The Making of a Radical:

Ellen Dawson’s Life in Britain --

Barrhead, Red Clydeside and Migration

Oh, dear me, the world’s ill divided,
Them that work the hardest are aye wi’least provided.

-- Mary Brooksbank¹
As we seek to overcome the elusiveness of Ellen Dawson, a logical first step is for us to take a closer look at the world in which she lived. By understanding the social forces that shaped her early life, we can better understand her actions during later years. I believe Barrhead provided the foundation for Ellen’s activism. The hardships she endured, as a child and a young worker, fortified her with the strength and the courage required to challenge the established system. The spirit of cooperation that was institutionalized within Barrhead during those years helped to built a sense of community that she took with her to the picket lines of America. And, as a working class village, Barrhead provided Ellen with a perspective of the world that was based on class, rather than ethnicity or race, helping her better understand the doctrine of the communist workers’ party in which she was a leading participant and allowing her to communicate more effectively with diverse groups of workers in the United States.

Looking back, Ellen’s early years in Barrhead appear to be highly representative of working-class life throughout industrial Scotland during the years before and during the first world war. It was a time when the great mass of urban workers lived on the edge, trapped in a routine of near-slave working conditions, with only a few simple pleasures at best. It was a world where the irregularities of life
were usually those caused by accident, illness and death. Unquestionably, it was a world that offered few opportunities to break free of this monotonous cycle.

I began my examination of Ellen’s hometown of Barrhead in 1900 by looking first at the larger world, because this was an era very different from our own. Ellen was, after all, a child of a new century, born when the British Empire, of which the workers of Scotland were a vital part, was still one of the most powerful commercial and military forces in the world. It was also a time when the established order was under siege, when numerous special interest groups pushed hard for change: women in Europe and America campaigned for equality with men; workers throughout the industrialized world fought for fair and equitable treatment from their employers; migration continued to offer countless individuals their only viable chance for economic survival; reform-minded members of the middle-class experimented with new methods for resolving social ills; and technology promised to resolve the world’s problems.

In 1900, people were impressed with the technological achievements that had been made during the nineteenth century, a period that they often labeled “A Century of Progress.” The telephone, the automobile, electricity, and the airplane were all new in the years surrounding Ellen’s birth. Consider the following lists of comparisons presented by one Scottish newspaper that was read in Barrhead. It detailed how dramatically the technology had changed between 1800 and 1900. In the field of transportation, the world moved from the horse to “the bicycle, locomotive and automobile.” Writing progressed from the goose quill pen to “the fountain pen and typewriter.” In the art world, the painter’s brush was joined by “the lithograph, the camera, and colour photography.” Clothing production changed from the hand loom to “the cotton and woolen factory.” The article noted that the number of known
chemical elements grew from twenty-three to eighty-eight. In communication, “beacon signal fires” were replaced by “the telephone and the wireless telegraph.” And, in the field of medicine, “unallieviable pain” was replaced by “aseptics (sic), chloroform, ether and cocaine.” The actual list was much longer, but this sample clearly demonstrates both the optimism and pride individuals of the period had for the advancement of technology. However, the article also ended with a rather insightful warning. “The above summary of scientific progress shows the one side of the shield, but it neglects the other. The development of science has brought us face to face with many social problems, which must be solved under pain of extinction.”

Clearly, the author recognized the uncertainty of the time and the challenges presented by rapidly changing technology. It was technology, after all, that dramatically changed the lives of the individual, moving workers from the farm to the factory.

Such issues were of little concern to Patrick and Annie Dawson. The Dawsons, like the vast majority of working-class families of the period, were trapped in a day-to-day, hand-to-mouth existence where survival was often their only objective. As a result, the joy the family should have felt at Ellen’s arrival was certainly tempered with the financial burden presented by yet another hungry mouth to feed.

