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# From the Slums of Red Clydeside to the Campaigning World of American Communism: a Quest to Reconstruct the Life of Ellen Dawson (1900-67)

DAVID LEE McMULLEN

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For centuries Scots have felt the need to leave their native land in search of economic opportunity. Scattered across the globe, many have distinguished themselves in other countries. While this is a well-rehearsed theme, the stories of many expatriates remain absent from Scotland's historical memory. And where there are accounts of the activities of such individuals, too often they merely note their Scottish birth and make no effort to connect their later story with the forces within Scotland that helped shaped their character and aspirations. Ellen Dawson's story is a good example.<sup>1</sup> She was born into working-class poverty in Barrhead, an industrial village on the south-western outskirts of Glasgow, in 1900. She spent her early adult years during World War I – the years of labour unrest, that were to give the area the soubriquet 'Red Clydeside' – working in the local textile mills. It is highly unlikely that witnessing the turbulent Clydeside events failed to influence her later life, in which, after emigrating to the United States, she became, in the late 1920s, a leading Communist labour activist, and the first woman elected to a national leadership position in an American textile union.

Until 2006, no history of the Scottish people mentioned Dawson.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, she attracted limited attention from historians of the three major strikes in which she was an active participant,<sup>3</sup> but although some noted her Scottish birth, none sought to uncover the forces that shaped her political and social beliefs. As a result, American labour historians have missed a direct connection between Red Clydeside and the American Communist labour movement of a decade later; and Scottish labour historians have missed a story that stands in counterpoint to the idea that expatriate

<sup>1</sup> Ellen Dawson was married in 1936, after her years as a radical activist. From that point forward she was Ellen Kanki. All known historical references use her maiden name. I have continued this tradition.

<sup>2</sup> She is included in Lynn Abrams et al. (ed.), *Biographical Encyclopedia of Scottish Women* (Edinburgh, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> The most comprehensive account of Ellen Dawson's life can be found in Philip S. Foner's *Women and the American Labor Movement from World War I to the Present* (New York, 1980). Foner is the only historian to connect her participation in the three Communist-led textile strikes of the late 1920s in Passaic, New Bedford and Gastonia. He also notes her involvement with the Lovestoneites. Foner, who is one of the few American labour historians to research the American Communist labour movement, mentions Ellen approximately half a dozen times in the forty-five pages he devotes to the three strikes. Even today, Foner remains a controversial figure because of his often sympathetic view of Communists such as Ellen. Although the quality of his research has been questioned by other scholars, my research within the original documents indicates that his accounts of these three strikes are accurate.

achievement should always be measured in terms of capitalist enterprise or orthodox political success. Lack of attention to Ellen Dawson's story can be attributed to several factors, including the difficulties of reconstructing the lives of working-class women and transatlantic migrants. My pioneering research into her life on both sides of the Atlantic has, I think, uncovered the fascinating story of a woman who took her experience of Scottish working-class life overseas and fought courageously for the rights of women, unskilled workers and immigrants in her adopted country.

I discovered<sup>4</sup> Ellen Dawson in John Salmond's account of the 1929 Loray Mill strike in Gastonia, North Carolina.<sup>5</sup> During the first two months of that strike, she served as co-director of an organising effort sponsored by the National Textile Workers Union. From there, Philip Foner's summary of the American women's labour movement allowed me to trace Ellen's steps back to major strikes in New Bedford, Massachusetts and Passaic, New Jersey. Finally, Ellis Island records helped me to identify her homes in England and Scotland. As I researched her life, my fascination with her, and the world in which she lived, grew. Appearing publicly for the first time in 1926, she quickly became a labour evangelist, a woman who could climb atop an improvised platform and, speaking in her native Scottish brogue, inspire an audience of American textile workers with ideas of cooperation, social equality, and peaceful civil disobedience. Fearlessly, for half a decade, she was a leader in the workers' struggle. She was in the forefront of picket lines, and marched at the head of demonstrations, often facing violent attack. Her life provides an insight into the forces that influenced the lives of immigrant women workers of her time, and her experiences challenge scholars to develop a better understanding of why an emigrant Scottish woman like Ellen Dawson could make the decisions she did.

## I

Ellen was born and raised in one of Scotland's oldest industrial villages, an environment where the theories of socialism and cooperation were discussed and tested in an effort to resolve the economic problems of the working poor. Her life began during the closing days of the Victorian era, in a decaying, two-room tenement in the grim, smog-filled community of Barrhead. She was the fifth of at least ten children<sup>6</sup> born to Patrick and Annie Dawson, a family that a descendant later described as 'very, very poor'.<sup>7</sup> The Dawson family was at the bottom of the working class; they were among the poorest of Britain's working poor.

<sup>4</sup> It was my partner, Cindy Wilkinson McMullen, who first noted Ellen Dawson's Scottish connection.

<sup>5</sup> John Salmond's book, *Gastonia 1929* (Chapel Hill, N. Carolina, 1995), provides the most comprehensive account of the Loray Strike, an event that many consider to be the most infamous strike in the history of the textile industry in the southern United States.

<sup>6</sup> Given the high level of infant mortality, between 15 and 20 per cent, in Barrhead during this period, it is highly possible that there were other children that did not survive.

<sup>7</sup> Betty Dawson, interview conducted by Hugo Manson, March 20, 2004. (Tape and transcript held by David Lee McMullen. I am grateful to Hugo Manson for his assistance.)

