'[T]he whole tragedy of leisure in penury': the South Wales Miners' Institute libraries during the Depression

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In the *Aberdare Leader* newspaper for 21st February 1903 it was reported that the small South Wales mining township of Penrhiwceiber had turned down an offer of £700 from Andrew Carnegie to help establish a public library in the area. This was not a unique occurrence, although generally Carnegie's offers had the opposite effect of concentrating local minds, overcoming any opposition and leading to the provision of a **public** library service. But then, as the report makes abundantly clear, Penrhiwceiber was not interested in the local authority funded model of public library development either, which the community also dismissed as 'municipal doles'. Why such strong feelings and such strong language? Was the local community implacably opposed to the concept of a library service for the locality? The answer is no, quite the reverse. The main reason for Penrhiwceiber's decision was that the township already enjoyed a library service from a local Miners' Institute and had done so for some years. The community did not see why it should forfeit its 'independence' and pay twice for a library facility via their own contributions and local rates, or be beholden to a wealthy American philanthropist, whose handouts were frequently seen as 'blood money'.

Beginning in the late 1860s and early 1870s, i.e. when public library enabling legislation was already firmly in place in the British Isles, many South Wales coal-mining communities had looked to themselves to provide for the growing reading needs of their inhabitants. Libraries and reading rooms could meet these needs, whether they were educational, cultural or recreational, but in the newly emerging mining communities of South Wales, where there was little or no tradition of municipal governance, their answer was formed by entirely different traditions. Whereas the older, more established towns around the fringes of the coalfield, such as Pontypridd, Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare did adopt the Public Library Acts between 1887 and 1901, smaller townships and villages all across the coal-mining region of Monmouthshire, Glamorgan and parts of Carmarthenshire and Brecon established well over 100 libraries and reading rooms in the five decades before 1914, generally as a major, if not the most important feature

of a local Workmen's or Miners' Institute or Hall. These were a communal response to a community's need, and individual communities were justifiably extremely proud of what they had achieved for themselves, long before 'charitable millionaires' arrived and without the assistance of local authorities.

Welsh non-conformist traditions and social practices had instilled in local mining communities a desire for and belief in reading, culture, self-education, and self-improvement, one practical manifestation of which had been that since the mid 19th century, many miners had had deducted from their wages, via a system known as poundage, a levy which paid for their children's schooling. When elementary schooling became free, this levy, rather than simply being cancelled, was channelled into the provision of workmen's halls, whose libraries were able to meet the growing demands for better, wider and easier access to reading, a demand that had developed as a result of the rising literacy levels, and the increasing amounts of progressively cheaper reading materials.

Self-help was an acknowledged and widely advocated element of Victorian social policy, but to this the South Wales mining valleys added various extra features defining factors. Welsh non-conformity was fundamentally democratic in nature. It relied on its own members for its leadership, organisation and finance, thereby encouraging and nurturing self-belief in their own abilities, giving them practical experience in management, and weaning them off any reliance on the traditional external religious hierarchical structures associated with the established Church in Wales. Other features of these emerging mining communities further promoted a self-help, collective-style response to the social issues that confronted them. Firstly there was geography. Many mining communities were in remote areas, cut off from their neighbours at the heads of dead-end valleys and physically isolated from each other. This made many mining communities bounded in outlook to their own concerns; they were not part of the world outside, but belonged to a world of their own – a situation which had both positive and negative consequences. One example of this insularity and the closeness of individual communities can be seen at Ynysybwl, where of 3,274 registered workers in the local pit between 1907-1925, only 186, or just 6% came from outside the village.

Elsewhere, as in the heavily populated Rhondda, where the lie of the land required ribbon-type development along the bottom of the river valleys, the result was a string of settlements, which although physically connected to each other, still maintained a village-like atmosphere focussed round the local pit, rather than creating a major town with a clearly defined municipal centre, as is normally the case in urban areas. In both geographical responses strong local identities and community allegiances dominated. Nor should the semi-frontier nature of these mining communities be overlooked. Once a pit had been sunk and the population begun to grow, the provision of basic social, cultural, religious and leisure facilities had to rely on local initiative and collective enterprise, rather than outside agencies. Finally, it is in the very nature of mining, especially during this period, that miners counted heavily on their fellow workmen (or 'butties') to work together co-operatively and collectively to ensure each other's safety in such a dangerous occupation. All these elements encouraged feelings of separateness and independence.

