**Shadowing Rogovin: Retracing *Family of Miners, Scotland 1982***

**Nicky Bird**

**Abstract**

Nicky Bird discusses a photographic project in development. By focusing on its research process to date, she reflects on a series of photographs made by the American photographer Milton Rogovin (1909-2011) who travelled through the Scottish coalfields for three weeks in 1982. Within two years of his *Families of Miners, Scotland 1982* the miners’ strike (1984-85) took place. Over 30 years later, the cultural and physical landscape of his photographs has dramatically changed. Drawing from Milton Rogovin’s photographs and his own words about his practice, this photo-essay begins to explore how the processes of *looking back, revisiting*, and *retracing* touch upon the collective memories and social histories of others.

**Looking back, revisiting and retracing**

Two Images:

Untitled, 2014 by Nicky Bird. *Family of Miners, Scotland 1982* by Milton Rogovin

In 2014, I was in Bilston, a former mining village in Midlothian, where I had heard about a celebrated but short-lived miners’ social club known locally as the Casino. I was visiting the location as part of initial research, for what I had hoped would be a new photographic project.[[1]](#footnote-1) Bilston’s vernacular style of housing has similarities with other Scottish mining villages and small towns. This alone might have accounted for that strange feeling of deja-vu when I viewed the photographs of the American social documentary photographer Milton Rogovin (1909-2011) for the first time in the Print Room of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.[[2]](#footnote-2) Looking at his monochrome portrait of an unidentified man crouched down among his prized onions, I was drawn to the background detail of garden sheds and houses. Was I, inadvertently, over 30 years later, following in Rogovin’s footsteps? This portrait, in common with all 56 of his photographs in the National Galleries of Scotland’s collection, has a simple yet evocative title, *Family of Miners, Scotland 1982*. The photographer purposefully did not provide specific names of individuals or locations. For Rogovin, this is the viewer’s role: *‘*Once you have studied the pictures for awhile, they begin to speak […] I’ll have to ask you to write your own captions. Look at them closely. Look into the people's eyes and let them speak. They tell you about their lives.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Looking back**

Two Images: *Family of Miners, Scotland 1982* by Milton Rogovin

The series *Family of Miners, Scotland 1982* belongs to Rogovin’s *Family of Miners* (1981-1987), an extensive body of work that took place in countries such as the USA, the former USSR, Cuba as well as Scotland. Rogovin’s photographic practice had social and political purpose, to give voice to those he called ‘The Forgotten Ones’. From steel to coal workers, he had been photographing individuals and struggling working class communities since the 1950s. In 1957, his left-wing activities led to him being summoned to the House Committee on Un-American Activities, seriously damaging his own business as an optometrist: ‘my voice was essentially silenced, so I decided to speak about problems through my photography’. By the time he arrived in Scotland and travelled through the Scottish coalfields in September 1982 with his wife Anne, Rogovin had already witnessed the closure of steel mills in the USA and the consequent impact on communities he had photographed.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Turning attention to the diptych of a miner at work and at home with his wife and daughter, it is not difficult to see why Rogovin’s work is frequently discussed as in the tradition of Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, and W. Eugene Smith, a photographic lineage that Rogovin himself identified with. However, a closer look at his two portraits may detect an air of informality that departs from more ‘objective’ photographic approaches. These photographs are compelling examples of Rogovin’s desire to create portraits ‘showing these people as workers, members of a family’,[[5]](#footnote-5)

as well as demonstrating his photographic method of making two portraits of the same individual.

The notion of ‘family’ works across the diptych, that at first glance appears to be defined by male labour identity and the ‘at work’ is above ground: the miner is with others, his headlamp hanging from his belt, possibly in a lamp room of a colliery. There is a trace of a smile as he looks directly at Rogovin and not into the camera lens - the effect of the twin-lens medium format camera, where the photographer looks down into the viewfinder rather than through it as in the case of an SLR. In the companion portrait, the same miner is photographed with his wife and young daughter who stand in front of a fire place. Behind them is a display of artefacts – a picture of a battle, ceremonial swords, photographs of Orangemen, portraits of Glasgow Rangers footballers - all associated with Protestantism.[[6]](#footnote-6) By bringing the two photographs together, Rogovin creates a multi-faceted portrait of this man. For the present-day viewer, these photographs may acquire other meanings shaped by a knowledge of the history-to-come, first-hand memories of the miners’ strike (1984-85) and its aftermaths. The young girl is one of many children photographed by Rogovin who would grow up through the strike and where all members of a family – man, woman, child – would in, different but connected ways, find themselves in a changed world.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Revisiting, retracing**

Two images:

Untitled, 2018 by Nicky Bird. *Family of Miners, Scotland 1982* by Milton Rogovin

The questions surrounding specific names, locations and how Rogovin came to Scotland continued to stay with me. Four years later, in 2018, I would eventually view his un-digitalised letters, photographic contact sheets and prints in the Library of Congress, Washington, USA.