Patrick Dawson was born in Scotland around 1869. He was a strong, hard-working family man. His politics were conservative, his Roman Catholic religion sincere, and he was never to share the radical views his daughter had developed after he died. Annie Halford Dawson was born in 1867<sup>8</sup> in Nitshill, a neighbouring village to Barrhead.<sup>9</sup> She was the oldest daughter in a large and very poor working-class family. An independent and free-spirited young woman, she was a hard worker and also a devout Roman Catholic. Like her sisters, Annie Halford went to work as a local textile operative during her early teens. By the time she married Patrick, she had worked for a decade, becoming a power-loom weaver, an occupation near the top of the textile-mill hierarchy. Achieving such a position is evidence of exceptional diligence and determination on Annie's part, characteristics that she passed on to her daughter Ellen, who also became a weaver and she too was, according to her niece, 'a very hard worker'.<sup>10</sup>

Patrick Dawson worked as a labourer in the local Shanks' Tube Works, one of Barrhead's largest industrial enterprises and a leading international manufacturer of bathtubs, washbasins, toilets and bidets. It was an unhealthy and physically exhausting job that attracted workers who were forced to take the worst jobs just to survive. According to the schoolteacher James Maxton, later one of the leading 'Red Clydeside' MPs, who was brought up and lived in Barrhead, the foundry was a centre of serious political debate and the source of his own conversion to socialism.<sup>11</sup> However conservative Patrick Dawson's own beliefs, he lived in a political environment, in what for many were times of radical aspirations.

Ellen's parents must have greeted her birth with mixed feelings. They were a family of seven, with four young children and a baby, living in a two-room tenement on Patrick's labourer's wage. With the oldest child only seven, it would be another six years before the family would have a second full-time wage earner, and by then there would be seven children, with another on the way.

Few specific details survive concerning the day-to-day life of the Dawson family. There are, however, several important observations that can be made. Annie came from a large family. She had at least ten siblings, and ultimately at least ten children of her own. Patrick's family has been less easy to trace, but there are indications that he may have had at least one sibling living in the area. Ellen's childhood was attended by a large extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins. This, combined with the family's cramped living conditions, meant that Ellen would not have lacked companionship; and

<sup>8</sup> The year of Annie's birth remains in question. On her gravestone, 1867 is the year listed for her birth, however, based on the age listed on her marriage record, she may not have been born until 1869 or 1870.

<sup>9</sup> General Registry of Scotland: Marriages 1893; SS *Baltic* Manifest, Oct. 22, 1922; *Barrhead and Neilston*, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Betty Dawson interview.

<sup>11</sup> James Maxton, 'Reminiscences,' in *The Independent Labour Party, 1893-1943* (London: ILP, 1943).

she must have overheard many adult conversations, with topics including the social and political events, and ideas, of the day.

Certain details of officially recorded events do survive, such as the arrival of new siblings and the death of family members. Two deaths provide particular insight. First, on July 31, 1903, Ellen Dawson's aunt, Ellen Halford, a nineteen-year-old thread-mill worker, died of acute pulmonary phthisis. This was a lung disease almost certainly exacerbated by working for five or six years in a textile factory with excessive concentrations of lint in the air and where the humidity was kept intentionally high in order to reduce thread breaks. The second death occurred on January 29, 1906, when Ellen lost the first of her grandparents, her paternal grandfather, Edward Dawson. His death certificate indicates that he was a worker at the local water and sewer plant, a job he had held for most of his adult life. The cause of death was listed as 'gangrene of the foot,' possibly the result of an on-the-job accident, and 'exhaustion', a telling comment on the realities of working-class life at the time.

At some point during the months immediately preceding World War I, Ellen joined other young women taking their first wage-earning jobs in the local textile industry – following in the footsteps of her mother and her mother's sisters. From one perspective, Ellen's formative years as a young worker remain shrouded in mystery, and yet from another perspective they are perhaps the most researched in Scottish labour history. Almost none of the personal details of Ellen's life as a young textile worker in Scotland survive. We know where her family lived and the approximate time she entered the labour force, but not where she worked or what exactly she did from day to day. By contrast, the larger world in which she and countless other young women workers lived – the world of 'Red Clydeside'<sup>12</sup> – has been researched by numerous scholars, who provide us with a detailed understanding of these turbulent times, and the labour unrest that occurred in Ellen's own backyard.

In that outpouring of collective action by the workers of Glasgow and the surrounding industrial communities, I am convinced, can be found the powerful forces that influenced Ellen's radical activities in the United States a decade later. Red Clydeside was Ellen's classroom, and the activists of the period were her teachers. It was during these years that she was introduced to the realities of industrial wage labour, and began formulating her own attitudes and opinions as a worker. It was during this

<sup>12</sup> Much of the initial scholarship surrounding Red Clydeside focused on the engineers' strike of 1915, the question of dilution, and the 40-Hours Strike of 1919. See Terry Brotherstone, 'Does Red Clydeside Really Matter Any More?', in Robert Duncan and Arthur McIvor (eds.), *Militant Workers: Essays in Memory of Harry McShane* (Edinburgh, 1992). In recent years, historians have begun to expand the definition of Red Clydeside to include other major events between 1910 and 1919. See William Kenefick and Arthur McIvor (eds.), *The Roots of Red Clydeside* (Edinburgh, 1996); Glasgow Digital Library, Strathclyde University, 'Red Clydeside: A history of the labour movement in Glasgow 1910-1932', accessible at the website <<http://gdl.cdl.strath.ac.uk/redclyde/rceevents.html>>. However, very little research has been published on the role women played in the events of Red Clydeside, or on how dilution affected women workers.

time that Scottish women emerged not only as rank-and-file workers, but also as leaders within several major struggles. And, it was during this time that Scottish workers confronted many of labour's central issues. Ellen may have been only a silent witness to these events, but it is difficult to believe that she, or any other young worker of the period, could have escaped the influence of such firebrand rhetoric and monumental events. Looking at Ellen's life in its entirety, it seems a very rational speculation that 'Red Clydeside' was a pivotal moment.