If Patrick Dawson read the Glasgow newspaper on the morning of Ellen’s birth, he learned “of a very serious disaster to British arms in South Africa.” It was the middle of the Boer War. He read that Queen Victoria, in the sixty-third year of her reign, had taken a carriage ride from Windsor Castle with the Duchess of York; two hundred lives were lost when an overcrowded Chinese river steamer capsized; and parts of Glasgow, the heart of industrial Scotland, were inflicted with a “vile stink…of what seemed to be sulphuretted hydrogen (that was) positively
There was also a report concerning the annual meeting of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies at the Exchange Station Hotel in Liverpool, where a prominent speaker expressed her opinion “that the militarism of the country was one of the greatest hindrances to the cause of women’s suffrage.” Finally, Patrick probably would have skipped over the newspaper’s only full page advertisement. The ad offered the twenty-five volume Encyclopaedia Britannica for £24, something parents were encouraged to purchase to aid their children’s education and future success in the world. For a laborer like Patrick, £24 was approximately half his annual income, and even a penny, given the expenses associated with a new baby, was probably too dear for him to have spent on the purchase of a morning newspaper.

Moving from this snapshot of the larger world, I began to focus on Ellen’s birthplace. Barrhead, I quickly discovered, was not the romantic Scotland of Highland warriors and imprisoned queens. It was the product of Scotland’s Industrial Revolution, one of numerous villages begun in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to provide housing for the families who were rapidly abandoning generations of agricultural labor for the promise of a better life as workers in Britain’s new factories. In these villages, workers learned the essentials of the factory, where work was often nothing more than the endless repetition of a few simple tasks, repeated in concert with the tireless movements of power-driven machines. Days were governed by the clock; workers were expected to arrive at a set hour and work according to the dictates of an employer’s time schedule, which granted few and infrequent escapes from the monotony of manufacturing. It was a period of transition when men, women and children moved from the croft (farm), where they had enjoyed at least some degree of independence and self-sufficiency, to places such as Barrhead
where almost every aspect of their lives depended upon their weekly wage. It was also a period when married women, who had been more equal partners with their men in the day-to-day workings of the croft, became dependent upon the wages of others, most importantly the wages of their husband and their older children.

Barrhead was one of Scotland’s earliest industrial towns, begun in 1780 by a partnership of merchants from nearby Glasgow and the more distant Lancashire in England. In the eighteenth century, water was the primary source of industrial power in most British towns, and for that reason the partnership built a cotton mill on the River Levern, creating a new town for the mill workers. It was this town that provided the foundation for the village. In 1827, the Glasgow Free Press noted how rapidly the village was transformed in a period of just thirty years. Once a tiny village with a single textile mill and a population of thirty families, it had grown to include six large cotton mills, at least three print fields, two weaving factories and numerous bleach fields. In addition, the number of local schools had grown from one to at least six, and the number of public houses (pubs) increased from one to thirty.

This rapid growth continued through the end of the nineteenth century. A description of the village from the time of Ellen’s birth indicates that it was a rather grim, smog-filled environment. The 1903 Royal Directory of Scotland explained that the town was “lighted by gas…and is the centre of a manufacturing and thickly populated neighborhood…In the district are several large bleach fields, a number of extensive calico printing establishments, and mills for cotton spinning and power loom weaving, besides collieries (mines), engineering works and iron foundries.” Even the kindest comments, which began with a description of Barrhead’s “old-world streets and low-built dwellings…(juxtaposed) with the more imposing business premises and dwelling houses,” went on to note that the addition of “handsome
and...substantial buildings in Barrhead may not mean that the civic architecture of the town has much to be proud of.”\textsuperscript{11}

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the village of Barrhead was part of the larger Glasgow metropolitan area, an industrial center that included neighboring Paisley, one of Scotland’s largest textile centers. In 1900, Glasgow was Scotland’s most populous city, having grown by more than 85,000 during the final decade of the nineteenth century, reaching a total of 571,615. Glasgow was also Britain’s third largest industrial center, the core of a metropolis that reached out across the counties of Lanark and Renfrew. Lanarkshire, which included Glasgow, grew by more than 200,000 people in the 1890s, reaching 1,339,237 by 1901. Neighboring Renfrewshire, which included Paisley and Barrhead, grew by over 140,000 during the same period, reaching 268,980. Paisley’s population more than doubled during the period, growing from 42,478 to 99,899. Barrhead\textsuperscript{12} reported steady growth during this period as well. In 1891, the population was 8,215; in 1901 it had grown to 9,855; and by 1911, it had reached 11,387. This steady increase clearly reflects the magnitude of the population shifts caused by Britain’s continuing industrial growth. In the final decade of the 1800s, the population of Scottish towns increased by 18.6 percent, while the population of rural areas decreased by 4.6 percent, a trend that had been progressing for at least a century.\textsuperscript{13}

