

‘The evidence has always been there’: Unreliable Narrators and Archival Sources for the Battle of George Square, Glasgow, 31 January 1919

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This is the third paper in a series considering aspects of the ‘Battle’: on the primary evidence; on the creation of the mythology; and this, on the historiography. It explores the extent to which the dominant narrative continues to be framed by about a dozen sources written by the strike leaders and their followers from 1919 to the 1980s, and by the *Strike Bulletin*. It considers how the omission or inclusion of key elements in the story in a range of history texts follows the pattern of these source texts: significant circumstances and events underpinned by evidence may be omitted while others, either unevicenced or even fabricated, may be repeated uncritically. The problems arising from telling the story substantially from only one perspective are considered.

... the vigour with which this episode has been contested and redefined, the sheer refusal of its ghost to disappear, bears witness to its continuing importance for the way Scots define themselves today.²

This paper grows out of a presentation Louise Heren and I gave at the Scottish Records Association’s meeting at Dundee in 2019 titled ‘The Battle for George Square: hidden in plain sight’. In this we briefly explored the reality behind the myths surrounding the events of 31 January 1919 in Glasgow, the trajectories of the still-developing mythology and the sometimes erratic engagement with contemporary sources by writers of both academic and popular history. This, in turn, was based on two papers published in the *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* in 2018 and *Scottish Affairs* in 2019, on the reality and the mythology of the ‘Battle’ respectively.³ This is the third paper in this series, and looks more closely at the historiography of this contested event. The editor has kindly allowed me

¹ I am grateful to Kenneth Brophy, Louise Heren, Elizabeth Goring, Neil McLennan and Gerry Mooney for reading and commenting on drafts of this paper (Louise and Elizabeth more than once), and for the stimulating comments of two anonymous referees. The final version, however, reflects only my own views.

² J. Foster, ‘Red Clyde, Red Scotland’, in (ed.) I. Donnachie and C. Whatley, *The Manufacture of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1992), 106–24, 108.

³ G. J. Barclay, “‘Duties in Aid of the Civil Power’: The Deployment of the Army to Glasgow, 31 January to 17 February 1919”, *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 38:2 (2018),

John Maclean	1919	Pamphlet. <i>Sack Dalrymple, Sack Stevenson. Let Labour Revenge Bloody Friday</i>
Morton	1919	Pamphlet. <i>The 40 Hours Strike: An Historic Survey of the First General Strike in Scotland</i>
Bell	1941	<i>Pioneering Days</i>
Bell	1944	<i>John Maclean, a Fighter for Freedom</i>
Gallacher	1936	<i>Revolt on the Clyde</i>
Shinwell	1955	<i>Conflict Without Malice</i>
Dollan	1957	Memoir. <i>Sunday Mail</i> , 6 October 1957
Gallacher	1966	<i>The Last Memoirs of William Gallacher</i>
Shinwell	1973	<i>I've Lived Through it All</i>
McShane	1978a	<i>Harry McShane: No Mean Fighter</i>
McShane	1978b	<i>Glasgow 1919: The Story of the 40 Hours Strike</i>
Shinwell	1981	<i>Lead with the Left: My First Ninety-Six Years</i>
Shinwell	1984	<i>Shinwell Talking: A Conversational Biography to Celebrate his Hundredth Birthday</i>

Table 1 The thirteen main sources, written by those involved with the Forty Hours Strike, which continue to frame the established narrative of the ‘Battle’.

to maintain the informal tone of a spoken paper, hence it is written largely in the first person.

The ‘Battle’ was a riot on 31 January 1919 involving Glasgow police and a crowd gathered at a demonstration that was part of the Forty Hours Strike. It came at a time of great political and social upheaval, of revolution and potential revolution, across Europe in the period between the Armistice and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.

The quotation in the title is from one of the article’s anonymous referees: ‘the evidence has always been there’. This is true, but it sometimes feels that not enough has been done with it, as many accounts continue to rely, to a surprising degree, on the narrative framed by the strike leaders and their followers⁴ between 1919 and the 1980s in a dozen or so of their books and articles (see Table 1).

261–92, 268; G. J. Barclay, “‘Churchill rolled the tanks into the crowd’: mythology and reality in the military deployment to Glasgow in 1919’, *Scottish Affairs*, 28:1 (2019), 32–68.

⁴ For example G. Gorid, “‘We Were Carrying On a Strike When We Ought to Have Been Making a Revolution’: The Rise of Marxist Leaders in Glasgow During WWI and the Illusion of a Communist Workers’ Republic in Scotland’, *Voces Novae*, 3:1 (2011).

John Foster, in his seminal historiography of Red Clydeside suggested that the ‘Legend of Red Clydeside’ had been seen as, ‘invented years after the event by left-wing propagandists such as Gallacher [one of the leaders of the Forty Hours Strike], Tom Bell, and McShane’. The paradox is that this wider ‘Legend’ has been subjected to intense critical analysis by Iain McLean and Foster, and their supporters and critics, for almost forty years.⁵ But the ‘legend’ of the ‘Battle’, the foundational event for which the strike is most widely remembered, has remained largely undisturbed, created not only by ‘Gallacher, Tom Bell, and McShane’ but also by Shinwell, John Maclean, Morton and others. Foster has also described the passage of Red Clydeside into history as ‘dislocated and incoherent’.⁶ But once again, the Battle seems different – the essentials of the story were created by this handful of contemporary authors, providing a limited range of versions of the same event.

