



**UNIVERSITY OF
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Able Bodies:

Work camps and the training of the unemployed in Britain before 1939

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ideas everywhere

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Preamble

In 1928, two years after losing his job, William Heard went to a work camp. Even though he was still a young man, this was his second experience of unemployment, and had lasted for two years when an official at his local Labour Exchange encouraged the one-time steelworker and coalminer from Ebbw Vale to go for a period of ‘reconditioning’ Shobdon, deep in rural Herefordshire. As he recalled it, he jumped down from the truck, and was sent to stand in a line to collect clothing (“heavy nailed boots, a pair of corduroy trousers, and some kind of shirt”), then stood in another line to pick up cutlery. After that, Heard was allocated a hut to sleep in, and then set to work. “Some were allotted to do one particular thing, some another; it was anything to harden yourself. I always came in for the woodcutting”¹. He hated it.

Heard had been sent to spend a few weeks in what was then called a ‘testing centre’. The main purpose of the centres – which functioned from 1929 as Transfer Instructional Centres (TICs) and from 1931 as Instructional Centres (ICs) – was to harden young men through heavy manual labour. In 1929, when Heard entered Presteigne TIC after a further period of unemployment, the Ministry had eight camps, with a combined intake of 3,518 men. By 1938, long after Heard had found a job as a hotel porter in Oxford, the Ministry was operating 29 camps with a combined intake of 23,772. Like Heard, the vast majority of trainees were young men, drawn from those parts of Britain that were known as the ‘distressed areas’. All had been unemployed for some time, and if they stayed the course – many did not – they spent the next three months grubbing up roots, chopping down trees, breaking stones, digging ditches, and preparing rough roads. By the end of the 1930s, after preparing rough pasture and moorland for the Forestry Commission, they had laid the foundations of some of Britain’s most beautiful landscapes.

Around 200,000 young unemployed men entered one of the work camps belonging to the Ministry of Labour². How many young men went into other types of work camp is anyone’s guess: Britain was covered by a network of labour colonies, training farms,

¹ J. Field and D. Colledge (1983), ‘To Recondition Human Material...’: An account of a British labour camp in the 1930s, *History Workshop Journal*, 15, 163

² The figures are based on my own calculations from the annual reports of the Ministry of Labour between 1929 and 1938, with an estimated number for 1939 when no report appeared.

summer camps and alternative communities, all of which involved young men living in tents or huts, and working on the land. This at first seems strange: surely the work camp belongs to the punitive world of early twentieth century dictatorships? We have heard about Nazi and Communist work camps – but similar systems in Britain, Sweden, Canada, New Zealand and even the United States of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal?

In fact, work camp systems were remarkably wide spread and well developed. This paper, which examines the case of British government work camps during the interwar years, will argue that the Instructional Centres were not some peculiar British expression of a wider authoritarian tendency, manifested most perfectly in the Nazi *Lager*³. First and foremost, the work camp system belonged to a toolkit of policies that successive governments in different countries adopted in the face of unemployment. Second, the Ministry of Labour system was one particular strand within a much larger, more deeply rooted and more diverse movement whose primary concern was the male body, and more specifically the working class male body, in the context of a large scale and persistent crisis of industrial society. In this paper, I focus on this second aspect. The paper starts with a brief description of the work camp system created in Britain by the Ministry of Labour. It traces the origins of the system, not to overseas examples such as the voluntary labour service schemes of Weimar Germany, but to work camp systems that had developed in Britain, as well as other European countries, in the late nineteenth century. Although they were responding primarily to the problems of urban poverty and unemployment, those who promoted work camps were preoccupied with men's bodies, and the paper traces this concern as it evolved over time.

Work camps and the unemployed between the Wars

In December 1928, an official in the Ministry of Labour sounded out his counterpart in the Treasury about a new idea:

³ The political scientist Desmond King identifies a paradox between the political liberalism of governments in interwar Britain and the USA and their use of illiberal methods, such as work camps. See D. King (1999) *In the Name of Liberalism: Illiberal social policy in the USA and Britain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, ch. 5.

I think I ought to warn you that we have under consideration here a proposal to deal with the class of men to whom our existing training schemes do not apply. I refer to those, especially among the younger men, who, through prolonged unemployment, have become so ‘soft’ and temporarily demoralised that it would not be practicable to introduce more than a very small number of them into one of our ordinary training centres without danger to the morale of the centre on which the effect of training depends. Nor could they be sent to a labouring job in London or elsewhere. It is essential to the success of the transference policy, which already has many difficulties to contend with at the receiving end, that only the best material available shall be sent forward for any given job. It is obvious, therefore, that the class of whom I am speaking cannot be considered by our local officers for transfer until they are hardened⁴.

The formal proposal from the Labour Emergency Expenditure Committee arrived nine days later, this time containing a definite plan for ‘reconditioning’ men in centres placed far away from the distressed areas⁵. Treasury approval followed, despite the holiday, after one week⁶. Shobdon, which had previously offered short ‘testing’ courses, re-opened as one of nine TICs.