This migration from farm to industrial village is clearly evident in Ellen’s family. Although they moved during the middle of the nineteenth century, at least three of Ellen’s four grandparents were born to farm families, and yet by 1900 not a single agricultural worker could be found in her extended family.\textsuperscript{14}

The families of Ellen’s maternal grandparents, the Halfords and the Hurles, moved to Scotland to escape the Irish famines of the late 1840s, when millions of
families abandoned their homes in Ireland and moved to other countries within the English speaking world – places such as Australia, Canada, England, Scotland, New Zealand and the United States. These displaced individuals were participants in a desperate struggle for survival, as they escaped the devastating reality of starvation and death in their native Ireland. More than eight million men, women and children migrated from Ireland during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Brenda Collins noted, emigration became a natural part of life for the Irish. Of the eight million Irish refugees, one in twelve moved to Scotland.15

In the first third of the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants had begun settling in Glasgow and the area west of the city and south of the River Clyde.16 This is not surprising, because it was a region where there was economic opportunity. New factories attracted semi-skilled and unskilled workers. In turn, this large and ever increasing reserve of cheap labor attracted the additional capital necessary to create more factories. By the late nineteenth century, in the years following the Irish famine, there were more than 200,000 Irish-born Scots, approximately 6.6 percent of the total Scottish population. In Renfrewshire and Lanarkshire approximately fifteen percent of the population was of Irish birth.17 These Irish-born and first-generation Irish-Scots, such as Ellen’s mother, Annie Halford Dawson, encountered significant levels of discrimination in Scotland, just as most working class immigrants encountered in other parts of the world.

There can be little doubt that Barrhead was a workers’ town, where the vast majority of its citizens worked long hours. The primary occupations in the village, according to the 1901 census, were manual jobs. The single largest category was textiles, with almost a thousand workers. It was followed by 759 metal and machine workers, 464 construction workers, 367 domestic servants, 324 food and tobacco
workers, 288 transportation workers, 181 garment makers, and 175 commercial workers. Male workers dominated fields such as commercial, transportation, metal and machines, and construction. Female workers were a significant majority only in domestic service. Work was fairly balanced between men and women in textiles, garment making, and food and tobacco, with women leading in textiles and garment making. Of the 930 textile workers, 490 were women, making female textile workers the second largest gender-specific occupational category in Barrhead, trailing only metal and machine work with 758 male workers and only one woman worker. Only 1,265 of the 3,681 women in the parish were identified as working outside the home, while 3,142 of the 3,659 men in the community worked outside the home.

What does an examination of these key labor categories tell us about the community, its residents or Ellen? First, the large number of construction workers supports the idea that Barrhead and the surrounding area was an economically sound community with steady growth and job opportunities for those who were physically able to work. Second, a significant number of workers in domestic service, in a community with a small middle-class and non-existent upper-class, suggests relatively easy travel to other, more affluent communities outside the village. Barrhead was on the main railroad line between Glasgow and London, and during the first decade of the twentieth century it was connected to both Paisley and Glasgow by electric trams (trolley cars). In 1912, for example, a tram trip from Barrhead to Glasgow cost twopence. This suggests that some of Barrhead’s domestic servants probably commuted to work in Glasgow or Paisley. Third, men dominated the high wage/high status jobs within the community, skills that one would expect to be more highly organized and represented by trade unions, such as construction, metals and machines, and transportation. Fourth, women were responsible for caring for the family and the
domestic duties of life, since more than sixty-five percent of the women in the community were listed as “unemployed.” The term “housewife” was not an identification used by Scottish census takers of the time. By comparison, less than fifteen percent of men were classified as unemployed. It seems obvious that most married women depended on the wages of their husbands and older, unmarried children. Finally, of the women who did work outside the home, they were in occupations most closely tied to the work women had traditionally done in the home—textiles, domestic service and garment-making—often the low wage/low status jobs.

