

RED HISTORY WARS?
COMMUNIST PROPAGANDA AND THE MANIPULATION OF CELTIC HISTORY IN
THE THIRTIES

Antony Howe

Abstract

The theme of the 2007 Celtic Studies Foundation Conference was ‘Celts in Legend and Reality: Ancient and Modern.’ This paper looks at communist propaganda that packaged a leftist form of national history. In the British Isles this set off debate over how ‘History’ could be used and abused in the dubious service of propaganda for an avowedly internationalist Marxist party. The awkward fact of multiple national pasts was glossed over and the ‘line’ was clumsily implemented by the British party centre in London. A grab-bag of bits of ‘English’ history was adopted that ignored nearly all ‘Celtic’ history. The Scottish and Welsh party districts reacted very differently, the Scots alone successfully resisting this affront.¹

Red Armband History

The dependence of the Communist Party of Great Britain [CPGB] on Moscow for money, policy direction, and even choices of leadership has been well covered.² Less well known is the impact the ‘line’ from Moscow had on the party’s approach to issues such as national identity, the related recourse to ‘History’ (both English and Celtic), and the impact these manipulations had within the party and its allies. Any hint of nationalism was a toxic topic on the left in the era of fascism. Decreed by Moscow, this ‘line’ was in response to fascist demagoguery and meant to claim legitimacy through local roots. But it was one thing in Moscow to set this very general ‘line’, quite another to implement it in Dundee. For Scottish insiders a sincerely fought mini Red History War broke out as they witnessed the ‘line’ from London imposed on Wales, so they sought to block or at least reshape it, and to get their rival interpretations adopted during the ‘Popular Front’ era of the mid to late Thirties. Nonetheless, in Dundee people

¹ I wish to thank Malcolm Broun for hosting my earliest presentation of this paper at the S.S.S.H., and Sybil Jack for her crucial help in slashing the paper when it grew beyond reasonable length.

² One of several recent analyses using Russian archives is Andrew Thorpe, *British Communist Party and Moscow 1920-43* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

poured ‘ridicule’ on the CPGB’s sudden pretensions to be the torchbearer for a truly national Scottish history of struggles for freedom.

From its origin in the Twenties and early Thirties, the party had had a very strong Scottish contingent in its top ranks. Its future M.P. was William Gallacher, a Scot, representing West Fife from 1935 to 1950. He had even met Lenin at a meeting of the Communist International (‘Comintern’), a meeting he memorialised often. Significantly Lenin there persuaded him of the need to put ‘British’ working class solidarity ahead of any vestigial nationalism inherent in his loyalty to John Maclean’s popular call for a separate Scottish Socialist Republic. Gallacher then used all his persuasive powers to convert other Scots to Lenin’s view, and they played vital roles in forming a viable British party in 1920. Consistently, until Moscow was to later invert such instructions in 1935, the ‘Comintern’ opposed any form of racial or nationalist emphasis.³

The CPGB opposed imperialist propaganda, seeing it as a cause of war and oppression. Consequently any use of British history in propaganda was significantly circumscribed: a ‘Red Armband’ style of history. Instead the party favoured fervent celebration of international anniversaries such as the Russian Revolutions, the Paris Commune, and sundry rebellions. Moscow wanted to destroy the British Empire, so at all costs the British party had to work to this end, avoiding even a whiff of jingoism. The Amritsar Massacre in India, or the Irish Easter Rising, were to be remembered, the better to be excoriated. Attacks on the Union Jack as an Imperial emblem were rife in the 1935 Royal Jubilee as part of this incendiary proletarian activism. There was little utilisation of British history in party publications or training propaganda before 1936, as if there was no radical local history to celebrate. At most there was the occasional rhetorical flourish, with a vague mention or use of ‘traditions’, such as the oblique inference of historical Chartism in the ‘Charter’ campaign in 1930-32.⁴ The party was more comfortable with infrequent mentions of some early socialists, and Trades Unionists, with a sporadic historical commentary on relatively contemporary material such as the 1926 General

³ James D. Young, ‘Marxism and the Scottish National Question’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 18, no. 1. (1983), pp. 147 ff.

⁴ Antony Howe, “‘The Past Is Ours:’ The Political Usage of English History by the British Communist Party, and the Role of Dona Torr in the Creation of its Historians’ Group, 1930-1956’ (Unpublished PhD, University of Sydney, 2004), pp. 54-66.

Strike or the Invergordon Mutiny. In stark contrast, the wider left ran many education historical courses through unions and the Workers' Education Authority.⁵

Communists in Britain, previously confident they were the wave of the future, were rudely upset in 1933-34 by Hitler's unexpected success in rapidly crushing the German Communist Party, the largest outside the Soviet Union.⁶ Reluctantly the Comintern abandoned ideological ultra-purity to endorse new alliances, and its Seventh Congress in Moscow in 1935 inaugurated the 'Popular Front', leading to big changes in propaganda. The Comintern General Secretary, Georgi Dimitrov, demanded responses to "Fascist demagogy and the falsification of history." Variations of the phrase resounded in the British party, even in Scotland.⁷ The previous era of sectarianism, when the CPGB drove away potential leftist allies, abruptly ended. The militancy and rhetoric familiar up to 1935, with Union Jacks being torn down by activists in Glasgow marches, and scuffles with police, was replaced by ranks of well dressed and orderly marchers commemorating their country's past.⁸

'The Past Is Ours'

Communist parties world-wide now insisted on confronting fascist presentations of a glorious, even Volkish, past. But the Comintern, the fount of a rarefied internationalist, revolutionary rhetoric, was inherently ill equipped to provide guidance for a localised approach on historical issues. The problem varied depending on local traditions and the skills of local members, few national parties had a range of accepted interpretations to promote. The French were perhaps the best placed as *L'Humanité*, the party daily paper, organised a 'Grande Fete', a 'Gorgeous Pageant', and a

⁵ Howe, 'The Past is Ours', pp. 46 ff.

⁶ Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *Harry McShane: No Mean Fighter* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), pp. 213-214; Douglas Hyde, *I Believed* (London: Reprint Society, 1952), pp. 55-56.

⁷ G. Dimitrov, in *Daily Worker* (5th August, 1935), p. 2. Phrase, 'fascist falsifiers' in 'Programme of the Pageant of Scottish History', Glasgow, 1938 (dated by internal evidence), Glasgow University Library, p. 4.

⁸ '10,000 March in Glasgow,' May Day, *Daily Worker* (2nd May, 1935), p. 2. Events, *Daily Worker* (6th May, 1935), p. 1; on well dressed Lewis Day, 'England Expects,' *Discussion*, #9 (November, 1936), p. 26.

ballet symbolic of local revolutionary history.⁹ Similarly, the Americans began to insist on the “Americanness of the Party and the adoption of previously eschewed American patriotic symbols.”¹⁰ But many other parties had little by way of modern revolutionary credentials, yet were also expected to suddenly clothe themselves in ‘traditions.’ Almost by default the emphasis was often bizarrely nationalist.