In 1929, the Minister of Labour put forward a further proposal. Her aim, she told the Cabinet, was to focus on the problem of “men, chiefly young men . . . who are very unlikely to obtain work either locally or elsewhere without a course of reconditioning or training, but who refuse to avail themselves of the offer of training”⁷. Margaret Bondfield, who had served as a junior minister in the 1924 Labour Government, had a background in trade unionism and feminism. She also had a long standing interest in training issues, served on the Oversea Settlement Committee and Central Committee on Women’s Training and Employment, and had promoted one of the largest oldest labour colonies while in opposition⁸. The Cabinet had asked Bondfield to consult the Trades Union Congress on her proposal, which was that she should invoke her powers to compel the unemployed to enter training centres on pains of losing benefit; she duly reported that the TUC was comfortable with the scheme provided that it applied

⁴ F G Bowers to A W Hurst, 12 December 1928, NA T161/902

⁵ Labour Emergency Expenditure Committee Proposal, 21 December 1928, NA T 161/902

⁶ F W Leith Ross to Ministry of Labour, 28 December 1928, NA T 161/902

⁷ Cabinet Minutes 23/12/29, National Archives CAB23/62

⁸ *Parliamentary Debates*, 27 February 1929

only to the Transfer Instructional Centres, and not to the (non-residential) skills training centres⁹.

For each of the main players, this was a revealing episode. Bondfield and her Labour colleagues showed an authoritarian streak that was rarely seen on the Conservative front bench. The trade union movement was looking to protect skilled and semi-skilled workers, who might already be union members or be persuaded into joining, but had little interest in the fate of long term unemployed young men. Government officials, including Bondfield, feared that economic recovery was threatened by 'demoralisation' and frailty among the unemployed, causing them not only to refuse training, but to stay in the 'waterlogged' labour markets of the distressed areas. Investing in TICs, Bondfield argued, offered a responsible and plausible channel for draining off at least part of this surplus.

A year before Labour came to power, the Ministry of Labour was running a mere four work camps, three of which were in East Anglia. Claydon, the first of these, had started life in November 1925. Based in an old workhouse that had been converted during the War into a skills training centre, Claydon initially took in 200 unemployed ex-servicemen, half of whom were undergoing 'handyman' training, and half of whom were preparing to serve on farms overseas¹⁰. The second centre, at Brandon in Norfolk, was opened February 1926, in a former country house on an estate jointly purchased by the Ministry of Labour and the Forestry Commission, expressly for the purposes of training men for settlement in the Dominions¹¹. West Tofts, the third 'oversea training centre' in East Anglia, was purchased in 1928, along with a fourth centre on farmland near Carstairs in North Lanarkshire¹². There were also five 'testing centres', including Shobdon, which offered very short courses as a preliminary to selection for assisted passages.

In late 1928, faced with rising unemployment within the Dominions, the Conservative Government abandoned its small scale scheme of 'oversea training'. The existing centres were kept open as Transfer Instructional Centres, aimed at 'reconditioning'

⁹ Memorandum of the Ministry of Labour, 7/3/30, National Archives CAB24/209

¹⁰ *Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour, 1925*

¹¹ National Archives LAB2/2037/ET4905

¹² National Archives of Scotland AF51/174

young men who had gone ‘soft’ as a result of long term unemployment, with the hope of encouraging movement out of “black spots” such as the coalfields, while the testing centres were mothballed¹³. Under the Labour Government, the testing centres were reopened as TICs, and Bondfield’s plans for compulsion were implemented, with young men being told to enter TICs on pain of losing benefit. The National Government, formed in crisis and keenly focused on keeping public spending to a minimum, closed some of the TICs, but kept six – now known as Instructional Centres - as what the Minister of Labour claimed was an ‘experiment’¹⁴. Over 40 ICs were constructed over the following eight years, rising to a peak of 30 in 1937, with 28 in operation when they were closed on the outbreak of War in 1939. Development was particularly rapid from 1934, when the Government created the Unemployment Assistance Board to provide for those unemployed who were not covered by the unemployment insurance scheme (see Table).

Table: Admissions to Instructional Centres, 1929 - 1938

	Capacity	Annual admissions
1929	1,200	3,518
1930	1,880	9,886
1931	1,100	11,170
1932	2,200	16,540
1933	3,190	21,715
1934	3,300	22,788
1935	5,110	18,474
1936	6,170	24,146
1937	5,835	20,588
1938	6,185	23,772

Sources: *Annual Report of the Ministry of Labour, 1929-1938*

¹³ Memorandum by the Minister of Labour, 23/11/27, National Archives, CAB24/189

¹⁴ Memorandum by the Minister of Labour, 21/4/32, National Archives CAB24/229

Generally based on Forestry Commission land, each camp held 150-200 men, housed in Nissen huts, and provided with a basic infrastructure for catering, entertainment and medical care. The course itself lasted for three months; the trainees were free to leave, albeit with a potential risk to their benefits, and were given rail warrants to go home once a month. Provision for organised leisure activity, which in the 1920s had largely comprised a recreation hall equipped with a few board games and a handful of books, became increasingly elaborate. Hamsterley IC in Durham was one of several with a football ground, and photographs of Allerston IC in North Yorkshire clearly show a swimming pool. Films, boxing matches, concerts and lectures were organised (if partly to prevent boredom), and there was some basic adult education provision, later supplemented by some limited crafts courses¹⁵. The daily routine, though, was organised around work.