In Paul Kaufman's term, the Miners' Institute libraries of South Wales were genuine 'community libraries', which sprang from an 'original collective impulse', and a 'spirit of local independence', but which also reflected their specific time and environment. The communities served by these libraries were unusual in character, being essentially one-industry and one-class dominated. Apart from the pit managers, there were a few professionals, such as doctors, teachers and ministers of religion, and a small shop-owning class. But these mining communities were almost completely without that middle-class stratum found in other industrialised areas, who often played such a crucial part in progressing the public library movement locally. Rarely was there any alternative employment, apart from the railways. Life revolved around the pit, the ups and downs of the coal-mining industry, and the rhythms and demands of the central figure, the working class miner.

Other non-mining members of the community were not necessarily excluded from Miners' institutes and their libraries. In the early stages of the movement (if it can genuinely be called that), the coal owners and mine officials, many of whom lived locally and worshiped with their workforce in the same chapels, were also heavily involved. They helped establish these institutions through financial and other donations, and also took active parts in their organisation and administration. The local pit owner

might feature as Institute President or Chairman, whilst managers would sit on relevant general Committees. Similarly other influential members of the community, especially local ministers of religion and schoolteachers were frequently drafted onto the Book Selection committee for predictable reasons. Often, there was also a category of Institute membership for non-miners, unfeelingly but tellingly referred to as 'outsiders', who paid by regular subscription, rather than via poundage deductions, and who, as a result, were also allowed representation on management committees. In those few communities where there were pockets of alternative employment, such individuals might also join, whilst the local policeman and postman might be given honorary membership.

But, as miners comprised the overwhelming bulk of the membership and provided much of the initial capital and the subsequent daily revenue, the Miners' institutes and libraries can justifiably be seen as established, organised, financed and run by the workforce itself, the ultimate self-help, independent working-class institution, which gave their members some power and control over at least one part of their lives. That was also how the coal owners generally understood and expected it to be. These were not philanthropic organisations grafted onto working class communities in an attempt to control them, partly because in the early period of their development, both the coal owners and the miners' trade union leaders still believed in a commonalty of interests. Capitalists and labour simply needed to understand each other, and then work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect and best interest. This situation did not last for long (if it ever really existed), and certainly by the outbreak of World War I there was a far more confrontational atmosphere abroad in the Valleys, as many South Wales miners had moved politically to the left, shifting their support broadly from the Liberal Party to the emerging Labour Party, the more radical Independent Labour Party, and even some openly revolutionary, socialist groupings.

The position of women and children vis-à-vis the local Institute and library was more complex, and would vary from location to location. There is no doubt that these groups participated in many activities that took place in the Institute theatres and Halls, and that women's clubs and societies also used the meeting rooms. But formal membership of the institution and library usage is a more difficult aspect to identify. There are some examples of women being listed in their own right as library members and users, and a few Institutes even ran ladies reading rooms. However, instances of women taking part in Institute management are very rare and only materialise towards the end of the 1930s. Unsurprisingly, children were not granted membership, but again they clearly used the libraries, as individual library catalogues contain sections listed as 'juvenile' or 'boys and girls'. Nevertheless there is the strong impression that women (and children) normally used the Institutes via the membership of another male member of their family, be it father, husband or brother. Apart from attendance at formal performances in the theatre or regular meetings of women's societies, women certainly felt awkward in visiting the local Institute, and rarely dallied in what was undoubtedly regarded as a male space.

Notwithstanding these caveats to the vision of the Miners' Institute and Library as total community facility, there is no underestimating their centrality to the social, cultural and educational life of the surrounding population, a position they took over from the non-conformist chapels during the last decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Physically they came to dominate their communities, as they, the 'miners own cathedrals' generally towered above the interminable terraces of miners' cottages. But unlike contemporary municipal central public library buildings (often similarly over built and over large) these were not dependant on initial Carnegie funding, but were instead concrete symbols of each individual community's own achievements and independence.

