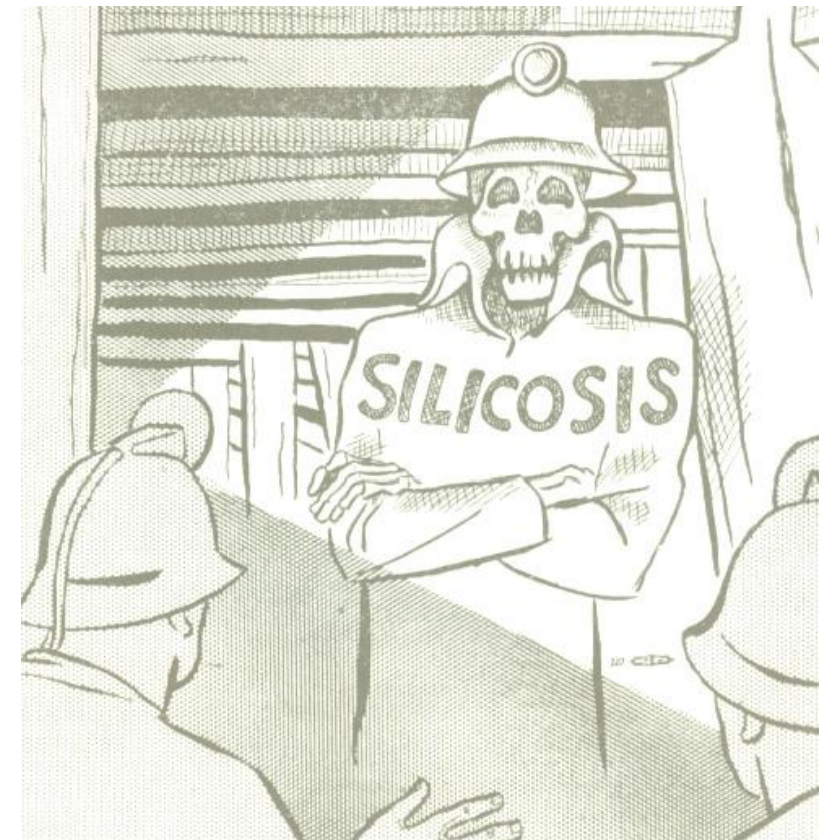


# INDUSTRIAL WORK AND THE BODY: TOXIC LEGACIES, ILLNESS & DISABILITY STORIES

Arthur McIvor



# INDUSTRIAL WORK AND THE BODY: TOXIC LEGACIES, ILLNESS & DISABILITY STORIES

- Clyde shipbuilding worker John Allen reflected in an interview for our recent SWW ROs project:

**‘I’ve got marks on my body from working in the shipyard’.**

Recalling working during the SWW he said:

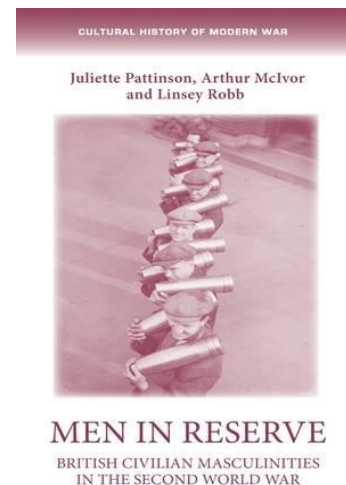
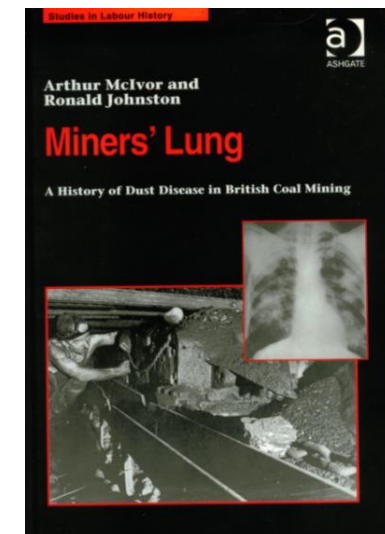
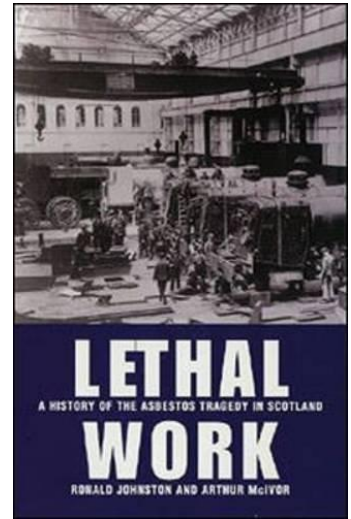
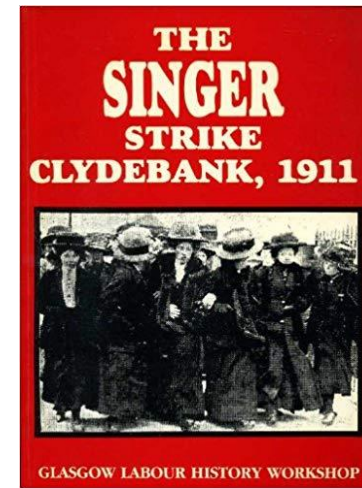
**‘You had no safety. They didn’t supply you with gloves, they didn’t supply goggles. They didn’t supply you with helmets. Nothing.’**