Recalling the party’s startling turnaround on this type of propaganda, the famous apostate from communism, Douglas Hyde, recalled that due to the alien sounding ‘Bolsheviks,’ and taint of ‘Moscow gold’,

There had undeniably been something ‘alien’ about the party. ... [so] in the ’30s, during the popular front period, we had tried to strike the national note. ... we had held great demonstrations in the big cities under the slogan ‘the past is ours’ aimed at proving that we were really the most ‘British’ of all parties.¹¹

Publicly, the CPGB abandoned the requirement of impeccable revolutionary credentials. To the disgust of some, a startling array of nationalist rebels of all stripes, and even just moderates, were now to be celebrated in the ‘Past Is Ours’ campaign which began in September 1936.¹² A historically oriented procession premiered in London, to be repeated a few weeks later in Sheffield. Around 20 such national events took place around the country in fits and starts.¹³ Celtic variants only appear to have been held in South Wales (in 1937 and 1939); plus three or more in Scotland, which all appear bunched in mid 1938.

A ‘*Boy’s Own*’ English Template

⁹ The French Party’s Paris daily, report in *Daily Worker* (11th September, 1937), p. 4.

¹⁰ Harvey Klehr, J.E. Haynes, and F.I. Firsov (eds), *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 203.

¹¹ Hyde, *I Believed*, p. 166.

¹² Lewis Day, sneering about this appeal to ‘bowler hatted ... Liberals,’ *ibid.*

¹³ Howe, ‘The Past is Ours,’ pp. 138 ff., 691-696.

The CPGB had eschewed British history for fifteen years, so it was badly placed to create an ultra-left pantheon almost overnight. By 1936 the party had hardly any historians left in its ranks, but suddenly was obliged to disburse unprecedented resources on a totally new style of 'tradition' themed campaign, an approach they had never attempted before, and which went against the established grain. This sudden adoption of a wide pantheon of heroes from 1936 was blatantly obvious to party members who were used to a strong emphasis on foreign history and militant internationalism. There was little notice given in London, so one suspects much fell to amateurs and old time propagandists who hastily threw together an incongruous range of rebels from the national past, boldly (or foolishly) asserting they were suitable heroes for the left. The party also drew on allied organisations in and around London, and scripting and planning often used many of the same personnel and ideas, especially from the related groups of Writers and Artists who provided a powerful impetus to utilising historical material in banners, articles, novels and plays. Organisations of newly recruited students and party historians followed the initiation of this new 'line', rather than causing it.¹⁴ Over time they contributed more sophisticated fare, even some history textbooks for party use, but that was in the future. To swiftly celebrate wide swathes of national history, the simplest solution was to dust off a veritable '*Boy's Own*' range of heroes.

The first march in September 1936 in London, unashamedly emphasised 'English history,' using over sixty big (6' by 4'), bold and plain, pictorial banners interspersed with text, ideal for visibility from a distance. They were produced by the 'Hogarth Group,' the party's artists in London.¹⁵ Most were reused in the almost identical history marches in Sheffield and South Wales. Gone were the banners of Stalin, Marx, and others. The party was now seeking mainstream respectability, to rally all

¹⁴ Howe, 'The Past is Ours.' The role of party intellectuals in organizing historians during 1938-40 and after the war, is outlined with fuller references in Antony Howe, 'Dona Torr,' in Keith Gildart and David Howell (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Volume XII* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 275-282, and Antony Howe, 'Robin Page-Arnot,' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ These history banners were not at all like the lavishly produced, and long-lived, Trades Union banners that are described in the books by John Gorman.

anti-fascists, hence, the banners started with people and incidents covering 700 years of English history from Magna Carta, the Peasants' Rising, Thomas More, and the 1640s Civil War Levellers.¹⁶ This introductory smattering of major pre-industrial era topics, then jumped more than a century to Tom Paine, introducing the main focus on the industrial and revolutionary era. But alongside Trades Unionists and other undoubtedly leftist forebears, many nineteenth century radical or Whig/Liberal figures were also prominent on banners. Other portraits were of Establishment cultural figures, familiar from school, such as Milton, Shelley and Byron. Previous ultra-militant stunts and provocations (even vandalism) were abruptly banished. Now this march had a banner explicitly disavowing violence, with the words: "Justice hath a sword in her hand to use against all violence."¹⁷ Many banners were of recent events such as the 1919 solidarity of British dock workers with the Russian Revolution, which had involved the party's future leader, Harry Pollitt. It ended commemorating the death a few weeks before of artist Felicia Browne, "fighting for liberty in Spain."

The banners also served to introduce the presence of living legends such as Sylvia Pankhurst and Tom Mann, also in the march, and again at the subsequent rally. They served the crucial purpose of adding legitimacy to the party's claim to be the culmination of a continuous labour movement lineage.¹⁸ These moves were presumably intended to improve the prospects of the Communist Party's application to affiliate to the Labour Party, which had been made prior to Labour's forthcoming Conference in Edinburgh in October.

¹⁶ Barry McLoughlin, 'Proletarian Academics or Party Functionaries? Irish Communists at the International Lenin School, Moscow, 1927-1937' *Saothar*, vol. 22 (1997), p. 65. I wish to thank one of the then editors of *Saothar*, Dr E. O'Connor for supplying me with this article.

¹⁷ The block and text being on banners in the 1936 'March of English History' (and visible in the Kino film of it), National Film Archive, London. Few illustrations exist of the other marches so this film is a crucial overview of the 'Past is Ours' type history march, note that many banners went to other cities.

¹⁸ This theme is developed in Antony Howe, "'Our Only Ornament': Tom Mann as Communist Icon' *Twentieth Century Communism: A Journal of International History*, vol. 1 (2009).

As a mark of its propaganda importance, the London march was filmed by Kino Films and released as *'We Are The English'* in late October.¹⁹ For a 'British' party whose sole MP was elected from Scotland, this brazenly English emphasis showed a startling degree of insensitivity.²⁰ The film revealed that the banners of text acted like captions and this narrative made the march a more coherent spectacle, both for bystanders and in the silent film. The decision to put scarce resources into filming suggests it was intended for use afterwards around the country as a tool for internal discussion and explanation of the new Popular Front line. Party members were expected to be militant activists, not passive. Although the march was an initiative from above, the CPGB required its members to follow the lead, to take the new line and propagate it outside the party, in discussions at work, and whenever possible. But the Anglo-centrism of the film must have rendered it useless in the large Districts of Scotland and Wales.