The cultural and educational results achieved by these institutions should not be treated lightly. Much autobiographical, biographical and other evidence bears eloquent testimony to the importance of Miners' Institutes as a whole, and their libraries in particular, in furthering and expanding individual minds and horizons, in firing imaginations and giving their readers a glimpse of a life beyond the slagheaps, a vision of a better world. The community did not just resource the facilities, but hugely benefited from them as a community and as individuals. Often the only venue for local adult education activities, as well as cultural events, Miners' Institutes have been variously referred to as the 'brains of the coalfield' (Dai Smith), as 'Prifysgol y Glowyr' (the miners' university), the 'Athenaeum of the working man; the 'Hall of Hope' or the 'Palace of Progress'. Nor can their libraries be dismissed as working class

equivalents of penny-a-volume circulating libraries that concentrated on light, escapist, even trivial reading. Fiction invariably formed the largest category in the stock and also the bulk of issues, but individual library catalogues reveal a wealth of other materials, especially of a radical nature, in politics, economics and social policy. And there is sufficient evidence to show that a small, but vociferous, section of the local reading community made good use of this material, which, as users, they had been in a much better position to buy for themselves in the first place than users of their municipal counterparts. One noticeable feature of many early public library collections was the scale of inappropriate donated items dumped on their shelves. This happened far less often in Miners' institute libraries, especially when, as the 19th moved into the 20th century, the influence of local ministers and teachers on book selection committees waned as the miners themselves became more assertive and more radical in their book buying policies and began purchasing material to match their community's needs. Finally, these libraries were not just paid for and used by the local communities, they were normally run by their inhabitants, i.e. the librarian was himself an ex-miner (sometimes admittedly deemed worthy of filling the post simply because they had lost a limb in an underground accident), whose knowledge of the local community and their reading habits was unequalled. They may not have been professionally trained and qualified, but neither were they middle-class outsiders out of place in a working-class milieu. Institute librarian was a much sought after position, and once again the literature bears witness to how many of them were instrumental in forwarding the education of individual local miners, via the books on the library shelves.

By the beginning of 1914 the South Wales valleys were viewed with a growing degree of suspicion and alarm by the government and the establishment. These valleys and the miners that largely populated them took independent, advanced, if not revolutionary, stances on many aspects of contemporary political, economic, social and educational practice. The Tonypandy riots and major coalfield strikes of 1910 and 1911, the syndicalist philosophy revealed in the publication *The Miners' Next Step* of 1912, other radical far-left political publications and activities, and the espousal of independent working class adult education, (which even regarded the Worker's Educational Association as an untrustworthy bourgeois organisation), only added more fuel to the fire. And in the middle of virtually every mining community was a Miners' Institute and Library, as physical evidence of a socialistic communal ideology and working class culture whose understanding of community embodied, in Raymond Williams's phrase 'the idea of active mutual responsibility'.

Yet, when the Government's wartime Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest reported in 1917 on South Wales, it commented on a lack of 'community sense', a lack that the Commission blamed for much of the social and political turmoil associated with the region. In particular they noted the inadequate 'development of the civic spirit and the sense of social solidarity', which they believed resulted from the 'absence of municipal and centralised institutions', commenting that 'dignified municipal buildings are extremely rare', especially in the central Glamorgan coalfield. One particular building was singled out as missing, namely the 'municipally-maintained public library', of which none were to be found in that area. It was as though this institution was necessary, not just outwardly to symbolise the necessary 'community sense' and 'civic spirit', but also to prevent the more extreme positions adopted by the mining communities – an interesting take on the public library as agent of social control. Clearly, as we might realise, if we were to stop and consider the term for a minute, there is no such thing as 'the community', but rather a variety of communities, whose philosophies and raison d'êtres can be significantly different. In this instance a major contrast can be seen between the community values of municipalism and civic pride and the community values of working-class independence, successful self-help and mutual dependability. Unfortunately in the years that followed the First World War, that spirit of independence and self-help, as made manifest in the Miners' Institutes and Libraries, was to be initially sorely tested, and then finally broken.

The shifting sand on which these institutions were founded and subsequently floundered was their finance. Initially local communities had received assistance in this direction from favourably disposed coal owners and other influential individuals. Such voluntary help became seriously eroded not only as the pit management literally became outsiders, distancing itself from coalfield society as it increasingly moved

away from the mines they owned and ran, but also as the mining communities aggressively asserted their independence and became more radical in outlook. All might still have been well had the miners' own contributions, together with the revenue obtained from other activities in the Institute halls and theatres continued to flow. But this could not be guaranteed. Even before the General Strike of 1926, in which the miners carried on, alone, for nine months instead of nine days, and the catastrophic depression in the coal industry, which began in the late 1920s and continued, almost unrelieved until the outbreak of World War II, there had been hiccoughs in individual Institute funding caused by strikes, lock-outs, pit closures and other stoppages. Continuing income relied on continuous, regular employment, from which poundage payments could be deducted. No work, whether it resulted from strikes, pit closure or whatever else, simply meant greatly reduced income. Before 1914 Many Institutes had erected imposing buildings via large mortgages and were consequently saddled with crippling debts, let alone normal everyday running expenses. Paradoxically of course, it was precisely at these times of enforced inaction when the Institutes, including their libraries, were under the severest financial pressures, that their services were most required. Like their public library counterparts, the idle time created by strikes and unemployment has historically led to increased business in libraries and reading rooms and soaring issue figures. The increased demand experienced in the South Wales Miners' institute libraries for much of the period from 1920 to 1939 was met with their own collapsing if not collapsed funding.