The letters evidenced how the photographer had arranged his visit through the National Union of Mineworkers~~,~~ initially with Mick McGahey, President of the Scottish Area, who in turn made practical suggestions about the arrangements. Individual names and places were revealed in Rogovin’s letters of thanks that followed his return home after the three week visit, during which he had shot 61 rolls of film. Rogovin was excited about the results. Three years later he credited the greater depth of his portraits of Scottish miners, when compared with his portraits from other countries, to the way union organisers encouraged his participation in going to pubs, dances, backyards, and gardens.[[8]](#footnote-8) Consequently the series became a wide portrait of Scottish communities from East Ayrshire to Fife.

With photocopies of the contact sheets and my own transcriptions of the letters, I returned to Glasgow. I talked to a colleague about my visit, who mentioned that her partner’s grandfather had been an NUM full time official. When she sent me the name of Alex Doolan, I was astonished to see from my notes that this was the man who had met Milton and Anne Rogovin on their arrival at Prestwick Airport. From that moment of serendipity, I have been meeting with his son John, who has been instrumental in shaping my own understanding of Rogovin’s 61 contact sheets. A former miner and committed communist himself, John put names to faces, places and collieries, specifically to the contact sheets that transpired to be of East Ayrshire. This process of naming and identification brings with it other kinds of information, such as pit closures unconnected to the 1984-85 strike, but which helped establish where Rogovin was. For example, the photographer was at Highhouse Colliery in Auchinleck, East Ayrshire, which would close within a year of Rogovin’s visit. His final contact sheet was first thought to be related to Roger Mine on the border between Dumfries & Galloway and East Ayrshire – now discounted, as the mine closed in 1980. Rogovin’s quietly beautiful photograph of East Wemyss in Fife, with the mining pithead at the end of the street is probably Michael Colliery, which had closed in 1967 following a disastrous fire in which nine men died. Surface structures would not be removed until 2001.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Looking back, revisiting, retracing**

Two Images:

Tweet image, 2019 by Newtongrange Community 1st. *Family of Miners, Scotland 1982* by Milton Rogovin

In addition to East Ayrshire and Fife, Rogovin and his wife would also spend time in Midlothian. When I was in the Library of Congress, the village of Newtongrange with its distinctive Dean Tavern, was one place I instantly recognized. On the back of Contact Sheet No.52, in Rogovin’s handwriting is ‘Willie and Elizabeth (Newtongrange)’, one of the few notes that provide names to a portrait. This information does not prevent close attention to the final print that the photographer would make. The couple affectionately hold hands in front of the fire place against a backdrop of bold, floral wall paper, Elizabeth in a patterned floral dress. The mass-produced Boots print *Tina 1964* by J H Lynch (which has now acquired vintage kitsch status) hangs above the fireplace behind them, and behind Elizabeth is a bird cage and food.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Newtongrange is now the location for Scotland’s National Mining Museum, and during my research visits we discussed the photographer’s work, and my findings so far. I mentioned two NUM receipts I had seen in Rogovin’s Library of Congress papers, which evidence the photographer’s donations during the Miners’ strike.[[11]](#footnote-11) Rogovin’s own name is then found in the National Mining Museum archive of NUM minutes of 1984, which meticulously recorded donations until the task became overwhelming.[[12]](#footnote-12) When I met Village Voices, Newtongrange’s reminiscence group, they provided a wealth of names, including their own relations, in the contact sheets.[[13]](#footnote-13) They also helped plot the photographer’s movement around the village, walked me around and identified the neighbours’ houses Rogovin had visited. The group also did their own close looking at Rogovin’s photographs, when they visited the Scottish National Portrait Gallery for the first time. While they noted that few prints are of Newtongrange, this did not prevent recognition of shared experiences and memories being triggered by details in the photographs. In response to a portrait of a couple with a coal fire in the background, one group member recalled how her father, before leaving for the pit, would lay out her school clothes to warm by the fire.

**Revisiting, retracing**

Two images:

Untitled, 2019 by Nicky Bird. Family of Miners, Scotland 1982 by Milton Rogovin

In this photo-essay, the processes of *looking back, revisiting*, and r*etracing* with the work of Milton Rogovin have begun to touch upon both personal and collective memories as well as social and political histories. Thirty-seven years have passed by; within two years of *Families of Miners, Scotland 1982* the miners’ strike (1984-85) took place to resist the pit closures and the deliberate running-down of coalmining in Britain. Ongoing legacies of the strike, consequent pit closures and de-industrialisation also mean that responses to Rogovin’s photographs are often defined by the miners’ strike and its aftermaths. Throughout this development period, I have encountered both a sense of weariness that any new project is too late – as in ‘they are away now’ - to a sense of urgency that there is history yet to be told. Yet building up a picture of the photographer’s visit to Scotland is leading to a complex contemporary picture of communities, people, place – and politics - prompted by his contact sheets. ***Shadowing Rogovin: Retracing Family of Miners, Scotland 1982*** has much in common with previous projects of mine, where processes of *looking back, revisiting*, *retracing* bring specific memories and histories that eventually lead to the final artworks.[[14]](#footnote-14) The form these take will be determined by continuing with this journey across Scotland’s coalfields, with Milton Rogovin’s photographs, and the people I meet on the way.

