the call in the middle of the night: the times when he had to hurriedly pack and take himself off to a far corner of Britain. And steel himself for what was to come. They'd been another disaster" (*Blackberry*, 2016, p. 157).

of ordinary working men and women to transform and regenerate society in a more rational, equitable and humane way. It was this personal experience that provided the radical premise for Chaplin's own literary project: to recapture and celebrate an essential working-class way of life through the art of fiction.

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