This paper considers the extent to which writers have engaged critically with the primary sources. Some readers may feel I overstress the importance of going back to this evidence in dealing with this contested event. Indeed, one of the anonymous referees described my approach as ‘more Rankean than Ranke’. Critics of Ranke’s approach stress the impossibility of writing a history based on primary evidence that is unfiltered by the author’s selection of that evidence. I do not have an ‘absolute and unqualified faith in the pre-eminence ... of historical fact’.⁷ But there should be boundaries between: selecting from a mass of evidence to make a narrative coherent and manageable; unconsciously selecting material that reinforces one’s own prejudices; or consciously selecting evidence to present a dramatised but misleading version of the past. In February 2020, as I was writing this paper, Suzannah Lipscomb published a thought-provoking piece in *History Today*, titled ‘Lies, Damned Lies and History’, which included these apposite words, in the context of much writing about the ‘Battle’:

But there were other books that took quite a different approach to their research material: they fictionalised, they took liberties, they failed to engage critically with their sources ... The drive to create compelling narrative history – to write history that reads like a novel – can, in the wrong hands, end up with history that is written like a novel.⁸

Some versions, especially those intent on dramatising the story, explain the course of events in Glasgow in 1919 in a rather oversimplified way: that of ‘establishment’ fears of a ‘Bolshevist rising’. This view informs the next line in the familiar story that, as a consequence of those fears, ‘the government sent troops to crush the strike’ or even ‘a revolution’, of which more below.

⁵ I. McLean, *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (Edinburgh, 1983); Foster, ‘Red Clyde, Red Scotland’, 106–24.

⁶ Foster, ‘Red Clyde, Red Scotland’, 118.

⁷ E. H. Carr, ‘Progress in History’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 July 1952.

⁸ S. Lipscomb, ‘Lies, Damned Lies and History’, *History Today*, 70.2 (February 2020), <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/making-history/lies-damned-lies-and-history>.

This is not to underplay the real fears which existed within government, nor the effect that those fears had on decision-making; but the levels of concern in ‘the establishment’ were not consistent, as the discussion at the War Cabinet on 30 January demonstrates, and the causation for events is more complex.⁹ It is interesting to note that the opponents of the strike, for example in the *Daily Record* of 1 February 1919, also commented, albeit favourably, on the arrival of what they saw as government-sent troops, which ‘suggested at least that the Government is in earnest in the measures to crush the new revolutionary spirit which has found expression in the Clyde area’.¹⁰

The over-simple narrative, that ‘there was a Bolshevik rising so the government sent the tanks’ requires much of the complexity of events to be ignored, notably the inconvenient reality that it was Alastair McKenzie, the Sheriff of Lanarkshire, who called for ‘military aid to the civil power’, having previously checked with the government that such aid would be available if he needed it.¹¹ But the city authorities’ crucial role in the military deployment has almost never been mentioned in academic and popular accounts; in fact, I have not so far found one published prior to 2019 which includes it.¹²

The ‘Battle’ has become an iconic moment in the political history of Red Clydeside, of Glasgow, of Scotland. Yet strangely the events of the day and those leading up to and following it have rarely been the main focus of research or publication. Rather, the ‘Battle’ has often been treated as a coda, crisis or interruption in the wider historical narrative of Red Clydeside; as a catalyst for subsequent developments or as a symbol for something important to an individual author. No historical events can be understood in isolation, but occasionally one gets the impression that the ‘Battle’ is like a lump of narrative clay, picked up out of its box and moulded to fit whatever predetermined shape has been left for 31 January 1919 in that author’s version of Red Clydeside, without very close examination of the complexity of events or their causation.

I have come rather late to the ‘Battle’, through a long-standing interest in the manipulation of the distant and recent past to promote political agendas, notably those of English and Scottish nationalism.¹³ I first came upon the ‘Battle’ in October 2017 while revising an article on a piece of ‘fake history’ – that ‘Churchill planned to abandon Scotland to the Nazis in 1940’ (he did not, by the way)¹⁴ – when I started coming upon references to ‘Churchill sending the tanks

⁹ The National Archives (TNA), CAB23/9/9, War Cabinet minutes, 30 January 1919.

¹⁰ *Daily Record*, ‘Serious Strike Riot in Glasgow’, 1 February 1919.

¹¹ Barclay, ‘Duties in Aid of the Civil Power’, 268.

¹² Barclay, ‘Churchill rolled the tanks into the crowd’, 32–68.

¹³ G. J. Barclay, ‘“Four Nations Prehistory”: cores and archetypes in the writing of prehistory’, in (ed.) H. Brocklehurst and R. Phillips, *History, Nationhood and the Question of Britain* (Basingstoke, 2004), 151–9; G. J. Barclay, ‘A “Villain for All Seasons”: Churchill and Scottish Mythologies of Grievance’, *Finest Hour*, 189 (2020), 14–18.

¹⁴ G. J. Barclay, ‘The Birth and Development of a Factoid, 2013–17: the invention of history in the Scottish independence debate’, *Academia*, <https://www.academia.edu/35272980/>

to George Square to crush the strikers'. It quickly became clear that much of what was written about events in Glasgow in 1919 was contradicted by primary sources. This led to a year's research, the two articles already mentioned, and now a planned book with Louise Heren, due in 2022.