This was, then, a complex and sizeable operation. Administered through the Ministry of Labour's Training Department, the Instructional Centres were part of a wider national system of dealing with the unemployed. There was, of course, a benefits system: for those who had worked in an insurable occupation, there was unemployment benefit; for those who had not, there was outdoor relief, and after 1934 unemployment assistance. Although successive governments sought to reform and modernise the benefits system, they stuck doggedly to the insurance principle. Training was not therefore directly linked to the payment of benefits, as it was in countries where the state did not provide universal – or near-universal – unemployment benefits.

The main aim of training was to improve employability. Initially aimed at ex-servicemen, the system sought to prepare those who might emigrate to the Dominions, and thus relieve the crowded domestic labour market, as well as those who might learn a semi-skilled trade, and find work in the expanding manufacturing and service industries. Although the link to emigration was broken in 1929, as the Dominions faced the collapse of world agricultural markets, the Ministry increasingly sought to promote domestic labour mobility, out of the distressed areas and into industries and regions that were growing. The Instructional Centres had a specific role within this

¹⁵ *Unemployment Assistance Board Annual Report 1936*, 48; National Archives CAB/24/268

wider range of training provision, which was to improve physical capacity for work among young men who had been unemployed for some time. They were new institutions, run on a national basis by a national government department, and appeared to owe little to work camp schemes elsewhere in Europe. In many respects, though, they echoed and continued a type of institution that had existed since the late nineteenth century: the labour colony.

Labour colonies and training farms before 1914

In 1906, while debate over poverty and unemployment was raging, a leading member of the Christian Union for Social Service harked back to happier days. For the Reverend J. B. Paton, Doctor of Divinity, the pre-industrial order was a time of stability and strength:

England was ... held and cultivated by a splendid type of men, who owned their own land and tilled it with their own hands; men who were made strong in body by healthy labour, and who had the virile temper and the freedom of spirit which grow naturally from such independence and industry. . . . Now, the whole of this order of men has been exterminated¹⁶.

Paton had helped found the English Land Colonisation Society in 1904, and his solution to the crisis of his own times was to settle men “in groups or colonies in order that wherever settled they may have the full enjoyment of social fellowship, stimulus and pleasure”, as well as access to the best education and the material benefits of co-operation¹⁷.

Paton’s was no lone voice. In 1906, Will Crooks – trade unionist, county councillor and MP - found himself in front of the inter-departmental committee on agricultural settlement in the colonies, talking about those men who had been out of work so long that they were “absolutely degenerate”. His advice was to

take them into the country; I should not attempt to work them for the first three months; I should bath them and feed them; I should try the open-air treatment

¹⁶ J. B. Paton, *How to Restore our Yeoman-Peasantry*, James Clarke & Co, London, 1907, 8-9

¹⁷ Paton, 21

with them, and little by little get them to find an appetite; and when they began to find their appetite and to eat I would begin to work them slowly and for short periods¹⁸.

Sydney and Beatrice Webb, Fabian socialists and arch-modernisers, argued that the public good argument for state intervention was overwhelming: “It is demonstrably better for the community to have, as its citizens, strong, disciplines and trained men rather than half-starved and physically incompetent weaklings, unable to use either hands or brain to any practical advantage, with irregular habits and uncontrolled will”¹⁹.

If the problem was the weak and soft body, the solution was the labour colony. The earliest labour colonies appear to have been opened in the early 1890s, just as social scientists started to use the concept of unemployment, as a subset to or refinement of the widely discussed idea of poverty. Hadleigh, opened by the Salvation Army in 1891, formed part of a national system of institutions and support. General William Booth’s approach was profoundly Christian, but showed clear traces of Darwinian thought:

How can we marvel if, after leaving generation after generation to grow up uneducated and underfed, there should be developed a heredity of incapacity, and that thousands of dull-witted people should be born into the world, disinherited before their birth of their share in the average intelligence of mankind²⁰?

Unusually, Booth proposed that women as well as men should enter labour colonies for training, provided that they had proved their potential in other Salvation Army institutions, but his proposed curriculum was typical:

Every person in the Farm Colony will be taught the elementary lesson of obedience, and will be instructed in the needful arts of husbandry, or some other method of earning his bread²¹.

Fundamentally, the labour colony comprised a residential settlement whose members worked the land; the goal was usually also to work on the body.

