Mineworkings: Jim McMahon

Transcription of interview by Nicky Bird on 13 October, 2023

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Original Transcription by Joan MacKenzie
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0:00:00 Jim McMahon: My name is Jim McMahon. And as far as my connection to mining goes, I was a miner. Started ma training at the Barony colliery in 1979. Thereon moved on to the Killoch colliery, until it closed in 1987. I was out o mining for two years, but it was in ma blood, so luckily, there was still a mine working in East Ayrshire, was Craigman mine. It was a privately-run mine, as opposed to Killoch, which was run by the National Coal Board then, latterly, British Coal, Scottish Coal. And it was a private-run mine. And I worked there fae 1989 to it closed, which was the last mine in Ayrshire, and that was 1994.

So, literally, it was in ma blood, obviously, because my father worked in the coal mines, albeit he didn’t have a really good attendance record when he worked in the coal mines. And my grandfather all worked in the coal mines as well. So, it was a kinda destiny and it was that misconception that it would be a job for life, at the time. So, as a young man looking for security, stayin as I said, ma dad didna have a guid work record. I came fae a family that split up. And havin tae get work as quick as possible, I left the school at 16, destined for the mines. However, when I went for ma interview and I spoke to – it would have been the personnel manager at the time – it was a face-to-face interview and he was aware of ma dad’s record. That kinda set me back.

So, I didnae get a job in the mines, initially. That was me at 16. It was 18 eventually, when I went back again and I was successful, albeit my younger brother, he was successful when he was 16. He was a year younger than me, so he followed me a
year and he ended up wi a job at Sorn mine. I started a year after him, when I was 18. And I ended up at Killoch.

So, it was in ma blood and it was destined. It was where I’d always wanted to work because it was that security o bein a job for life.

**0:02:03 JM:** Once you were 18, you come under the category o work that was called ‘green labour’. Right, so, you were 18, over 18. So, we went and did ma training at the Barony colliery. And I remember bein handed ma helmet, an all ma work gear and looking at it now, I still have that, that helmet. It saw me through ma full mining career fae 1979 right through to 1994. It may be tattered, battered and tied, but it got me through safely and it kept me alive.

But, bein handed that helmet, that was me. I was now a miner. That was me. I was part o that mining family. And once, as I say it gaes in your blood, it’s in your blood. In fact, I’m sittin here the now, just wi talkin about it, I’m getting goosepimples again in my arm because – there’s a sayin out there and it wisna me that gave this – but once you’re a miner, you’re always a miner. It never leaves you. The ethics, the morals – everything about minin is wi ye.

So, goin doon that mine for the first time, it was a - I don’t know what that feelin was like. There was lots o emotions runnin through me. Goin doon there. Finally bein where I wanted to be and destined to be, so to speak, wis doon the mines. But I remember goin doon the shaft in the Barony colliery and the feelin, the air whizzing by you as you were droppin doon at the speed you were droppin doon. The tension and the nervousness for the first time, and that was the same wi the rest o the young boys that was in the cage that day wi me. They were aa the same cos it was their first time they were doon the pits.

And it was a character that took us doon. It was a gentleman, Mr Lopez fae New Cumnock, was part of the training team. And, of course, bein young boys, it was always a wind-up wi him. Everything was gonna be a wind up and that’s what I loved aboot the mines, was that camaraderie where you know you were gonna get a joke. There was gonna be a laugh and there was gonna be a joke every day, at your work, o some description. You never knew whit you were gonna face that day.

But that was my initial reactions to bein a miner.

**0:04:08 JM:** I did a training course at the Barony and it was for four weeks, ma underground training. Then straight over tae Killoch, where you started shift
patterns. I tried to get in at the same age as my younger brother. At 16, you
didnae dae shifts; it was only when you became 18 that you started goin, doing the
shift work.