The extent of the Communist assertion in 1936-37 that the 'Past Is Ours', is strikingly illustrated by the standardised cover artwork used in several of the earliest souvenir programmes and posters, in both England and Wales, and reproduced here.²¹ At the top we see the medieval, French born, Baron Simon de Montfort, often cited as the founder of Parliament. A long line of reformers of varying types unscrolls, with the celebrated union and party icon of militancy, Tom Mann, at the base. Most of the fourteen men depicted were English, few can be called revolutionaries, but even fewer were Celts. So using this cover for the programme of the march into South Wales was poorly advised public relations indeed. The Scots never

¹⁹ Bert Hogenkamp, *Deadly Parallels: Film and the Left in Britain 1929-39* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), pp 151-152. Ralph Bond, 'Cinema in the Thirties: Documentary Film and the Labour Movement', in Jon Clark, et. al., (eds), *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), esp. pp. 246, 248-249; and Bert Hogenkamp, 'Making Films with a Purpose: Film-making and the Working Class', in Jon Clark, et. al., (eds), *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), esp. pp. 257-261.

²⁰ It was 16mm, about 10 minutes, and silent, viewed at the British Film Institute.

²¹ The border artwork was used in the first London march and elsewhere in England, e.g. the July 1937 Manchester advertisement, a 'handbill' as described by Mick Wallis in 'The Popular Front Pageant: Its Emergence and Decline', *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 41, (February 1995), p. 21.

utilised this very Anglo-centric cover for its march. One also notes that none were women, somewhat surprising given the roles of equally significant women radicals. Such patriarchal exclusiveness was typical in the male dominated labour movement of that era. Commissioning such a cover for wide use, must have opened up the thorny question of what history was suitable for party purposes. A problem presented in stark terms with the first march outside England.

A few months after the first marches of English history, party leader Harry Pollitt travelled to Moscow and reported to the Comintern's secretariat. The CPGB was now told to "base the whole of [its] propaganda upon British tradition."²² That there might be a difference between 'British' and 'English' history, or 'tradition,' seems to have escaped everyone. 'Britain' was obviously just accepted as a synonym for 'England.' Armed with such a firm Comintern resolution, the broad policy direction was consolidated, so Pollitt and his allies could overrule local resistance. Almost immediately, the *ad hoc* nature of the 1936 march of History was replaced by a more permanent organisation of artists with calls for volunteers early in March.²³ Seven weeks later it was prominently reported that the Artists' Studio was:

working continuously in the basement of the London communist party's offices ... to bring more colour and brightness ... into every meeting and procession of workers in London and other parts of Britain. The artists' studio ... is a new institution.²⁴

Reports of the English marches and pageants display a total lack of interest in any bar the most outstanding Celts who had become national figures. One of the few archival remnants of scripts and programmes has a lengthy series of details from 'Music and the People'. This seems resolutely

²² Draft resolution of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, 4th January 1937, quoted in Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, pp. 235-236.

²³ Call for artists in 'What's On,' boxed advertisement, 'ARTISTS! MAY 1ST,' *Daily Worker* (11th March, 1936), p. 6.

²⁴ 'They Are Putting Colour into May Day,' *Daily Worker* (28th April, 1937).

focused on the English regions south of the Tweed, and east of the Severn.²⁵

The location of many future history marches was partly influenced by the party's support base and priority areas, but also by local enthusiasts. From 1932 two areas in England and the two Celtic Districts, were the party's chosen focus for activity, sales of the newspaper, rallies and the like.²⁶ London District had the largest membership with almost 40% of party members. All other Districts were spread over larger areas such as Scotland (especially Glasgow) with about 20% of the membership, and Lancashire at about 10%. Roughly equal with around 6-7% each were South Wales, Yorkshire, and the Midlands.²⁷ Some Districts such as Lancashire and Scotland consequently held several history marches in various cities, some twice in the same one. The far smaller Sussex District was prompted to hold two by a keen local history enthusiast and his friends.²⁸ This shows up the paucity of marches in many other areas and some seem to have been imposed on reluctant locals as we shall see.

Many of these street marches have been misleadingly called 'pageants' – both by the party's press and later writers, but not all were in the mould of the traditional pageant format so beloved of community shows. For the first 'pageants' the CPGB merely toned down its traditional style of protest march into an orderly column through the streets with some singing (and pipe bands in Scotland), and illustrated banners, followed by a rally. Marches had a straightforward appeal, drew on some aspects of the wider non-communist labour movement education and iconography, could involve hundreds of untrained people, and were also a cheap form of advertising.

²⁵ This general assertion is based on my viewing the film, 'We Are The English,' and reading of many subsequent items relating to the avowedly 'English' events in the *Daily Worker*. And see Mick Wallis, 'Pageantry and the Popular Front: Ideological Production in the 'Thirties,' *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 38 (May 1994), script extracts on pp. 144, 145, 149.

²⁶ Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, pp. 183-185.

²⁷ For relative District sizes in 1938, see Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, p. 285.

²⁸ Ernie Trory, *Between the Wars: Recollections of a Communist Organiser* (Brighton: Crabtree Press, 1974), on 1938 pp. 112-114, and 1939, pp. 151-59.

Red History Wars?

For a party that emphasised the unity of the British working class, such a recourse to history, especially from pre-industrial eras, inevitably raised problems of Celtic as opposed to a national 'British' (read 'English') history, and this could be divisive. There were awkward issues to confront. Eire had only recently achieved independence, leaving the Celts of Northern Ireland in the fraying United Kingdom. There had even been demands for independence from stalwart socialists such as the Scot John Maclean, and others associated with 'Red Clydeside,' such as Gallacher. Some thought their Scots countrymen were politically more 'advanced' than the English.²⁹ The Scottish District felt courting nascent nationalism was inclining towards the 'fascist' Scottish Nationalist Party, a rival. For almost two years, the Scots resisted London's approach to nationalism, even though this had the explicit imprimatur of the Comintern. There was a sustained indirect public, and direct internal, pressure on the Glasgow office to adopt the new nationalist stance.³⁰

It was far from obvious to many militants why the CPGB should embrace old style nationalism and celebrate heroes of medieval and Tudor-Stuart monarchies and aristocracy, Parliament, and the founders of Empire. These were usually claimed by the Tories. The pinnacle of Establishment pageantry was provided by national celebrations of a string of Royal events during the years 1935-7: a jubilee, funeral, and a coronation. All lovingly presented by the BBC (which totally dominated the radio), newsreels and print media. In these fields the Establishment had a virtual hegemony over the image making of the nation's symbolic representation of its past. The only contrary voices were found in a few of the smaller newspapers. For traditional Communists, far from being 'Ours', this much touted past was *Theirs*, something to be rejected.³¹

²⁹ Young, 'Scottish National Question,' pp. 142, 150-152.