¹⁸ Interdepartmental committee on agricultural settlement in colonies, Evidence Vol II, Parliamentary Papers 1906, Cd 2979, 143

¹⁹ S. and B. Webb, *The Prevention of Destitution*, Longman, London, 1911, 146

²⁰ W. Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, Salvation Army, London, 1890, 44

²¹ Booth, 134

Booth's Hadleigh was soon joined by a number of other institutions. Early supporters included socialists such as George Lansbury and his fellow labour representatives on the Poplar Board of Guardians, as well as utopian socialists, who set up an experimental colony at Starnthwaite in the Lake District, the Christian Union of Social Service who opened a colony for vagrants and paupers at Lingfield, and a group of Glasgow merchants and professionals who formed the Scottish Labour Colony Association²². The 1890s labour colonies included settlements for epileptics and tuberculosis sufferers, groups believed to benefit from country air and manual labour²³. Momentum accelerated during the economic crisis of 1904-6, when a number of new colonies were created, most of them under the provisions of the 1905 Unemployed Workmen Act. Many of these were short-lived, as was the intention of the Act, but others proved more enduring, including Laindon Farm Colony (opened by the Poplar Guardians in 1904) and Hollesley Bay Labour Colony (opened in 1905 by the London Unemployed Fund, and praised by the labour MP Keir Hardie²⁴).

The large socialist labour colonies were mainly a London phenomenon, reflecting the prevalence of casual and unskilled labour which was precarious even in good times and highly vulnerable to downturns in the trade cycle. It also reflected the electoral strength of Labour: many socialist politicians' first experience of government came through controlling the poor law system in working class boroughs like Poplar²⁵. Elsewhere, religious and charitable initiatives predominated. The Church of Scotland opened a training farm at Cornton Vale, near Stirling, which sought to reclaim the unemployed and habitual drunkards for resettlement in the Dominions²⁶, while the Church Army set out to build labour colonies at Dorking, Hemel Hempstead, Thetford

²² J. Schneer, *George Lansbury*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990; Interdepartmental committee on agricultural settlement in colonies, Evidence Vol II, PP 1906 Cd 2979, 107; London Metropolitan Archives, A/FWA/C/D254/1; National Archives of Scotland, HH1/1351

²³ A labour colony for epileptics at Chalfont St Peter's was founded in 1894 – see the Report of the Viceregal Commission on Poor Law Reform in Ireland, PP 1906, 550

²⁴ *Parliamentary Debates*, 20 June 1905

²⁵ J. Schneer (1990), *George Lansbury*, Manchester University Press, Manchester

²⁶ M. Harper (1998) *Emigration from Scotland between the Wars*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 170

and elsewhere²⁷. The Salvation Army is, remarkably, still operating part of its Hadleigh site as a training centre for adults with special needs²⁸.

Advocates included those who hoped that they would discipline the poor, and those who hoped they would emancipate them. Sometimes, as with socialists like Crooks, these categories overlapped. For Crooks, the remarkable thing about Laindon was that it took in men who “were slouching about, muscle-soft, ‘fishy-eyed’, listless, being unable to fix their minds or their eyes upon anything”, and turned them into productive workers²⁹. Similar claims were made for the Glasgow Distress Committee’s labour colony: “Many of these men go to the Colony after a period of privation considerably reduced in physique, and dejected and miserable looking. After a period at Palacerigg they return to the city different men altogether”³⁰. Increasingly, as local government became professionalised, such judgements were couched in medical terms. The medical officer responsible for Palacerigg started weighing the trainees, noting with satisfaction that the “resident colonists” had put on 7 pounds over two months³¹; he also reported on maladies such as hernia and skin conditions that could prevent men from finding work³², and expressed his disappointment at “how very dirty they had become in such a little while” when allowed to visit their homes³³.

By the outbreak of the First World War, there was a scattering of labour colonies across Britain. Most were in rural settings, partly as a way of removing trainees from the contaminating temptations of the cities, and partly because of the opportunities for productive labour. Many were relatively small, such as the 20-30 who were sent to the Scottish Labour Colony Association farm near Dumfries; but some, including Hadleigh and Hollesley Bay, counted their members in the hundreds. And while the work involved a wide variety of tasks, it invariably included a full working week of

²⁷ J A Hobson (ed), *Co-operative Labour upon the Land*, 1895, 78-9; *Interdepartmental Committee on Agricultural Settlement in the Colonies, Minutes of evidence, Vol II*, Parliamentary Papers 1906 Cd 2979, 54-6; *Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, Appendix XLIV*, Parliamentary Papers 1909

²⁸ <http://www.sahtc.co.uk/>, accessed 15/1/2009

²⁹ *Interdepartmental committee on agricultural settlement in colonies, Evidence Vol II*, Parliamentary Papers 1906 Cd 2979, 138

³⁰ *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Scotland, 1909*, PP 1910, xlv

³¹ *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Scotland, 1909*, PP 1910, xlv

³² *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Scotland, 1911*, PP 1912, xlix-xl

³³ *Annual Report of the Local Government Board for Scotland, 1914*, PP 1915, liv

heavy labour: reclaiming moss, digging peat, and chopping firewood at the Dumfriesshire colony in 1909³⁴, market gardening, road making, brickfields, tramway and bridge making at Hadleigh³⁵.

