

## **'Forward from Wigan Pier': Re-making documentary photography in the 1930s**

### **Abstract**

This essay reconsiders the status of documentary photography by shifting enquiry from the making of the exposure to the processes which make the results of that act public. Instead of granting that a photograph functions in a semantic field and asking 'how did this signify?' this essay explores the question: 'how did this have the opportunity to signify?' This question is addressed by exploring the agency of editors and publishers in the rather fraught production of George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the first edition of which featured a suite of 33 photographs.

## **Keywords**

- documentary photography
- illustration
- *The Road to Wigan Pier*
- working class
- communism
- socialism
- Orwell, George
- Gollancz, Victor

**Word count: 6871**

## *Introduction*

Unlike many new magazines, *Picture Post* did not include an editorial in its first issue of October 1938. However, on the last page of the issue the editor, Stefan Lorant, placed a feature which effectively filled the role of the editorial. This was a short text accompanying a dramatic picture of a car lurching across a road as a detached front wheel flies toward the photographer. The feature was entitled 'Scoop – Every camera-man's dream'. The text opens with a definition of the successful photojournalist:

"Scoops" mean much to the camera-man lucky, adroit, or persistent enough to secure one. Many men have the technical knowledge necessary to earn a living as press

photographers, but the careers of all the outstanding men have been built up on their ability to get “scoops” – to make their way in where other men could not get, to take pictures where other men would not dare, and, equally important, a kind of happy knack of being in a position where pictures can be got at a moment when something surprising happens.<sup>1</sup>

Here the work of the photographer is characterised by a combination of determination and serendipity (and, together with the praise of courage, this is a familiar and quite banal description of masculine endeavour). By extension, the successful photograph is seen as the result of a combination of calculation and chance. In presenting this account of photography *Picture Post* was perhaps not so far from its precursors such as *Vu* and *Life*; and as such it helped to establish the photographer as a mythic figure. In this mythology the defining photographic act is the making of the exposure; the other parts of the process resulting in the publication of the image are not presented, and so must be judged ancillary. Like other myths, this one has its cultural work to do and part of this is to render obscure the operation of photographs in print. In the present essay this is something I hope to illuminate by shifting the emphasis away from the making of the exposure to the processes which make the results of that act public. It seems worth pursuing this given that most viewers in the 1930s encountered photographs not as individual prints but as reproductions in books, newspapers and the periodical press, that is, in contexts such as *Picture Post*.<sup>2</sup> Starting with this still too often overlooked fact will allow me to reconsider the ‘documentary’ status of photography. I shall do this by focusing on one case study, that of George Orwell’s book of 1937, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which in its first edition featured a suite of 33 photographs. Orwell’s book, it will transpire, offers a highly distinctive

relationship between text and image and thus may serve to reveal certain uses of the documentary genre with particular clarity.<sup>3</sup>

There are several reasons for pursuing an argument that turns on the uses of photographs rather than their making. First, it seems to me that students of visual culture, rather than seeking to identify what is distinctively or even irreducibly 'visual', should consider the role of the visual in relation to other discursive practices, that is, address the placement of the visual, and its operation. This involves investigating the roles with which photography is endowed, rather than considering the properties of photography and what these might be held to entail.<sup>4</sup> And this brings me to the second reason for investigating the uses of photography: it is a means of sidestepping - more or less elegantly - discussions of the problematic ontology of the photograph.<sup>5</sup> Histories of photography have become freighted with analyses of the apparatus and its functioning; these histories sometimes seem overburdened in attempting to account for photography's unstable combination of human agency and mechanical process. In particular, the indexicality of photographs has often determined lines of enquiry and saturated the resulting histories.<sup>6</sup> That a negative is created by a pattern of light falling on a prepared surface has been held to establish a particular, fundamental link between subject matter and image. Such claims for the special status of the photographic image have created problems for those examining documentary photography when they have assumed their task is to assess the truth claims of the image. And these claims for the role and status of photography emerged with a new force during the 1930s, as photojournalism became more widespread and as the rhetoric of immediacy in documentary practice was refined by prominent figures such as Robert Capa.<sup>7</sup>

Yet rather than probe these now familiar problems, in what follows I want to adopt a different approach. Instead of simply granting that a photograph functions in a semantic field and asking 'how did this signify?', it seems more productive to ask 'how did this have the opportunity to signify?'<sup>8</sup> Thus what needs to be examined is the process of turning the initial print into part of a print run. However, this process needs to be approached with some care. A number of studies of circulation have tracked the movement of images from one context to another and in the process have treated the photographic unit like a unit of currency which preserves something of its value across a series of transactions, even as the photograph may generate a plurality of meanings.<sup>9</sup> This recasts the problem of indexicality rather than resolving it as the iterations of the photograph are placed in a temporality with the negative positioned as anterior to the prints. Whilst this might seem merely the most logical ordering of a sequence, constructing the sequence may give the impression that the reproduction of the image is a secondary activity, the transference of an already established value.