- Int: by Linsey Robb 7 Nov 2011 (SOHC 050/09)

# Scottish Oral History Centre

## Collaborative projects on work and the body

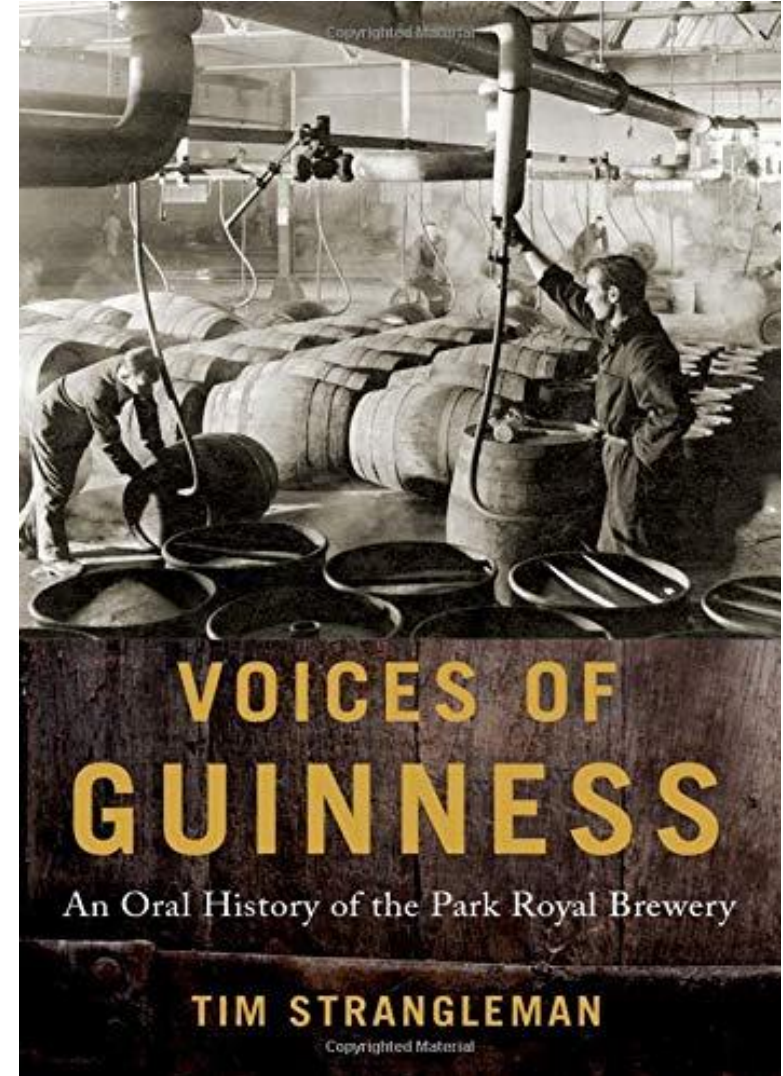
- GLHW Singer project 1987-8 (collective)
- Asbestos project 1998-2000 (Johnston & McIvor; later Walker, dockers)
- Black Lung OH project 2000-2007 (McIvor & Johnston; Rafeek)
- OHS SWW 'Crisis' 2014-17 (Pattinson; McIvor; Robb)
- Currently working on deindustrialisation & the body
- Research student's work
- Debts & influences: Portelli; High; Strangleman...