By reclaiming bodies, labour colony promoters hoped to create full members of society. As one MP put it, “they hoped to get a reward in the renewed health, strength and vigour of the men . . . to restore men once more to the ranks of useful citizens”³⁶. One socialist supporter hoped that the colonists were “back on the land, engaged in the arduous task of knocking sense into those who are placed in authority over us”, by demonstrating the possibilities of reclaiming men and land at the same time³⁷.

There were, of course, also critical voices. Loch, secretary of the Charity Organisation Society, thought them doomed to failure, preferring instead to focus on the application of social science to classification and treatment of individuals³⁸, while Beveridge thought they might work if there was a clear training element, but predicted that they would wither away once there was a national system of labour exchanges³⁹. The sternest critic, however, was John Burns, one-time Marxist and union militant and lifelong cricket-lover, who as President of the Local Government Board in Campbell-Bannerman’s Liberal Government was well-placed to obstruct proposals from the likes of Lansbury and the Webbs. For Burns, labour colonies were too soft to solve unemployment; if they were to serve as steps on the road to socialism and land reform, on the other hand, they should not be populated “by the unskilled unemployed, plus an in-and-out army of loafers, casuals and wastrels”⁴⁰. Lansbury certainly believed that Burns’ opposition had harmed the movement. Yet, although Burns was ideologically hostile to the emerging Labour Party and detested Lansbury in particular, he was also able to point to the high costs and low success rate of some of the London colonies⁴¹. He also expressed contempt for those who had not joined trade unions or friendly societies, such as the “Tired Tims Weary Willies” and “old but thriftless

³⁴ National Archives of Scotland HH57/70

³⁵ *Select Committee on Distress from Want of Employment*, PP 1895, 365, 79

³⁶ *Parliamentary Debates*, 30 January 1908

³⁷ *Clarion*, 11 November 1904

³⁸ London Metropolitan Archives, A/FWA/C/D254/1

³⁹ Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, 1909, App viii, PP 1910 VIII

⁴⁰ *Parliamentary Debates*, 27 March 1907

⁴¹ *Parliamentary Debates*, 11 March 1912

men” that he described after visiting the West Ham Guardians’ Labour Colony at Ockenden⁴². During the Great War, when unemployment all but disappeared, many of the labour colonies struggled to recruit, and some closed. Yet the central ideas of the labour colony, as a means of producing able male bodies through a ‘pedagogy of labour’⁴³, far from dwindling into faint memory, continued after the War, and indeed were applied to new groups, such as disabled ex-servicemen.

Working men’s bodies

The idea that unemployment made men’s bodies ‘soft’ was widespread between the wars. The soft body was unmanly, undermining its owner’s place in the wider community. J. R. Clyne, the Labour MP, told Parliament that unemployment cost men their “dignity and virility”, so that their “usefulness as serviceable citizens is completely disappearing”⁴⁴. Bondfield spoke of unemployment as causing “a kind of dry rot”⁴⁵. UAB officials claimed that the unemployed of Newcastle “are undisciplined and physically soft”⁴⁶. Edgar Anstey filmed a camp manager greeting a group of new recruits by telling them:

Your own experience will have taught you that long spells of unemployment tend to make a man what most people call soft or flabby. It’s our job here to help those of you who’ve become soft to get back to that state of fitness in which you can hold your end up on a job of work alongside other people who’ve been more fortunate or in the case of those of you who’ve not yet become flabby then to help to keep you fit⁴⁷.

During this speech, Anstey panned to show the audience mostly looking down at their feet.

⁴² Quoted in M.A. Crowther, *The workhouse system, 1834-1929: the history of an English social institution*, Routledge, 1983 p 86

⁴³ P. Dudek (1988), *Erziehung durch Arbeit: Arbeitslagerbewegung und freiwilliger Arbeitsdienst 1920-1935*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen

⁴⁴ *Parliamentary Debates*, 14 March 1927

⁴⁵ *Parliamentary Debates*, 30 April 1928

⁴⁶ *Annual Report of the Unemployment Assistance Board, 1936*, London, 85

⁴⁷ *On the Way to Work*, 1936, National Film Archive, British Film Institute

While this concern was clearly ideological, it could also involve medical or other physical evidence. Every applicant was screened (and weighed) by a doctor before being accepted for training. Anxious Ministry of Labour officials noted that a worryingly large proportion of applicants were being rejected, expressing their doubts whether “Ministry of Health Medical Referees were not setting too high a standard when examining men for the instructional centres”⁴⁸. Their immediate reaction was to debate the possibilities of compelling healthy men to attend, a solution that they rejected as impracticable.

