

Before and After Coal: Images and Voices from Scotland's Mining Communities. Exhibition. National Galleries of Scotland: Portrait. 23 March to 15 September 2024.



Figure 1 Commemorating the Miners' Strike Fife, 2024.

The title of this exhibition is explained, in the handsome booklet accompanying the event, as ‘reflecting the strength and spirit of towns where families measure time as being “before and after coal”’.¹ The crucial turning point was obviously the major 1984–1985 strike against colliery closures that, forty years on, has a place in this exhibition and is currently being remembered and reflected upon in locations across the country (Fig. 1).

The exhibition opens with a series of portrait and landscape photographs made by the American social documentary photographer Milton Rogovin (1909–2011) during a three-week visit to three coalfield communities in Scotland in 1982. This work was to inspire his larger series *The Family of Miners*, featuring mineworkers and their families in ten nations.² In 2006 the National Galleries of Scotland received a gift of photographs from the Rogovin family; this was supplemented in 2018 by a further donation of Rogovin’s photographs from private collectors.

Rogovin’s visit was facilitated by the National Union of Mineworkers; but why he chose, or was steered towards, Scotland rather than coalfields

elsewhere in UK is not clear. The subjects of his portraits are anonymous and silent, their precise geographical locations unspecified. The photographs are not posed, but reflect the authentic settings of the people’s lives: workplace, home, the local environment. They are shown in everyday situations such as exiting the mine after a shift (Rogovin was not permitted to photograph underground) or engaged in leisure activities.

Portraits of the miners are presented honestly, without the tendency towards romanticised heroic male strength found in some officially endorsed or sponsored photographs of mineworkers from the immediate post-Nationalisation phase and heyday of the industry.³ In these ways, Rogovin’s work is reminiscent of the ‘straight photography’ of Paul Strand (1890–1976) – some of whose [1954 photographs of South Uist](#) have also been acquired by the National Gallery⁴ – and the output of the American social realist photographers. The black-and-white aesthetic appropriately suggests nostalgia and history, situating Rogovin’s work within the tradition of photographers who worked in the British coalfields before and after him, including Bill Brandt, fellow Americans Robert Frank and Eugene Smith, Kjell-Ake Andersson of Sweden, John Claridge, Walter Waygood, Ian Beesley, Mick Hodgson, Roger Tiley, Anton Want, David Severn, Martin Pitt, John Cornwell and Michael Kerstgens. Colin Cavers and Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert photographed at Longannet Colliery, Fife, shortly before mining ceased there in 2002.⁵

¹ Trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland, *Before and After Coal: Images and Voices from Scotland's Mining Communities*. Exhibition booklet (Edinburgh, 2024).

² <https://www.miltonrogovin.com/photography-series/family-of-miners-19761987>.

³ Stephanie Ward (2021), ‘Miners’ Bodies and Masculine Identity in Britain, c.1900–1950’, *Cultural and Social History* 18:3, 443–462, DOI: 10.1080/14780038.2020.1824599

⁴ <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/features/all-roads-lead-scotland-paul-strands-1950s-hebridean-photographs>.

⁵ <https://www.documentscotland.com/photographs-longannet-colliery-scotland/>

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In several of Rogovin's prints, miners pose proudly with their families in tidy living rooms, often symbolically by the hearth, or relaxing alone or with friends. While the settings are typical of working-class life at the time, we can detect aspects of the older, distinct culture of the mining communities: modest material possessions, popular art prints, sectarian imagery, photographs of Charles and Diana, vegetable gardening, accordion music, rabbiting, keeping ferrets, going to football matches, dancing, walking greyhounds, drinking and having a crack in the community pub, and playing dominoes or darts in the miners' institute or social welfare club. Together they illustrate personal, community and industrial life, the conditions of which are already in transformation, but just on the cusp of unforeseen dramatic change that will alter them forever.

The images document places and things, too. Rogovin's studies of a tidy row of vernacular-influenced miners' cottages in East Wemyss (*Fig.2*), and of the plain salters' and colliers' houses by the eighteenth century Tolbooth on the main street of West Wemyss, Fife, are of a quality and significance worthy of inclusion in the National Monuments Record of Scotland, as are Nicky Bird's recent companion shots of the same streets. Others show utilitarian shops devoid of modern marketing tat (I was delighted to see one shop in Drongan, East Ayrshire, displaying a poster for a forthcoming concert by The Corries, still going strong as a duo in the 1980s) and landscapes long since 'improved' through the Scottish Development Agency's 'land renewal' schemes.



Figure 2 Miners' cottages at East Wemyss, Fife. Milton Rogovin, *Family of Miners*, 1982. National Galleries of Scotland. Gift of David Knaus, 2018. By permission.