And, I’ll never forget my first night doon the pit on the night shift. I was sittin
having, what we cried wir piece. And, the face oversman cam out. And he was as
black as the coal in the face, and he sat doon beside me and then, he asked me,
‘Are you enjoying your work?’ I said, ‘Well, this is where I always wanted to be’. I
says, ‘It’s early days yet for me, but I really, really like my work’. He say, ‘Can I gie
you a wee tip?’ I said, ‘Aye’. He says, ‘Make your work your hobby,’ he says,
‘because that’s where you’re gonna spend maist o yir life, is at your hobby. See if
you don’t like your hobby, go an get another een’. That stuck wi me all ma days.
And I can tell you, every workin role I’ve had has been my hobby. And it’s never,
ever left me. So, I’m sittin here the day as an elected member. And it’s exactly the
same way. It’s work, but I treat it as a hobby. So, that stuck wi me fae 18 year-old
fae that wise miner that day, gave me that. And aa the way throughout ma
working career and the other three jobs I’ve had since I left the mines, I treated it
that way and folk look at me thinkin I was daft. ‘Why did you want tae…work the
wey you’re workin’, because I get paid the same as you’. But they just didnae get
me, I don’t think.

That was my early days.

Nicky Bird: Well, there’s so many interesting things you’re saying about the
legacy-type things. That’s almost like a kind of intangible legacy, isn’t it, of
somebody saying a piece of advice that’s lasted throughout your working life...

JM: Yeah, it has and I think, as I’ve grown older masel and become a wee bit wiser,
I hope. I hope I’ve become a wee bit wiser and I’ve passed that knowledge on. And
some of the stuff, other stuff I picked up through the mines. It’s great that I can
still see it. And I know my family, they’re lovin that kinda work ethic as well, that
they have grown up. One of them’s self-employed, one of them works for a social
landlord, in housin. And they love their work. They absolutely love their work. So
it’s been really valuable, the lessons I learned through ma mining career, that let
me carry them on through the rest of my working career.

0:06:47 NB: Jim, can I just ask you about your mother, because it’s interesting,
when you were talking about your father’s record, and there’s a bit of an impact
on you getting into mineworking. Going back to this theme of family of miners, the
mothers seem to be very important figures.
JM: I came fae a family that split, so it was getting oot there and gettin a job pretty early and tryin to put something back into the hoose.

I couldnae get up in the mornins, for day shift. Getting up at five o’clock in the morning was alien tae me. I’d never got up at that time in the mornin except if I was goin fishing, which was all right. So, I needed my mum tae get me up. I know that she had a task every mornin. My mum would have got up, made ma piece for me, every mornin. Fill the flask an everything. And she did that for years, as long as I’d live wi her. But, I mean, she wis really, really important, for me. And as I said, her dad was a miner, so she knew what it was like, coming fae that mining background. She had it a lot harder than me, obviously. She was part of a family of 11 at that time. So it wis really, really hard for them. Our family, there was four ae us. But Mum had tae get up early, really early in the morning, to make sure I was up. She was some woman, too. People had asked me before round aboot, who ma hero was, and I’d said it was ma mum for what she come through and what she did. So, she certainly was.

In fact, I remember when I left the hoose when I was 18. I wanted my ain independence and I had my ain wee flat. It was a single end in Cumnock, in the square. And ma bed was right next tae ma sink. It was an aluminium sink that was in it. and I was sayin... thinkin tae maself, ‘I’ve nae mum tae get up here, noo, so how am I gonnae get up?’ So, I left the hoose and she’d gaed me two Big Ben clocks, and a handful o cutlery. So, the cutlery and the clock sat on the sinking board. So, when it went aff in the mornin, everything rattled, to get me up. And believe it or no, sometimes I still managed to sleep through thae knives and forks, cos ma work colleague had to come and gie me a shout at the windaes some mornins, to make sure I was up for ma work.

Ah, they were great days.

0:09:00 JM: That item that you just pointed to was ma water bottle. I got handed that when I was, I think I was 18, maybe 19 and it was an old miner that was retiring. So, obviously 65. He’d had it for a lot o years. So, that was ma water bottle. I kept a haud o that. I’m one of these type of people that, as you can see, likes to keep a haud o these things for memories, between ma pit helmets and ma watter bottles and so on, the documentation I’ve got in front of me. But no... I’ve used that, and believe it or no, what I used it for latterly was, what it was called a minion bottle. Er, we used it when you uised tae go fishin and catch we minions tae attach for trout. That was ma minion bottle. So, it’s a ribbed aluminium can and I don’t know, they might even have been used as... they might have been military
issue at one point. I think they could have been, aye, used in the army as well. But you can see the dents and everythin. But it never, ever smartest and it wis as I said it kept ma water cold. Something that you really needed, your water bottle, down there - whether just to quench your thirst at times and rinse yir mooth oot, and other times you could empty that pretty quickly because some temperatures doon that pit we were working in, really, really intense heat, up at 60, 70, 80 degrees. So, I mean, you could go through water! (LAUGHS) So, it was vital that you carried your water wi ye.