The end of the war brought massive unemployment to Glasgow and Britain's other industrial cities, and survival became the primary concern for most of Scotland's working class. Ellen and her family struggled to remain in Barrhead, but the economic depression that followed the war ultimately forced them to leave Scotland in search of employment. Near the end of 1919, the family moved across the border to Lancashire. There they found employment in the village of Millgate, in the Whitworth Valley, midway between the villages of Shawforth and Facet, just north of Rochdale.<sup>13</sup> It was one more relocation in the family's multi-generational quest for economic stability. Four of Ellen's eight great-grandparents had moved from Ireland to Scotland in the mid-nineteenth century, and at least two others moved from a Scottish croft to an industrial village during the same period. It is clear that the Dawson family considered the move to England only temporary, and even after the family migrated to the United States, several individuals in Ellen's generation, and the following generation, moved back and forth across the Atlantic many times.

Employment opportunities in Millgate proved to be only slightly better than in Scotland. As Patrick Dawson noted, 'trade is no better down here yet, at the same time I don't think they are as bad as they are up in Scotland.'<sup>14</sup> The Lancashire textile industry had a brief upturn immediately after World War I, but then collapsed in the early 1920s. As a result, the Dawson family, like thousands of other British workers, turned their sights further afield, joining a massive post-war migration of working-class families. Ellen and her older brother David were the first to leave Britain, sailing aboard the SS *Cedric* from Liverpool on April 30, 1921. Ellen was twenty and David was twenty-six. At Ellis Island, Ellen and David Dawson were met by their mother's cousin, Margaret Curley, who served as their American sponsor.<sup>15</sup> Margaret's husband John had emigrated to the U.S. in 1914 from Paisley.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, back in Millgate, economic conditions worsened. Patrick's health declined, the working members of the family had their working hours reduced to half time, and a sister lost a month of work when she injured her hand on the cellar door. However, the family received good reports from America, and, as Patrick Dawson wrote:

<sup>13</sup> Whitworth Poor Rate, 1919, p. 29. Whitworth Local History Museum, Whitworth, England.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Dawson letter to his son Richard Dawson, November 7, 1921.

<sup>15</sup> SS *Cedric* Manifest, May 9, 1921.

<sup>16</sup> SS *Caledonia* Manifest, June 22, 1914. The date of Margaret's crossing is unknown.

They are fairly enjoying the country. They say that it is the place to live in comfort if we were all together and that won't be long if father's helth [sic] would improve...we are fed up some of our family in one place and us in [another], for we have had plenty of that, but it can't be helped it is our luck and we have got to put up with it. Surely thing [sic] will come to our liking soon.<sup>17</sup>

Patrick Dawson, however, never made the journey. He died on June 19, 1922 at the age of 53. The cause of death was listed as stomach cancer, a disease that can be directly attributed to his work in the Shank's foundry in Barrhead.<sup>18</sup>

## II

With her husband dead, and three of her children already in the United States, Annie sailed from Liverpool on October 14, 1922, aboard the SS *Baltic*. Travelling with her were her five youngest children.<sup>19</sup> David Dawson met Annie and the children at Ellis Island, served as their official sponsor and took them to their first home in the United States. Passaic, New Jersey in the 1920s was similar to, and yet very different from, Barrhead. It was an industrial community on the outskirts of New York City, the largest urban centre in the United States, just as Barrhead was on the fringe of Scotland's largest industrial city. While Barrhead had several different local industries and a relatively homogeneous labour force, Passaic was a major textile centre and one of the most ethnically diverse communities in America.<sup>20</sup> Although the ethnic diversity must have seemed very strange to this Scottish family, the concentration of textile mills offered an economically ideal destination. According to the occupations listed on the immigration manifests at Ellis Island, almost every member of the Dawson family was an experienced textile worker.<sup>21</sup>

During their early years in Passaic, the Dawson family adjusted to life in America and Ellen worked as a weaver in the Botany Worsted Mill just a few blocks from where she, and the other members of the family, lived. However, in late 1925, Ellen's life changed dramatically. In October, under the leadership of a Communist labour activist named Albert Weisbord, a massive strike, ultimately involving more than 16,000 unskilled textile workers, began against the employers at Passaic area mills. Botany was at the centre of the strike and Ellen quickly joined the Communist Party and became one of the strike leaders. As the strike unfolded, Ellen served as a member of the Botany's strike committee and then became secretary of the umbrella committee, the United Front Committee of Passaic Textile Workers. After the American Federation of Labor (AFL) took the lead in the Passaic strike, she became financial secretary for the AFL's United Textile Workers of America's (UTW) newly chartered Local #1603 in

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Dawson letter.

<sup>18</sup> Whitworth Urban Sanitary Authority, June 30, 1922.

<sup>19</sup> SS *Baltic* Manifest, October 22, 1922.

<sup>20</sup> In the 1920s, there were more than thirty different languages spoken in Passaic.

<sup>21</sup> Ship manifests for SS *Cedric*, May 9, 1921; SS *Columbia*, August 7, 1921; and SS *Baltic*, October 22, 1922.

Passaic. During the strike, she was on marches and picket lines that often involved violent confrontations with local police, and with thugs hired or inspired by local mill owners. She travelled around the country in an effort to build support for the striking workers among government officials and workers' groups, whilst also helping to raise relief funds for the strikers and their families. These activities helped establish her as one of the leading women labour activists in the Communist-led campaign to better the working conditions of unskilled textile workers, especially women and immigrants. When the strike finally ended, the workers of Passaic had gained the right to have their union recognised by the companies, a first for unskilled textile workers in America.