To consider the act of reproduction as the prolonging of an image is thus only a partial shift of emphasis. One consequence of this is that the photographer's agency is given a privileged status and subsequent users of the image are presented as more or less parasitic on the former's activity. And it may well be that art-historical habits have conditioned this; the model of the print made after the painting is clearly unhelpful here.<sup>10</sup> It seems preferable to return reproduction to one of its original senses, of re-production as re-making; this has the advantage of redistributing agency and enabling a more critical photographic history. The agency that is now brought more clearly into focus is that of editors and publishers. Yet, if in renewing such a focus texts are given priority over images - which become 'mere' illustrations in the sense of decorations or adornments - then another

problematic structure has been put in place; this renewed focus should not obscure the operation of the visual. So the key question becomes: in what ways do photographs in print comment on or interpret texts? One set of answers, or, rather, a more focussed set of questions, may be framed by turning to case study.

*The Road to Wigan Pier* was amongst the first books to be published by Victor Gollancz Ltd. with a substantial suite of photographs. Yet under what circumstances was the decision taken to illustrate the work? What roles did different agents play here? A first inspection of the photographs leads to further questions. If Orwell's title suggests an account of a journey to Wigan, the photographs suggest the strangest of itineraries. For whilst there are indeed images of the North of England, there are also nine from Wales, two from Scotland and thirteen from London. Why should such a range of locations be included? The book was presented as an examination of the working class, yet, again, the selection of photographs would seem to make a curious accompaniment.<sup>11</sup> There are images of working-class housing [Fig. 1, Fig. 2]. And there are images of the unemployed [Fig. 3.]. However, there are no images of actual, paid work; Wigan was a mining town so one might reasonably have expected an image of miner at the coalface but none appears. So what image of the working class is produced here? And to what ends?

### *The Left Book Club*

*The Road to Wigan Pier* was first published as the Left Book Club selection for March 1937. The book was published for a specific purpose and its first readership was of a distinctive character; understanding this purpose and readership is an important preliminary to an analysis of the text and its illustrations.

The Left Book Club had been founded by the publisher Victor Gollancz in May 1936. Gollancz had already made a journey from liberalism to socialism and after Hitler's rise to power he had become increasingly convinced that socialism offered the most effective way of combatting fascism.<sup>12</sup> His view of fascism as capitalism grown desperate was at this moment widespread, within the Labour party and to its left.<sup>13</sup> Gollancz's response was the book club; as he explained in his first editorial for *The Left Book News*, he had come to see his role as providing 'the indispensable basis of *knowledge* without which a really effective United Front of all men and women of good will cannot be built.'<sup>14</sup> The publisher was by his own description a fellow-traveller and his stated aim of building a United Front was in conformity with Comintern policy.<sup>15</sup> At the Seventh Comintern Congress of July-August 1935, Dmitry Manuilsky had called for 'a broad, general, people's front' to defend the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> However, it was also acknowledged that a more restricted united front might be more appropriate to the situation in Britain.<sup>17</sup> The result was that the Communist Party of Great Britain [CPGB] moved closer to the Independent Labour Party [ILP] and the Socialist League. Such policies of cooperation seemed vindicated in May 1936 by the electoral success of the Popular Front in France, and Gollancz opened his first editorial by celebrating this victory of anti-fascism.<sup>18</sup>

Members of the club were to be offered a selected 'Book of the Month', the books being selected by Gollancz along with Harold Laski, a founder of the Socialist League at the left of the Labour party, and John Strachey, who Gollancz described as being 'in broad sympathy with the aims of the Communist Party'.<sup>19</sup> The 'Book of the Month' was offered at the low price of half-a-crown; Gollancz hoped that these low prices could be sustained if club membership grew so as to ensure a sufficiently large and stable market. When the first

newsletter was written the club had a relatively modest membership of 6,000 yet this was to grow rapidly and at its peak in 1939 the club counted 57,000 members.<sup>20</sup>

The project for what was to become *The Road to Wigan Pier* was initiated by Gollancz. He commissioned Orwell to visit what were then known as 'the distressed areas' and this may readily be seen as part of the publisher's project to secure and disseminate politically useful knowledge.<sup>21</sup> As a result of the commission Orwell travelled through the coalfields of Lancashire and Yorkshire between January 31 and March 25, 1936.<sup>22</sup> Orwell explains at the opening of the second half of his book that he undertook the journey 'partly because I wanted to see what mass-unemployment was like at its worst, partly to see the most typical section of the English working class at close quarters'.<sup>23</sup> He had already demonstrated a sustained engagement with different kinds of social experience and this had resulted in his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Doubtless this work was a factor influencing Gollancz's commission. Yet it was not the case that *The Road to Wigan Pier* was the outcome of a happy coincidence of the interests of author and publisher, as is clear from the production history of the book and the work's subsequent reception.

Orwell submitted his manuscript on December 15, 1936. He was soon invited to a meeting at the publishers' to discuss the work; this took place on December 21. At this meeting it was decided that the book would include a suite of photographs. It is unclear whose idea this was; it may have been that of the architect Clough Williams-Ellis. He seems to have proposed the names of various people the publisher could solicit for suitable photographic material.<sup>24</sup> It is not immediately clear that the architect of Portmeirion was the best person to advise on working-class life in the distressed areas and it may be that his principal qualification was that he was John Strachey's brother-in-law. In turn, this perhaps

suggests a measure of inexperience on the part of the publishers when it came to the matter of illustrations. Yet Williams-Ellis had launched various campaigns for the preservation of rural England and was familiar with the use of photography in this context. He had published *England and the Octopus* in 1928 and was at work on the sequel *Britain and the Beast* at the end of 1936 (which was to appear in May 1937). Both these works were concerned with the destructive effects of industrialisation and suburbanisation and *Britain and the Beast*, in particular, made effective use of photography to chart this. Williams-Ellis was to prove an able visual propagandist against industrialisation and it may be that he was enlisted by Gollancz in this capacity.