- ‘The workplace environment can make an impression on all the senses – smell, taste, vision, touch and sound – and workers often related their memories through a combination of these’.

Tim Strangleman, *Voices of Guinness*, p 83



# The presentation...

- Focus = reflecting on the OH interview narratives of *male* industrial workers
- The questions I want to address here are...
  1. What kinds of narratives did British male industrial workers compose on work and the body?
  2. How and why were accident and disease stories constructed / composed?

Coal miners Charles Walker; Alan Napier, Easington, 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2004 Interviewer: Neil Rafeek (Scottish Oral History Centre)  
(to 0.51)



CW: 'That's how I see it. They are all gone [dead], and they've all gone of one *bloody thing*, coal mines.'

AN: *'The club I drank in, they used to call 'Death Row', when you were going in there was a row and there was about ten miners used to sit on that. I mean it's been beefed up and it's a theme pub now but even, in five years ago, you saw it go from ten, to nine, to eight, to seven, and they were all, in the main, mining related injuries or diseases that killed them off. And you can see the ones who were lucky to be alive mind, but they cannae get the words out, they cannae breathe properly. And in the main, the ones who are in their eighties are bent at right angles. So you can see it, you can see it, because they used to work in twelve inches, and fourteen and eighteen inches, so you can see the legacy, you can see the legacy of the pit. So you can understand the anger we've got...'*



# INDUSTRIAL WORK AND THE BODY: TOXIC LEGACIES, ILLNESS & DISABILITY STORIES

Presentation outline

- 1. Positive work-body narratives; health-enhancing**
- 2. Bearing witness: social injustice / activist narratives**
- 3. 'Graft and sacrifice' stories: identity construction**
- 4. Risk denial accounts**

Range of work-body narratives speaks to duality, complexity and multi-layered meanings of work

# 1. POSITIVE WORK-BODY NARRATIVES

- Health-enhancing narratives: industrial work was good; kept workers fit; contributed to well being / mental health
- Secure, stable, interesting , decently paid industrial work that was relatively benign (as at Guinness, at least over 1945-75 'long boom' - Strangleman)
- Strong positive attachment to work
- Intrinsic joys and satisfactions of work
- Meaningful relationships
- Pride and identification in the job and the product
- Willie Dewar, NBC, Glasgow: 'Some people said they would quite willingly have worked for nothing in the locomotive industry because it was an interesting, interesting trade to be in....' Int: McIvor, 2008 (SOHC)