Ironically, the Government, for whatever reasons, had realised the need in mining communities throughout the United Kingdom for increased welfare provision, and had established the Miners' Welfare Fund in 1921. The money for this Fund came from a levy per ton of coal mined, not just on the mine owners, but for the first time, on the royalty owners, those scarcely known individuals who actually owned the land on which the mines were sunk, and thereby obtained royalty payments from the pit owners. These funds, which over the next 17 years amounted to nearly £2 million in South Wales alone, were spent on improving the social amenities and infrastructure in Britain's coalfields. This often involved the building of Halls and community centres (usually referred to as Welfare Halls) together with various outside facilities, such as bowling greens, tennis courts, children's play areas and so on. Generally speaking money was not available for already existing institutes, nor to help provide a library, or at least not as the 1920s progressed.

Despite this clear drawback, the role of the Welfare Fund in providing facilities, especially when the economic position of mining communities significantly worsened following 1926, was surely wholly beneficial. Not so, as in South Wales at least, one effect of the Welfare Fund was the destabilization of the working miners' independence, self-esteem and self-reliance. For instance, the rules governing the receipt of Fund money via a local Welfare Association required a greater presence on management committees of the whole community, including women, non-miners, the unemployed and the retired. Yet, so desperate did the economic and social situation become in South Wales during the depression that eventually many mining communities would be grateful for any help they could get, and this included assistance with their library services.

It is difficult perhaps for us to fully grasp the scale of the collapse of the South Wales coal industry from the mid 1920s. There had been a brief boom immediately after World War I, such that the South Wales coal industry peaked either in 1920 with over 271 thousand employed miners, or in 1923 when a slightly reduced workforce raised a record 51 million tons of coal, all the while pouring money into Institute coffers. By contrast, at the outbreak of World War II manpower was down to 128 thousand and output to 35 million tons. In the Rhondda Valleys coal production in 1939 was one third of its 1913 level. Between 1921 and 1936, 241 pits had closed, generally for good, and if lucky enough to be in employment, miners found themselves with reduced pay packets, either as a result of short-time working, or lower rates for the job or both. Thus, the wages bill went down from £65 m to £14m. You can appreciate the devastating effect such a downturn must have had on all aspects of life in these one-industry communities. Unemployment rates in individual areas could be astronomical and long-term. For a brief period in 1935/6, unemployment in the Rhondda Fach was over 80%; it was never less than 40%, and in September 1936 there were 11,000 long-term unemployed in the Rhondda alone. One consequence of this was mass emigration from the valleys, either to more prosperous English coalfields, such as Kent, or to

new industries and new areas, such as the car industry and Slough New Town. Between the 2 World Wars, Wales lost nearly 450,000 of its population through emigration, and it was generally the younger, more dynamic, more employable and able-bodied people who left.

Without regular and sufficient funding, no general library can fulfil its functions for long, and by the late 1920s many Miners' Institute libraries were struggling to survive as two reports commissioned by the Joint Committee for the Promotion of Educational Facilities in the South Wales and Monmouthshire Coalfield in 1928 into the condition of workmen's libraries in the Rhondda and Aberdare areas of the coalfield movingly highlighted. Many libraries had been totally unable to purchase any new material for a number of years, funds had collapsed and future prospects, given the current state of the coal industry, were just as bleak. Something had to be done, but what?

Some libraries tried to maintain their independent approach even in these dire circumstances. A few appealed directly for donations via the national press, whilst others wrote begging letters to sympathetic public library authorities, such as Manchester and Bethnal Green in London, and received from them box-loads of withdrawals. But these were merely stopgap haphazard measures, which resulted in poor, unsuitable materials simply to fill the shelves with something. More long-term and systematic answers were required.

