

The Inverted Coalmine

The crisis of energy & representation

Terry Brotherstone

Tim Halford, publicity man for Occidental Oil's Armand Hammer, remembers his boss in the early 1980s visiting the Piper Alpha platform, 110 miles north-east of Aberdeen in the North Sea, and enthusing: "I can just feel those dollars going through underneath me!" Speaking in the mid-'90s on Channel 4's *Wasted Windfall*, Halford exclaimed: "That's what it was all about!" He has since put it on record that Hammer's comment was in response to his own observation about the way the platform was vibrating. This memory chimes with what Piper Alpha meant for many workers, for whom it was a mass of safety anxieties waiting to translate into a nightmare. Then on July 6th 1988 what one worker, Bob Ballantyne, called "Your worst nightmare come true" happened. The platform went up in a spectacularly disastrous explosion killing 167 men in all – the North Sea oil and gas industry's worst human tragedy to date.

Owen Logan's image, *The inverted coalmine* (on facing page), was made in 2003 for a permanent exhibition of contemporary art commissioned for the newly opened Scottish Parliament at Holyrood in Edinburgh. It was inspired by his discussions with Ballantyne, who had become one of the best-known survivors of the Piper Alpha tragedy. Logan got to know Ballantyne through the University of Aberdeen's 'Lives in the Oil Industry' oral-history project, carried out between 2000 and 2006 by Hugo Manson. Manson, an oral historian with an international reputation, came to Aberdeen from New Zealand to record the life stories of some 200 people who made the industry happen, or who were directly affected by it. He has created one of the largest oral archives ever devoted to a single industry, certainly in the UK; and Ballantyne was one of his first respondents.

Sadly Bob died, with very little warning, of throat cancer in 2004. In January this year I visited his widow Pat Ballantyne and we looked at Owen Logan's image. I asked what it meant for her to hang this photograph in the home where she and Bob brought up two talented young daughters? "I've got to take myself out of looking at it as a piece of art," she said, "and start to think of everything that it means. The first thing that it makes me think of is Bob's own reaction to the offshore industry, and the hierarchies and demarcations. The way he would relate what was happening offshore in the 1970s and '80s to the worst of life in the coalmines, the appalling conditions that miners had, ... the way life, life itself, was expendable. He felt very strongly that that was the case offshore. He was relating very much to the fact that, for example, he was a contract worker, he didn't work for a company; and there was a huge difference between how contract workers and how company men were treated... All these thoughts about the conditions for workers crowd in when I look at that image."

It was Ballantyne himself who had compared an oil rig to an inverted, or "upside down", coalmine. As Pat recalled, "Bob was very good at talking in visual bites." He had "an image in his mind", when he used the phrase, and "he was thrilled with that realisation of it."

Bob Ballantyne, he told Hugo Manson, was not one of those who saw the Piper Alpha as a disaster waiting to happen, though he knew others did. He didn't think the platform was worse than any others. It used to be said of some platforms that the "painters were proud", meaning it was paint that held them together! There was a sceptical culture, but one that still allowed workers to believe that so long as you knew where the gas leaks were they could be managed. Everything

seemed normal the day the disaster happened. Ballantyne was sharing a cabin with Charlie and Ian. Charlie was a Glasgow Catholic he'd known since they were young journeyman electricians together and who was now so proud of his grandchildren – "a rough diamond" who would "give you his last for your last". Ian was "a terribly gentle chap" from north-east Scotland, a "lovely person ... a terrific worker", who used to help Bob keep the cabin tidy – in that way he was "the complete opposite of Charlie."

Ballantyne recalled, when Piper Alpha began to explode: "I was in the recreation room, Charlie [at] the movies... We'd come back to the cabin and Ian ... was showering and the shower thing had fallen in and he came staggering out ... 'Get yourself dressed! We're going up to the canteen to see what's happening.' It was absolute chaos. And when we came back down ... we'd seen people putting on wetsuits and thought, 'This is quite serious, let's ... get our wetsuits'. So we were back in the cabin. And there was Ian – because I'd [recently] collected the laundry bag – turning socks inside out, and he'd pulled out his drawers ... he was fixing his socks and putting them back in the drawer. I thought, 'Ian, I'm tidy, but ...' [and] I said to him, 'Don't worry about it, we're ... going off the platform'. I could see Ian tucking his socks in ... and checking his underwear, and I'm thinking, 'Oh, don't do this. We've not got time. It's not important.'"

It was difficult finding a way outside, and it was only when Ballantyne did so – with about a dozen others – that he, "saw the enormity of the whole situation. It was absolutely terrifying ... your worst nightmare come true ... Hell! And some of the lads ... if your whole life has been regimented, [you're steeped in] your safety manuals ... in time of emergency you will leave the platform by helicopter ... [You've] been told ... there's helicopters coming out and the accommodation is still called to this day a 'safe haven'. Those lads went back inside the accommodation ... [following] Occidental's training manuals. I just never bought into that. I used to think ... 'You've got to be joking that you can get a helicopter out of here if these things go up.'"