In Barrhead, Ellen’s father, Patrick, worked at the Shanks’ foundry, one of the most unpleasant jobs in the village. Foundry work—as described by Jimmy Lindsay, who lived in Barrhead during World War I—was “Slave labour! If you saw the conditions of these people working—it was unbelievable. I knew those that worked in the iron foundry. Your heart would break for them, seeing the way they had to work, and the conditions they had to put up with. It was just brutal work they had to do.”

According to Lindsay, the foundry workers made “cast-iron cisterns—you know, the overhead ones with the chain pull—they used to cast them in thousands and send them abroad.” The work was hard and dirty. “Cisterns were made in a box, with sand. They ran the sand into one box, then into the other—it was made in two halves—to make one pattern, and then they smoothed off the shell they’d made and they’d lift the holder of molten metal and put it on the top. They had two holes in the top, and they’d pour the molten metal into that. This was all done by hand.” The same process was used to make bathtubs, wash basins and bidets. “It was really brutal work...Before you went into the foundries you had to have plenty of fat muscles and not much brains in you,” Lindsay said.
The advantage of working in the foundry was the ability to earn higher wages, sometimes twice the local average, but it was piecework and the price was set according to the efficiency of the molding team. Those who worked hardest and produced more often found their income reduced. Lindsay noted, “There was no incentive to go ahead. So the result was you were inclined to set your target for the day and once that came you’d idle the time away until you’d get away, simply because you wanted to keep the price up for the job you were doing.” Another negative aspect of the job was that workers had to wait for hours at the furnace for the molten metal. “The furnace started up every day at seven o’clock in the morning. By the time the metal was ready for pouring it was maybe ten or eleven, but everybody was ready with their castings then… (as a result) there was a bit of dissension between (the workers). It got to such a stage that they were actually coming down there at four o’clock in the morning, climbing the fence to get in, so they could get the first metal.”

The very worst aspect of working in the foundry, according to Lindsay, was the lack of concern for the health and safety of the workers. “It was dirty work, inasmuch as there were no masks, and there was all this sand. Pneumoconiosis was rife. They just thought it was chest disease. The foreman had the power of life and death over them.” As Andy Wilson, who started in the foundry at the age of fourteen recalled, “Apart from fatigue and soreness the swallowing of dust particles was distressing, nostrils being choked constantly. The normal daily experience was to cough and spit for several hours after finishing – almost solid black clots.” Some workers rolled “their eyelids up on to a matchstick to rinse out tiny particles of brass.” As for safety regulations, there were none. “The moulding shop could never have passed the most basic, simple, rudimentary safety requirements.” Patrick Dawson
died in 1921, at the age of fifty-three, of stomach cancer, a disease that appears
directly attributable to his work in the Shanks’ foundry.

When and where Patrick Dawson met his wife Annie Halford is unknown. She had worked for most of a decade as a power-loom weaver in a local textile mill before their marriage in 1893. Like a growing number of single women with a steady wage, Annie moved out of the crowded home of her parents and was living on her own, or possibly with Patrick, in the years immediately before their marriage. Given the birth of one child before their marriage, and the pending arrival of another on their wedding day, it is difficult to determine exactly when Annie stopped working and became a stay-at-home wife and mother. The usual course of events would have been for Patrick to marry Annie as soon as he established a regular income of a pound (twenty shillings) a week. It was the way things were done. Until their marriage, most young men and women lived at home and contributed to the support of their parents and younger siblings. As one contemporary noted: “Most Edwardian elders in the lower working-class...looked upon it as a natural right that children, after leaving school, should work to compensate parents for all the ‘kept’ years of childhood. Early marriage robbed them, they felt, of their just rewards.”

Once married, it was a common practice for women in Barrhead to give up their jobs and assume the domestic responsibilities for the family. As one local historian noted, women “did not go back to work even when their children were grown up. The situation was very different in the Lancashire cotton towns where married women had to work in the mills to support their families because there were so few jobs for men available.” This observation is supported by the 1901 census, which noted that most individuals in Barrhead remained unmarried until after the age
of twenty-five. Only in the over-thirty age categories did married individuals significantly outnumber the unmarried.  