I look in more detail below at the ways in which archival material appears to have been selected, used, not used or ignored in telling the story of the Battle. In one sense, what can appear to be a limited engagement with the primary evidence is not surprising. The research for any wider history of the period could not possibly justify the amount of time necessary to study in any depth all the evidence available for the events in the week leading to and following the Battle, with all its complexity and many contradictory versions of events. And in any general history, the results of such detailed research could not be accommodated. Iain McLean's seminal *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (1983) is still the fullest account of the events of January and February 1919, but even in that volume the Forty Hours Strike is only part of the wider story, and the 'Battle' only a subset of that. Some authors have consulted the trial papers, but there are nearly a thousand pages of trial evidence and pretrial statements, and important aspects have been overlooked or omitted (see below).¹⁵ The dissection of the contradictory accounts of just one meeting, that between the strikers' delegation and the Lord Provost on 29 January, from the precognitions, trial transcript, the newspapers and in a range of memoirs, has so far taken Louise Heren and me many hours. This key meeting, which reveals some of the fundamental misunderstandings and conflicts between the two sides, and led directly to the violence on 31 January, is often covered, if at all, in no more than two or three sentences in books and articles.¹⁶

It is interesting to read in a number of versions (including his own) the 'fact' that Emanuel Shinwell (later a Labour MP and peer) led the delegation to meet the Lord Provost on 29 January, and that the delegation had some purpose in mind, that is, to ask the Lord Provost to intervene. However, nine defence witnesses at the trial gave evidence on oath that Shinwell, and indeed the other leading figures present, David Kirkwood and Neil Maclean MP, were not part of the delegation at all but had ended up in the meeting by an unfortunate series of accidents, and that the delegation had no clearly defined purpose. Neil

[The_birth_and_development_of_a_factoid_2013_17_the_invention_of_history_in_the_Scottish_independence_debate.](#)

¹⁵ National Records of Scotland (hereafter NRS) AD15/19/11 Precognition against Joseph Brennan, Harry Hopkins [*et al.*] for the crime of mobbing and rioting at George Square, Glasgow and other locations; NRS, JC36/31 Trial transcript from the trial of William McCartney, George Ebury, David McKenzie [*et al.*] for the crime of mobbing and rioting at George Square, Glasgow and other locations. Tried at High Court, Edinburgh 7 Apr 1919.

¹⁶ E.g. K. MacAskill, *Glasgow 1919: The Rise of Red Clydeside* (London, 2019), 194; J. Foster, 'The 1919 Forty Hours Strike: A turning point for class mobilisation in Britain', *Theory & Struggle*, 120 (2019), 30–40, 33.

Maclean MP gave evidence that the delegation had no programme and no plan as to what the Lord Provost was to be asked to do. He said that he had no idea what was in the minds of the men: that it was ‘a hopeless thing altogether’.¹⁷

This circumstance raises another issue with the dominant narratives. While the obvious choreographing of problematic police evidence, notably for the day of the riot, is often criticised, there is evidence of equally obvious scripting of problematic defence evidence, not only concerning the meeting on 29 January, but on other days. I have yet to find any writer who has commented upon this. One must ask on what basis MacAskill asserts that the ‘reality [of the origins of the violence in the Square] was probably much closer to the version of the strikers’ told at the trial.¹⁸ As an active politician of the left, seeking to appropriate the legacy of early twentieth-century Labour politics for his own party, it is not surprising that his account of Glasgow in 1919 is written largely from the point of view of one side in the dispute, the strikers’. But this is not unusual.

Indeed, as one works through the primary evidence in detail and considers what has been selected as worth mentioning or as being necessary to support different versions of events, or what has been left out, it becomes clear that the selection is often directed towards telling the story using only the frame of reference established by the strike leaders. There will inevitably be differences in the weight given to and the interpretation of evidence, but where more than one voice exists in the archive, one would hope that the historian would listen to them. There is a lot of ground between, on the one hand, an account that has to encompass all accessible evidence, with its complexities and contradictions, and on the other, one that uses only evidence selected consciously or unconsciously to support a familiar or even predetermined narrative. In the popular market, there is also a world of difference between celebrating or mythologising a heritage to create an uplifting ‘wha’s like us’ version of the past – ‘nostalgic celebration’¹⁹ – and writing a history in which the protagonists are individuals, with a variety of personal as well as political motivations, ambitions and weaknesses, not mere ciphers representing ‘the people’ or ‘the establishment’, heroic or villainous according to the author’s taste. MacAskill’s list of key figures in the period in Glasgow tellingly includes only the strike and labour leadership,²⁰ while the ‘characters’ for the other side remain faceless.²¹ Low-Beer has described ‘multiperspectivity’ in history as ‘the need to assess historical events from different perspectives ... In history, multiple perspectives are usual and have to be tested against evidence, and accounted for in judgements and conclusions.’

¹⁷ NRS, JC36/31/09 Trial transcript from the trial of William McCartney [*et al.*]. Evidence of Neil Maclean MP.

¹⁸ MacAskill, *Glasgow 1919*, 205.

¹⁹ S. Damer, ‘And if you know the history ...’, *Scottish Affairs*, 28:1 (2019), 112–15, 113.

²⁰ MacAskill, *Glasgow 1919*, Appendix C.