0:10:20 JM: There was a true contrast. There was the Killoch, which was a big pit. Although it was a big pit and covered in miles and miles, tunnels below ground, there were some bits within that pit was really low, and the L coal, for example, was a low, low coal that you were on your knees working. And then, there would be the other main seam, which would have been three metres high.

But it was a big pit. It was a really big pit and the main roadways and the junctions into it... were really big – huge, some o them – 20 feet, 25 feet high. And it’s hard to comprehend that. The mechanism within, back in ma time, even, back in the ’70 and ’80s, really modern mining. With the hydraulic supports and stuff like that. Big new machines that cut, cut the coal, double-headed coal cutters.

And then you had the contrast when I went to Craigman mine, which was a wee mine. And there wasn’t the same mechanisms, goin back tae an auld AB15 undercutter. Hand-strippin on your knees. But again, they had a big coal in there as well.

So, the two contrasts. Where we would, in the ’70s and ’80s, nurses would be brought doon into the face lines as part of their training. Because at that time, there was a lot of miners got hurt.

And obviously leadin up... no so many in the ’70s and ’80s to the extent there were in the earlier years, where it would ha been a constant flow of miners goin to hospital. So, they had to understand the kinda workin conditions, so we took them into the kind of the bigger seams and It was right into the coal face.

So then, moving on to Craigman where I’d been asked if I could take a friend of mine, doon, who was a diver in the North Sea, goin doon in the bells and, just not divin, he was a welder. So, I took him doon and I took him doon intae Craigman and fae the minute he put on his lamp, you could almost sense the tension and the nerves and the anxiety. So, a bit of reassurance for him, we’re walkin doon the mine. So, he was OK. He was OK, that reassurance. An odd creak and he would
shrug his shoulders and duck. But as we got nearer the face line, which was... I'm tryin tae think... So, it was in an afternoon, so the face line had been cut and the coal had been cleared. So, after that, it would be advancing what we cried the supports, to get ready for the next cut.

So, as we got to the bottom end of the road which was... we went in the main gate, which was pretty high. That was the intake...air. The air then went doon the face line and on the return, out the tail gate, where the... the staler air would ha been because the...machine was cutting all the... strippin. The intake air would go roond then and cairry aa the bad air and back out the tail gate. So, it was an air course.

When we got to the bottom o the face line, I mean, he was a bag o nerves by the time we got to the bottom o the face line because the boys were drawin the dowties and the waste, what we cry the waste, efter the dowty had supported the face line, you pull the waste and the roof would collapse behind it. So, there was lots o bangs and lots o creaks and by this time he was getting really, really nervous. As we got to the tail end, the boys were stemmin the brushin, which was the stone that was left after the coal had been taken away, which had to be dropped. So that everything was flush again for the next move in. So, I'd said to them, 'Could you just haud on five minutes so as I can explain what’s happening', I says. Then I'd said to him, 'Look, we need to go about 100 yards oot the road'. So, we'd got oot the road and in tae a manhole. 'So, what we’re in here for', I says, 'is, you’ll hear that in a minute because the shotfirer’l shout, “fire” and you will hear an explosion. OK?' ‘OK.’

So, that was the process and that’s what happened.