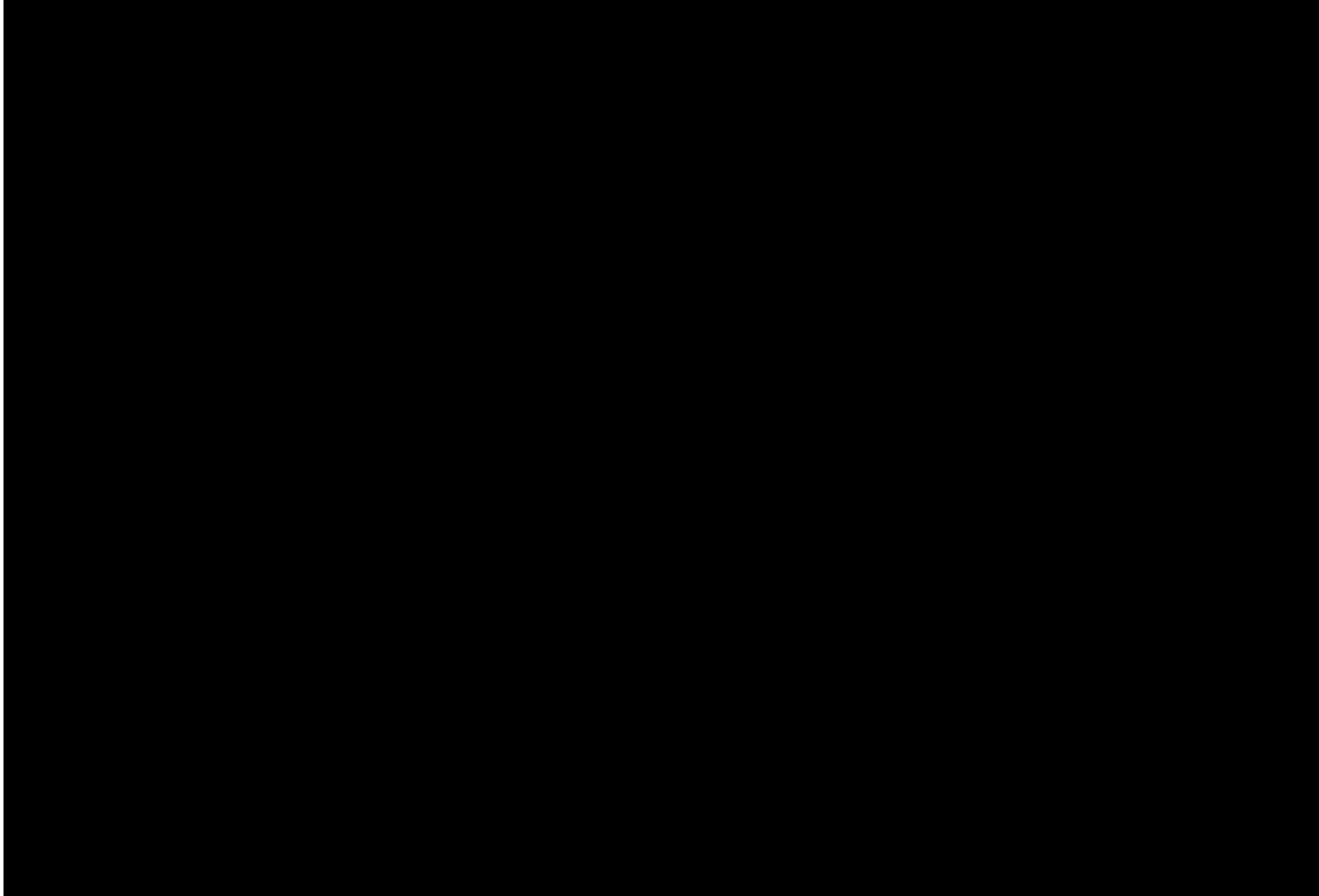


## 2. Bearing witness: social injustice narratives

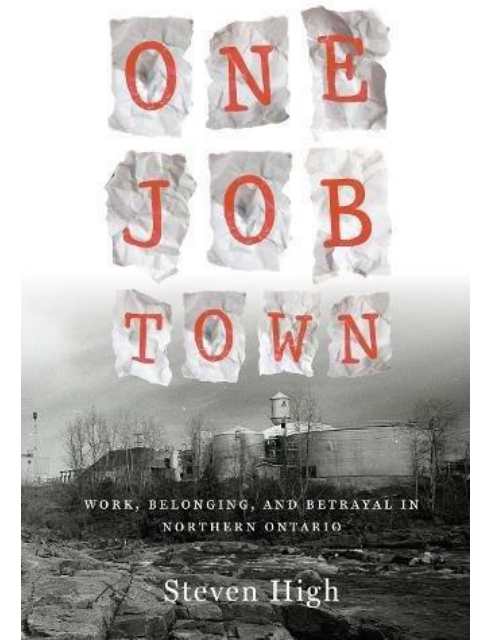
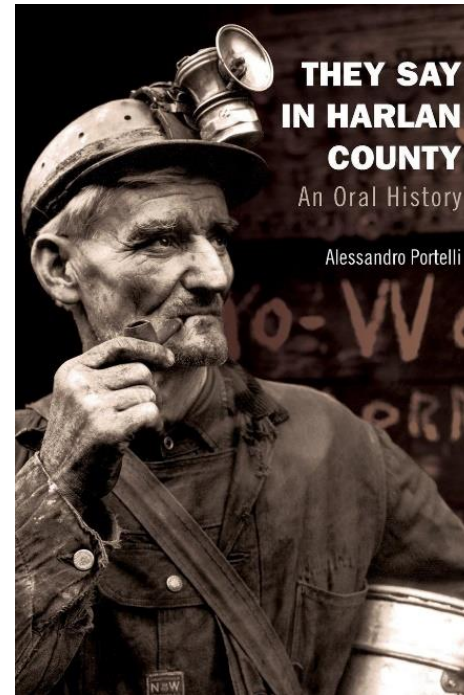
- Other stories convey unfair treatment that harmed bodies, breaching the moral economy of work (companies / managers expected to give due care and take responsibility)
- Witness to harm: The impact of 'slow violence' (Rob Nixon) – Alan Napier's 'death row' story
- Sharp awareness of class relations / power dynamics – feeling pressured
- Gap between regulatory framework (protection) and actual workplace practice / experience
- Juxtaposition of villainous managers / corporate negligence and worker victims / heroic TUs struggling to protect bodies
- Making us (oral historians) aware of a different world – and evoking that world and their sensory experiences of it