²¹ Damer, ‘And if you know the history ...’, 114.

It is this approach that my survey suggests may have been applied inconsistently in the telling of the story of the ‘Battle’.²²

Louise Heren and I are using an immersive and intensive approach to archival research, which we define as exploring all the accessible evidence, even material at first sight tangential to the events, and not only following well-trodden paths. And then, when working through the evidence, actively looking not only for corroboration but also for contradiction or greater-than-expected complexity. And finally, leaving unchecked no ‘fact’ on which any significant part of the narrative relies; no alleged quotation; no statement; no assumption; no event; no supposed cause or effect. The more significant the event, the more central the ‘fact’ to the interpretation being presented, the more carefully it should be checked and corroborated.

In the case of the events of 1919, there can be a surprising willingness to take at face value significant ‘facts’ provided only by the protagonists of one side. For example, William Gallacher quoted an editorial in the *Glasgow Herald* published on Saturday 8 February 1919:

the panic of the civic and national authorities can only be explained thus. That they actually believed a Spartacus coup was planned to start in Glasgow, and that they were prepared to suppress it at all costs.²³

This quotation has been described by an author of a biography of John Maclean as ‘key to the question of revision and myth in the Battle of George Square’. It purports to reveal, notably through the editorial columns of a violently anti-strike newspaper, the true fears and intentions of the government.²⁴ As such, it has been given prominence in a recent book on the events,²⁵ and in a review article on Red Clydeside.²⁶ The problem is, no such words appear in the *Glasgow Herald* of 8 February 1919, nor on Friday 7 or Monday 10 February, nor, in my extensive reading, in that or any other national newspaper published that month. As far as I can tell, it first appears in Gallacher’s book. Did he misremember where he had read it? Did he invent it? If this quotation is so significant, has no one thought it prudent to check its provenance?²⁷

Gallacher’s co-accused at the April 1919 trial of the strike leaders, Emanuel Shinwell, certainly invented things. His most lasting invention is the claim, in his autobiography *I’ve Lived Through it All* (1973), that ‘Churchill persuaded the Cabinet that troops, machine guns and tanks should be deployed in the Clydeside area’, which has subsequently been repeated in a variety of forms:

²² A. Low-Beer, *The Council of Europe and School History* (Strasbourg, 1997), 54–5.

²³ W. Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde* (1936; 5th edn, London, 2017), 164.

²⁴ Twitter @henbell, 9 May 2019.

²⁵ MacAskill, *Glasgow 1919*, 225.

²⁶ J. McNicol, ‘The Atmosphere of the Clyde’, *London Review of Books*, 42:1 (January 2020).

²⁷ If anyone can find the source of Gallacher’s text elsewhere, I would be grateful for information.

'Churchill sent the tanks' is the constant refrain on social media.²⁸ Churchill was not responsible, as the War Cabinet minutes (released 1969) show.²⁹ Shinwell had claimed previously that Westminster sent the army and in two later volumes of autobiography, he blamed Lloyd George personally instead. Shinwell provided no evidence for any of these claims.³⁰ It is not for nothing that his memoirs are described as 'entertaining but unreliable'.³¹ Among those following Shinwell's line are Michael Fry: 'It fell to ... Winston Churchill to take decisive action of the kind he always relished. The same evening, about 10,000 soldiers with tanks ...'.³² John Burrowes's subtle adaptation of the War Cabinet minutes to shift blame towards Churchill has been discussed elsewhere.³³

A 'conspiracist' version of events first appeared in the immediate aftermath of the riot, in John Maclean's 1919 pamphlet *Sack Dalrymple; Sack Stevenson* and soon thereafter in Morton's account of the Forty Hours Strike.³⁴ Key elements include that the riot was deliberately fomented by the connivance of the head of the tramways department and the Chief Constable, to justify a pre-planned police attack on the crowd, and perhaps also to justify the calling in of troops. In this version of events the telegram to the government and the arrangement for the delegates to return on the Friday formed a trap, into which the leaders fell. Maclean's explanation, with emphasis on the 'trap' was rehearsed again in detail in Tom Bell's biography of Maclean.³⁵ A supposed fact often adduced to 'prove' this version of events is that the troops were already in the city or were on the move before the riot started.

At least five modern authors have claimed exactly this. Some adduce no evidence, while others provide 'evidence' that turns out on examination to be problematic; for example, the events of one day may be reported as having happened the day before. Finlay suggested that troops had already been sent to Glasgow 'in case things should turn nasty'.³⁶ Andrew Marr, in the book accompanying the 'Making of Modern Britain' documentary, claimed that, 'By the time the leaders of the strike had gathered in George Square, on Friday

²⁸ E. Shinwell, *I've Lived Through it All* (London, 1973), 45.

²⁹ TNA CAB 23/9/9 War Cabinet minutes 30 January 1919; CAB 23/9/10 War Cabinet minutes 31 January 1919.

³⁰ E. Shinwell, *Conflict without Malice* (London, 1955), 64; E. Shinwell, *Lead with the Left* (London, 1981), 63; J. Doxat, *Shinwell Talking: a conversational biography to celebrate his hundredth birthday* (London, 1984), 93–4.

³¹ J. S. Rowett, 'Emanuel Shinwell', in (ed.) K. Robbins, *The Blackwell Biographical Dictionary of British Political Life in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1990), 372–4.