Unquestionably, the 1926 Passaic textile strike changed Ellen's life. It transformed her from an anonymous weaver into a prominent labour activist. Using her new position as an officer of the Passaic local of the United Textile Workers, she participated in several of the most famous events of the late 1920s. In 1927, for example, she joined in the campaign to save Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two Italian immigrant workers convicted of the 1920 murders of a paymaster and a security guard outside a shoe factory in South Braintree, Massachusetts. The case attracted international attention, and numerous liberal groups sought to save them from the electric chair.<sup>22</sup> Ellen joined other leading labour representatives in demonstrations in both New York and Boston during the final days before their execution.<sup>23</sup>

In 1927, Ellen participated in a variety of women's rights activities. She travelled to the USSR as a member of the American Women's Delegation to Soviet Russia, making the journey with leading women journalists, and women representatives of other prominent organisations.<sup>24</sup> On their return to the United States, the group reported on the changes in women's rights that occurred in Russia after the revolution of 1917, and how women in Soviet Russia had more basic rights than their American counterparts. During 1928, Ellen was involved in the planning and implementation of International Women's Day celebrations in New York City, and also served on women's committees of the American Communist Party.

In 1928, Ellen became involved in her second major textile strike, in New Bedford, Massachusetts. At its peak, it involved more than 30,000 workers. No longer a striking worker with a leadership role in a local strike, Ellen assumed the role of labour organiser. In New Bedford, she worked with all of the strikers, but especially with the women workers, who were a majority amongst textile workers. Ellen was what those opposed to the strike often called 'an outside agitator', but from the perspective of the

<sup>22</sup> Many still believe that Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent victims. Future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter noted in a March 1927 article in the *Atlantic Monthly* that the long delays and numerous disclosures turned the case into an international *cause célèbre*.

<sup>23</sup> Ellen's participation in New York City demonstrations and her journey to Boston with other labour activists were reported in the *New York Times*, August 11, 1927.

<sup>24</sup> Others on the trip included journalists Mary Windsor, associate editor of *Equal Rights*, and Rosa Laddon Hanna, a freelance writer, as well Ella Rush Murray of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Lucy Gwynne Branham of the American Society for Cultural Relations with Russia, and Harriet Silverman of the Workers' Health Bureau.

New Bedford workers, she was one of them. She was a textile worker, an immigrant, and a woman who had fought the mill owners in the violent Passaic strike and won. In many ways, she provided New Bedford workers, especially immigrant women workers, with an important role model.

The New Bedford strike pitted skilled workers against unskilled workers, a conflict very similar to the question of dilution during the Red Clydeside years. This conflict also exacerbated Ellen's relationship with the American Federation of Labor's United Textile Workers' Union. The unskilled workers of New Bedford were united under the banner of the Communist-led United Front Committees, the same group that led the striking workers during most of the Passaic strike in 1926. As a result, Ellen and the other Communist activists came in direct conflict with the New Bedford Textile Council, which included skilled unions represented by the AFL. This proved to be the final straw as far as the UTW national leadership was concerned. On September 11, 1928, Ellen was thrown out of the United Textile Workers Union during the group's annual convention. As the *Daily Worker* reported, UTW officials did not trouble themselves 'to offer an explanation for their actions, despite the fact that Ellen and other Communist associates [were] accredited delegates from Locals ... of the Passaic UTW' In a fiery speech from the convention floor, Ellen branded the UTW's action in New Bedford as 'strikebreaking,' and insisted that her membership in both the UTW and the Communist backed Textile Mill Committee was appropriate.<sup>25</sup> But her removal from the UTW was not the end of the matter. It proved to be the spark that set off a new development, when, on the following day, Ellen joined five other UTW delegates, as well as representatives of the Silk Workers and the Knit Goods Workers, in the creation of a new textile union.

On September 22 and 23, 1928, the Communist-backed Textile Mill Committees met in New York City and formally launched this new union – the National Textile Workers' Union of American (NTWU). The meeting was attended by 169 delegates – approximately one-third of them women – from twenty-one cities, including communities in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island. The new union claimed to represent 131,943 American textile workers.<sup>26</sup> Albert Weisbord, who was the organiser behind the convention and the new union, was elected national secretary. Ellen was named first vice-president – the first women to be elected to a national leadership position in an American textile union. She was also one of three women named on the NTWU's thirteen-member National Executive Committee. Together they established a subcommittee on women and directed that every NTWU local have a women's committee.

Women's issues were central to the new union, and under Ellen's leadership the NTWU articulated a comprehensive agenda for the improvement of pay and working conditions for women in America's textile industry. Their demands included equal pay for equal work, a minimum wage, the elimination of night work, prohibiting women

<sup>25</sup> *Daily Worker*, September 12, 1928.

<sup>26</sup> *New Leader*, October 6, 1928.

from heavy and dangerous occupations, paid maternity leave, time off for mothers to nurse infant children, free childcare, and separate rest rooms.<sup>27</sup> In the United States during the 1920s, these were radical ideas. The NTWU's concern for the rights of women workers was unique at a time when the American Federation of Labor continually ignored the needs of women textile workers. Addressing the rights of women workers, however, was part of the Communist programme, which recognised working women as a massive and untapped resource for social change.