Lack of knowledge - asbestos (recurring motif)

James McGrath, docker, int 2004, David Walker (SOHC)



## Bearing witness: social injustice narratives



- Portelli and High have both attested to the *frequency* of stories about bodies in very different contexts –
  - the dangerous, health-sapping work of Harlan Co. mines (where ‘black lung’ was endemic) –
  - a Canadian paper mill, where, High notes: ‘accident stories quickly emerged as a major topic of conversation’ (p102). And workers showed an acute awareness of what High calls the ‘danger spots’

## Bearing witness: social injustice narratives

- Emotive language...
- ‘That employment did something wrong to me’ Owen Lilly int. 1999 (SOHC) - language of abuse / survivor testimony (mesothelioma).
- ‘If you put a guy in a car and push him down a hill with no brakes on it and it crashes at the bottom and kills him, you’ve murdered him. Well, it’s the same with us. They made us work with poisonous materials that were killing us, and never told us’  
Clydeside Insulation Engineer, Interview Asbestos Project, A23 (1999)

## Bearing witness: social injustice narratives

- Social exclusion ('lepers')

'I have gone from one extreme to another... I led a very full social life... **I have shut myself off from life completely**'. (marine engineer) SOHC A9

- A Glasgow sheet metal worker reflected, 'I've had no social life since about 1980. Eh, **people unfortunately don't want to know you when you're ill**' (Interview 1 May 1999, SOHC 016/A9).

- 'I wasn't a bad dancer. I liked dancing But **you can't do that now because you're breathless...** Even getting out of bed in the morning you're breathless. Even washing and walking down and getting the papers you're breathless'

(shipyard boilermaker) SOHC A3

- '**I'm bugged**' (Interview 22 December 1998, SOHC 016/A2).





## Bearing witness: social injustice narratives

Interview: Phyllis Craig (Welfare Rights Officer Clydeside Action on Asbestos)

Int: Arthur McIvor, 2013 (SOHC) extract 16.28 (2 mins)



## Bearing witness: social injustice narratives

### Agency / activist narratives

- Not perhaps surprising, some of the most powerful 'social injustice' narratives were those generated by TU and political activists, advocates and disease movement activists like Phyllis Craig (CAA)
- Making connections between stories / experiences of bodily harm and injustice, and action, mobilization, campaigning and change
- Nicky Wilson (Pres. NUM).... Witness Seminar SOHC 2015 for the *Industrial Society and Disability* project

Nicky Wilson Pres NUM speaking in 2015 2 min



### 3. 'Graft and sacrifice narratives': Identity construction in accident and disease stories

- What I think we can also see in many industrial workers' accident and disease stories are ways that narrators are constructing their identity(ies); projecting a sense of self. Framing & composing (eg Dawson / Thomson / Summerfield / Abrams).
- Expressing a 'performative self' (Carol Reissmann).
- For WC men, working in the heavy industries, this often meant conveying a sense of their hard work ethic – that they were 'grafters' and their successful fulfilment of a masculine protector/provider role.
- One element = 'body-building'; 'I was like steel. I was a hard man then' (Thomas McMurdo, coal miner)...