Well, you can imagine, if he was bad enough wi the supports getting moved in and the waste falling...he absolutely...crapped hissel. (LAUGHS) It was ‘Aw, Jim, Jim, Jim, Jim, Ji...’ I says, ‘Right, come on, come on. Let’s go in. We’ll go and see noo what’s happened’. So, as we were walkin in the road as the coaldust and the dust was comin towards us, his light beam was becomin mair focused and shorter. ‘What’s that? What’s happening?’ I said, ‘It’s just the stoor comin out. Just haud your breath and we go out through that.’ That was the last straw. That was a panic attack. He could not take any more. ‘You need to get me up. I don’t want to see it.’ That was enough. So, I’d to mair or less nurse him and talk tae him aa the wey back oot the mine which, it took me about another half an hour to get him back to the surface. And he said he would never, ever dae it again. It was an
experience. He couldn't understand how anybody would want to work in those conditions.

I get that for him, but that was second nature for us. We never gave that a second thought. We were always conscious of the dangers. I mean, you had to be conscious of the dangers and look after what... you neighbour, the guys that you were workin' wi. You were always conscious of that every day. But it was second nature to us. We didnae have that fear factor that was built in. There was an element of risk and danger that you were always conscious of, but you worked aware of that and being conscious of, there was a danger. You knew what you were doin' when you were drawin' the support and the roof was gonna drop. You knew what you were doin' when you were puttin' a piece o' wood or something, or a steel girder that was goin' to support the side or the roof. But he couldn't cope wi that and he would never, ever wanted to go back down a mine again. He still talks about it to this day.

0:15.49 NB: And talking about the dangers, your other helmet, which has got 'Rescue' on it...

JM: Yeah. So, my white helmet there, that's the one I got initially when I started at the mine in 1979. When I went to Craigman mine in 1989, every mine, every pit had to have a Mines Rescue Team. So to complete that team I went and did my mines rescue training. So, that was up at Crossgates in Fife, where they had the centre up there. So, I spent a bit o' time then, up there, regular, doin' training. They had different training scenarios where... there'd be an underground fire or there'd be a collapse and you're up there, rescuing men. So, I carried that with me till Craigman closed. Luckily and fortunately enough for me, I never had to use it...in seriousness. The... as the mines were decreasin', you need to remember, so there was only two or three mines that were still workin' mines left in Scotland at that time. There was a couple o' private mines, but you still had Bilston Glen, I think, and no, it'd be Monktonhall. That would still be workin'. There was a couple o' private mines. But you could ha been called out to them. It didna mean to say, it wasnae just yir ain mine. If there had been a heatin' or a fire, you could have a call to any o' them. So, I never used that, so to speak, in anger, any times.

But it was there. It was part o' that Mines Rescue Team. I remember back in ma wee village o Logan, in the '70s, growing up in there, that there wis various doors aa the wey oot through the village had badges outside their door, and it was Mines Rescue that was on them. So, they knew if there was an incident where the minibus or whoever was pickin' em up had to go to. That's a Mines... 'He's a Mines
Rescue’, or ‘He’s a Mines Rescue’. They all had badges outside their door as part of the Mines Rescue Team. I never had one, I didnae need one.

Yeah, but that helmet there... although it’s got its scratches and its bruises, er, that was all part ae training, er, that. It was a new helmet, but it was well used, as you can see. That’s no tied. That’s no tied wi the wires and it’s still got all its straps and clips, unlike the other helmet, which was used every day. Yeah.

That’s still the coal dust inside it. I mean, if I can describe it...the back strap, the adjustable strap, is tied wi, I think it’s twine... and wire. As I said, I could never part with the helmet. I don’t think it would meet legal obligations and requirements now. (CHUCKLES) Although it came as a British standard at the time, it certainly wouldnae meet that now. But it saw me through my years’s mining. And you can see aa these marks on it there. Aa the hitting your head on steel girders or something scratched it and caught it some way.

But, yeah, that’s it. And the wee sticker there, and some o the guys, all the miners’l’ll remember these stickers that you had – ‘Miners Do It In The Dark’, so these were all stickers that come out as part ae a promotion. I think it was 3M was the name o the company. But, yeah, you sat there in... moments, and scribble wee things on it. Wee names, ma name and suchlike. That’s the coal dust that’s still in there yet. It’s never been cleaned. And I said that will stay wi me, till the day I die. When I said mining’s in ma blood, it still is in ma blood and I mean, it’s a memento. It’s a trophy for me. It’s a trophy that I cherish.