³⁰ In public articles appeared in party and allied journals, such as *Left Review* and *Discussion* in 1936 and 1937; internally the London leadership repeatedly pressured Glasgow, Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, 'Communists and the National Question in Scotland and Iceland, c. 1930 to c. 1940,' *The Historical Journal*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2002), p. 616; and Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, 'Nation Before Class? The Communist Party of Great Britain and the Scottish Question 1935-1939,' (Unpublished MPhil thesis, Cambridge, 1998), especially pp. 42-47. I am indebted to him for sending me a copy of his thesis.

³¹ 'Editorial', *Discussion*, #9 November, 1936, p. 3.

The 1935 Comintern directive had demanded a very awkward 180 degree turn which may explain some of the delay in the implementation of the new line in first England and then Scotland. There were, however, some overarching nationwide themes evident in emphasis. Celebrating Trades Unions and Chartism was less controversial amongst party members and allies in the labour movement than the history of pre-industrial eras when Scotland, in particular, had for long been totally independent of England. Emphasising the struggles of the British proletariat had the advantages of non-racial class solidarity, topicality, and could even revive family memories of events, reformers and radicals who had been active quite recently. Contemporary heroes like Tom Mann were genuinely British figures, but those from the distant past necessarily invoked clashing regional variations of firmly non-English history and tradition.

Welsh History on the March

The first regional parade in a Celtic area was held on March 21st in South Wales where party supremo Harry Pollitt sought election to Parliament several times (unsuccessfully). The march was largely organised by the London based Labour Research Department. It was really just the London march of (mostly) English history imposed on the Celts, bizarrely masquerading as local being titled ‘South Wales in the March of History.’ Perhaps the high numbers of English migrants in that area made this seem less inappropriate than if it was in the Clydeside. The march started in Tonypany, and proceeded for five hours through the Rhondda Valley, and back, there were 2,500 marchers with 80 banners, and a later rally had 3,500. The *Daily Worker* reported it was to “rouse the mining villages to the great part they have played and are playing still in the moulding of working-class history.”³²

The Artists’ Studio made “the banners and decorations for the special demonstration held in South Wales.”³³ It is unlikely many Welsh

³² *Daily Worker* reports - ‘Workers’ History Comes to Life in South Wales’ (20th March, 1937), p. 2; ‘Welsh March of History’ (22nd March, 1937), p. 1. If anyone has access to any (especially Welsh) newspapers, or archives with any further information, I would be very interested to hear from them.

³³ ‘They Are Putting Colour into May Day,’ *Daily Worker* (28th April, 1937).

banners were made by locals. Drawing on the 80 banners from the London and Sheffield marches, perhaps fewer than ten were newly minted. Indeed, only one of the two new banners mentioned is of a Welshman, being the militant Chartist, John Frost, who led the Newport Rising in Wales in 1839.³⁴ His image was absent from the London march, and the topic, a rebellion, hints at a more militant local sentiment in Wales. This was an important example of insurrection for the party, and the event was commemorated locally again in 1939, as would be expected in such a proletarian mining valley.

The London based myopia is starkly evident in the souvenir programme which reused the striking cover art used for the ‘March of English History.’ Only one of the fourteen faces, Robert Owen, was Welsh, although the Scot, Keir Hardie, had won a Welsh seat of Parliament. A case of Cultural Imperialism at its most unfeeling. Most locals who saw the programme’s cover no doubt felt it had very little to do with Wales at all. At least a chronology inside mentions local heroes who had been hanged before the more famous Tolpuddle Martyrs, and the era when the Chartists had been active. The puff falsely asserted that the march is of “great figures and great events of South Wales in the march of history,” and is to show “how the South Wales workers have stood in the very forefront of the worker’s fight since 1800.”³⁵ But the few specifics enable one to conclude this had little by way of a true Welsh flavour.

So, despite the South Wales District being a party stronghold, with some interest evident in approaching the Welsh nationalist movement, the London style English history march was virtually just thrust down the throats of the Welsh locals.³⁶ Perhaps indicating some local passive resistance, there were apparently no more such ‘Welsh’ history marches for over two years.

³⁴ For descriptions of the new material I have to rely on the *Daily Worker*, as the associated pamphlet was for selling to bystanders, so is not a *report* describing the March, presumably it looked like much like that in London. The pamphlet’s language is discussed further below.

³⁵ ‘South Wales in the March of History,’ South Wales Communist Party, Tonypandy, n.d. [1937], p. 2.

³⁶ Kristjánsdóttir, ‘Communists and the National Question,’ p. 616, and especially note 73. Wallis, ‘Popular Front Pageant,’ *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 41, (1995), on local resistance to the London organisers of the second pageant in South Wales in 1939.

1937 marked the high point of the street marches in England. The street march style history ‘pageants’ wound down as the defeat of the Spanish Republic loomed, and nation wide the revolutionary element was increasingly downplayed in accord with the Comintern’s ever more desperate ‘Popular Front’ policy of appealing to all anti-fascists, even the likes of the formerly derided Lloyd George. There was much emphasis on rallies to do with Spain, or the hunger marches, but obscured in the shadows of these mass events were several small indoor pageants of history in 1939, now complete with costumes, some incongruously celebrating such communist triumphs as Parliament and Press Freedom! More logically the anniversaries of Chartism in 1939 were given the major focus with huge pageants held in stadiums and halls with costumed participants and choirs.³⁷

Historical Pageantry

The CPGB had to confront thorny issues created by the more conservative uses of historical pageantry by the Establishment. Montagu Slater, the party’s usual pageant scriptwriter, was to reflect on the problems created by the pre-modern era. He was concerned that uses of this sort of history should not be too traditional. In planning for a pageant on the 1600s pre-industrial era, Slater even considered going to the opposite extreme by having the participants in modern dress. He stated the party’s event is not to appear as:

a conventional pageant. There’s in fact a danger we’ll be stifled in costume. [Regarding the English Revolution] ... we have to make the point in advance that this material peculiarly belongs to us. We can’t take it for granted as we did [with the Chartists].³⁸

As being ‘stifled in costume’ was almost the point of the traditional pageant format so beloved of community shows and Lord Mayors, the party eschewed costume in its history street marches for about two years. Costumed events did not become significant in England until mid-1938,

³⁷ Howe, ‘The Past is Ours,’ Appendix 4.

³⁸ Montagu Slater, ‘Outline for Tercentenary Pageant,’ (on the English Revolution). In Jack Lindsay MSS, National Library, Canberra, Australia.