Increasingly, as the experience of working for the UAB turned local medical officers of health into a professional group who thought and acted in a national frame, medical reports served as the basis for lobbying. The UAB noted in 1938 that over one in five of applicants were rejected on medical grounds, half of whom suffered from relatively minor complaints, such as defective teeth or eyesight, that might easily be remedied⁴⁹. Violet Markham, chairman of the Central Committee on Women’s Training and Employment throughout the interwar years, and a member of the UAB, visited a number of camps. At Fermyn Woods she noted that the men tended to be ‘Official light weight doctors report’. At Cranwich Heath, where she met a “Good type of men morally but physically rather poor”, she heard that 64 of the 157 trainees weighed less than 11 stones, with five weighing less than 8 stone⁵⁰.

The camps were widely talked of as ‘reconditioning’ these ‘soft’ and ‘light weight’ male bodies. Civil servants were already speaking of the ICs as “reconditioning centres” in the late 1920s⁵¹. By the early 1930s, it was normal for policy makers to use this term in Parliament and among themselves. Thus the Cabinet Committee on Unemployment noted its plans for “training and re-conditioning arrangements”⁵², while the Scottish Commissioner for Special Areas lamented that the Centres found themselves often having “to return the men, splendidly reconditioned, to their former dreary condition of unemployment”⁵³. Even the local newspapers called Glenbranter

⁴⁸ Clark to Power, 27 March 1933, National Archives LAB2/2039/ET204 Part I

⁴⁹ *Annual Report of the Unemployment Assistance Board, 1938*, London, 82

⁵⁰ Visits to training centres 1936, British Library of Political and Economic Science, Markham 8/11

⁵¹ Letter 21/12/28, National Archives T161/902

⁵² 21 April 1932, National Archives CAB24/235

⁵³ *Reports of investigations into the ... depressed areas*, Parliamentary Papers 1933-34, Cmd 4728, 233

IC a “reconditioning centre” in some reports⁵⁴. Communists and the socialist Left deployed a more negative terminology. They spoke of ‘slave camps’⁵⁵ or even at one stage of ‘slave concentration camps’⁵⁶, provoking a senior UAB official in Belfast to instruct that

Above all the word ‘camp’ must never be applied to any open-air training schemes. The communist orators and pamphleteers [sic] have been quick to play upon an unpleasant association of ideas by denouncing such organisations as ‘Concentration Camps’⁵⁷.

Some parliamentarians and journalists also used the term ‘labour camp’, apparently treating it as a neutral or even positive phrase; such uses appeared in the later 1930s⁵⁸.

As in the labour colonies, work was invariably a technique for reconditioning male bodies. Inside the camps, the daily regime was organised around such heavy labour as “felling, grubbing roots, clearing scrub land, quarrying and road making”⁵⁹, almost always carried out on Forestry Commission land. IC regulations specified a working week of 44 hours, though new entrants were given a regime of lighter work – supplemented during the 30s with physical training classes - until they were capable of heavy labour. Pathé cinema news showed footage in 1933 of men felling trees in an unnamed labour camp⁶⁰, and the Ministry invited the celebrated documentary maker John Grierson to make a half-hour documentary in 1936 which appears to have been shot largely in Bourne Instructional Centre⁶¹. The meaning attached to these activities was made clear in an aside on Carstairs, which was scheduled to close once the forestry work was completed, and where the men were made to labour for its own sake in the final days; elsewhere, it was reported, “the work is performed for some definite, though remote, purpose”⁶². Purposive work had a pedagogic purpose, and was placed at the core of every day camp life.

⁵⁴ *Dunoon Herald and Cowal Advertiser*, 21 April 1933; *Glasgow Herald*, 16 August 1933

⁵⁵ For example *Daily Worker*, 3 January 1935, 13 March 1935

⁵⁶ *Unemployed Leader*, May 1934

⁵⁷ Unemployment Assistance Board for Northern Ireland. Memorandum by the Chairman on Training, 1 January 1935, Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, LAB5/2

⁵⁸ For example *Scotsman* 3 March 1938, *Parliamentary Debates* 5 June 1939.

⁵⁹ National Archives LAB2/1775/SE774

⁶⁰ British Pathé, *Scrapbook for 1933*,

www.itnsource.com/shotlist/Bpathe/1933/01/01/BP010133184103, accessed on 25 May 2009

⁶¹ J. Grierson, *On the Way to Work*, National Film Archive, British Film Institute

⁶² *Reports of investigations into the ... depressed areas*, PP 1933-34, Cmd 4728, 229

Hard work was supplemented by a solid diet. A camp steward told the film-maker Edgar Anstey that

I have to serve 200 meals of two hot courses in twenty minutes. Today there's meat pie, peas and potatoes, then bread pudding and custard. There's porridge, bacon and beans for breakfast, ham, sauce and cake for lunch, bread and cheese for supper⁶³.