Ballantyne was amongst those who broke the rules. Ian and he went to the west side; "The reason was [that] if you found a way out then you'd come back to the central point, and you would tell everybody. And I know, looking back, how crazy that was, because, if you [had] found a way out, you were going to go ... You've not got time to go back because you don't know where people are, but you get driven back by fireballs... The rate these fireballs came was the speed of lightening. You could actually see the fireballs coming towards you, and we jumped away, and this thing went right by us..."

The whole story is in the Aberdeen archive and can also be listened at the British Library in London. Ballantyne found his way into the water and – unlike those waiting for the helicopters – survived the ordeal. While he waited, wondering if the cold of the North Sea would get him before the rescue vessel, he went over his past life in his mind and made important decisions, though that is another story. But the experience was also making decisions for him. His sense of responsibility to others was born perhaps of his own fractured childhood in Glasgow and the compensating solidarity of Clydeside working-class life. He had worked briefly in the shipyards, been an active trade unionist, shop steward and Communist Party member. This made it inevitable that he'd

be a leading campaigner for the survivors and the victims' families. Whatever he did from then on, he would be billed as 'Bob Ballantyne, Piper Alpha survivor'.

One reason Hugo Manson was able to get Bob to tell his story so compellingly for the archive was that, at last, he was given the time, and afforded the interest, to tell his whole story. Like other critically practised oral history in this mode, it's a story in which the self-perception of a life interacts with a historically significant social development. The story of North Sea oil and gas, with the Piper Alpha tragedy at its centre, is crucial to understanding what has happened in the UK since the 1970s – the years of the so-called 'Thatcher revolution'. That argument's for elsewhere, but the evidence of the Aberdeen archive is that no single subject features in the personal memories of the many different participants – from all sides of the industry – more consistently than the night of the tragedy and the subsequent implications of what happened.

But what of Pat Ballantyne's experience? "I found out about it," she said, "when the police came to the door at about six o'clock in the morning... I answered the entry phone and this voice asked if Bob stayed there... I thought, 'What's he done, what's he done?'... I should lie! I admitted it eventually... These two policemen ... couldn't really tell me... They just said there'd been an accident offshore, that Bob had been involved in it, and that he was one of the lucky ones."

So Pat never had the anxiety of not knowing whether or not Bob was alive. The reason is a story in itself. As a kind of superstition, she, "used to stay up every night until I'd heard the late [TV] news ... at the back of twelve ... just so as I could be sure that nothing had happened... He'd phone me in the evening but I'd still wait [up] just in case, I just never did trust the rigs... This was one night where I hadn't because Bob was doing an Open University course. He'd been sent these LPs of *The Marriage of Figaro* and I'd been putting them on to tape and making some notes about them... I was going to post them to him. I'd been so busy doing this I'd forgotten about my normal talisman..." And: "I was really fortunate in being able to deal with it... My sister stayed in the next street and she was a psychiatric nurse [who had just] completed a two-day course in bereavement... She'd just keep saying to me that the most important thing I could do with Bob was just to get him to talk about his experiences ... as much as he could..."

As soon as she heard what had happened, Pat's sister joined her. Switching on the television, she quickly turned it off when the Piper Alpha coverage came on. She didn't want Pat to see the flames and the meltdown. After phone-calls that took an age to be answered Pat found out that Bob was in Aberdeen Royal Infirmary: "It took us a very long time to eventually find him... He was in a tiny little room on his own... wearing an orange boiler suit, with burns round his eyes. He was just, you know, completely shell-shocked... [But] he was fine. We took him home and I remember getting the doctor... His physical injuries were superficial... [and] this doctor, a very weird guy, said, 'Oh, you can go back to work soon, can't you!'"

This was the first in a series of incidents that convinced Pat that the mental aspects of the survivors' experiences were not understood. Where they were, it was from the point of view of medical researchers treating the victims as case-studies. It seemed Bob Ballantyne was no more a whole human being to them than he had been to



the bosses concerned only for the dollars which Armand Hammer had felt running under his feet.

Oil revenues helped to finance the social security expenditure necessary to ensure that de-industrialisation and the destruction of industrial communities did not lead to far greater social disruption and militancy than actually occurred. Meanwhile, the same profit-driven values that had made the coal mines the scene of so many human tragedies in the nineteenth century were threatening the lives of workers. Bob Ballantyne like many others was a refugee from traditional industrial areas like Clydeside – with personal and family disaster.