Wales in 1939, and Scotland not at all. The main ones were focused on the Chartists and after, the very era Slater stated so ‘peculiarly belongs to us.’ Although the medieval and early modern periods were full of martyrs and rebels, these figures were seldom clearly proletarians, a point he conceded in that their relevance to modern party members could not be taken ‘for granted.’ Obviously any hint of Merrie England imagery was a minefield, since it was seen as the core of the national mythos for the Establishment, with films of costumed Elizabethans, and other images often involving the Tory side of politics.³⁹ No doubt this is one of the main reasons the Scots District of the party never went along.

The 1937 Welsh march had clearly failed to create a pool of local history enthusiasts, unlike Sussex, and such events lapsed completely. Not until 1939 was another history related event held in South Wales, with a tighter focus on Chartism. This time, however, it was one of the most ambitious costumed events staged by the CPGB. For May Day, the ‘Pageant of South Wales’ was a major production. The South Wales Miners’ Federation organised it, but again with the aid of the Labour Research Department in London, and calling on the party’s experienced team of producers and party writers. Welshman, Bill Williams, the Department Secretary who had become a Londoner is reported as spending “much time in the coalfields promoting the idea.” He found that: “Many people from South Wales were suspicious of local boys who had got the coaldust off their hands.” He reveals that: “The pageant was not a spontaneous expression, and it took work to get people involved. But after initial hurdles, enthusiasm and excitement grew.”⁴⁰ Despite the London input, this later pageant appears to have been more successful and to have had a more ‘Welsh’ feel to it.

Andre Van Gyseghem, its producer, recalled it was spread over three locales, ‘Abertillery, Pontypool and Ystradgynlais,’ and may also have been held in Caerphilly, with around 6,000 people, including ‘amateur actors’ and ‘massed choirs’ from the local communities.⁴¹

³⁹ The filmmaker Alexander Korda even had Winston Churchill on his payroll. Elizabethan films starring Bette Davis and Flora Robson were popular during the late 1930s.

⁴⁰ Wallis, ‘The Popular Front Pageant,’ *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 41 (1995), p. 28, Williams was interviewed.

⁴¹ Andre Van Gyseghem, ‘British Theatre in the Thirties: An Autobiographical Record,’ in Jon Clark, et al., (eds), *Culture and Crisis*

Unusually, it was given a major spread in the *Daily Worker*.⁴² It seems it also compromised with local sensibilities by linking nonconformity and socialism, whereas most other party pageants were resolutely secular.⁴³ ‘Redcoats’ burst into the booing crowd and leaders of the Chartists in 1839 ‘arrive in chains.’ The trial of John Frost was followed by an overview of the growth of the Miners’ Federation, pausing at the General Strike of 1926 on to ‘today’ with singing of the Internationale.⁴⁴ Apart from Chartism, the historical component was thin, being on contemporary events. These vignettes of industrial era oppression could have been presented almost anywhere in Britain as they relied on class sentiment rather than any sense of Welsh historical identity. Nor did the *Worker* article present it as Welsh nationalist in any way. Unlike the Scots pageants that we will examine below, apart from some generic statements, there was nothing that seems specifically aimed at Welsh culture, let alone any celebration of the era before the English conquest.

Celtic Opposition

Marches in Celtic regions inevitably opened up the ambiguity of the whole concept of a shared ‘British’ history, but there was little public debate over this issue. The same historical personage could be acceptable or reviled by different ethnic groups. On the one hand, Jews might have accepted some promotion of Oliver Cromwell, the ruler who had invited Jewish refugees to settle in England, but Irish members in London party branches were critical of the sight of his banner. He was a traditional enemy to the Irish and Scots due to his conquest of their lands, and especially in Ireland where he had had a ruthless racist attitude. A result of such anti-English feeling was evident in the Spanish Civil War when Irish soldiers voted to

(London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), p. 218. He cites a programme which I have not seen, the scenario being written by Montagu Slater, who wrote many of the party’s pageants in the later Thirties. The *Daily Worker* states Caerphilly not Ystradgynlais, see next note.

⁴² ‘May Day Pageant in the Mining Towns,’ *Daily Worker* (27th April, 1939), p. 7.

⁴³ Wallis, ‘Pageantry and the Popular Front,’ remark on religion, note 39, p. 156, and pp. 132, 135, 148, but he gives no historical details relevant to the themes of this paper.

⁴⁴ Rose Smith, ‘Pioneers Live in Pageant of Struggle,’ *Daily Worker* (2nd May, 1939), p. 1.

leave the 'British Battalion' and join the Americans.⁴⁵ As a top-down initiative from London District, it seems the very idea of any hint of nationalism in the 'March of English History' may have offended Jewish party members in the East End (where the marches culminated), as within weeks the area was invaded by Mosley's Black Shirts leading to the 'Battle of Cable Street.'⁴⁶

The Scots District and others of the left had long had an overwhelming majority opposed to any form of pandering to Scottish nationalism. Lewis Grassic Gibbon (expelled from the CPGB in the 1920s) had critiqued nationalism as "just another plan to do down the common folk ... in kilts ... with bagpipes playing and a blether about Wallace. Similarly James Barke opined: "Scottish nationalism is largely inspired by the superior-race-theory of the Gael and the demagoguery of Major Douglas."⁴⁷ For many such writers, there was a difficulty in teasing apart language and culture from the very race context with which all (in the Hitler years) seemed so indissolubly united.

The Scottish District also had the unusual twist of a local nationalist movement, and rival socialist tradition of John Maclean, to contend with. Having opposed nationalism before the Popular Front, the District was reluctant to adopt the national tone during 1937-38, and clashed with southern parts of the CPGB on such issues. For instance, it was overruled by the rest of the party and obliged to retract its expulsion of the famous poet and nationalist member, Hugh MacDiarmid, at Moscow's behest. Despite his espousal of a Maclean style Scottish Socialist (or Workers) Republic, the party was keen to promote MacDiarmid, well known for his 'Hymns to Lenin.'⁴⁸ He had been critical of a 'Scottish "Communist"

⁴⁵ Peter O'Connor, *A Soldier of Liberty: Recollections of a Socialist and Anti-Fascist Fighter* (Dublin: MSF, 1996), p. 13 about Cromwell, pp. 14-15 in Spain.

⁴⁶ Joe Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto, My Youth in the East End: Communism and Fascism 1913-1939* (London: Janet Simon, 1978), a Jewish activist in the East End in 1936, is oddly silent on this history march despite the lavish detail on other marches and anti-fascist activity, chapters 9-13.

⁴⁷ Young, 'Marxism and the Scottish National Question,' Gibbon expelled p. 152, quote from Grey Granite on p. 146; Barke in *Left Review* Feb. 1936, quoted on p. 150.

