Gildea, R. (2023) *Backbone of the Nation: Mining Communities and the Great Strike of 1984-85*. Yale University Press.

Review by **Jamie Owen Daniel**

In 1976, Raymond Williams was asked to prepare a speech to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the General Strike of 1926. In "The Social Significance of 1926," Williams began, as he so often did, from the personal, by grounding his remarks first in the experiences and subsequent memories of his own family, and then more broadly of his South Wales community, and then of his class. He refers to his militantly pro-union father and his colleagues as "a small group of men in a very specific social situation," members of a working-class community that had "the potential of solidarity already physically present within it" because of the labor of the people who lived in it and their material interdependence. His community's active support throughout the strike and that of similarly militant communities was therefore "the self-realization of the capacity of a class, in its own sufficient social relations." And because of this, the strike was a defeat, but not a failure.

Robert Gildea's meticulously documented and compassionate book, published on the 40th anniversary of the mining strike of 1984-85, likewise commemorates an extraordinary resurgence of "the capacity of a class" in response to brutal and ruthless state power that sought to crush that capacity. Most of the dominant narratives of the strike read it as naïve and tragic, a victory for Margaret Thatcher that "broke the back" of Britain's most militant union, and with it, the capacity for resistance of a once-unified working class.

In contrast, Gildea also frames the crushing of the strike as a defeat, not a failure. He contextualizes the strike as the logical continuation, and to a great extent the culmination, of a long struggle between the miners and the British state. Coal production had been essential to the iron, steel, textile and other industries, so much so that, by 1913, over a million men, one in ten male workers, was a miner. These numbers, and the extent to which the nation and indeed the British empire depended on coal to function, resulted in the miners becoming the most muscular and best-organized constituency of the working class.

And they exercised their muscle, regularly striking for safer working conditions and a "family wage." The state increasingly exercised its muscle in response, such as when Home Secretary Winston Churchill ordered the army to brutally put down a Welsh miners' revolt in 1910. The memories of this event, as well as of subsequent strikes and confrontations with state power – including those in 1926, 1972, and 1974 – were passed down from generation to generation in the mining communities as a source of class and community pride. Raymond Williams, for example, was just 5 years old in 1926, but that strike was a "memory" that he referred to with pride throughout his life.

The British coal industry was nationalized in 1947. Thereafter, mining was increasingly mechanized, and eventually oil replaced coal as the dominant fuel source. As a result, the state began to close coal pits, often forcing families to move from the communities in which they were rooted to those with still-open pits, or leaving workers unemployed in communities that had been built around the mine. These working-class communities were increasingly being "hollowed out," as Gildea puts it, by state indifference fed by long-term Tory antagonism toward their class-based identities.

It was thus predominantly in response to rampant pit closings that the strike was organized. Gildea relies on interviews with miners, from militant activists to those who were against what would clearly be a confrontation with the Thatcher government, to provide the background for the eventual walkouts in South Wales, England, and Scotland. As Welsh activist Sian James put it, by the time it was called, the strike "had the inevitability of a train wreck." Eventually, the majority of the lodges, but by no means all, voted to walk out. The pickets went up on March 6, 1984, and the union finally succumbed on March 3, 1985.

Gildea describes in detail the vicious attacks on the miners at Orgreave and elsewhere, when Thatcher sent out army soldiers on horseback disguised as police to beat and brutalize the unarmed strikers. Thatcher also authorized cancelling the coal allowances usually provided for local families, thus leaving them in freezing conditions in the winter months. The book is not just about the experiences of the miners themselves, but also focuses on those of their communities as they self-organized to support their striking men and to draw financial and political support from across the nation and, eventually, the world. This broad and inclusive approach allows for the rich social density of the individual chapters.

Among these are a chapter on queer activist support organizations like the London-based Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM), later represented in the film *Pride* (Matthew Warchus, 2014). Here as throughout, Gildea relies on interviews with both mining community members and queer activists who eventually collaborated on providing funding for food and other essential resources since the striking miners received only a tiny strike fund allowance, not anywhere near their working wage.

The chapter on LGSM, together with those documenting the considerable self-organization of miners' wives and other women supporting the strike, provide a thoughtful focus on the impact of the strike on gender relations in families in which "traditional" gender roles had been taken for granted. Women were the first to accept and welcome the support of queer activists; they formed women's organizations to provide soup kitchens and food parcels for impacted families. They gathered winter clothing to distribute, and solicited help from supporters throughout Britain and beyond. One now-grown woman recalled a surprise treat of chocolate sent from East Germany to help provide a somewhat normal Christmas celebration for miners' children.

The extent to which women stepped forward and took on public roles was not always met with gratitude from their striking men, who traditionally understood themselves as the proper "heads of households." Already unable to provide for their families and feeling the weight of expectations that they should be doing so, some men took it out on their wives. Some couples didn't survive the

strike. Some women went on to stay active in public life, earning university degrees and even winning seats as MPs in Parliament.

Gildea's history of 1984-85, enriched by his reliance on the voices of the working-class men and women who participated in that strike and experienced its aftermath, is a model for what working-class history can be, incorporating both first-person testimony and historical contextualization and giving each equal epistemological authority. There is much for us to learn from this book about class solidarity and resilience, even in the face of defeat.

Raymond Williams, like Gildea, focused on the tension between the past and the present, and particularly that between working-class pasts and present-day narratives that negate or erase them. What remains, or should remain and be remembered, of past struggles? Are they ever really past? And how can the memory of these past struggles be brought into newer formations that understand collective working-class memory as a tool of resistance?

Gildea's book is a powerful example of such a tool of resistance as we enter a period in which such tools will again be urgently required.

Reviewer Bio:

Jamie Owen Daniel is a retired union organizer and university professor. She divides her time between Chicago and a small working-class community in central Vermont.