Norman Collins, Deputy Chairman of Victor Gollancz Ltd., was to undertake the correspondence with those nominated by Williams-Ellis. In his letter to the Reverend Gilbert Shaw, who ministered to the poor in Poplar, Collins describes the book as dealing with 'life in the distressed areas' and makes an appeal for appropriate images.<sup>25</sup> 'Any photographic material of this kind which you could let us have - either slum interiors or exteriors - would therefore serve a most useful purpose.'<sup>26</sup> He continues: 'We are going to make the book fully documentary, both as regards the text and as regards the pictures.'<sup>27</sup> This is a curious and telling locution. For Collins, the authorship is not Orwell's alone and the work of the authors is not yet complete, for the book is still to be made. Yet what remained to be done? An answer is already foreshadowed in Collin's stated intention to make the book 'fully documentary'. This is a disavowal of the second half of Orwell's text, which is not documentary in character and instead, as the author confesses, is the result of 'writing a certain amount of autobiography'.<sup>28</sup> In the second half of the book Orwell is concerned with his own 'approach to Socialism' and thus with his own long journey from the Indian Imperial Police in Mandalay and along the road to Wigan pier.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, the publishers wished to make the book documentary and it is my contention that the illustrations played a key role in this process. Whilst there is no record of who decided to illustrate the book, what is known is that very soon after the meeting of December 21 Orwell left to fight in the Spanish Civil War (it was either one or two days after the meeting).<sup>30</sup> He clearly had no part in the gathering of photographs and had no hand in the final selection and ordering (in fact he did not even have a chance to proofread the final text). All this fell to the publishers. The decisions they took should be understood as attempts to shape the reception of *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Precisely why such shaping was desirable was set out by Gollancz in the foreword he added to Orwell's book.

To explain his motivations, Gollancz has recourse to his first editorial in *The Left Book News*; in his foreword he repeats the view of the selectors

that by giving a wide distribution to books which represent many shades of Left opinion ... we are creating the mass basis without which a genuine People's Front is impossible. In other words, the People's Front is not the "policy" of the Left Book Club, but the very existence of the Left Book Club tends towards a People's Front.<sup>31</sup>

Whilst Gollancz protests that he wishes to represent different shades of opinion, to affirm that the Club is working towards a People's Front was in fact to affirm the communist party line, as many would have been aware. Support for broadening a united front into a popular front had grown from the summer of 1935, yet the policy remained controversial. The CPGB had pursued a campaign for unity and on November 25, 1935 applied for affiliation to the Labour Party. Yet whilst the application was supported by the Socialist League, the formally constituted organisation of the Labour left, on January 27, 1936 the application was rejected by the party conference, which also renewed a ban on joint action with the Communists.<sup>32</sup>

However, the position of the Labour leadership now came under increasing pressure, particularly after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. The policy of the united front was debated once again at the Labour party conference of October 1936 and after it was again rejected the leaders of the Socialist League began informal discussions with the CPGB and the ILP. On December 19 the *Daily Herald* reported on an agreement between the three bodies, and launched an attack on it; this was two days before Orwell's meeting with his publishers.<sup>33</sup>

Thus Gollancz was writing his foreword at a moment when the campaign for unity was at a turning point. Less than two weeks after he drafted his text, on January 24, 1937, members of the Socialist League chose to defy their party's ban on joint action by co-signing a 'Unity Manifesto' to fight fascism. For some this was a decisive step forward and indeed by April 19, 1937 the unity campaign had 34,399 registered supporters.<sup>34</sup> Yet as the campaign was effectively proscribed by the Labour party it threatened the very existence of the Socialist League; if at this moment members of the League chose to work towards a People's Front, they were opposing a Labour party leadership which seemed bent on class collaboration with the liberals of the National government. As much was the stated view of Sir Stafford Cripps at the launch of the unity campaign. Cripps was chairman of the Socialist League and he had long argued that liberals would always balk at socialism and, in the end, would 'always come down on the side of capitalism'.<sup>35</sup> Hence the urgent need to find common ground between the labour left and the communists. For tactical reasons this was established at the beginning of 1937, yet just as this was publicly affirmed in the 'Unity Manifesto' Orwell published a book which offered a rather different view of socialist unity and its role in the fight against fascism.

In his foreword, Gollancz welcomes the first part of Orwell's book as rightly 'full of burning indignation against poverty and oppression', yet he feels that the 'second part is highly provocative' because here Orwell presents an account of socialism which Gollancz finds deplorable.<sup>36</sup> The publisher begins his criticism by noting that Orwell writes 'as a member of the "lower upper-middle class"' and goes on to argue that in a number of respects he has not succeeded in escaping his upbringing; as much is betrayed in the Orwell's dismissal of 'almost every socialist as a "crank"'.<sup>37</sup> Orwell wants to build support for socialism by making appeals to liberty and justice and it should not be surprising that this brings forth Gollancz's strongest objections: 'Mr Orwell does not once define what he *means* by Socialism; nor does he explain *how* the oppressors oppress, nor even what he understands by the words "liberty" and "justice"'.<sup>38</sup> In Gollancz's view, Orwell's account of socialism is romantic and his account of class formation is presented in the absence of a systematic critique of capitalism. And in this context, Gollancz's conclusion to the foreword is particularly telling.