Milton Rogovin's fine photographs share gallery space with the creative outputs of a more recent project they inspired. It was on a visit to the National Gallery of Scotland's print room in 2014 that art worker Nicky Bird became aware of the 1982 photographs and was stimulated to embark on an endeavour of her own. Learning that Rogovin's papers, negatives, contact sheets and a complete set of prints of his Scottish project had been deposited with the Library of Congress in Washington DC, she undertook to survey the material. This led, in turn, to her development of *Mineworkings*, in which she traced Rogovin's steps to the communities he had visited, teased out the names of key individuals, and pieced together an understanding of the photographer's field trip and the relevance of his pictures today.⁶

In the summer of 2023, with financial support from Creative Scotland, Bird set out to identify the subjects of the portraits and collect personal testimony in response to them. With the help of local heritage groups and knowledgeable individuals, she met with members of former mining communities in East Ayrshire, Fife, and Midlothian to share copies of Rogovin's photographs and learn from the people themselves. 'Show and Tell' sessions were advertised in each location, during which members of the community shared personal artefacts – documents, heirlooms, photographs of their own – some of which are included in the exhibition.

Meeting these individuals – including some former miners who had themselves been Rogovin's subjects – inspired Bird to create new images, also included in the exhibition. My personal favourite is the portrait of miner Jim Rutherford at Sorn, East Ayrshire, that is paired with a recent one of him in the same location by Bird. In their use of colour and in their differing format and scale, Bird's

⁶ <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/features/images-and-voices-scotlands-mining-communities#mineworkings>.

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photographs create an immediate contrast with Rogovin's. This is highly appropriate, the chosen media suggesting the new reality 'after coal'.

Individuals' reflections on the mining life as documented by Rogovin in 1982, as well as on the strikes and their aftermath, play a major role in the exhibition. Many of their comments are reflected in the captions accompanying the images and other items displayed. A short '[community engagement project film](#)' entitled *After Burn 2024*, filmed by Edinburgh filmmakers Cagoule TV and available for viewing at the exhibition, features moving testimonies by former miners and their families.⁷ The [audio tour](#) to the exhibition contextualises six of the photographs in conversations between Nicky Bird, two of Rogovin's daughters, Paula and Linda, his granddaughter Malaika, and members of the former mining communities; it is well worth listening to for the sake of the details warmly conveyed about the lives of these communities at the time of Rogovin's visit.⁸ Lastly, [Nicky Bird's blog](#) detailing her engagement with this project, as well as her interviews with members of the mining communities, provides a rich resource for anyone interested in Scotland's mining heritage.⁹

Since de-industrialisation, mining communities have been the focus of much oral history research. Glasgow University historian Ewan Gibbs has described the methodological and interpretive challenges of such work, particularly the need to acknowledge the power of collective memory, by which communal experiences come to be 'retold through myth and legend consolidated by family, community and labour connections'.¹⁰ Robin Baillie's observation that contributors to this project often expressed 'memories of a thriving, cohesive, collective life "where everyone was in the same situation"' confirms Gibb's assessment.¹¹ Because oral testimony will inevitably throw up contradictions and conflicting views and opinions, there is a danger in selectively linking fragments of dialogue to specific images, or using them to suggest a straightforward narrative; indeed, we may wonder if the recollections Baillie mentions were necessarily shared by all.

Even so, those who shared their memories may have wished to stress the tight-knit character of their communities in response to what Baillie calls 'the erosion of working-class identity' since de-industrialisation. Several secondary schools sponsored art projects in which pupils, including the grandchildren of coal miners, were encouraged to decorate miners' workwear and create banners in response to the industrial heritage of their communities. These objects, on display throughout the exhibition, reflect young people's contemporary concerns about social media, drug use, and climate change – a world away from the sense of shared identity and fellowship that the miners and older members of their communities remember, a world unimaginable before coalmining ceased.

For those who missed seeing the exhibit itself, the website provides a wealth of information about the project as a whole and the people who made it possible. The scope and ambition of this exhibition was an excellent initiative. Does it mark a new departure in National Galleries of Scotland's engagement with its customers? In the [opening talk](#),¹² Robin Baillie suggested that the answer to this question may be yes, saying that the involvement of community members in this project has helped the National Galleries 're-evaluate the whole process around exhibition-making', and re-assess 'who we represent, and how we represent them'.

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⁷ <https://youtu.be/sW7aWQbAGvI>.

⁸ <https://app.smartify.org/en-GB/tours/before-and-after-coal-audio-tour?tourLanguage=en-GB>.

⁹ <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/features/images-and-voices-scotlands-mining-communities#mineworkings>.

¹⁰ Gibbs, Ewan, *Coal Country: The Meaning and Memory of Deindustrialization in Postwar Scotland* (London: University of London Press), 17.

¹¹ Trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland, *Before and After Coal: Images and Voices from Scotland's Mining Communities*. Exhibition booklet. (Edinburgh, 2024), 21. Baillie is Senior Outreach Officer for the National Galleries of Scotland.

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEoXBzUYIsc>.