Rover, 22 July 1950

Miners have a plan for clearing a fall of rock. Here you see it in operation as the search goes on for the missing men.

# THE MENACE IN PIT 19





‘Graft and sacrifice narratives’:  
Identity construction in accident and disease stories



- Owen Lilly: a machine operator at the Turner and Newall Clydebank (Scotland) asbestos factory in the 1960s commented:  

‘I knew it was dangerous before I went in there ‘cause there was people complaining, but when you have two of a family to bring up it was better than walking the streets. I never was idle in my life.’
- In the same interview his wife, Margaret recalled:  

‘He was frightened to walk out of the job because he was married with a family and he just could not afford to do it.’

(SOHC - 1 June 1999, SOHC/016/A26).

'Graft and sacrifice narratives':  
Identity construction in accident and disease stories

SWW industrial work stories...

- D.C.M. Howe, aircraft fitter at Vickers Aviation:

'Once we started then there were no days off at all. **It was seven days a week for days and days on end ... But everyone really got down to it.** It was amazing the amount of work ... We used to churn out 24, 25 aircraft in one small place like that ... in a week.

Fred Clark, aircraft wood machinist:

'I collapsed meself. 1941. Ulcerated throat and tonsils. Which the doctor said was the first sign of a nervous breakdown. **It was the hours we was putting in...** We wasn't tired, we was just bloody walking dead!'

Aircraft factory worker Derek Sims:

'**The long, the hours were ... oh they were, they were killers really. When I think about it, we coped with them ...** and I'm sure there was an awful lot of illness, that, you know, we never knew about.'

- Ints conducted by Linsey Robb for *Men in Reserve*

**WORK** as you've  
never worked before!



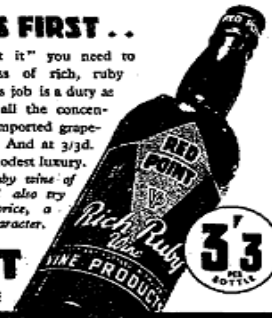
but don't forget  
**this POINT**

**FITNESS COMES FIRST . . .**

If you're going to "keep at it" you need to look after yourself. A glass of rich, ruby Red Point Wine after the day's job is a duty as well as a pleasure. There's all the concentrated goodness of the finest imported grape-juice in that fine rich flavour. And at 3/3d. the bottle Red Point is a very modest luxury.

\*Red Point is a rich ruby wine of Port character. You should also try White Point, at the same price, a white, sweet wine of Port character.

**RED POINT**  
RICH RUBY WINE



'Graft and sacrifice narratives':  
Identity construction in accident and disease stories

- 'POSITIONING' narratives – superior bodies

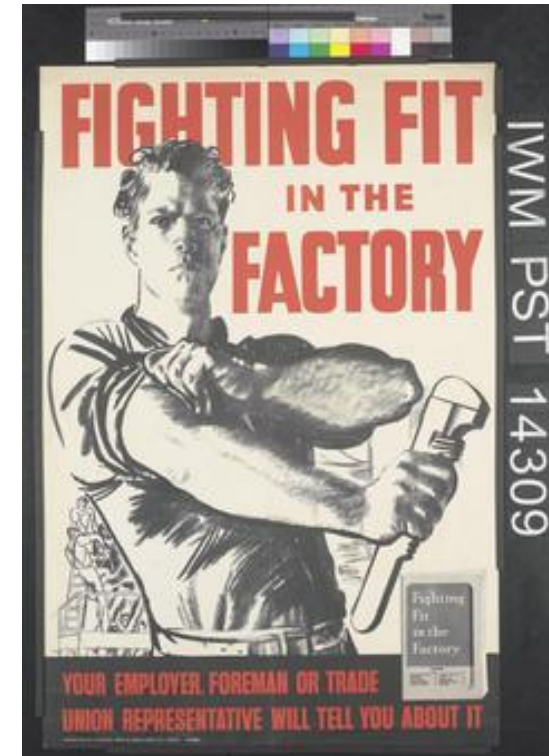
Richard Fitzpatrick, unskilled Glasgow chemical factory worker:

'They [female workers] were mostly out in the yard y'know, doing odds and ends, but never in the furnace shop or the crystal house or the store. Once the war finished the women all disappeared, y'know, bar the, where you made your breakfast, the women worked in there.'