On the one hand we have to go out and rouse the apathetic by showing them the utter vileness which Mr Orwell lays bare in the first part of the book, and by appealing to the decency which is in them; on the other hand we have so to equip ourselves by thought and study that we run no danger, having once mobilised all this good will, of seeing it dispersed for lack of trained leaders - lance-corporals as well as generals - or even of seeing it used as the shock troops of our enemies.<sup>39</sup>

Thus Orwell's account of oppression has great value in the anti-fascist struggle. Yet precisely for this reason it is dangerous; without the necessary framing such an account may

be turned to reactionary ends. As Orwell's presentation fails to provide this framing, Gollancz is obliged to do so with his foreword.

Not content with this, Gollancz prepared members of the Book Club for the text by providing an editorial commentary in what was now titled *The Left News*. Here he repeated the view that the first part of the book 'will prove one of the best weapons in rousing the public conscience about the ghastly conditions of so many people in England to-day'.<sup>40</sup> And he continues: 'We are therefore printing separately pages 1 to 150 of the book (including the 32 photographs which are an essential part of the indictment)'.<sup>41</sup> Members are to circulate the book to those 'they may have reason to believe, are prevented by nothing but ignorance and apathy from joining those who are actually fighting against these evils'.<sup>42</sup> The aim is to engage the indifferent and even the hostile. 'We believe that the reading of this first part (with its photographs) will begin to do the work: and it can then be followed up, in each case, by a further process of education.'<sup>43</sup> The insistence on the value of the photographs and their relationship with the first part of the book is significant. It clearly indicates the role of the photographs in rousing 'burning indignation' and suggests that this presentation is more valuable than the autobiographical perspectives of the second half of Orwell's text. The latter perspective is precisely not considered a weapon to stir people to action and so help to build the desired unity.

*The Left News* offered a two-fold account of how to secure this usage by pointing out two major failings of Orwell's text, both of which were thought to compromise the effective defence of socialism. The first failing was attacked in a review of the book. *The Left News* had established the practice of reviewing the month's selection and it fell to Harold Laski to

assess *The Road to Wigan Pier*; here he rehearsed Gollancz's charges and repeated the warning issued by Cripps. Laski felt that Orwell's book was flawed because it

ignores all that is implied in the urgent reality of class antagonisms. It refuses to confront the grave problem of the State. It has no sense of the historic movement of the economic process. At bottom, in fact, it is an emotional plea for socialism addressed to comfortable people. On the evidence, when the facts make them feel uncomfortable, charity seems to act as a sufficient anodyne. They rarely go further.<sup>44</sup>

As Orwell's analysis did not go far enough, it was insufficiently robust as an attack on liberal positions. This failing was felt so acutely in the first months of 1937 that when Orwell's book was published in its truncated edition, without the offending second part, a further response was still deemed necessary.

If a first charge against Orwell concerned his address to comfortable people and his tone in addressing them, a second, related charge was made on the grounds of failure to depict organised class struggle. This failure was denounced in a short essay entitled 'Forward from Wigan Pier', written by an anonymous author identified as 'ex-Public School, ex-University'.<sup>45</sup> Such an identification must have been intended to align the critic with Orwell's class position whilst showing how the critic - unlike Orwell - is able to transcend this formation. Rather than simply address 'comfortable people', the critic has a wider compass and is thus sensitive to matters Orwell neglects. Therefore the commentator laments that

Mr Orwell does not show us, beyond a few remarks about the working-class Communist, the N.U.W.M. [National Unemployed Workers' Movement] and the *Daily Worker*, that tremendously significant side of working-class life, the guarantee against further oppression - the organised working-class struggle.

If only Mr. Orwell could have portrayed the workers, not only as either oppressed or contented but as struggling against oppression in an organised way; and if only he had portrayed the workers that lead such struggles, and the members of the other classes that are now actively joining them in such a struggle, his picture would have been complete.<sup>46</sup>

This much confirms the position of the Left Book Club selectors *vis-à-vis* their own selection. And it should be clear that this position provides more than a mere context; for they were prepared to intervene in a number of ways to realise the stated intention of making the book fully documentary. If Collins understood the term 'document' narrowly, as a record or deposition, it would be understood as a form of evidence, and, as such, placed against, and valued over, opinion.<sup>47</sup> Whilst Orwell might be at pains to acknowledge his own perspective, his autobiographical mode was clearly problematic for the selectors and the inclusion of illustrations was a means to introduce other perspectives. Thus the illustrations moved the book away from the first-person and towards other works of social commentary that used photographs as evidence in support of argument. This reading seems confirmed by the use of illustrations in a subsequent Left Book Club selection: Wal Hannington's *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*.<sup>48</sup> Here the argument is supported with much detail and without excessive recourse to the first person and the photographs, chosen by the author, are congruent with the text.<sup>49</sup> Yet what was the situation for Orwell's text? What relations were established between his words and the images obtained by Gollancz?