³² M. Fry, *Glasgow: A History of the City* (London, 2017), 421.

³³ Barclay, 'Churchill rolled the tanks into the crowd', 57.

³⁴ J. Maclean, *Sack Dalrymple; Sack Stevenson. Let Labour Revenge Bloody Friday* (Glasgow: 1919); D. S. Morton, *The 40 Hours Strike: an historic survey of the first General Strike in Scotland* (Clydebank, 1919).

³⁵ T. Bell, *John Maclean, a Fighter for Freedom* (Glasgow, 1944), 84–5.

³⁶ R. J. Finlay, *Modern Scotland: 1914–2000* (London, 2004).

31 January [that is, before the riot]... six tanks and a hundred motor lorries full of troops had been sent north from England.³⁷ Craig reported events at the War Cabinet meeting ‘the day before Bloody Friday’ (that is Thursday 30 January) quoting part of Churchill’s contribution, before describing ‘at the same meeting’ Scottish Secretary Munro’s infamous ‘Bolshevist rising’ remark and the report by the Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) that ‘six tanks and a hundred motor lorries’ were being sent north by rail that night (that is, the night of the meeting, 30 January).³⁸ Munro’s remark and the report by the Deputy CIGS were, however, not made on 30 January, but a day later, at the War Cabinet meeting convened at 3 p.m. on Friday 31 January, at least two hours after the riot began and after the Sheriff had called for military aid, not in advance of those events.³⁹ Harvie also places the ordering in of the troops on 30 January, the day before the riot.⁴⁰ Michael Fry’s suggestion that ‘soldiers and tanks were waiting’ in case the police did not manage to control the riot may imply that troops were already in the city.⁴¹ Finally, MacAskill claimed:

That the troops were ready to be deployed so quickly was shown by reports in the *Edinburgh Evening News* on the very day of the riot, which noted that ‘long columns of khaki-clad men, who belonged to the Seaforth Highlanders, the Gordons and other Highland regiments’ were already heading west to deal with civil unrest.⁴²

Unfortunately, the text he quotes, which seems to imply the early movement of troops in Edinburgh on Friday 31 January, was in reality published in Glasgow in the *Daily Record* of 1 February. The full quote shows that it describes the movement of troops through Glasgow after their arrival from 10 p.m. onwards:

The troops were first marched to the Central Station ... and were then marched to quarters in different parts of the city, some of the contingents being headed by pipe bands. They were accompanied by heavy ammunition wagons, and the general appearance of the long columns of khaki-clad men, who belonged to the Seaforth Highlanders, the Gordons and other Highland regiments ...⁴³

While dramatic elaboration is more to be found at the popular end of the market, the omission of important parts of the story (usually following the line established by the strike leaders in their accounts) is more widespread. For example, I would argue that the train of events leading to the deployment of the army is too important to omit from any narrative, starting with the concerns

³⁷ A. Marr, *The Making of Modern Britain* (London, 2009), 231–2.

³⁸ M. Craig, *When the Clyde Ran Red* (Edinburgh, 2011; rev. edn 2018), 162 (2011), 181–2 (2018).

³⁹ TNA CAB 23/9/10 War Cabinet minutes 31 January 1919.

⁴⁰ C. Harvie, *No Gods and Precious Few Heroes: Twentieth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2000), 25.

⁴¹ Fry, *Glasgow: A History*, 321.

⁴² MacAskill, *Glasgow 1919*, 227–8.

⁴³ *Daily Record*, ‘Serious Strike Riot in Glasgow’, 1 February 1919.

of the Sheriff after the Provost's meeting with the strikers on 29 January, and his subsequent contact with the government to check that troops would be available for him to call upon on Friday, if he needed them. Should it not be mentioned that his request prompted the discussion at the War Cabinet on 30 January? And finally, is not the Sheriff's palpable and growing anxiety on the Friday as the violence escalated, the expression of his concerns to colleagues, and finally his calling for 'military aid to the civil power' once the riot had begun, worth a passing mention?⁴⁴

But this complex chain of events (which I have managed to summarise here in one paragraph) is often replaced by the lazy and inaccurate 'the government sent the troops', invented in the *Strike Bulletin* and other newspapers in the days after the riot. Variants of this occur in a wide range of academic articles and books, popular histories, school textbooks, and political tracts. Of twenty-five modern publications so far surveyed in detail for this paper, no fewer than fourteen explicitly state that the government sent the troops, the others leaving responsibility unclear.⁴⁵ None published before 2019 mention the Sheriff's role, and its appearance in a book published in that year may reflect the airing of this matter in the *Herald* during 2018.⁴⁶ Interestingly, Tom Bell, in his *Pioneering Days*

⁴⁴ Barclay, 'Duties in Aid of the Civil Power', 268.