After the convention, Ellen returned to New Bedford, continuing her efforts in support of textile workers there and in Fall River. In December 1928, she was arrested by Federal authorities in New Bedford in an effort to revoke her United States citizenship, which she had received earlier that year. As the American Civil Liberties Union reported, the government contended that because she believed in communism, she could not honestly have taken the oath to uphold the United States Constitution.<sup>28</sup> And deportation was a very serious threat, one of the most effective means the United States government had for eliminating foreign-born radicals who challenged the established system.<sup>29</sup> The threat of deportation was also a way of intimidating immigrant activists who remained in the country. During these events, an unnamed official of the Labor Department was quoted in a New Bedford newspaper saying that he 'would deport the Red Agitators'.<sup>30</sup> In New Bedford alone, at least three of the strike leaders were ultimately deported, including William Murdoch, a native of Inverness.

In February 1929, Ellen attended the Sixth National Convention of the Workers (Communist) Party of America, which was dominated by Jay Lovestone and his followers.<sup>31</sup> There she was elected to the party's Central Executive Committee, 'one of the highest positions in the American party'.<sup>32</sup> Then, at the end of March 1929, Ellen became involved in what was perhaps the most notable event of her career as a labour activist – the 1929 strike at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina. As the first woman organiser to arrive on the scene, Ellen played a pivotal role in a strike that is considered by many to be the most infamous strike in the history of the Southern textile industry.<sup>33</sup> Sent to Gastonia by Albert Weisbord to assist Fred Beal, with whom she had

<sup>27</sup> *Daily Worker*, March 9, 1929.

<sup>28</sup> American Civil Liberties Union weekly news bulletin no. 333, December 13, 1928. It should also be noted that while Ellen was exposed to the ideas of communism in Scotland, the first record of her joining or participating in a Communist activity was 1926 when she joined the Communist Party during the Passaic strike.

<sup>29</sup> At the time, the U.S. Immigration Service was part of the U.S. Department of Labor.

<sup>30</sup> Ashley Scrapbook. The unnamed official was certainly Charles G. Wood, U.S. Commissioner of Reconciliation and a former New Bedford newspaper editor.

<sup>31</sup> Lovestone was the head of the Communist Party in the United States at the time. Of the 104 delegates to the convention, 95 were his supporters.

<sup>32</sup> The FBI File on Ellen Dawson, February 25, 1943. I obtained a copy through the U.S. Freedom of Information Act and it is in my possession.

<sup>33</sup> Many attribute the infamy of the strike simply to the involvement of the Communists, however, James Leloudis believes that it was the Communist commitment to racial equality that

worked in New Bedford and Passaic, she arrived just days before the strike began. On March 30, 1929, she was the first union speaker to address workers at the union's first public rally held in the South.

The Loray Strike began on Monday, April 1, after mill bosses began firing workers who had been seen at the mass rally two days earlier. The union called a strike and by the end of the day the mill was closed. Again, Ellen was a key speaker at a mass meeting of workers. As a reporter for the *Charlotte Observer* recorded, 'The crowning speech was made by Miss Ellen Dawson, woman's organizer and agitator.' Two days later the *Observer* published a three-column photo of Ellen speaking to a crowd of strikers. The headline above the large photo read, 'WOMAN AGITATOR SPURS STRIKE.'<sup>34</sup> There can be little doubt that at Loray Ellen was at the peak of her career as one of the leading activists in the fight to organise the textile workers of America.

Despite the subsequent involvement of other women activists in the Gastonia strike, women who represented a variety of organisations, Ellen had two unique characteristics that distinguished her from her colleagues and, as a result, made her the most effective organiser in Gastonia. She was the only woman organiser with experience as a worker in a textile mill. In fact, at age 28, she was already partially deaf from having spent half of her life as a mill worker.<sup>35</sup> In addition, her Scottish birth and accent provided a unique bond with Southern textile workers, the majority of whom were of Scottish descent.<sup>36</sup>

Ellen's success as an activist in Gastonia is evident in the fact that she was the first NTWU organiser targeted by the forces opposing the strike. On April 18, Ellen was arrested on charges of immigration fraud. Her arrest rated a banner headline on page one of the *Gastonia Daily Gazette*. According to the news article, she 'was arrested ... just after she had finished a speech of most incendiary tone to a group of strikers in the Loray community.'<sup>37</sup> *Labor's News* reported:

made the strike so significant, because it brought the question of race to the forefront. Certainly the response of the community to the strike was very similar to the response of many southern communities to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Leloudis made these comments during a presentation entitled 'Looking Ahead: The Story Continues', a presentation at a public symposium commemorating the Loray Mill strike, June 12, 2004, Gastonia, North Carolina.

<sup>34</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, 5 and 7 April, 1929.

<sup>35</sup> Loss of hearing was especially common among weavers. Ellen's deafness was noted by Vera Buch (Weisbord) in her book, *A Radical Life*, p. 207.

<sup>36</sup> According to the 1790 U.S. Census, more than half the North Carolina population was of Scottish or Ulster Scot origin. Since English settlers tended to settle more heavily in the eastern part of the state, the number of Scots in the Piedmont region was significantly higher. Because the region attracted few immigrants after the American Civil War, when the great waves of immigrants began coming to the United States, the ethnicity of the Piedmont changed very little. During the 1920s, the ethnicity of the region remained heavily Scottish, perhaps as high as 60-70 per cent, followed by Germans and then English.

<sup>37</sup> *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, 19 April, 1929.