*The Road to Wigan Pier*

If the desire was to have Orwell's picture complete, this was a desire that Orwell had seemingly set out to frustrate. For in striking ways his text resists completion and marks its own lapses and lacunae, as Alex Woloch has drawn out with great skill in a recent study. Woloch notes that *The Road to Wigan Pier* opens with something the author has missed: 'The first sound in the morning was the clumping of the mill-girls' clogs down the cobbled street. Earlier than that, I suppose, there were factory whistles which I was never awake to hear.'<sup>50</sup> Orwell is a visitor to Wigan and not a worker and Woloch makes the point that the writer begins by dramatising the divergence between his own experience and that of the factory workers. In Woloch's account, reflections on this divergence structure Orwell's text; he notes how frequently Orwell writes of what one is 'liable to miss'.<sup>51</sup> One could add that this is even signalled in the title; the book is called *The Road to Wigan Pier* and whilst the author has set his heart on seeing the pier he has to record that it has been demolished 'and even the spot where it used to stand is no longer certain'.<sup>52</sup>

In the second chapter of the book Orwell attempts to focus on work and the full significance of his attention to what is missing is brought out. Orwell devotes pages to the long, gruelling 'commute' the miners take underground to and from the coalface. He writes: 'Of course, the "travelling" is not technically work and the miner is not paid for it; but it is as like work as makes no difference.'<sup>53</sup> Woloch glosses this by noting that the significance of the commute is something 'one is always liable to miss' for the precise reason that it has already been missed: nobody gets paid to commute, even though the time it takes is company time.<sup>54</sup> Orwell's account of the commute is interleaved with that of work at the coalface to make the point that the former is as like the latter 'as makes no difference'.<sup>55</sup> Thus whilst Orwell wants to see 'the English working class at close quarters', he understands that 'work' narrowly defined as productive gestures - those gestures of 'labour-power'

valued under the conditions of wage-labour - was only one part of the experience of class.<sup>56</sup> All that is involved in the commute is also part of this class experience. And in Orwell's account this is an experience which it is very difficult to grasp from the outside. In his text, the account of labour is extraordinarily compressed and amounts to only a few pages; he seems to want to maintain a difficulty of access to his subjects rather than an illusion of comprehensive knowledge. Accordingly, his second chapter draws to a close not in the pit but with the author 'sitting writing in front of my comfortable coal fire'.<sup>57</sup> This is of course a good place from which to address comfortable readers, if the point is to dramatise the divergence between their experience and that of those who produced their coal. And Orwell is concerned to acknowledge that watching

coal-miners at work, you realise what different universes different people inhabit.

Down there where coal is dug it is a sort of world apart which one can quite easily go through life without ever hearing about. Probably the majority of people would even prefer not hearing about it. Yet it is the absolutely necessary counterpart of our world above.<sup>58</sup>

This is the larger reason why his first-hand accounts - as first-hand - are also incomplete ones. The images of Orwell sitting by his fire or lying in bed in Wigan after the whistles have gone are images of the middle-class writer. For Orwell, such a status means there will always be much he will miss in attempting to present working-class experience. Alienation cannot be neatly encapsulated and so, Woloch argues, Orwell has recourse to 'a controlled failure of representation'.<sup>59</sup>

Accounting for this failure is the task of the second part of *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

It is in the opening of this section that Orwell acknowledges the class position which

Gollancz chose to underscore in his foreword. Orwell is at pains to argue that his description of the 'lower upper-middle class' indicates an economic stratification which is interpenetrated by a social one. For Orwell, this latter stratification has tenacious effects in the way that it colours perceptions and analyses of class.<sup>60</sup> He goes on to argue that 'orthodox' Marxism with its emphasis on the economic has failed to grasp this and thus fails to grasp the operation of the 'whole hierarchy of classes' in the 'English class-system'.<sup>61</sup> Above all it has failed to account for the persistence of social stratification in the present circumstances, in which large sections of 'the middle class are gradually being proletarianised'.<sup>62</sup> For Orwell, this persistence of stratification exposes incompatibilities of economic, social and cultural interests in contemporary Britain. His view of Britain is focussed on the difficulties of establishing commonalities; thus it is not so much that Orwell fails to move beyond a class formation but rather that he is concerned to examine the motivations of those involved in such attempts and the obstacles they encounter. As a result, Orwell offers a fractured picture. Gollancz's response, with his own reading of the exigencies of 1937, is to attempt to complete the picture.

The suite of illustrations played a vital part in this work of completion - or this work of re-making - and I hope the reader will understand that the foregoing exposition has been necessary in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of this work; the images selected by Gollancz and his collaborators were to perform a very particular task and were addressed to a particular audience. The club readership did not form a technical or specialist audience, as, say, for a publication like the *Architect's Journal*, yet nor was it a general audience for journalism, such as browsed through *The Listener* or the dailies. The choice of illustrations seems to respond to this; the suite of images has a greater coherence than for the latter publications without being restricted in the manner of the former. So whilst the illustrations