Amongst the potential providers were the newly emerging county public libraries, established under the 1919 Public Libraries Act. County services were set up in Brecon, Glamorgan, Carmarthen and Monmouthshire between 1920 and 1925, and lengthy negotiations between them and local Miners' Institutes often led to the latter becoming distribution points (or quasi branches) for the new public services. These small but regularly changed collections of books, which were normally largely fiction, helped to ease the pressure for current light reading materials on Institute libraries, but the situation was not without its problems. The independent nature of many Miners' Institutes and their libraries could be enshrined in their constitutions, whereby only members (and their families) were allowed to cross the sacred threshold. County library distribution centres had to be open to the general public, who may or may not also have been members of the receiving Institute. This created difficulties and some Institutes found it constitutionally impossible, or politically unacceptable, to adopt these regulations and went without or refused the County library books. The slightly bizarre solution arrived at in many Institute libraries was to have two collections – one from the County and open to all and sundry, the other belonging to the Institute and only for use by its members.

In the late 1930s a similar joint solution developed in the Rhondda valleys, which had originally been deliberately excluded from the area adopted for a public library service by Glamorgan County Council. Following protracted and frequently very bitter negotiations between the County Council, Rhondda Urban District Council, local Miners' Institutes and the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, the Urban District Council, rather than the County Council, finally adopted the Public Library Acts, and began using a number of Institute libraries as their distribution centres. Again, as in those communities served by County Library services, some Institutes were unable or refused to join.

The involvement of municipal public library services was a solution also increasingly advocated by the Miners' Welfare Fund. Although generally against using the Fund to support Institute libraries, the individual regional organisations, which administered the bulk of the monies raised locally, had sufficient independence of action to do just that if they so wished. In South Wales a few grants of this nature had been made in the early 1920s, before the Welfare Fund, nationally, signalled a clear shift in its policy in the mid-1920s, whereby it encouraged the regional organisations to re-direct requests for assistance with Institute or Welfare Hall libraries to the respective public library authority. Clearly as the County library services developed in the South Wales coalfield during the 1920s and 1930s, this became a gradually more viable and effective option.

References above to the Miners' Welfare Fund, the Carnegie UK Trust and the Joint Committee for the Promotion of Educational Facilities in the South Wales and Monmouthshire Coalfield signal another, and perhaps more significant response to the situation – the participation of outside agencies. There was no welfare state in the 1920s and 1930s, but there were plenty of organisations, frequently

brought together under the banner of 'social service', which were concerned with the welfare of British coal-mining communities. These included central and local government agencies, voluntary organisations and charitable trusts, and even the public at large. Thus individual communities in South Wales might be 'adopted' by more prosperous towns in the Midlands and South East of England, whilst a resurgence of the Quaker-led 'settlement' movement, led to a number of these welfare facilities being opened in various South Wales township. But although these examples provided financial help and some forms of work for the locality in general and the unemployed in particular, they were not seriously involved in providing reading matter or assisting Institute libraries.

This came from more 'official' organizations such as the Carnegie UK Trust, the South Wales and Monmouthshire Council of Social Service and, following the passing of the Special Areas legislation of 1934, the Commissioner for Special Areas. The published reports of all these organisations, and others including the Miners' Welfare Fund and the Pilgrim Trust, together with their practical help in pumping thousands of pounds into Miners' Institute libraries, underlined the perceived importance of continuing to maintain an effective library service in these areas of mass unemployment and social deprivation. But it was not simply a question of filling idle hands with a good book, or of sustaining a service that many mining communities had enjoyed for decades; there was a much more serious motivating factor, which may not have been openly expressed but which nevertheless lay behind this abundance of activity and involvement.

What concerned the 'powers that were' were the possible subverting effects, socially and politically, in the South Wales coalfield of totally idle time, coupled with the radical pedigree of the area. Providing the massed ranks of miners, both employed and unemployed, with reading material in the relatively warm and comfortable environment of the Institute library (and further occupying the unemployed via the settlements and unemployed clubs in activities such as boot repairing) might help turn them aside from the revolutionary solutions being advocated locally by militant communist demagogues, and organisations such as the Minority Movement or the National Unemployed Workers Movement. Maintaining this particular social service is credited with having helped prevent local society from sliding into anarchy and chaos, and, in the Government's eyes, of holding the community together. Reading could be judged as a broadly pacifying activity. Perhaps the actual reading habits of the majority of miners (and their families) had also been recognised by this time; namely that despite the radical material sitting on many Institute library shelves, issue figures revealed that fiction was the overwhelming staple diet. Thus, although 'self-organised and self-managed libraries have always been part of any oppositional culture', (and South Wales Miners' Institute libraries were clearly that), what counted was what was actually read in them. Moreover, as we have seen from the worries expressed in the Government's 1917 report into Industrial Unrest, linking these institutes, no matter how tenuously, with the more sedate and politically acceptable public library movement was no bad thing.