⁴⁸ McShane and Smith, *No Mean Fighter*, e.g. pp. 117-118, 261, and passim for Maclean, the MacDiarmid expulsion issue, pp. 224-25. While

clique,' probably referring to the die-hards who refused to change their approach.⁴⁹

Scottish History Strides Forward

Initially, the Scottish District showed a stubborn refusal to shift at all, and for May Day 1937 it ignored the lead of the London-style march, and that in Wales just two months earlier. Instead the Scots held a non-historical march with what appear to be just the usual red banners and slogans.⁵⁰ After around twenty months of bludgeoning from party head office in London, the district conceded, to a point, and held its first march of Scottish History. In 1938 several other Scots writers such as James Barke helped organise the 'Pageant of Scottish History', but MacDiarmid, stubbornly idiosyncratic, was again no longer a member, and was probably hotly against any dewy-eyed glorification of a mythic past.⁵¹ Despite the apparent monolith of Stalinism, a wide diversity of views persisted amongst members, and strands of opinion might be submerged, only to re-emerge in more favourable contexts. The march was included by the party for the May Day celebrations in Glasgow as part of a multi party parade, organised by the Glasgow Trades Council and Burgh Labour Party, and a short film was directed by Helen Biggar, in her 'Challenge to Fascism' for Glasgow Kino.⁵² Although temporary bans by magistrates delayed them,

this shows the Scottish District was sometimes out of step, McShane makes no mention of the marches of history or pageants.

⁴⁹ John Manson, 'Did James Barke Join the Communist Party?' *Communist History Network Newsletter On-line*, vol. 19 (Spring 2006), p. 7.

⁵⁰ The film of May Day in Glasgow in 1937 shows communist banners with a lack of historical content, I wish to thank Claire McKendrick of the Scottish Screen Archive, for checking this film for me to verify the absence of historical material in the 1937 march.

⁵¹ According to the Glasgow party organiser in 1938, Bill Crowe, those involved with the 'Pageant of Scottish History' were Aitken Ferguson, Barke, and George Middleton, who became General Secretary of the STUC in 1948, but MacDiarmid is not named, see Manson, 'Did Barke Join?'

⁵² A few details are in Wallis, 'The Popular Front Pageant,' p. 22. The short film is 16mm, Black and White, 29 minutes in length (data from British Film Institute), <http://www.bfi.org.uk/nftva/catalogues/film/960>. The Scottish Screen Archive, <http://www.scottish-screen.com/film/detail.php?id=05400001> has a 3 minute fragment of the film. Sites accessed 28th January 2008. I wish to thank Janet McBain of the Scottish Screen Archive for her help.

marches were eventually held in Dundee and Aberdeen, and perhaps elsewhere such as in the seat of West Fife, held by the party's sole MP, Willie Gallacher.⁵³ By now, however, the style of southern events was towards fully scripted, rehearsed and costumed pageants, many in stadiums, but the Scots never went that far, perhaps another sign of cursed defiance?

Without any trace of the southern cover artwork, the Glasgow produced programme was centrally designed for use in any Scottish locale and outlined the march's content.⁵⁴ Like the London march it was a grab of much of Scottish history with banners featuring the struggle for freedom from Roman times, ranging over the foe of the Romans, tribal leader Galgacus, portraits of Wallace, Bruce, Burns, and incongruously, David Hume – hardly a Communist. The Scottish Reformation was predictably presented as an attack on feudalism, and the end of the Scottish Parliament was betrayal by the greedy nobles, selling the nation to the rulers of England. More logical were later leftist figures: Robert Owen, Keir Hardie, and John McLean. But other historical personages in it were, Duns Scotus, Walter Scott, James Watt, and Lord Lister. This eclectic mix of socialist forebears, nationalism's medieval heroes, sundry intellectuals, engineers and others, culminated with William Gallacher, in person, representing the present as the party's sole MP, for the Scottish seat of West Fife (1935-50). Implicitly he was the living heir of all these great heroes. Again one notes the lack of women in this almost leftist *Boy's Own* type pantheon. The growth of the Trades Unions and of a workers' press were also featured.

Even local newspapers briefly reported on some marches:

⁵³ Mick Wallis, 'Heirs to the Pageant: Mass Spectacle and the Popular Front,' in Andy Croft (ed.), *A Weapon in the Struggle: A Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 55, on magistrates in Dundee. He cites the *Daily Worker* for 12th March, 1938, p. 5, but seems unaware that a march by Dundee Branch proceeded, on May 29th, (see 'Worker's Notebook,' *Daily Worker* (27th May, 1938), p. 2). Aberdeen march, on June 19th, 'Pageant Thrills Aberdeen,' *Daily Worker* (21st June, 1938), p. 8. In its description of the Dundee march, in the 'Worker's Notebook,' the *Daily Worker* appears to have utilised the Scottish programme booklet, the description is very similar. The London based *Daily Worker* ignored nearly all these.

⁵⁴ Published in Glasgow, there is no emphasis on the march being in any particular town.

Kilted pipers headed a mile long Communist procession through Dundee streets. Over 500 men, women, youths and girls of Dundee branch ... took part in ... a pageant of Scottish history. Over 200 banners were carried. They represented pictorially the heroes of Scotland's struggle for freedom. ... a Glasgow town councillor poured ridicule on the Communist pageant.⁵⁵

Ridiculed or not, a Scottish delegate at the party Congress later that year was pleased with these marches, noting approvingly that: "The Scottish pageant [read 'march'] of history had made a break with the Communists' previous neglect of Scottish traditions."⁵⁶ The publication of this remark may suggest southern approval of the catch-up, so long delayed by divisions within the District over the use of such historical propaganda.⁵⁷ In Scotland a wide sweep of genuinely Scottish history was tackled covering two millennia of independence from the south. It is notable just how different the Scots march was in contrast to the earlier Welsh march. Instead the whole display by the Scottish District reveals the creative work of many local intellectuals and artists as none of the banners from the south appear to have been borrowed. Not for them the easy option of importing a march made in London. The Scottish nationalistic touches do parallel, but not ape, the English march. Similarly, the coherence of the batches of banners is derived from the simplistic grouping of *all* opponents of reaction, and of *all* struggles for justice and freedom. As links to Marxism's 'scientific socialism,' let alone Communism, were in many cases far from obvious, critics within the party had ready targets, but by this stage had been brushed aside.

Rhetorical Excesses

⁵⁵ 'Pageant Holds Up City Square Meeting', May 30th 1938. Article scanned and emailed to me by Dundee municipal archive, but without newspaper title, or page number. I believe there are some reports in Aberdeen papers.

⁵⁶ Fred Douglas of Edinburgh, at the 15th Congress held in Birmingham (16-19 September), *Daily Worker* (19th September, 1938), p. 8.

⁵⁷ A vote was passed on a statement on Scottish devolution in 1938, several of the people mentioned above were on opposed sides, McShane and Smith, *No Mean Fighter*, p. 226.

Red History Wars?