This voluntary departure of newly married women from the labor force is indicative of the male dominated societies common to Protestant and Roman Catholic communities of both Scotland and Ireland. It also helps to explain why male weavers tended to earn more than their female counterparts. A majority of women weavers of the period, like Annie Dawson who married at age twenty-four, were below the age of twenty-five. Male weavers often worked at the same job well into their fifties and sixties.  

It may have been what today is called the “ticking biological clock” that motivated so many women to marry and abandon the workforce of wage earners; there may have been other reasons. Regardless of the motivation that caused women to leave wage-earning work, longer tenure on the job was one reason why men were able to gain more skill and experience, a factor which contributed to higher average wages for male weavers and their dominant standing in the leadership of labor unions. Another was the idea of the family wage, which employers used as justification for paying married men more than women. It was thought that married men needed higher wages because they had a family to support. The injustice of such a theory is evident when closer examination of the practice reveals that it was seldom applied to the women who headed households, and that single men were paid the higher wage, even though they had no family to support.

As for newly married women like Annie, their lives changed dramatically when they assumed the dual roles of wife and mother. As one contemporary author noted, after interviewing numerous working-class women, “They tell you that, though they are a bit lonely at times, and miss the companionship of the factory life and the money of their own to spend, and are rather frightened at the swift approach of
motherhood, ‘You get accustomed to it,’ and ‘It won’t be so lonely when the baby comes.’” Then the babies begin to come and their lives change even more. “Women dread nothing…so much as the conviction that there is to be still another baby with its inevitable consequences – more crowding, more illness, more worry, more work, and less food, less strength, less time to manage with.”

Was there an viable alternative to marriage? The tale of one of Annie’s sisters, Mary Halford, is testimony to the difficulties that confronted young women who tried to follow a different path. Given the numerous stories of destitution which can be found in the Poor Books of Scotland, it is not surprising that some young working-class women turned to prostitution as a way of supporting themselves and their children. There is no evidence that Mary Halford took such a course, but those who did were often ostracized from the community. The money and possessions they earned from selling their bodies was tainted, and the health risks they took were extremely high. It was, after all, in the days before penicillin provided a cure for the more common venereal diseases.

How did Scottish communities address these basic social problems? One answer can be found by examining the public and charitable institutions that served the shire. In 1901, out of a total population of almost 269,000, Renfrewshire had forty-eight institutions caring for 4,703 individuals. This included 1,473 in fourteen nursing homes and orphanages, 1,154 in four asylums, 938 in two poorhouses, 565 in eighteen hospitals, 148 in six local jails, and 364 boys and 91 girls in four reformatories. It is clear that the social safety-net of 1900 was virtually non-existent. Of the services that were provided, a significant number were of a punitive or warehousing nature – such as prisons, poorhouses, reformatories, asylums, nursing homes and orphanages.
What little protection most workers had against the uncertainties of life came from their own meager wages. A priority for most working-class families was burial insurance, because death was an ever present reality. Families of the time paid weekly premiums of threepence for the father, twopence for the mother, and one penny for each child – a significant sum of money for a family living on twenty shillings per week. Tenpence, the amount the Dawson family would have paid after Ellen’s birth, was an annual expense equal to almost three weeks’ wages. As a contemporary noted, “If the sum of £11,000,000 a year...paid (throughout Britain during the years immediately prior to World War I) in weekly pennies by the poor to the industrial burial insurance companies were to be spent on better housing and better food – if, in fact, the one great universal thrift of the poor were not for death, but were for life – we should have a stronger nation.”

As for illness, there was little or no help. Few workers had any kind of health insurance. If the father or another wage earner became so sick that he or she could not work, the family had little choice but to absorb both the cost of the illness and the loss in wages. At times such as this, families depended upon their extended family and neighbors for help. For the Dawsons, their extended family included both Patrick and Annie’s parents, as well as numerous siblings living in the area. It also included their religious community. In 1903, Barrhead had five Protestant churches and one Roman Catholic Church. The more established and affluent members of the community were Protestant, while the ranks of the Catholics grew as a result of the migration of workers into the community from the Scottish Highlands and Ireland. In the first census of 1755, there was only one Irish-born Catholic woman in the parish, but by 1841 the Catholic community had grown large enough to build St. John’s Chapel, a building project which was strongly opposed by local Presbyterians. By
1900, St. John’s Chapel, where Patrick and Annie were married, was one of the two largest churches in the village.