Ellen Dawson, heroine of mill strikes in Passaic, Paterson<sup>38</sup> and New Bedford, has been arrested in Gastonia on a federal immigration charge which was used against her in New Bedford. The case in New Bedford was later dropped, but revived in Gastonia to embarrass the strike's most effective women's organiser.<sup>39</sup>

Ellen's arrest was made by U.S. Deputy Marshal M. C. Coin, who served the warrant immediately after she 'finished an impassioned speech to the strikers who had assembled at the regular open-air meeting place in the rear of the demolished Loray union's headquarters.'<sup>40</sup> Her arrest, according to one Charlotte newspaper, 'caused a wild commotion among the strikers attending the meeting, but Miss Dawson herself seemed little perturbed.'<sup>41</sup> The marshal, who started to arrest her prior to her speech, had allowed her to finish her speech to the workers. One reporter noted:

The young woman ... is very small and of an aggressive temperament. In her talk preceding her arrest she explained that, 'I'm not scared of policemen for I've been around so many of them' ... She told the strikers not to fear policemen's clubs knocking their heads. 'I've had a lot of 'em knocking mine.' She ended her comments by urging the workers to continue 'fighting for their rights regardless of what becomes of us who are organising you'.<sup>42</sup>

At the end of May, Ellen left North Carolina and returned to New Jersey to face the immigration charges. Her early departure from Gastonia proved fortuitous from her perspective, because it came approximately a week before the Gastonia police chief was killed in a police raid on the tent city that housed striking workers and their families.<sup>43</sup> As a result, unlike her colleagues who remained in Gastonia, Ellen escaped being charged with his murder. According to one account, she may have sensed the impending doom that would quickly draw the eyes of the world to Gastonia and the plight of the Loray workers. Fellow activist Vera Buch (Weisbord) later wrote, 'full of smiles, (Ellen) bade us goodbye. I couldn't help thinking, did she have to be so completely joyful to get out of it? Could there not have been one moment of regret, one thought for those left behind?'<sup>44</sup> Ellen returned to Gastonia at least once that summer, but only briefly. Her attention was focused on other activities.

<sup>38</sup> I have found no record of Ellen being involved in labour disputes in Paterson, New Jersey, although it is possible since she lived in the area.

<sup>39</sup> *Labor's News*, April 27, 1929.

<sup>40</sup> The union headquarters had been destroyed the night before by a gang of masked vigilantes.

<sup>41</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, April 19, 1929.

<sup>42</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, April 19, 1929.

<sup>43</sup> Gastonia Police Chief Orville Aderholt was killed when police raided the tent city. Although Fred Beal and several others involved with the strike were ultimately convicted of the murder, many questions remain concerning Aderholt's death. For more detail, consult John Salmond's book, *Gastonia 1929* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

<sup>44</sup> V. B. Weisbord, *A Radical Life*, p. 217.

In her Federal deportation trial, Ellen was defended by the American Civil Liberties Union. Her ACLU attorney asserted that the charges against Ellen had been ‘trumped-up’ by a Labor Department official<sup>45</sup> in a conspiracy with the American Federation of Labor. Ironically, according to the *New York World*, Charles ‘Wood, whose official task is to meet labour leaders and capitalists and hear all sides of industrial disputes, ... has been particularly active during the last year in battling the more radical leaders.’ On October 23, 1929, Federal District Judge William Clark ruled in Ellen’s favour, saying, ‘I won’t allow my court to be used to persecute any one regardless of their ... affiliations. I feel there has been a mistake in this case, and if this defendant was sent to jail a great injustice would be done.’ The judge then ordered Wood to appear in his court to explain his actions.<sup>46</sup>

As the ACLU later noted in its annual report:

One of the toughest jobs confronting the representatives of civil liberties is to get any redress whatever for victims of official lawlessness ... Among the numerous actions brought in 1930 and 1931 unhappily no success can be reported. But the intangible effect of these actions in restraining (government) officials may have been considerable.

The ACLU singled out the government agent who sought to have Ellen deported.

Conspicuous among these actions was a demand on the Secretary of Labor for the discipline and removal of Charles G. Wood, red-baiting agent of the Bureau of Conciliation, who used his position to break left-wing strikes and to void contracts with left-wing unions, identifying his activities with professional patriotic societies.

The ACLU further noted how:

He also sought to secure revocation of the citizenship of Ellen Dawson, left-wing strike leader. For this he was scored [sic] by Federal Judge Clark in Newark. The Department of Labor disavowed certain of his activities, but he continued them ‘personally’.<sup>47</sup>

As a result of Judge Clark’s decision, Ellen’s U.S. citizenship was confirmed and she escaped the deportation suffered by countless other immigrant activists during the period, including several Scottish immigrants.

Having barely missed being charged with murder in Gastonia and having survived the immigration fraud charges, Ellen found herself under attack from the new leadership of the Communist Party. As a supporter of Jay Lovestone, Ellen had been elected to the Party’s Central Executive Committee in February 1929. In March, when Ellen headed south to Gastonia, Lovestone had gone to Russia where he hoped to gain

<sup>45</sup> Charles G. Wood was the U.S. Commissioner of Reconciliation and a former New Bedford newspaper editor. He was in New Bedford when Ellen was charged with immigration fraud, and was in Gastonia during the weeks prior to her being charged a second time.

<sup>46</sup> *The Fight for Civil Liberty 1930-1931, Annual Report of the American Civil Liberties Union*, ACLU Archives, Princeton University Library.

<sup>47</sup> See *The Fight for Civil Liberty*.

Stalin's endorsement in the dispute within the American Party. But he quarrelled with the Soviet leader who was in the process of consolidating his authoritarian power. By the time Lovestone returned home in June, he had been stripped of all his power and expelled from the party. As Ted Morgan, Lovestone's biographer explained, Lovestone

was a career Communist, which was not unlike having had a career at General Motors or the Republican Party. Promotion depended upon pleasing the head office. Cliques competed for advantage. Management was recruited on the basis of dependability rather than brilliance.<sup>48</sup>

Ellen, as a supporter of Lovestone, suffered the same fate. She quickly lost her position on the Executive Committee of the Party and was expelled from the National Textile Workers' Union. She wrote an account of her expulsion from the union that provides a meaningful picture of the transition that was affecting the Communist movement in the United States.