The history marches were ephemeral but made more permanent by 'souvenir programmes' which contained varying amounts of written material providing summations of the newly approved Communist version of history. Many different regional ones have striking similarities which indicates a degree of centralised approval. The actual rhetorical flourishes used can be compared and contain a startling appeal to mainstream imagery both in England and in the Celtic areas:

A programme of an English march, had nationalistic touches:

England: a word of power. A name deeply engraved on the minds of men, ... a picture of green fields and hedges ... a great nation ... [with an] instinct for fair play.⁵⁸

Not just the descriptions of landscape, but the rhetoric compares closely with:

South Wales! ... a name beloved by the heroes of progress ... a picture of beautiful vales, of mountains stately in their rugged outline ... its history is the story of a great people ... proud of their desire for fair play and justice.⁵⁹

The 1938 Scottish District pamphlet echoes these in its claims:

We Communists are proud of our country and its heroes ... Scotland is for us a word of power, conjuring up images of a country rich in natural and human wealth. We glory in the: *Land of brown heath and shaggy wood; Land of the mountain and the flood.*⁶⁰

Both English and Scots pamphlets exactly repeat the jingoistic statement: 'A word of power'. The use of loving landscape imagery,

⁵⁸ 'South Wales in the March of History', p. 3.

⁵⁹ 'South Wales in the March of History,' p. 2.

⁶⁰ 'Programme of the Pageant of Scottish History', Glasgow, 'Word of power', p. 3.

whether of England, Wales, or Scotland would be suitable for tourist brochures, being conservative, and stereotypical. The short bursts of rhetoric in the Welsh programme, however, had the more defiantly nationalistic praise of the people's "early struggles against the tyranny of English oppressors", presumably thrown in as a sop to the local Welsh Nationalists. In a more Communistic vein it continued: "It is a struggle, which has through the ages marked South Wales as a place whose people carry forward only the most noble of traditions." Nevertheless, the historical content in the Welsh programme is weak, and probably closely follows a lost original London version.

Subtle differences exist, however. The Welsh programme, from early 1937, is the most militant in tone, and has incorporated into its pages the fairly standard chronology, many local events, going into more detail on Nineteenth century events and after. It closes with aggressively anti-fascist rhetoric: "driving the blackshirts from our Valleys."

The Scots programme was clearly more independent of London influence. It has many pages of potted biographies of leading Scots figures, political and cultural; a few glossary type entries e.g. 'Reformation' and 'Stone of Destiny' (not the usual party fare); plus summaries of Trades Unions and other struggles. Perhaps indicating Scottish resistance to London is an adherence to older themes in Communist propaganda, as the largest biographies are of Communist figures.

However, in the march itself, few of the people represented were remotely Communist, and some, such as the opponents of the more 'advanced' Romans, were not even 'progressive' in a hard line Marxist-Leninist sense – 'progressive' being a buzz-term in party circles in the Thirties – a very teleological view of history.

History and the Party press

For most members, the London based party newspaper, the *Daily Worker* delivered the party line. The space allocated to commemorations of long dead radical British heroes or promoting a line on more remote historical issues, was largely dependent on who was the current editor. One in particular, the half Indian, half Swede, CPGB ideologue, Rajani Palme Dutt, was not interested in utilising British history unless it was more or less contemporary. He later had a long track record of blocking and

berating party academics in the party's Historians' Group.⁶¹ But the paper did report on some of the main marches, and in 1936-37 had a sporadic 'Past Is Ours' series of book reviews, many being leftist 'classics' of historical interest. With the departure of Dutt in April 1938, the use of historical material skyrocketed, especially on Chartism as the successor editors commissioned major articles.⁶² But the *Daily Worker* is a relatively poor source of reportage on some marches, and many outside London failed to even rate a mention. Some were only revealed buried in the classified advertisements when there were calls for volunteers.

The *Daily Worker* left regional and Celtic readers poorly served indeed. Apart from a few reports on the march in Wales, only one article was definitely about Welsh history when, in 1938, Iolo Wyn burst forth with "The Meaning of the Eisteddfod: The People's University."⁶³ He covered a broad sweep of its history from the time of Queen Elizabeth, who summoned the Eisteddfod of 1568 as a 'bardic court' that kept up the quasi professional standing of the bards. He also touched on how the bards preserved the Welsh language. Various Welsh antiquarians rated a mention, and were linked to known radicals such as Tom Paine. For the *Daily Worker* this was both an uncharacteristically large, and rather specialised historical article. Similarly even more specialised party journals were not remotely mouthpieces for Welsh historical themes, with just one short review of a book on Welsh Chartists.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Dutt was a top party ideological boss trusted by Moscow, *Daily Worker* editor Oct. 1936 – Apr. 1938. Dutt strongly contested Christopher Hill's interpretation of the English Civil War as a 'Bourgeois Revolution.' Fuller references in Howe, 'The Past is Ours,' pp. 411 ff.; for a systematic analysis of the *Daily Worker's* historically related contents, see 'Appendix 5: "English" Historical Material in the *Daily Worker* in 1930-40,' pp 697-708.

⁶² Dave Springhall took over from Dutt, then Johnny Campbell became editor in June 1939 – Oct. 1939. See Howe, 'Past Is Ours,' for overview of full Appendix on the paper, see 'Table 1: Summary of Main *Daily Worker* Historical Articles – 1930 – 1940,' p. 699.

⁶³ Iolo Wyn, 'The Meaning of the Eisteddfod: The People's University,' *Daily Worker* (1st Aug, 1938), p. 2.

⁶⁴ Allen Hutt (as G.A.H.), on T.I. Nicholas, *One Hundred Years Ago: Story of the Montgomeryshire Chartists*, review in *Labour Monthly*, vol. 21, no. 12 (1939), p. 762.

Other Celtic readers were also fed scraps: Cornish rebels rating a mention, once.⁶⁵ The radical history of Ireland, however, was actually more favoured in the London based *Daily Worker* than the Celtic areas inside the United Kingdom. Perhaps this was not so surprising, given the numbers of Irish workers in London whose new country had recently had the Easter Rising, and a subsequent successful rejection of British Imperialism, so celebrating Ireland would satisfy many readers.⁶⁶ Compared to reports of the Irish, or even the Welsh march, the Scots received perfunctory treatment, but on various years a Burns anniversary rated an article.