The politics of expression

There are other stories in the Aberdeen archive that reflect the impact of the system of global capital, epitomised by oil companies. Artist Sue Jane Taylor, wrestled with the task of creating a memorial to the Piper Alpha victims – a major sculpture in Aberdeen's Hazlehead Park where Bob Ballantyne's ashes were scattered by his partner and daughters on the first anniversary of the disaster to fall after his death. And of course it will not only be creative artists who will use the archive to represent, from whatever point of view, the crucial story of North Sea oil. It will be visited by many people, from journalists in search of 'human-interest' stories to company historians, as well as those for whom the central purposes of scholarly research (as of creative production) is the critique of humanity's current crisis and participation in a discourse about resolving it.

But, in responding to the archive, Logan is both returning to an important radical tradition and doing something new. He has said that, for photographers, "new technologies can help recover the rich relationships between image and text that were once so central to their work." Words and images can construct "a truly critical context for one another", but the drive for this "was often abandoned as more photographers sold themselves as artists and were encouraged to celebrate ambiguity over content in their imagery." This has left a vacuum, the filling of which, he believes, "goes beyond any simple sense of social engagement: it means heightening political awareness", and promoting discussions about the current sclerosis in ideas that grips much of the left as it attempts meaningfully, and with a necessary grasp of historical temporality, to overcome the "there is no alternative" nonsense of capital's ideologues.

By applying his technique to the oil industry and beginning from personal life-stories, Logan's work, like the best oral history, demands that we approach the personal and individual story in terms of its broadest social and historical context. In the early twenty-first century there is a crisis calling for collective work to find new theoretical and practical-political answers. The recent 'Oil in The City' project that took place in Aberdeen also recognised the need for collaboration in this respect. Urban November, the group behind the project, didn't come together because of oil, they first met to talk about making a response to a proposed BNP march through the city. The march was stopped by local opposition, in which Aberdeen Trades Union Council was also prominent, but Urban November's 2004 exhibition 'Aberdeen Urban Atlas' addressing 'the quality of life' in the city was the result of a creative sense of opposition.



Bob Ballantyne

Time for a re-think

Contrast the current situation with the time in the mid-1970s when 7/84 Theatre could greet the arrival of North Sea oil with an innovative (for its time) ceilidh-play, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. It aroused huge enthusiasm throughout the Highlands, north-east Scotland and beyond (and found a ready audience for its BBC 'Play for Today' adaptation), by presenting the arrival of the US oil companies in the North Sea as another episode in a long history of predatory exploitation at the expense of social humanity going back to the Highland Clearances. This was politically engaged performance that deserves recognition still, as it marked the beginnings of the offshore industry in an oppositional way; and, watched today, it may still raise many a laugh and two cheers for its spirit of populist protest. But its analysis and politics now look naïve; part of what was a general misreading of the nature of the period as one of progress towards socialism on the basis of accumulating militancy and protest. The defeats the industrial working class suffered in the Thatcher years, and the fact that the collapse of so-called 'actually existing socialism' did not bring into being a genuinely socialist movement in eastern Europe, signalled the end of this idea as a rational expectation.

A necessary, radical rethinking on the left of the nature of the period we are in, and the political tasks it sets, has been too long delayed. As the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report demonstrates, it now must take place in the context of international scientific recognition of the virtual certainty of environmental destruction in the foreseeable future, unless the problems created by the production and use of energy are addressed. Daily, it becomes clearer to growing numbers of people that the tinkering proposals of the politicians and the efforts of some leaders of global capitalism to give their profit-driven enterprises a measure of 'green' respectability go nowhere near the issue. But most remain politically paralysed by the difficulty in perceiving – in the aftermath of the effective collapse of the transformational aspirations of the twentieth-century 'labour movement' – how the agency of the transition beyond capitalism to one centred on international, democratic planning based on human need is to be identified and actualised in practice.

In this discussion, the critical talents of cultural practitioners are needed. No longer is it enough to suppose that traditional representations of the working class and poor can help to develop a practical oppositional consciousness of the 'dignity of labour', or of its role – as capital's only structural antagonist – in progressing what was once widely seen as humanity's unstoppable march to wards socialism.

This may seem to take us a long way from Bob Ballantyne's most incisive visual soundbite and the image it inspired. But there's a link: Ballantyne's life bridged the worlds of traditional heavy industry and the 'modernity' of globalised oil. He was a Clydeside electrician, though one who travelled widely for work, but for him it was coal mining that above all symbolised the world Thatcherism destroyed. It was this contempt for human cultural development and life itself that was to continue in the offshore industry – hence, I think, the inverted coalmine. The year after the Piper Alpha disaster, he was a key figure when the strike wave to fight for a serious attitude to safety was developing in the formation of a new, radical union, OILC (the Offshore Industry Liaison Committee). The history of class struggle in the 1980s quite properly focuses on the 1984-

85 miners' strike; but others came later, most importantly of all the offshore workers' industrial action. There were those then who thought that, if the miners' industrial militancy could not defeat Thatcher because theirs was an industry allegedly past its time, surely the oil workers could challenge the system that needed their product. Analysing why the gains made by a new type of union, but with traditional trade-union methods, were limited and reversible, must be part of the rethinking of recent history.