were chosen from a diverse range of sources this did not result in an eclectic final selection. Indeed, drawing on a wide range of source was not unusual at the time, and doubtless helped to underline the 'documentary' character of a work. For example, in 1936 W. F. Lestrangle had published a visual polemic, *Wasted Lives*, which drew together images from sources as disparate as the London Garden Society, the Education Department of the London County Council, the National Union of Teachers, the printers Hazel, Watson & Viney, the *Daily Herald*, the *Engineer*, the *Shop Assistant* and the *Architects' Journal*, to take only a sample from the acknowledgements.<sup>63</sup> Yet *Wasted Lives* is perhaps only unusual in the extent of these acknowledgements, which helps to illuminate the publishing practices of the period. The images for Orwell's book came from a similar range of institutions and publications to those used by Lestrangle.<sup>64</sup> One image was supplied by the St. Pancras House Improvement Society (the only image credited: No. 28). At least one image was provided by the Reverend Shaw, who had responded to Collins and indicated that he was willing to help (No. 27).<sup>65</sup> And one image of a miner was taken from the same source as that used for the illustration on p. 104 of *Wasted Lives* (No. 6: although uncredited it is in fact by James Jarché, whose work often appeared in the *Daily Herald*). It is not necessary to multiply these examples; the point is simply that their origins are various and cannot be used to account for the meaning of the images in a straightforward way.

Nevertheless, the publishers' selection produced a certain thematic unity in the illustrations in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The great majority of illustrations - Nos. 5 to 32 - could fairly be grouped under a rubric such as: 'Working-class living conditions'; this part of the suite underlines the concerns of the first part of Orwell's book. In these images architecture is assailed; houses are threatened by encroaching slag heaps or are literally undermined and require makeshift buttressing [Fig. 1]. The demands made on the

environment by resource extraction have, as a collateral, an impact on the homes of those employed to extract. In these images the imperatives of mining are shown to outweigh consideration of the miners' living conditions. These are images of surplus value, then, in that they show bare conditions of subsistence:

What appears as surplus value on capital's side appears identically on the worker's side as surplus labour in excess of his requirements as worker, hence in excess of his immediate requirements for keeping himself alive.<sup>66</sup>

The illustrations show the homes of those who are provided with little beyond what is deemed necessary for keeping themselves alive.<sup>67</sup> The photographs in *The Road to Wigan Pier* were thus the converse of the image of 'Beautiful Britain' which Williams-Ellis sought to preserve and that was being consolidated in the interwar period through popular illustrated guides.<sup>68</sup>

The photographs reveal interiors as fragile as the exteriors [Fig. 2]. Plaster rots to expose bare, damp stone and windows and walls alike disintegrate and fall away from their supports. The miners' houses are subject to such complete neglect by landlords as to precipitate physical collapse.

These photographs are an indictment. Yet who would prosecute the guilty and how would reparation be made? This was what concerned Gollancz. He was quite aware that Sir Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists were making their own use of this type of imagery. Mosley was campaigning in the distressed areas when Orwell visited them and he was then to campaign in the London at the end of 1936 and this clarifies the role of images of the capital in a book ostensibly concerned with 'the distressed areas'.<sup>69</sup> Gollancz wanted to frame the photographs in the same manner as Orwell's text was framed by the

publisher's foreword. And this, I think, explains the distinctive character of the first four photographs in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. These images are concerned with the collieries; they are paired [Figs. 3-6]. There are two images of the unemployed, searching the slag heaps for coal chips and waiting for buckets to tip onto the heaps. They are technically engaged in stealing; yet as it is from the heaps, 'it does no harm to anybody', as Orwell observes.<sup>70</sup> The other two images relate to strikes. Thus, taken together, these are images of working-class self-determination and resistance. In this they are in some respects departures from Orwell's text, for as the 'ex-Public School, ex-University' critic points out, Orwell's account of organised struggle is minimal. This lacuna seems to have prompted the representation of struggle in the form of the strike photographs.

The strikes pictured were at Fernhill and Nine Mile Point, both in South Wales, and it is worth establishing the significance of these events. The Fernhill strike of September 1936 was a stay-in strike and at the time the longest ever mine occupation. And the stay-in strike which began at Nine Mile Point in October 1935 soon spread to neighbouring collieries and at one moment seemed to threaten the whole of the South Wales coalfield. Yet perhaps most importantly, both strikes were mounted in a spirit of solidarity. This was noted in another Left Book Club selection for 1937, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*. Here Wal Hannington, head of the N.U.W.M., stated with pride:

It says much for the splendid character of the working class of these areas when those who are still in employment are prepared to take the risk of strike action (Bedwas, Nine Mile Point, Ferndale etc.) to compel 100 per cent trade union membership and recognition of trade union representatives. To strike purely on questions of principle

such as these is undoubtedly a stronger expression of the spirit of trade unionism even than a wage dispute.<sup>71</sup>

So that which Orwell does not show is shown in the first four illustrations. This is the inflection of the text. The inclusion of these four photographs moves the whole suite of illustrations away from images of poverty, where the working class are presented as passive objects for government attention and administration (at best). Instead the strike photographs show principled resistance.

Yet this is bought at some cost. Whilst the strike at Fernhill was a success, and the photograph shows celebration with bystanders smiling and applauding, the wife of the miner in the foreground does not want to be photographed. One imagines that the photograph was taken by someone moving out quickly from the side of the street to confront these figures, and the wife's surprised reaction is the result. A woman behind her to the left seems to show a similar reaction. These appear as responses to an aggressive act. Yet if the woman in the foreground does not want to be pictured, what does it mean to contemplate this image? Of course, in choosing to re-make the image, to place it before Orwell's readers, the publishers are prompting this question.