The recent convention [she wrote] ...is a good example of how an organization with the greatest possibilities for growth can be crippled and paralysed by false policies and destructive methods. It is a real warning to all ... revolutionary workers of what is ahead for us...The 'new line' of the Party [has] already done great damage to the Union.'<sup>49</sup>

Lovestone and 200 of his most loyal followers began the formation of their own political party, pledging to fight 'the anti-Leninist party-wreckers.' By October, the newly formed Communist Party of the U.S.A. (Majority Group) had a national council, to which Ellen was elected, and a publication, *Revolutionary Age*, on the editorial board of which, she served.<sup>50</sup> Lovestone's new party was a majority group in name only. Membership never exceeded 500. In 1941, the group folded when Lovestone joined the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations.

How long Ellen remained active with the Lovestoneites is not clear. She is included in a group that Robert J. Alexander says probably remained with Lovestone until 1941.<sup>51</sup> However, I have found no evidence that she was involved with the Group after 1931. Until then, she was an active participant in numerous activities. She represented the group at the 1930 May Day Unity Celebration in New York, helped to form a Textile Unity Committee, raised funds for the group, wrote articles for *Revolutionary Age*, and spoke at meetings in the Passaic area.<sup>52</sup> Although the exact date is not clear, it appears highly probably that Ellen's life as a radical activist ended at some point during the early 1930s. The last known reference to her working as a communist activist is on May 9, 1931, when *Revolutionary Age* reported that she spoke at a local banquet of the Majority Group. The meeting was at the Group's Passaic headquarters, located at 63

<sup>48</sup> Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life* (New York, 1999), p. 103.

<sup>49</sup> *Revolutionary Age*, January 15, 1930.

<sup>50</sup> Robert J. Alexander, *The Right Opposition* (Westport, Connecticut, 1981), pp. 28 and 35.

<sup>51</sup> Alexander, *The Right Opposition*, p. 35.

<sup>52</sup> *Revolutionary Age*, April 20, May 21, November 22, 1930 & April 25 & May 9, 1931.

Dayton Avenue – just a few doors down from 25 Dayton Avenue, the first offices of the United Front Committee, opened by Albert Weisbord at the beginning of the Passaic textile strike of 1926.

In 1931, the Great Depression was well underway and by 1935 one out of every four workers in the United States was unemployed. No longer a member of the Soviet-controlled Communist Party USA, it appears that Ellen, like so many American workers of the time, focused on survival. From the available records, it is clear she continued working in the Passaic area until her retirement in 1965. During this thirty-five year period, she endured the death of her mother and her older sister, married Louis Kanki, assisted several of her Scottish relatives in moving to the United States, and returned to her native Scotland on brief holidays. During this time, the American economy and the life of the average worker changed as well. Under the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, workers won certain basic rights, and a social safety net was established for older workers. During World War II, America's industrial base was revitalised, the economy boomed, and for the remainder of Ellen's life, the economic standing of textile workers in the United States improved. Like her early years, her later life remains sketchy. Her memories were rarely shared; her experiences were seldom discussed. Her surviving relatives know little of her activism. If she wrote about her radical days, nothing has been found. She simply laboured as a weaver and returned to being an anonymous American worker, retiring in 1966 at the age of 65.

Months later, on April 17, 1967, Ellen died suddenly at her new Florida home in an unincorporated area known as Charlotte Harbor. She was 66 years old. By the time the doctor reached her, she was already dead. According to her niece, Ellen 'died of a lung complaint contracted during her years working in the mills.'<sup>53</sup> Like too many industrial workers, the cause of Ellen's death was probably the result of the unhealthy working conditions. Sixty-four years earlier, Ellen's nineteen-year-old aunt, Ellen Halford, died of a similar illness.

### III

Reconstructing Ellen Dawson's life required more than four years of research in Scotland, where she was born and worked as a young textile worker; in England, where her family continued its search for economic stability; and in the United States, where Ellen lived for more than forty-five years. I travelled to the communities in which she lived and worked; I searched countless documents related to her life, the world in which she lived, and the events in which she was a participant; I communicated with her surviving relatives in Scotland, the United States and Canada; and I tried to understand how the world might have appeared to Ellen, drawing on the history of the times in which she lived, the lives of individuals I believe influenced her, and the memories of those who knew her.

<sup>53</sup> Ellen D. Kanki's death certificate; Betty Dawson letter, June 18, 2004. Both documents are in my possession.

This quest for Ellen is, I think, a story in itself, and one worth referring to by way of conclusion. Particular moments stand out in my memory: the first photograph I found of Ellen; the first time I saw the Loray Mill in Gastonia; my trip to Barrhead; the evening I spent at the Whitworth Heritage Museum in Lancashire; walking past the school at St. Nicholas Roman Catholic Church in Passaic; and the evening I found Ellen's grave. The experience of the historian is part of the making of history, and recounting such events offers relevant insights into the research process, the connections between scholarship and imagination, and the way in which a researcher can develop empathy with the subject.

The first image I found of Ellen<sup>54</sup> was in Vera Buch Weisbord's autobiography, *A Radical Life*. She is seen standing with Vera, Albert Weisbord and Fred Beal outside the union headquarters in Gastonia during the Loray strike. For me, in that photograph, Ellen started to become a real person. She was dressed in the style of the 1920s, with a 'flapper's' hat pulled down over her ears. The expression on her face and her position in the group seemed to demonstrate a reserve that became clearer to me as I pieced together the events of her later years. It also appeared to convey the sense of friendly whimsy and childish energy that Weisbord mentions in her own descriptions of Ellen, a part of Ellen's personality that seemed to disappear as she grew older. Comparing this photograph with others taken before and after, Ellen's nose appears swollen, perhaps as the result of a confrontation with local police or vigilantes – she referred to such violent confrontations in her speeches. According to Vera's account, the women strikers and women strike leaders were attacked more than once during the Loray strike. For me, that apparently swollen nose was the mark of the warrior who often faced violence and courageously stood her ground.