**Brief Biography**

**Nicky Bird** is an artist whose work considers contemporary relevances of ‘found’ photographs and latent histories of specific sites, investigating how they remain resonant. She is interested in a key question: *What is our relationship to the past, and what is the value we ascribe to it?* Her work incorporates new photography with oral histories and collaborations with people who have significant connections to the original site and its photographic archive. Alongside commissioned projects she has exhibited nationally and internationally, with published essays on themes of erased place and digital exchange of photographs. Nicky is also a Reader in Contemporary Photographic Practice at The Glasgow School of Art. Her forthcoming solo show *Legacy,* an exhibition of photographic projects from 2007 to 2020, Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow, 11 July -20 September 2020.

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1. This became the photo-essay 'From Car Showroom to Casino: A Midlothian Site of History,' in A.Vermehen (ed), *True North: From Documentation to Re-writing History*, 34-43, Helmsdale: Timespan, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This also began a continuing conversation about the work of Milton Rogovin with Anne Lyden, Chief Curator, Photography, at the National Galleries of Scotland. The collection can be viewed at <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/search/artist/milton-rogovin>. In 2014, the collection was smaller, with a significant enlargement of prints gifted in 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the full quote, and its context, see James Wood’s introduction to the exhibition catalogue *Milton Rogovin: Lower West Side, Buffalo, New York*. Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1975, and cited in this link, which explains Rogovin is quoting Kurt Tucholsky, a German-Jewish Journalist of the Weimar Republic: [https://www.burchfieldpenney.org/exhibitions/exhibition:12-05-1982-01-30-1983-working-people-photographs-by-milton-rogovin/](https://www.burchfieldpenney.org/exhibitions/exhibition%3A12-05-1982-01-30-1983-working-people-photographs-by-milton-rogovin/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Melanie Herzog, in *Milton Rogovin: The Mining Photographs*, Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005, 115-118; Also, see the episode from the Channel 4 documentary series *Rear Window* ‘Images of Atlantis: the photography of Milton Rogovin,’ 21 July 1992. Directed by Peter Wollen and produced by Tariq Ali. Note the left-wing credentials and reputations, in the era when Channel 4’s radical reputation would be on the wane. According to an interview with former Scottish miner Alec Mills, Rogovin had warned Mills of the potential destruction of the mining industry, based on his USA experiences. My thanks to Robin Connelly for his work in discovering this film. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Milton Rogovin: The Forgotten Ones*. Buffalo and Seattle: Albright-Knox Art Gallery and University of Washington Press, 1985 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There is much more to say about these two portraits, not only if we attend to the full quotation indicated in Note 3, but also I refer to conversations I have had with Jim Phillips, Senior Lecturer in Economic and Social History, University of Glasgow. See his book, ***Scottish coal miners in the twentieth century*,** Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For in-depth analysis of the miners’ strike, its legacies and de-industrialisation in Scotland, see for example Jim Phillips [Collieries, Communities and the Miners' Strike in Scotland, 1984-85.](http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/60388/) Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2012; and Ewan Gibbs, ‘The Moral Economy of the Scottish Coalfields: Managing Deindustrialisation under Nationalisation,’ c.1947-1983, *Enterprise & Society,* 19:1, 124-152*,* 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Milton Rogovin: The Forgotten Ones,* 1985, p.17 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Canmore records for Michael Colliery, <https://canmore.org.uk/site/53967/east-wemyss-michael-colliery>. From my on-location conversations with former miners, such as Iain Chalmers (Fife) and John Doolan (East Ayrshire), there is much more to say about the iconic role of the pithead in Scotland’s regeneration and memorial work. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Willie is also photographed at work by Rogovin, most likely in Monktonhall Colliery, Midlothian: <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/91526/scottish-miners?artists%5B27623%5D=27623&search_set_offset=12>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rogovin’s letters show that he sent photographs to Alex Doolan in December 1982 to be distributed to those he had photographed. Between 1983-1984, he was in correspondence with Mick McGahey and Murray Johnson of Stills, Edinburgh, about a possible show, including a touring exhibition of the photographs to the communities that he had worked in. Two receipts, each for $100 dollars, were to the Scottish Area Strike Fund, 1984. In letters between the photographer and Johnston throughout 1985, a Stills show for Edinburgh International Festival, 13-27 July is confirmed, touring then to the Midlothian areas of Lasswade and Roslin; Clackmannan, Clackmannashire and Lochgelly, Fife. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Thanks to the research of Robin Connelly and support from David Bell at the National Mining Museum. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. My introduction to Village Voices was made possible through the help of three key women: Julie Read, Fiona Horne and Rhona More. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. My forthcoming solo show *Legacy* is an exhibition of photographic projects from 2007 to 2020, Streetlevel, Glasgow, 11 July -20 September 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)