The question of response here is hardly an idle one. The re-making of photographs was to be part of a rousing of conscience, part of the larger project of the book club to create 'the mass basis' for a popular front. Yet at precisely this moment in 1937 unity was under threat. The question of appropriate response was thus an urgent one. In the absence of this response there would be at best the anodyne of charity and at worst victory for fascism. Could there then be a properly collective response to the conditions pictured in the majority of the illustrations? If the publishers have in effect posed this question, it is not

one to be answered with reference to a single image of strike action. For after all the image of Fernhill is paired with that of Nine Mile Point and, in turn, this pair have their place in larger series constructed by the publishers.

The image of Nine Mile Point shows the relatives and friends of miners currently underground, conducting the stay-in strike. It seems fair to say that with this image the photographer has brought the viewer closer to the perspective of those supporting the strikers. There is here at least some congruence of viewpoints. This is confirmed if the photograph is compared with alternative views, such as that published in *The Listener* at the time of the strike [Fig. 7]. The magazine photograph does not show figures but a site, the colliery as the location for a strike; the image is organised to show the extent of the site and to feature the two pit-heads (even if this means the composition is awkwardly divided by a telegraph pole). In contrast, the photograph in Orwell's book brings the viewer much closer to those attendant at the site. Nevertheless, from where the viewer is positioned it is not quite clear where the friends and relatives are looking, or what they see. The direction of their gaze is not quite that of the viewer. So, once again, one could say that something is missed. The viewer is not placed among the supporters; solidarity is not yet achieved. Yet nor is the viewer forced into the discomfiting confrontation of the Fernhill photograph.

The difference between the two strike images is underlined by their sequencing. The first five images in the book are in landscape format and so readily viewed as a group. The first image of coal searchers is opposite a page of text. Turning the page, there is the Fernhill image and across the gutter the second image of the unemployed on the slag heap. Turning the page again, the view of Nine Mile Point replaces the street in Fernhill [Figs 3-6]. So even if something is missed in the Nine Mile Point image, the viewer is nevertheless

made aware of a partial alignment of viewpoints. Thus taken together the strike images might figure the emergence of solidarity, or at least its possibility, depending, of course, on the response of the viewer. And across the gutter from the Nine Mile Point image is the photograph of the undermined houses [Fig. 1]. This spread thus makes the turn from the introductory sequence into the main body of images. And in the photograph of houses, in the middleground, a woman is gesturing to buttressing, directing the viewer's attention, and making an indictment.

### *Conclusion*

I began with two propositions concerning documentary photography. The first was that the figure of the photographer in search of 'scoops' is in certain respects unhelpful, no matter how attractive to other journalists; the second was that addressing the photograph in print enabled a broader and more critical account of agency. I hope it is now at least a little clearer how these two propositions are related, for it is not the case that a focus on the latter simply replaces the former. As I noted at the outset, the mythic figure of the photographer had work to do and one can consider Gollancz to be re-deploying the photographer's agency, to particular rhetorical effect. Here the case of *The Road to Wigan Pier* is especially illuminating, for what it reveals is the operation of the visual not as a happy confirmation of the textual but as a means of attempting to secure an interpretation. The text becomes the occasion for a rhetorical performance as one agency is played off against another.

Now, it might be objected that all I have done in making this argument is to shift authority from Orwell's text to a series of intervention orchestrated by Gollancz. Yet I would

be relatively unperturbed by such a charge; it would be without force because the shift in question cannot be understood merely as a matter of moving a singular authority from one position to another. The case of *The Road to Wigan Pier* reveals the ways in which authority is challenged and dispersed, rather than the ways it is confirmed and controlled. For the publishers' desire to make Orwell's book 'fully documentary' was precisely a desire to re-make the author's work. The re-making of photographs in Orwell's book - even whilst it is a production - relies on the status of the photographs as 'documents'. This fictive status is present in an extreme form in the mythology of the 'scoop', in the fantasy that, with the quickest of reactions and the technology to match, the photographer has seized something of the world with a particular immediacy. In this mythology, and more broadly in the documentary genre, photographs are held to 'show'. And this is what may give them a particular value in rhetorical performances. It is whilst seeming to show that they are able to tell.

---

1. Anon. 'Scoop', 71.

2. For the exponential growth of periodical press in the interwar period see Fernández, *Fotografía pública*.

3. The most extensive account of these photographs is Taylor, 'Picturing the Past', and see also Taylor, *A Dream of England*, 164-71.

4. The argument here draws on those developed by John Tagg. For the relationship between photography and other discursive practices see Tagg's *The Burden of Meaning* and *The Disciplinary Frame*.

5. One of the most influential accounts of photography opens with a confession of an 'ontological desire' to learn what photography was 'in itself': Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 3.

6. For the fundamental account of indexicality see Peirce 'Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs'. For a wide range of views on indexicality and photography see Elkins, *Photography Theory*.

---

7. See Lugon, *Le Style documentaire*.

8. The argument here builds on a developed body of work concerned with the ordering of photographic knowledge. For particularly effective accounts see Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* and Trachtenberg, 'From Image to Story'.