Hugh MacDiarmid no less, wrote for the anniversary of Robert Burns in January 1938. Although it was a long article by *Worker* standards, and was notionally an anniversary piece, MacDiarmid's main theme was current cultural politics, not Burns' life or works at all, about which he had almost nothing to say. His target was the 'Burnsians' whom he sneered at repeatedly, "their praise of Burns is simply a blatant farce" pushed by the "Burns Movement and Church in Scotland." He castigated such 'bourgeois' elements for their myopia about the realities of Scotland and life in the Great Depression that most workers knew. The 'Burns Clubs' dwell on a lost rural, romantic past, instead of promoting contemporary writers. He asserted these are "subject to incessant misrepresentation ... [and are hidden by a] dense smokescreen of decomposing, religiously antiquated moral prejudices and superannuated sentiments." He lamented the lack of current Scottish literature in the schools, which are the victim of 'English Imperialism.' The conclusion is that only the CPGB can reverse this and lead the writers forward. This focus on the contemporary was now out of step with the line on history and it was no doubt used due to MacDiarmid's name. To add the correct 'line' a top party figure, Johnnie Campbell, added biographical information and discussion of Burns himself, in a small boxed insert.⁶⁷

Campbell, a Scot himself, was soon to be the *Daily Worker's* editor, actively pushing the new history. At the 1937 party congress he had stated

⁶⁵ [Anon.] 'When Cornwall Rebelled,' [on 1497], *Daily Worker* (20th September, 1938).

⁶⁶ Howe, 'The Past is Ours,' Appendix 5.

⁶⁷ 'Burns as Seen By Hugh McDiarmid,' [sic.] *Daily Worker* (25th January, 1938), p. 2, insert by 'J.R.C.'

“the need for ‘a big change in our propaganda methods’ in Scotland.”⁶⁸ He later even wrote a book on Burns in his historic setting as a “fighter for the common people.”⁶⁹ Unlike MacDiarmid, Campbell accommodated to the new propaganda spin, applying it to the actual man. Ever the party apparatchik, he pointed up key aspects of some of Burns’ works, such as his ‘fierce anti-clerical satires,’ and links to the model radical, Tom Paine, and the French Revolutionaries. Campbell’s treatment seems to be evidence that this sort of historically oriented propaganda was more directed by the sophisticated ideologues of the party Centre in London, rather than by activists in the north (and west) who previously had not seriously attempted to develop any themes about Scots or Welsh history beyond the usual contemporary orientation of polemics.

The End of History

The ‘Popular Front’ alliances and the historical campaigns appear to have built up a wide network of supporters and ‘fellow travellers,’ this had done much to rescue the party from its earlier sectarian obscurity. All this was vitiated in about two months with the outbreak of war in 1939, and in October the startling reversals of the ‘line’ from Moscow, attendant on the Hitler-Stalin pact.⁷⁰ The ‘line’ of the Comintern now led to some extremely embarrassing political problems for the party. At times, it even seemed to be asserting that every aggressive move in the war in 1940 was the fault of the Imperialist British and French! As Nazi tanks rushed to Paris, former anti-fascist allies, such as the Left Book Club had had enough and denounced the CPGB, issuing the *Betrayal of the Left*. The new line had a subtle ideological element as well, which consequently also saw an abrupt end to any form of British historical propaganda. Not surprisingly the mass displays were abandoned with air raids expected, but even short historical articles in the *Daily Worker* vanished almost overnight, and other related projects, books, journals, and advanced plans for party

⁶⁸ Campbell quoted and paraphrased in Michael Keating and David Bleiman, *Labour and Scottish Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 123.

⁶⁹ J. R. Campbell, *Burns The Democrat*, published by the Caledonian Press which also published some of MacDiarmid’s work. Reviewed by A. Hutt, in the *Daily Worker* (23rd January, 1946), p. 2, praising the work.

⁷⁰ Francis King and George Matthews (eds), *About Turn: The British Communist Party and the Second World War: The Verbatim Record of the Central Committee Meetings of 25 September and 2-3 October 1939* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990).

education on British history were nearly all abandoned.⁷¹ Cuts in paper supplies do not explain this as the science articles in the *Worker* continued. Some allies of the historians in the party publishing arm managed to issue Christopher Hill's booklet, *1640: The English Revolution*, for party training, but were roundly denounced by Palme Dutt and his allies.

The CPGB's flirtation with formulating an agreed line on 'History' for propaganda in the short-lived 'Popular Front' era, provides a salutary case study of the problems inherent in this sort of popular level, leftist *Invention of Tradition* (recalling Eric Hobsbawm's book of that name). To be fair, rhetorical flourishes are to be expected in any pageantry, no matter how worthy, and as entertainment some 'poetic licence' can be granted. But that was the least of the weaknesses displayed in this case. With the intrusion of these marches into Celtic areas, we saw no sign of scholarly integrity, and no cultural sensitivity, all was cast aside in the pursuit of public relations 'spin.' Contentious and problematic issues were swept aside, with 'British' history being crudely conflated with 'English,' with little or no Celtic material in the very march (and related artwork) claiming to be aimed at the South Welsh. This was a massively self-contradictory effort in public relations. Presumably this eruption of English history led the Scottish District to simply refuse to host it. Even there, however, things did not really look up, as the new banners replicated many of the problems of the southern marches. At best there was superficial research, at worst there were clumsy errors, with David Hume perhaps being the most absurd 'hero' to be lionised in a Communist display. Such elements simply invited derision from all but the converted. This is not what you would expect from any campaign that intended to be taken seriously, especially one seeking to answer rival political claims being made for the same 'Past'. With all this superficiality, much of the campaign, especially in the first year in England, and in the Celtic areas, was no more informed than an historical epic in the cinema!

During the later half of the war, the Communist party returned to using some nationalist propaganda, but it was as nothing compared with the 'Popular Front' era described above. Pageants were never really to return after the war, perhaps the victims of cost cutting and television.

⁷¹ Howe, 'The Past is Ours,' pp. 393-407, for wider history related activities; and Appendix 5 (on the *Daily Worker*), Table 1, p. 699, and details of 1939-40 *Daily Worker*, pp. 731-743.

Red History Wars?

There were only two big stadium events in London, one in 1948 on the centenary of the Communist Manifesto and Chartism, and another in 1956. The party's writers and historians tried to have one on the 'English Revolution' for the Tercentenary of the Republic in 1949, but after lengthy planning it was dropped. However, within the CPGB, historians of 'England' had found their voice, and their new Historians' Group, led by some of the activists of the 'Popular Front' era, flourished.⁷²

North of the Tweed things were different. The apparent potential of a party group of *Scottish* historians, never crystallised. Politically speaking, however, the Celtic nationalist card was still to be played, at least as a cynical ploy for wider local appeal. After the war the Communist Party Congress of 1945 adopted a clear cut policy for Scotland and Wales to have their own Parliaments.⁷³ We all know the party never gained the power to secure this aim, but by carrying out such Communist policy, it seems Tony Blair was really a dangerous Red after all.

⁷² Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Communist Party Historians' Group,' in M. Cornforth (ed.), *Rebels and Their Causes* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978).

⁷³ *Daily Worker* (27th November, 1945).