Quantity and bulk appear to have been more important than quality and variety. One UAB official reported that

At one Workhouse I visited recently in Yorkshire, the inmates were given best English butter and best home-killed meat; in Instructional Centres trainees receive margarine and foreign meat (and thrive excellently on it)⁶⁴.

For many contemporaries, this diet compared well with what might be expected by the families of the unemployed or of short time workers, and maybe even some in full time but badly paid jobs. Jack Lawson, a Labour MP and mining union official, and an occasional critic of the system, admitted that “they do get good food”⁶⁵. Although most trainees appear to have found the diet monotonous, and it was the largest cause of organised protest⁶⁶, this may reflect the conditions of institutionalised life.

What, then, can we make of Britain's experience of government work camps? There is little or no evidence that civil servants or Ministers were influenced by developments overseas. Although the Ministry of Labour was aware of and circulated reports of other work camp systems, and indeed contributed accounts of the ICs to international forums⁶⁷, the British system had its origins in the early 1920s. If it was influenced by overseas experiences, then it was indirectly, through the models offered by early labour colonies in Germany and elsewhere. It was rather the labour colony movement, and the negative experience of the workhouse, that were the primary influences on the Ministry of Labour and later the UAB in developing the IC system. Their major concern was to ‘recondition’ the ‘soft’ male body by exposing unemployed men to a significant period of heavy manual work, supplemented by a solid diet and access to basic medical attention and a limited range of adult education.

⁶³ *On the Way to Work*, 1936, National Film Archive, British Film Institute

⁶⁴ Osmond to Ryan and Eady, 29 Sept 34, National Archives AST 10/2

⁶⁵ *Parliamentary Debates*, 3 May 1934

⁶⁶ *Daily Worker*, 27/2/35; *Parliamentary Debates*, 14/6/38, 27/3/39

⁶⁷ E.g. *ILO Yearbook, 1934-35*, International Labour Organisation, Geneva, 1935

While the system grew steadily through the 1930s, it was small scale in comparison with the voluntary labour service schemes of Weimar Germany, or the Civilian Conservation Corps in the USA. As for its claimed goal of promoting labour mobility, by the end of the 30s, the Minister of Labour was claiming a placement rate of around 30% of those who completed their course; the remainder were sent home, returning to a life on the dole⁶⁸. Even William Heard's success in finding a job, and leaving Ebbw Vale for Oxford, illustrates this general pattern, for it owed more to his networks and initiative than to his experiences in two work camps. In short, Britain's work camp system was not only too small to make much difference to unemployment levels, but it was remarkably unsuccessful in placing the tens of thousands whom it did attract.

⁶⁸ *Parliamentary Debates*, 16 February 1939.

Conclusions

The body is a fashionable topic in sociology and cultural studies. Much recent literature reflects the preoccupations of the ‘cultural turn’. Thus Alan Petersen’s influential book, *The Body in Question*, adopts a poststructuralist approach to analysing “the socio-political and justice implications of particular theories of bodily difference and of efforts to regulate the bodies of certain groups – women, gay and lesbians, racial and ethnic minorities, and disabled people – through biomedical, psychology and other expertise and systems of classification”⁶⁹. In so far as he discusses social class and the body, it is very briefly and mainly in the context of a short exposition of Bourdieu⁷⁰.

This paper has explored an example of one set of body interventions that was profoundly marked by class. Public concern about ‘soft’ bodies between the wars was by no means limited to one particular stratum of society. Physical education and games spread rapidly through schools during the inter-war years, and local authorities and other bodies provided a growing volume of physical training for other groups. Scouting and camping movements of all kinds thrived. There was also a wider public awareness of and interest in the fit body, and as the prospect of war loomed larger from the mid-1930s, growing numbers of people took an interest in continental – especially German – body culture. One visitor to the young Christians erecting huts on Iona proudly reported that

Their bodies were bronzed by the sun and glistened with the sweat of honest toil... They were achieving strength through joy – joy at being able to take part in a new venture of faith which, if it succeeds, will have an important influence on the life and work of the Church of Scotland⁷¹.

An English academic was impressed by a German *Arbeitslager* for girls: “They look just like our own girls in an English high school – or just as we would have them look, for these are very merry, healthy and strong”⁷². Physical fitness was not exclusively male, any more than body work was exclusively aimed at the working class. What was distinctive about the work camps was that they comprised a national, publicly

⁶⁹ A. Peterson (2007), *The Body in Question: a socio-cultural approach*, London: Routledge, 4

⁷⁰ Peterson (ibid.), 50-51.