⁴⁵ Our detailed revisiting of the texts was curtailed by the closing of the National Library of Scotland in March 2020. The analysis has so far included the recording of which elements of the story appear: 'all the troops were English'; reliance on the fear of Bolshevism as the main cause of the deployment; the mythical 'howitzer'; claims that troops were deployed/deploying prior to the riot; whether the Sheriff's role in calling the army is mentioned; moving War Cabinet meetings forward or backwards in time and/or subtly editing them. Those so far analysed are as follows: M. Archibald, *Glasgow: The Real Mean City* (Edinburgh, 2013); C. Bambery, *A People's History of Scotland* (London, 2014); J. Burrowes, *Great Glasgow Stories* (Edinburgh, 1998); J. Cameron, *Red Flag Over the Clyde* (Glasgow, 1994); Craig, *When the Clyde Ran Red*; T. Devine, *The Scottish Nation: A Modern History* (London, 2012); Finlay, *Modern Scotland*; Foster, 'Red Clyde, Red Scotland', 106–24; Foster, 'The 1919 Forty Hours Strike', 30–40; Fry, *Glasgow: A History*; Harvie, *No Gods and Precious Few Heroes*; M. Hutton, *1919 – A Land Fit for Heroes* (Stroud, 2019); J. Jenkinson, 'The 1919 Riots', in (ed.) P. Panayi, *Racial Violence in Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1996), 92–111; J. A. Kerr, *Scotland and the Impact of the Great War 1914–1928* (Paisley, 2010); A.-M. Kilday, *Crime in Scotland 1660–1960* (London, 2018); M. Lynch, *Scotland: a New History* (London, 1991); MacAskill, *Glasgow 1919*; Marr, *The Making of Modern Britain*; J. McGonigle and C. Wood, *The Era of the Great War 1910–1928* (Glasgow, 2013); R. K. Middlemas, *The Clydesiders: A Left Wing Struggle for Parliamentary Power* (London, 1965); N. Naughton, *Glasgow's East End: from Bishops to Barrabos* (Edinburgh, 2014); S. Webb, *1919: Britain's Year of Revolution* (Barnsley, 2016); B. Weinberger, *Keeping the Peace? Policing Strikes in Britain, 1906–1926* (Oxford, 1991).

⁴⁶ It is possible that two articles published in the *Herald* in 2018, although unreferenced, may have been the source: R. Leadbetter, 'Revealed: truth about the tank and Glasgow's Bolshevik rising', *The Herald*, 29 January 2018; G. J. Barclay, 'Debunking more myths of the Battle of George Square', *The Herald*, 20 April 2018.

(1941), is the only contemporary witness to note that ‘in the meantime military assistance was called for’ rather than ‘sent’ by the government.⁴⁷

Weinberger goes beyond asserting that the deployment of the military and the arrest of the strike leaders ‘were decided on by the government’ (both were discussed, but ‘decided’ goes well beyond the evidence of the War Cabinet minutes), to state baldly that, ‘The military were not called in by the local authority.’ Her references, however, show that she had accessed the trial transcript, where the Sheriff’s decision to call in the army is described in detail in his own and others’ testimonies.⁴⁸

As another example, none of these works mentions the alleged plans for sabotage of the city’s power stations by elements of the strike leadership, described by Middlemas. Shinwell’s biographer, Peter Slowe, repeats them, and Tom Bell and Gallacher both refer to them indirectly, in ways that suggests they did not want to be involved.⁴⁹ While it is hardly surprising that Shinwell and the others do not mention this in their autobiographical writings, its omission from every modern account of the events that we have read does raise interesting questions, particularly as a power blackout on the afternoon of 31 January 1919 was at first believed to be ‘due to sabotage on the part of the strikers’ although ‘these reports were authoritatively denied later in the evening’. Potential or actual sabotage is perhaps too complicating a factor to fit into a simple narrative of the government sending tanks.

One might reasonably be concerned that so much of the framing and indeed the detail of the dominant narrative in secondary accounts of the events of 1919 seems to have been derived from the pages of the *Strike Bulletin* and only around a dozen published sources, six of which were written by Gallacher and Shinwell, and the remainder by other leaders of the strike and their followers. Would a history of the General Strike of 1926 be acceptable if framed solely by the version of events presented in the government propaganda sheet, the *British Gazette*, and Churchill’s memoirs? I suspect not. Although events can be mythologised ‘top down’ as well as ‘bottom up’, there has been no attempt, later than the anti-strike newspaper coverage in 1919, to write an ‘establishment’ mythology of the ‘Battle’.

The largely autobiographical writings of Shinwell, Gallacher, Kirkwood and the others, written over several decades, were not intended as history, but to establish their authors’ place in history, their achievements, their role in important events, their legacy, occasionally achieved at the expense of the reputations of their rivals (e.g. Gallacher’s attack on John Maclean as ‘a mentally unstable, historically marginal, Scottish socialist’).⁵⁰

⁴⁷ T. Bell, *Pioneering Days* (London, 1941), 169.

⁴⁸ Weinberger, *Keeping the Peace?*, 155–7.

⁴⁹ Middlemas, *The Clydesiders*, 92; P. Slowe, *Manny Shinwell: an authorised biography* (London, 1993), 85; Bell, *Pioneering Days*, 166; Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde*, 158.

⁵⁰ T. Brotherstone, ‘John Maclean and the Russian Revolution: a discussion article’, *Scottish Labour History Society Journal*, 23 (1988), 17.