0:19:21 JM: I was a boy, I was 23 at the time, of the 1984. I wisna 24 to the December. So, I was a young boy wi one daughter. Married. A year later I became a man, right, comin oot o that. That was a year-long strike, that moulded me, politicised me, as well. I wasn’t really politically motivated prior to 1984. Although I was a union member, that was the kinda extent o it, bein in the NUM. However, the motivation and the principles and the reasons behind the strike politicised me because I knew the importance, even at 23 years old, I knew the significance ae what that strike wis all aboot.

Aye. Yeah. So, that was aboot, no jus... It wisnae for a wage rise. It wisnae for nothin about wages. It was aboot preserving and saving communities... as we knew them at the time. It was aboot saving jobs. And when I say, saving communities, it was aboot savin communities as well, cos I’ll come back to that.
But that was hard. It was a long, long hard year where, it wisnae just the Coal Board that the miners were up against; it was obviously the government as well. It was wir police and I’d go as far as to say the judiciary as well.

During the strikes, and I had many laughs during the strikes, when we were at... on strike, on the picket lines wi ma colleagues. We were miners and that didnae stop, the fun and the hilarity that we had as work colleagues, even doon the pit. That carried on to the picket lines and also back to the strike centres, where everything was organised – wir kinda daily routines.

So, when you were on the picket lines and you were facin the police, for example, if there was a mass picket at the Killoch, where there was literally hundreds of police would arrive. Questionable to this day whether they still were police, even with the uniforms that they were on, wi nae numbers, nae branch, division numbers; troosers aboot a foot shorter than their shoe length. So, you could question whether they were police, but they werena local. Er, so they didnae understand the close-knit mining communities that we were. So, they werenaecarin what they were sayin, and tormentin us wi their pile-ins, tellin us they were on overtime, shoving us ower the pit line, the gate line, so to speak, where management would be lookin out the main office windaes, just seein who was aa there, tryin tae identify who would be the ringleaders or workin fae the strike centres or union leaders. In fact, one o ma colleagues lost his job because o that.

There was efter all these years, during that strike, I said I went in as a boy and became a man durin it, because I learned a lot o values aboot looking efter one anither, lookin efter your faimly, how to look efter your faimly in really hard times.

At the back o that strike, efter that strike was lost, it was there to see noo, for everybody, that what happened. And I talk about communities and I talk aboot one particular community was New Cumnock. New Cumnock was built on the foundations o coal. And, when you take away the foundations o any building and then, it crumbles. So, New Cumnock had a population...near on 7,000. It now has a population o 2,500.

The amount o jobs, and I counted at one time, I just did a rough count aff the top o ma heid, through coal bein in wir communities, the industry that that brought ootside coal as well, the knitwears and your sweater shops, the carpet factories, for example. With the loss o the coal industry and then the knitwears and the carpet factories, 6,000 jobs went round about the Cumnock and Doon Valley
area. That’s colossal. Just think about that. Six thousand jobs. We were left an industrial graveyard. We see now that transition to green energy and we talk about a transition. There was no transition back in 1980s, where it was just dropped and we were left. We were left. It was payback, er, and I say this with the Thatcher government, that it was payback. Obviously for strikes for previous years. This was payback to destroy the miners and the powers that unions had.

It really hurt. It really hurt me and it hurt me tae this day. But for me, there wis an independent review into policing mining communities and that was prompted by the then Justice Secretary, Michael Matheson. I took part in that review because I did mention the judiciary earlier on, and how communities were policed.

I was arrested on several occasions through the miners’ strike, for fabricated offences that never would never ever have stood. But on one occasion it was... at Largs, at Hunterston terminal. Er, I’ll always remember it. It was early on in the strike. It was in May. It was May and it was a lovely day. You’ll remember the strike in ’84, the weather wisnae in favour of the miners, cos it was really warm.

And I’d been arrested early in the mornin at Hunterston, er, by an officer that I’d stood and laughed and joked wi for about an hour prior to that, believe it or not. It really... bit of fun, but his attitude changed and we knew there was something happening. Anyway, I’d fell. There was a push fae the back and I had fell. He lifted me up and I thanked him for lifting me up, only for him tae pit me airm up me back and tell me I was under arrest. Anyway, I didnae go quietly. But anyway, once I was in the van, then taken back oot the van, there was another officer brought ower tae get ma photograph taken wi him, so they could identify me when it went to the coort.