Coal

One morning in late November 1988, just a few months after Piper Alpha, at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh, Maggi Hambling's portrait of Scottish mineworkers' leader, Mick McGahey, was unveiled. He'd been number two in the leadership of the national union that, for over a year in 1984-85, had fought to defend the coal industry and defeat Thatcherism. The National Union of Mineworkers' defeat and the availability of North Sea oil revenues in the early 1980s were two of the crucial conditions that enabled the 'Thatcher revolution'.

The unveiling ceremony was rich in contradiction. Here was the respected workers' leader, reviled in the Tory media alongside NUM President Arthur Scargill only a year or two before, now elevated to the pantheon of great Scots. Performing the unveiling, the Historiographer Royal in Scotland (the Queen's beyond-the-Tweed history man), a mild-mannered, English-born, liberal professor was anxious to allude to McGahey's essential moderation in contrast to the militancy of the still-demonised Scargill. Though he never publicly acknowledged it, McGahey was known to have fallen out with Scargill during the latter stages of the strike. Presiding over it all, an Edinburgh merchant banker, chair of the gallery's board of governors: the sort of person who was doing well out of the Thatcher years, the taming of the unions and the devastation of working-class communities. And then the artist: louche, loud, lesbian, Maggi Hambling, who had spent weeks in the autumn getting to know McGahey and creating an image of mid-twentieth-century proletarian masculinity, fit for a gallery determined to update its image in a new fin-de-siècle world. Hambling and McGahey – contrasting personalities as they were – had obviously got on well.

Hambling's portrait of McGahey, I wrote at the time, "is more of a question than a statement. The legs [are] ... thrust forward, ... the huge hands folded in front of the stomach, as though on guard against an anticipated assault on his dignity. The face... is of a much younger man than the McGahey who watched the unveiling in the flesh. It is round and alert, rather than oval and puffed. Yet within the youthfulness ... there is also the immanence of age. Hambling has not done a cosmetic job: [it is a] dialectical piece of art."

Hambling captures McGahey's features in a way that alludes to the coalface itself. The colours reflect the earth and the growling, geological layers beneath. And another contradiction. The face is thickly painted in short, decisive strokes. But the viewer, conscious of a growing awareness of a superficially concealed asymmetry, is drawn to the area around the right eye, which has been done differently. Here the paint is thin and the bumps in the canvas remain visible. It is as though a gap has been left in the psychological outer armour, a pathway to potential engagement with the real thinking behind the battle-scared exterior.

In creating the possibility for the viewer to consider the relationship between the exterior image and its subject's inner reflections, Hambling

drew us towards McGahey's more profound significance. Not a 'national hero' on a national gallery wall, celebrated for his moderation and his slightly embarrassed shaking of hands politely with the class enemy. Rather, a man of his class, who had justly earned respect as its champion, was now nearing his life's end with personal achievement providing small consolation for the apparent defeat of his wider dreams – it was only months before the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union.

Membership of the Communist Party, albeit at very different levels, united Mick McGahey with Bob Ballantyne. It made them part of what had started out as the twentieth century's most important, potentially progressive political programme. But the movement that transmuted into the barbarity of Stalinism had not helped them end the system that, in 1980s Britain, required the destruction of mining communities and could only extract energy from the North Sea at the cost of human lives. Of course we now know more clearly than ever before that our dependency on the oil industry threatens catastrophe. However, if we start from individual stories and particular images like these, but with a new critical awareness, the bigger question we should be asking is: what are the real tasks left for the twenty-first century?

Anyone who visited the recent offshore-industry exhibition at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, *Energy* by Fiona Carlisle, might have also seen Hambling's McGahey portrait. In that one portrait of a coal miners' leader, caught in the political contradictions of his time, there is more to think about than there was in a gallery full of oil industry personalities flatteringly painted in bland washes and pastel shades. Fiona Carlisle's *Energy* is corporate art. Yet Carlisle's images were presented by the gallery's director, as meeting – for the first time – an unfulfilled need to represent the modernity, the contemporaneity, of Scotland's oil industry in a major public space for art. Sue Jane Taylor's engaged portrayals of oil workers, exhibited long before in Aberdeen, went unmentioned. Her work, of course, even when not directly related to it, inevitably calls to mind the Piper Alpha memorial, and the disaster it represents. And that is certainly not how 'the nation' is being encouraged to think about the oil industry.