It is in this dozen or so publications that the key elements of the dominant mythology have been established, or from which they have been developed. No matter to what extent academic accounts are based on primary evidence, it is surprising the extent to which the overall narrative is still framed by these core accounts. Take for example Gallacher's famous quotation, which appears alone or with further supporting material from the same paragraph, 'If we had gone [to Maryhill Barracks] we could easily have persuaded the soldiers to come out and Glasgow would have been in our hands.'⁵¹ There is no evidence to support this, nor the frequently appearing elaboration built upon it, that the troops in Maryhill were not 'locked in' because they could not be trusted. The further (inaccurate) elaboration, that the unit in residence was the Glasgow regiment, the Highland Light Infantry, has been used to 'explain' why they were 'not to be trusted'.⁵² Although Gallacher's retrospective claims of revolutionary potential have been dismissed by academic writers,⁵³ both Gallacher's quotation and the more recent elaborations continue to appear as part of the 'catechism' of Glasgow 1919.⁵⁴

Other secondary accounts continue to add new embellishments and circumstantial detail, adding drama to the narrative. Mike Hutton tells us that, in addition to the troops being 'mainly English' they 'were posted on rooftops in an attempt to identify the ringleaders'; in reality, first they were mainly Scots, and secondly they arrived at least ten hours too late to be so deployed.⁵⁵ Naughton tells us that Manny Shinwell 'faced down an army tank in George Square', yet he was in custody by the time the tanks arrived.⁵⁶ Here indeed, we have Lipscomb's 'history that is written like a novel'. I am not, of course, the first to point out that much writing about Red Clydeside is over-reliant on an uncritical acceptance of the versions of events written by the strike leaders.⁵⁷ But, as I have already noted, the more critical approach to the 'Legend of Red Clydeside' since McLean's book has not extended anything like as far to the 'legend' of the Battle.

The 'Battle' is not the only comparable event that has accumulated a mythology that has all but extinguished the reality, where the calling in of

⁵¹ Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde*, 164.

⁵² e.g. MacAskill, *Glasgow 1919*, 223–4. There were twenty-seven men of the HLI in Maryhill in January 1919, the last remnants of a garrison-duties battalion being demobilised. The nearest actual HLI battalion was east of Edinburgh, at Haddington (Barclay, 'Duties in Aid of the Civil Power', 272).

⁵³ e.g. L. J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party. Its Origin and Development until 1929* (London, 1966), 43.

⁵⁴ J. Broom, *John Maclean* (Loanhead, 1973), 20; Kerr, *Scotland and the Impact of the Great War*, 107; Kilday, *Crime in Scotland*, 179; MacAskill, *Glasgow 1919*, 223–4; Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party*, 43.

⁵⁵ Hutton, *1919*, ebook reference.

⁵⁶ Anon. 'Hero Shinwell incited racist Clydeside mob', *Scotland on Sunday*, 4 October 2009; Naughton, *Glasgow's East End*, 190.

⁵⁷ Foster, 'Red Clyde. Red Scotland'; Damer, 'And if you know the history ...', 112–15.

‘military aid to the civil power’ (by the Chief Constable in the case of the Tonypandy riots of 1910) is blamed on Churchill personally. ‘Churchill sent the tanks’ is the accusation most commonly made on social media, not only ‘to Glasgow’, but even in some cases to ‘Tonypandy’, five years before such things existed!

It is striking how easily many of the myths within the dominant narrative can be dismissed. For example, the often quoted myths that ‘all the troops were English’ (earliest appearance as yet, 1957)⁵⁸ and that there were ‘tanks in George Square’ on the Saturday or even on the Friday itself, can be disproved by looking at a handful of newspaper reports from 1 to 4 February 1919, in which were lists of Scottish units and photographs of Scottish troops, who formed by far the majority of the force, and which recorded the arrival of the tanks three days after the riot. The largely mythological version of the ‘Battle’ presented in Scottish school textbooks in use during the last decade, which includes both these ‘facts’, has already been described.⁵⁹

The sources for a study of the events of 1919 are rich. The War Cabinet Minutes have been accessible at The National Archives (TNA), Kew, since 1969, and are now available online. The pages of key newspapers such as the *Glasgow Herald* have always been available at the Mitchell Library and other repositories; some newspaper archives are accessible online by subscription only while the *Glasgow Herald* is now available to view free of charge on Google. One of the most useful illustrated newspapers, however, *The Bulletin*, is accessible only in hard copy, at the Mitchell and the National Library of Scotland, and is rarely referenced. The fourteen-issue run of the *Strike Bulletin* is accessible in part in a number of archives but nowhere seems to have a complete run (and indeed we finally located a copy for 7 February 1919 only in November 2020). Disappointingly, no archive has co-ordinated the digitising and mounting of a complete or near-complete set for online consultation. The transcript of the trial in April 1919 (held in the National Records of Scotland) was available at least as early as the 1990s, and I consulted it in 2018. My attempts to go back a few months later to do more work were prevented by a GDPR sensitivity review, which extended the closure of all trial papers to one hundred years. Louise Heren and I managed to have these and the file of prosecution precognitions (pretrial statements) opened a year early by a Freedom of Information request. Only later did we find that the Glasgow City Archive holds a beautifully bound (and more consistently paginated) copy of the transcript! None of this material (the GDPR blip aside) has been sequestered in hard-to-access archives.

Beyond the accessibility of the sources, it is clear from much of what has been published about the ‘Battle’ how difficult it is for one person to attempt to write dispassionately about a contested event – particularly this contested event – especially when the author may have a greater sympathy for perhaps

⁵⁸ P. Dollan, ‘Riot Act: when Glasgow faced an army of tanks and guns’, *Sunday Mail*, 6 October 1957.