So, my lawyer, when it went to coort, along wi another 12 miners that day, was Roy Penny. And I’ve said this in the past, and it was part of the evidence I submitted to the review. When I was up in front of Sheriff Smith, Roy Penny had... before the case even started – I was the first of 13 miners that day – and Roy Penny had asked Sheriff Smith to stand down and no take the case. He didnae feel it was appropriate for him tae take the cases and Sheriff Smith had asked why. ‘Because I overheard you saying, Sheriff Smith, that, you would hammer the miners when they came up in front of you, at an ice-rink event I was at. And you were there and I overheard that comment, so I don’t think it’s appropriate for you to take this.’ So, he retired to his chambers for ten minutes and come back out wi the opinion that he could take the cases.
So, he did, and he fined every single miner that day, £150. Now, after callin... one o the policemen that had arrested me a liar, he still fined me £150 and I can assure you that other policemen, in fact both policemen were liars that day. But it didna matter. Bear in mind that a standard fine for breach of the peace back then would have been £20. But we were fined £150.

My lawyer appealed those cases and I think it’s commonly known as the Bradford MacLean 51 case now, in the law books in Edinburgh. And he was successful in their appeals. So, I didn’t have a criminal record, but as part ae that review, ma push was for that they be quashed. Well, they werenae quashed, I mean, I’d love for them tae be quashed. But there’s something there for them when miners that had a criminal record, and even miners that had passed away, and their families lived with that criminal record, they now don’t live...with the criminal record any more, because it’s been taken away. But it’s thanks to that review and I’m really, really pleased that I took part in that review and I said at the time, I pay homage to the men that kept pursuing that review.

But it wis an eventful year. I’ve often said it and I would say it again, under the same circumstances I would ha did it again. The exact same wey I did it. I went oot on strike that day wi a mission. That mission was never accomplished, but when I walked back through the pit gates a year later, wi the banner, Kilcho banner, I know I’d given everythin, for the fight. But we see the outcome o that. Now, I’m no sayin eventually mines would ha closed, but there could ha been a dignified way that would have been done for the communities, an no just to drop the communities. When you knock the foundations away fae any buildin, then the buildin’s gonna crumble, and what’s what the mining communities did.

Thankfully, we’re on the way back. It’s been a long, long time, but we’re now on the way back again tae some sort ae pride roond about our work. We’ve always had a pride, but when you looked aboot wir communities and you saw the demise because there wis nae job, and buildins and housin schemes bein demolished, it really, really hurt, your pride was hurt. But, I think through the hard work o the communities and still, although we’re two, three generations on in some cases, that, for me, it sits deep and it still hurts, but to see them comin back and some o the old people, older than me, part o that process to bring it back, whether they’re in voluntary organisations or whether they’re part of development trusts or no, there’s still pride there.
There’s still pride there, so it’s great tae see the communities comin back, and that spirit that’s still there. But I said, we’re two or three generations doon the road, noo, for the young yins. And I know, one o ma colleagues wis daein a talk recently in one o the primary schools. And he had taken a bit o coal in and asked the Primary 3 kids, I think it wis, did anybody know what this was. Nobody knew. They did not know and had never saw a piece o coal in their life. They’d never saw a piece o coal.

Yeah, for me, I loved goin back tae ma mining career. I loved it, er, albeit short. It was, I think, 15 years in total. I can only empathise and sympathise wi the men that went doon the pits when they were 13 years old and worked doon there till they were 65. One thing that I do have about it, I still have ma health. I’m still reasonably fit. I think, if I had still been in the mines, which I probably would ha been at this age, er, I don’t know. I don’t think I’d be sittin here talkin with the same capacity in ma lungs that I do have just now. But for me, workin doon the pit was an absolute honour and a pleasure. To work wi the men doon the pit, er, was an honour and a pleasure because they’re a breed o men that I don’t think I’ve came across in ma life since, and I don’t think I ever will. I don’t think I ever will.