When I went to Gastonia and saw the Loray Mill for the first time, I had read about the 1929 strike, and knew what a dangerous place it had been then. I had seen pictures of the mill during those turbulent weeks; and had heard that Loray was once promoted, at least locally, as one of the largest textile mills in the world.<sup>55</sup> None of that fully prepared me for my first encounter with this looming structure, squatting on a small hill, surrounded by abandoned streets and dilapidated mill houses. I felt uneasy as I parked my car and walked up to the main gate, where strikers had walked the picket lines. Gazing through the chain link to the spot where the National Guard once pitched their tents, I recalled the early confrontations between workers and the police. Standing there, alone, looking up into the darkened windows, I tried to imagine what it would have been like to have been a worker in a now silent mill that now seemed more like a prison than a workplace.

<sup>54</sup> This photograph is included in the photo section of David Lee McMullen, *The Elusive Ellen: Reconstructing the Life of Ellen Dawson and the World Around Her* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2005).

<sup>55</sup> Loray was certainly one of the largest mills in the Southeastern United States. It was, however, comparable in size to numerous mills I have seen in both Lancashire and in New England. The claims, I suspect, were more the result of local boosterism than of fact.

The visit to Loray was impromptu; my trip to Barrhead was well planned. I had a copy of a 1913 map of Barrhead from the National Library of Scotland, and had noted all the key locations from Ellen's childhood. Even today, in a country of remarkable beauty, Barrhead is not an attractive place. It sits in the middle of a large valley that, several hundred years ago, must have been a lovely part of pre-industrial Scotland. While there had been significant changes since the days when Ellen lived there, it was still rather grim, a community that clearly reflects its working-class roots and the workers' struggles to survive in a rapidly changing world. My exploration quickly revealed that Ellen's birthplace, and most of the places where she and her family lived, were gone. The church the family attended had been destroyed by fire in the 1950s, and with it the records of the Dawson family. I found no one who had ever heard of Ellen Dawson, and even those I spoke with about her were only politely interested. But even in its disappointment, the trip was significant for my research. It brought home how the lives of working-class women and men can vanish almost without a trace from historical memory.

My trip to Lancashire was much more productive and evocative. I was introduced to people who shared some of the same roots as Ellen. The tiny village near Whitworth, where Ellen's family moved in 1919, is between the larger communities of Bacup and Rochdale. I wanted to find out when the family arrived and when they left. I planned carefully, and spent much of my time at several libraries, studying the area during the years following World War I. My final stop was at the small Whitworth Heritage Museum that I had discovered on the internet.<sup>56</sup> It was open only a couple of hours, twice a week, and it provided one of the most rewarding moments of my research. It was almost like a small private club, managed by a group of gentlemen in their late seventies and early eighties. They had done a remarkable job of collecting a wide range of documents and artifacts about the area and the major local events of the past hundred years or so. The museum, it was clear, had been a labour of love for a group of working-class men seeking to preserve the world into which they had been born and lived. Their efforts reminded me of the Dylan Thomas poem about old age raging 'against the dying of the light'. They did not want to 'go gentle into that good night'.

They took me under their wing. My two most important questions were about when Ellen's family had lived there and about what happened to her father. The answer to the first lay in rent books from the period, from which I was able to document when the family arrived, where they lived, how much they paid in rent and when they left. As for the second question, I was offered the local death records, where I discovered Patrick Dawson. These records had only survived, I was told, because, when the village council came to an end, one of my informants had rescued them from the dustbin where they

<sup>56</sup> See <[www.beautifulbritain.co.uk/htm/whitworth/whitworth\\_museum.htm](http://www.beautifulbritain.co.uk/htm/whitworth/whitworth_museum.htm)>.

had been discarded – another lesson in the fragility of the survival of historical memory and the role of chance in determining what records remain for historians to interrogate.

I had a similar moment of reflection during my time researching in Passaic, as I passed St. Nicholas Church School. St. Nicholas was the church Ellen attended for more than forty years. It was where she was married and where her funeral was held. Looking up at the classroom windows, I found a message from the students, a quotation handwritten on large strips of paper and taped to the windows. ‘Together we stand as one.’ For me it was as though Ellen – the striking worker, the Communist labour leader – was speaking the words. The church is now Hispanic, the priest delivers his sermons to an immigrant congregation in English and Spanish, but the ideals of the Passaic workers of 1926, knowingly or unknowingly, lived on in that simple phrase.

On what would have been Ellen’s 103rd birthday – though that was pure chance – I found her grave. As daylight faded beyond the working-class homes of Lodi, New Jersey, on a cold mid-December day, I walked through St. Nicholas Cemetery for more than an hour, searching for her name among the seemingly endless parade of gravestones. Just when I had given up hope, I suddenly saw the word ‘Dawson’, chiselled in stone. It proved to be the combined graves of four Dawson women – Ellen, her mother and two of her sisters. It was an emotional moment, the dedicated biographer before the remains of his subject. I had always promised myself I would find that grave and, rather foolishly, I found myself addressing it aloud. It was a kind of dedication of my work, a culmination of my commitment to ensure that the life of Ellen Dawson, who had left only tantalising traces of her struggles as a militant woman worker in the history books, would not be forgotten.