⁵⁹ Barclay, ‘Churchill rolled the tanks into the crowd’, 34.

one side; as Damer puts it, that an author's 'heart is in the left place'.⁶⁰ I have presented a number of examples in this paper. Some were clearly unconscious; some may reflect the careless handling of material. Others may stray over the line into 'motivated misrepresentation', demonstrated by the 'convergence of historiographical errors', that decisions about selecting, excluding, presenting or interpreting evidence tend to support only one side of a historical argument.⁶¹

The problem was rather brought into focus while I was finalising this paper, by an anonymous referee for a recent academic book proposal on the Battle. Rejection was recommended because our proposal would be 'likely to be seen as an attempt to belittle the events'. In contrast, it was noted, a 'populist account' published during the anniversary year had been 'sympathetic to the idea of ordinary working class people mobilising politically to effect change ... [which] most established historians would agree with'. The supposedly 'hostile tone and unsympathetic character' of our proposal was not 'how most Glaswegians would like their history to be presented'. And so the boundaries of the acceptable narrative are policed.

Although I do not feel that I have any axe to grind about the 'Battle', about which I had not heard until late 2017, I did spend a career as a minor cog in 'the establishment' (albeit as a trade union member); I am the son of a policeman, who was, however, so active in the Scottish Police Federation (the police 'union'), that he was punished by being put on permanent night duty for three years in the mid-1930s; and I am a member of the successor of the political party (Liberal) of some of the protagonists. Therefore, I inevitably bring my own biases to an account in which the actions of public servants, police officers and Liberal politicians must be scrutinised. In our work on the events of 1919, my colleague Louise Heren (herself a socialist, and granddaughter of a ship's boilermaker and daughter of a marine fitter, both of whom experienced extended periods of unemployment and short hours at the hands of the 'management') and I are challenging our own acknowledged and unacknowledged biases, and we are already enjoying catching each other out in how our language reflects them. We were in the early stages of our immersive trawl of archives across Britain when the Covid-19 lockdown put everything on hold. As I write, we are part of the way through a detailed analysis of the hundreds of pages of trial evidence and pretrial statements, of which we had obtained complete digital copies, and transcribing relevant newspaper accounts from difficult-to-read copies.⁶² So far we have found many 'new' things that have been overlooked or left out of

⁶⁰ Damer, 'And if you know the history ...', 112–15.

⁶¹ C. Gray, [*Judgment of the libel case between Claimant David Irving and Defendants Penguin Books Ltd and Deborah E. Lipstadt*] (London, 2000), 325, <http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2000/115.html>.

⁶² NRS, AD15/19/11 Precognition against Joseph Brennan, Harry Hopkins, David Kirkwood [*et al.*] for the crime of mobbing and rioting at George Square, Glasgow and other locations; NRS, JC36/31 Trial transcript from the trial of William McCartney, George Ebury, David McKenzie [*et al.*] Tried at High Court, Edinburgh, 7 Apr 1919.

previous accounts: for example, that someone may have leaked to Shinwell the news that the Sheriff had asked the government if military aid would be available to him. Or that a woman member was excluded from the delegation at the key meeting with the Provost on 29 January and again from the delegation to see him on the Friday. That the extent to which the, at times, low-key but occasionally violent week-long conflict between staff of the tramway department and the strikers set the path towards the violence on the Friday. And finally, at trial the extent to which the defence evidence was just as ‘scripted’ and problematic as that of the police has long been known to be.

Conclusion

... the doctrine that history exists to fulfil a social need ... confusing history and mythology. What society calls for – and too often gets – is not history but myth, the cement which holds all society together.⁶³

It has been suggested that our desire to explore the evidence for the events and their proximate causes reflects ‘no interest in interpreting the events of Bloody Friday or in discussing its meaning’⁶⁴ and further, that it misses the point that ‘the myth is the history’ now.⁶⁵ There should surely be room not only to explore the power and meaning of the mythology, but also to shape a narrative in which the mythology can be compared critically with a version of events more securely founded on evidence. And it is also worth thinking about the way that a ‘useable past’ has been created against the grain of the evidence. But these approaches seem to provoke hostility.

Louise and I intend to provide an account based on primary evidence, as far as the archives allow, by our immersive and intensive approach. No doubt future historians will interpret the same material differently and new information will come to light, but we hope that we will not have to be corrected for inadequate research, approaching the material with predetermined views, uncritically repeating myths, or ‘motivated misrepresentation’. Evidence to investigate the events of 31 January 1919 lies in the archives if writers are interested in looking, and if they believe that understanding what happened that day, and in the lead-up to it, is of as much importance as the stories since told about it. This is not a ‘sterile accuracy’ in Trevor-Roper’s terms, and if I might be permitted to turn his famous phrase around, ‘there are times when a new truth is more life-giving than old errors’.⁶⁶

⁶³ G. Barraclough, ‘Historical pessimism’, *Guardian*, 20 October 1961.

⁶⁴ S. Damer, ‘In the Rapids of Revolution’, *Scottish Affairs*, 28:3 (2019), 339–48.

⁶⁵ Comment by anonymous referee.

⁶⁶ H. R. Trevor-Roper, *History, professional and lay. An inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 12 November 1957* (Oxford, 1957). The original quotation is, ‘there are times when a new error is more life-giving than an old truth’.