How did the recipients of this beneficence respond? Imagine what it must have felt like for these communities, which had prided themselves on being self-sufficient, self-organised and self-providing, to suddenly become largely dependant on hand-outs. Many Institutes had little choice but to accept whatever was on offer if they wished, literally, to continue to keep their doors open or avoid being sold off. A few Institutes and libraries did withstand this onslaught on their independence; some survived because financially they were initially in a solvent position, or because the local pits were still working to full capacity and providing sufficient revenue, or because enough income was generated by other Institute activities, such as billiards and cinema showings.

But this splintering into the financially sound and the financially insecure, together with the infiltration of outside agencies with their own rules and regulations, and the onward and upward march of public library services in the mining valleys, meant a serious dilution of what had initially characterised the Institutes and their libraries, namely their self-reliance, their independence and their successful version of community self-help. The questions asked of them by the mass unemployment of the depression and the social consequences of the collapse of the coal industry were simply beyond them in the aggregate, and the majority required outside assistance. Not that it was received with open arms, as if the recipients knew that these circumstances and their solutions ultimately sounded the death knell of the all-embracing

community response. One condition of receiving help for instance from the Miners' Welfare Fund was that a plaque, 'gratefully' acknowledging that help, had to be mounted in the benefiting Institute. In one instance, after simply refusing to comply for some time, the plaque was hidden away in a remote corner, out of sight. To this Institute it clearly symbolised an important loss of integrity and independence.

In a 1937 survey of another mining township the setting up of clubs for the unemployed, was seen as a deliberate attempt by outside agencies to sabotage the miners' own facilities, to break the Institutes, built up with 'their own hard earned pennies'. These clubs and other social centres 'stank of charity' and took away the miners' proud feeling of independence. But, ironically, some Institutes had only themselves to blame, consciously or not, for the growth in alternative clubs for the unemployed. Institutes had always been paranoid about non-members sneaking into the building to use the newspaper reading room and other facilities, and technically only working miners, who paid their Institute dues via poundage deductions, could be members. Individual Institute constitutions had simply not taken into consideration what to do with armies of out-of-work miners, and there are isolated examples of Institutes turning away their unemployed ex-members. As if to rub salt into these wounds, outside bodies stepped into this self-made breach, with unemployed clubs being set up by the settlements or councils of social service. To further add insult to injury, a bête noire of the South Wales mining communities, the Conservative regional newspaper, the *Western Mail* and its sister publication the *South Wales Echo* ran a campaign in late 1935 requesting donations of reading materials, so that libraries could be set up in these unemployed clubs. The finger was being pointed at the failure of certain Institutes and their libraries to act in an understanding way for the benefit of the whole community. Although enticing, this rift between the recipients of help could not be in the best interests of the welfare providing sector as a whole. So, towards the end of the 1930s the social service councils and others realised that to be successful they had to work with and through the existing social structures and institutions, especially the Miners' Institutes and libraries, and not antagonise and alienate them. Most of them were already reeling from falling incomes and did not need their loss of power and independence to be rubbed in their faces. But, the Institutes also had or would have to change their ways, if not their constitutions, if they were to benefit fully from the relief activities.

By 1939 the old-style community libraries of the South Wales valleys had been mortally wounded, those defining characteristics of independence and self-reliance irretrievably gone forever. It may well be idle to speculate, but speculating on what might have happened to the Miners' Institute libraries of South Wales had there been no Depression, no mass unemployment and no collapse in the coal industry, is none the less interesting. How long could they have stood their ground against the better provided and better organised public library alternatives, especially given that the bulk of reading was of fiction, which public libraries were more than able to provide? What would have been the affect of the post 2nd World War changes in leisure time activities? Would they have coped any better or any differently with the gradual run down of the coal-mining industry in South Wales in the half century after 1945, as opposed to its swift and brutal reduction in the decade between 1925 and 1935? Who knows! But, what can be stated with confidence is that for many years the South Wales Miners' Institutes and libraries represented the pinnacle of what working-class self-help and community activity was capable of achieving. It is perhaps ironic that it was 'the whole tragedy of leisure in penury' that finally led to their demise. It is doubly ironic that the South Wales valleys, outwardly amongst the most politically advanced areas of the United Kingdom, were perhaps kept back from the brink of revolution during the Depression through as simple and everyday a practice as reading, with materials disseminated largely from those very communities' own libraries.