9. For a range of approaches to reproduction and circulation, some conforming to the tracking model, see the essays in *History of Photography 2*: 32 (2008) and Phu and Brower, 'Editorial'. See also the essays in Gervais, *The "Public" Life of Photographs*.

10. On the status of photographic reproduction and its relation to earlier modes of presentation see of course Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', especially 255-258.

11. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 113.

12. See Gollancz, *My Dear Timothy*, 266ff.

13. Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition*, 154ff.

14. Gollancz, 'Editorial: The Left Book Club', 2, emphasis retained.

15. Edwards, *Victor Gollancz*, 213. For the complex relationship of Gollancz, the club and the communists see 213-300.

16. Degras, *The Communist International*, 346.

17. See Degras, *The Communist International*, 352-3.

18. Gollancz, 'Editorial: The Left Book Club', 2. For the broader context of campaigns for leftwing unity in Britain see Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition*. For a detailed narrative of the Left's response to fascism see Corthorn, *In the Shadow of the Dictators*.

19. Gollancz, 'Editorial: The Left Book Club', 3.

20. For details and a history of the club see Lewis, *The Left Book Club*.

21. For the commission see Crick, *George Orwell*, 278-9. The distressed areas were technically those subject to the provisions of the Special Areas Bill of 1934: for details see Hannington, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*.

22. Orwell, *A Kind of Compulsion*, 417.

23. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 113.

- 
24. The most detailed account of this stage of the production process is given in Davison, 'General Introduction', xxxii-xxxv.
25. Cited in *ibid.* xxxiv.
26. Cited in *ibid.*
27. Cited in *ibid.*
28. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 113.
29. *ibid.*
30. See Davison, 'Textual Note', 229.
31. Gollancz, 'Foreword', 217, ellipsis added.
32. Corthorn, *In the Shadow of the Dictators*, 60-83.
33. For the sequence of events see Corthorn, *In the Shadow of the Dictators*, 86-128.
34. Corthorn, *In the Shadow of the Dictators*, 154.
35. Cripps at the 1934 Socialist League conference, cited in Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition*, 168.
36. Gollancz, 'Foreword', 217, 218.
37. *ibid.* 218, 220.
38. *ibid.* 224.
39. *ibid.* 225.
40. Gollancz, 'Editorial', 255.
41. *ibid.* The reference is to the number of plates rather than the number of photographs, as one plate had two half-page images.
42. *ibid.*
43. *ibid.*
44. Laski, 'The Road to Wigan Pier', 275.
45. Anon. 'Forward from Wigan Pier', 379.
46. *ibid.*

- 
47. This is not an attempt to define the 'documentary' but merely to speculate on a particular usage. There is of course an extensive literature on the documentary modes: for a sophisticated account of immediate relevance to Orwell's context see Edwards, 'Disastrous Documents'.
48. Hannington, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*. This was the selection for November 1937.
49. Taylor, 'Picturing the Past', 22.
50. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 3.
51. *ibid.* 25, Woloch, *Or Orwell*, 122, 130.
52. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 68.
53. *ibid.* 26.
54. Woloch, *Or Orwell*, 130.
55. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 18-31. It should be pointed out that something further is missed in Orwell's account in that he does not acknowledge that the reason for the commute was the chaotic organisation of the mining industry in which the disposition of mines had to adapt to surface ownership: see Hannington, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*, 37-8.
56. For the formation of these conditions see Marx, *Capital*, 711-724, especially 716.
57. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 29.
58. *ibid.*
59. Woloch, *Or Orwell*, 137.
60. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 208-9.
61. *ibid.* 208.
62. *ibid.* 209.
63. Lestrangle, *Wasted Lives*, 7-8.
64. Taylor gives some detail of copyright holders, as referred to in a letter of Gollancz of November 10, 1949. See Taylor, 'Picturing the Past', 17 and 31.
65. Davison, 'General Introduction', xxxiv.
66. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 324-5.
67. This is not an overstatement: see Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 84-96, and the chapter 'Scientists, Diets and Realities' in Hannington, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*, 56-76.
68. For the illustrated guides see Taylor, *A Dream of England*, 120-51.

---

69. Orwell attended one of Mosley's meetings in Barnsley on 16th March 1936: Orwell, *A Kind of Compulsion*, 456-7.

70. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 93.

71. Hannington, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*, 163-4.

### Figure captions

Figure 1. Anon. 'A Row of Undermined Houses in Blaenavon, Monmouthshire', Illustration 5 in George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1937

Figure 2. Anon. 'Scullery in an "offshoot" Coming Away from the Main Building (now reconditioned)', Illustration 15 in George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1937

Figure 3. Anon. 'Coal Searchers', Illustration 1 in George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1937

Figure 4. Anon. 'South Wales: Miners of the Fernhill Colliery come to the surface after a stay-in strike of nearly two weeks underground', Illustration 2 in George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1937

Figure 5. Anon. 'Cilfynydd, Pontypridd, South Wales: Unemployed miners watching the buckets tipping slag in the hope that some coal may fall', Illustration 3 in George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1937

---

Figure 6. Anon. 'Nine Mile Point Colliery, Newport: Relatives and friends waiting at the pit-head for news of the miners, who are conducting a stay-in strike below', Illustration 4 in George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1937

Figure 7. Anon. "'Stay-in" strike', *The Listener*, Issue 354, October 23, 1935, p. 713.