William Ryder, Woolwich Arsenal, London on women workers:

'Ah only they were more or less cleaners. They used to keep the gangways clean and that sort of thing. It was hardly the hardest job in the world. They were a nuisance. Well you could never find them when you wanted them. [laughter] You had to keep your eye on them... It was all little stuff they were fiddling about with. Yes, little bits and pieces. I was more or less dealing with hundreds of tons'.

Ints by David Walker and Linsey Robb (SOHC)



# Protection was for 'cissies'

- Willie Dewar asserted that in wartime fellow workers in the NBL Glasgow rarely worn protective gloves, helmets or goggles. He claimed this was to avoid risking slurs against their manliness from workmates:

'Oh he's a "jessie", you know. A "jessie" was, well, like a woman, you know . . . The majority of them [workers] that was sort of child's play to wear gloves, "oh no", or wear glasses. "No, no", but nowadays you're forced to do that.' int: McIvor, 2008 (SOHC 050/04).

- Shipyard worker Thomas Stewart recalled of American shipyard workers: 'you would scoff at them working with gloves . . . daft!'
  - Interview 1996, 2000 *Glasgow Lives Project* (Glasgow Museums).

Hull drawing, Ailsa shipyard, Troon, 1998





## Stuart McIntosh on 'macho' world of steelworks (1960s) – to 1.10



A: It was great, it was like Billy Connolly always says, when they shut the gates it was just a big laugh inside. It was a very macho culture but at times the work could be very hard, but it's not like a production line so it was never boring, never boring, it got very exciting when the furnace was operating and that kind of thing, it could also be quite violent too. But it was, you would say very much an old fashioned West of Scotland man's world, definitely.

Q: How do you mean it could be violent at times?

A: Well, when steel was running well there was always jobs and when there was a slump, steel was always the first into recession and the last out. When there was a slump we would all be laid off but that was part of the family culture, everyone knew that would happen but the work would come back. But when the work was there, there was such a demand for men that they would take in *anyone*, so guys quite often recently released from prison, and they include the occasional psychopath, literally, would wind up working beside you. So that could be a bit uncomfortable but, you had to be able to look after yourself

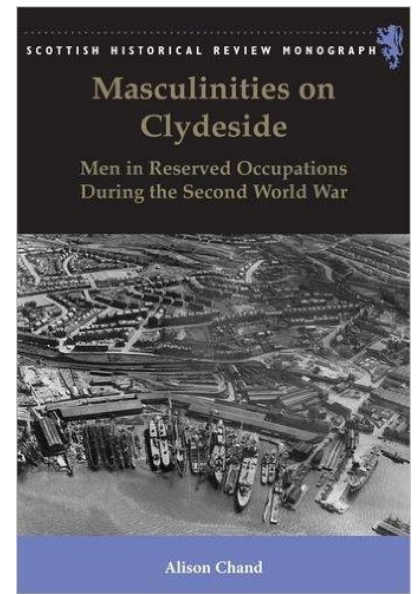
Q : Was there much physical problems there? Violence amongst..?

A: Not a lot but you had to be prepared to stand up and say that you *were* prepared to fight. A couple of times I was in fights and *I didn't choose them* but if you backed down, that would be it, you would, you wouldn't, *everyone, everyone*, would stamp on you from then on, so had to do that. But once you'd done that, that was okay.