⁷¹ *Scotsman* 6 August 1938

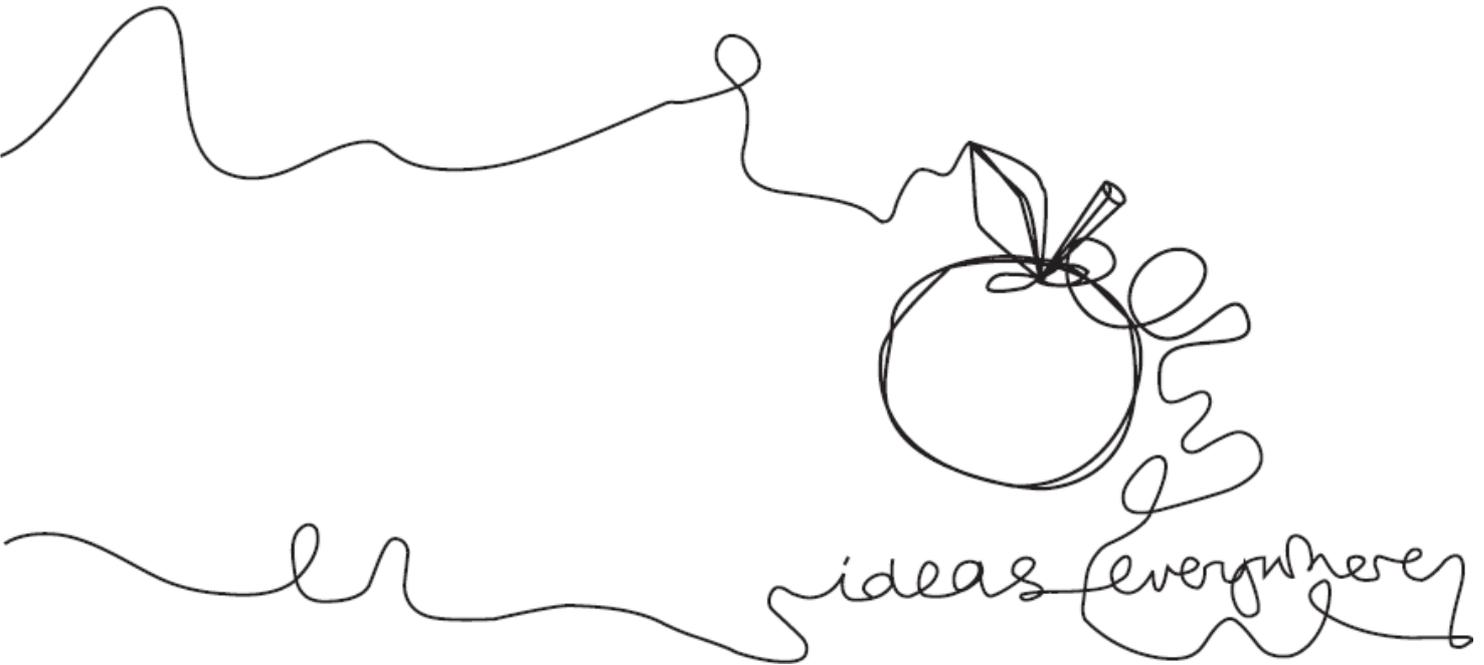
⁷² *Scotsman*, 14 June 1939

funded work camp system that aimed solely at ‘reconditioning’ male bodies through steady, heavy manual labour.

Camp life was indeed a male world. No government work camps were organised for women in this period, nor have I found any record suggesting that anyone thought this worth discussing. It was entirely taken for granted that the Ministry of Labour scheme was exclusively male. The men only encountered female company ‘after hours’, and usually ‘off site’, with visits being regulated by the camp manager. No type of sexual activity is ever mentioned, either in official accounts or in trainee recollections. There were residential training centres for women, but these had none of the qualities of labour and outdoor life that were the hallmarks of the camps. Through an arm’s length organisation – the Central Committee for Women’s Training and Employment – government supported a small number of residential training centres for unemployed women. The first Home Training Centre was opened in Market Harborough in 1927; it was later joined by others in Glasgow, Harrogate, Newcastle, Leamington Spa and London. As with men’s training, the initial aim was to prepare women for emigration, but the scheme was redirected towards home positions after 1929. Rather than seeking to ‘harden’ bodies that had ‘gone soft’, the women’s centres were designed to take women out of the industrial labour market, and prepare them for a life of domesticity, either as housewives (‘homemaker training’) or as servants (homecraft training).

Work camps are associated in popular memory with the brutal penal systems operated by the Nazi and Soviet regimes. Less brutal systems were common in many democratic nations as well. One of the largest work camp schemes was promoted as part of Roosevelt’s New Deal, while there were work camp systems in many other countries, including Canada, New Zealand, Finland, Sweden, and pre-Nazi Germany itself. In Britain, the first state work camps were opened in the mid-1920s, and were initially devoted to training unemployed men – often miners – for emigration to the Dominions. But these official schemes followed on and built on a wide variety of private and local government approaches, including a wide variety of farm colonies, labour colonies and similar ventures. Some had emerged from the labour movement, some from proto-Green land settlement movements, and some from modernising groups within the poor relief system. Relatively few were openly authoritarian in nature, though there were certainly some within the UAB and Ministry of Labour who

favoured a more coercive and disciplinary regime, at least in principle. This paper is therefore a contribution to a more diverse and differentiated – and perhaps less teleological - perspective on work camp systems.



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