• **Int: Neil Rafeek, SOHC (2003)**

# Intersubjectivity

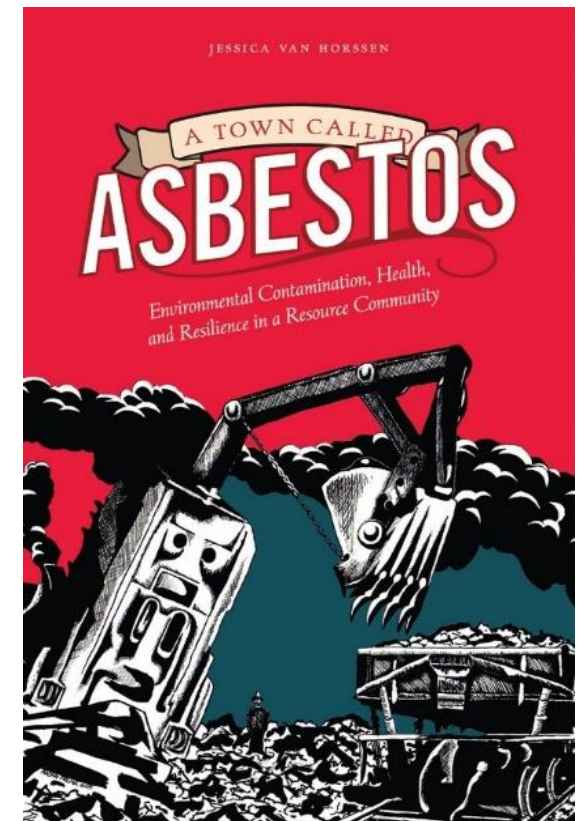
## In these identity construction stories



- Alison Chand's work comparing the interviews she and I both conducted with two SWW civilian veterans, Willie Dewar and Harry McGregor
- Playing down tough masculinity in their dialogue with Alison
- Hamming it up for me

## 4. Risk denial accounts

- Management / co. doctors; eg coal dust good for you; white asbestos was harmless...
- Eric Jonkheere (int: McIvor 2013) memories of father and grandfather
- Jobs come first!
- Asbestos, Quebec (Van Horssen, 2009; 2016)
  - Interviewee threw lump of chrysotile asbestos on the table
  - Town voted not to change its name
  - 4 ex-workers to France to run a marathon to prove their lungs weren't affected



# Where are the female voices?

## 1. Sexual division of labour / dangerous work taboo meant less direct exposure to risk

- But still significant (eg textile factories) and exhausting work and stress-filled lives given the double burden of unpaid home work as well as paid employment (eg Ann Oakley, *Housewife*, 1974...; Ali Haggett, *Desperate Housewives*, 2012)
- Toxins could seep from industry into the home – eg asbestos /chemicals (Bhopal eg – Mukherjee)

## 2. Female industrial workers and work-health cultures

- Risk-taking similar to men (challenges idea = distinctively 'macho' behaviour)
- Abendstern et al (2005) textile weavers and a high risk culture... 'a part of daily life...tolerated because of peer pressure and managerial expectations' p 77
- Mari Williams study: *A Forgotten Army* (2002)
- Ongoing Scottish work (Dundee and Paisley): Wright; Stride; Burns

# Where are the female voices?

## 3. Women and occupational and environmental activism

- Phyllis Craig eg (many others – eg Nancy Tait SPAID; Mrs Jonkheere EVEVA)
- Lachlan Mackinnon / Stacey Zembrzycki – on the role of women in occupational and environmental activism and the wives / support networks behind the union health activists ('Sinter Boys') – steelworks / copper mining in Quebec / Ontario, Canada



# Concluding thoughts

- Carol Wolkowitz: ‘We only have one body, and it feels the pinch’
- Narrators show a sensitivity to the duality / complexity of industrial work – the good and bad impacts on their bodies; satisfactions and horrors...
- In these stories worker narrators are doing many things, including:
  - a) Bearing witness to harm and injustice
  - b) Composing their identities / sense of self
  - c) Identifying as agents / social actors
- Through their stories we get closer to understanding the intimate impacts of work on the body, the structural violence that characterized many industrial workplaces and prevailing work-health cultures.
- And, as Steven High has noted, such story-telling has ‘an important political function ... transforming private hurt into public knowledge’ (High, 2018, 103), providing vital witness evidence, sustaining campaigns for justice, reparations and change.

Thanks

Questions and comments welcome

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