At the time of Ellen’s birth, the Dawson family lived at 238 Main Street, in sight of the old Levern Mill and the Shanks’ Foundry. In fact, during all their years in Barrhead, the family never lived more than a short walk from the foundry and the old mill. Given the location, and because Catholics had few connections with the mainly Protestant property owners, the Dawson home was certainly of the old one- or two-room type dwellings that dated to the early days of the village. A description of life on Main Street, from someone who lived there during the time, offers a meaningful glimpse at what the area around the Dawson home was like. It also demonstrates how close the community was to it rural roots. “There used tae (sic) be a dairy beside us, and round the back was a byre (shelter), for the cattle. There was a piggery, and a midden (place for the collection of refuse), for the dung. They had anything up to six cows, and they let them out…the Water Road. They could take the cattle through the close (courtyard) if they wanted. But it was a dairy! On the Main Street!”

The location described was within a block of the house where Ellen was born and from a time when the Dawsons lived in the general vicinity.

Later, the Dawson family moved to 33 Glasgow Road, in the Dovecothall area of the village. A member of the Wilson Family, who may have been a neighbor of the Dawson family, provided one of the most vivid descriptions of working class housing in Barrhead.

We were better off than the rest of the people living in the two-storey (sic) tenement. At the west-end side of the building we had our own small close, in the middle of which, on the left, was our front door, which led into a small, dark lobby facing doors on the left and right. Two rooms. But for a while, for some reason, we had an aunt and uncle staying in one room.

On the left there was a fireplace – a hob – black, with a deep-grated fire, ovens, with steel candles on either side and a large kettle and pans on the top.
Immediately to the left of the door was a large bed recess and in the exact centre of the room wall on the left was the sink and the windows looking onto the Glasgow Road.

When we could only use one room we slept six in a bed, with the youngest brother at the top, in front of my father, who slept with his arms around young Alex in case the wee fella fell out during the night.

…not much rain was needed to turn that open back-court into a bog. A morass. Drainage was non-existent. I think in the earliest days we were nearly all bare-footed, and being ankle-deep in cold, wet mud is quite demoralizing.

Even worse was the job of trying not to get your feet wet another way. The lavatory, that served one half of the building, was opposite the close back door. It was often out of action and the material it was supposed to consume could be found all over the floor, and often outside.

Eventually my father made some sort of receptacle which was placed in a small closet in our lobby for our use. It was looked after and emptied – I don’t know how – by my poor mother.¹⁴

A similarly unpleasant picture was offered by Miss Allan, the Barrhead nurse, who visited hundreds of homes each year. “The majority of people have made a praiseworthy effort to maintain a high standard of cleanliness, even in the poorer quarters of the town where most of the houses were reeking with damp, infested with vermin, and showing every sign of dilapidation. Few repairs are done. Thus many houses are uninhabitable. In spite of this, however, so urgent is the housing problem that the dwellings are urgently sought after.”¹⁴⁵

Cramped and unsanitary living accommodations were a problem that plagued the community throughout the early part of the twentieth century. In 1901, the village of Barrhead was home to 230 families -- with an average size of just over five individuals per family. Of this number, 173 families lived in dwellings of two rooms or less; twenty-nine families lived in three room dwellings; and only twenty-eight families lived in homes with four rooms or more. Expanding the focus to Paisley, the number of families living in inadequate housing remained an equally huge majority. Of the 20,500 families living in Paisley, 14,483 families lived in one- or two-room dwellings. At the opposite end of the economic scale, sixty-one Paisley families,
certainly the very rich, lived in homes with twenty or more rooms. In 1891, Edward and Ellen Halford, Ellen’s maternal grandparents, lived with nine of their children in a two-room dwelling in Nitshill.

These cramped living conditions resulted in horrendous health problems. In 1906, Dr. Corbett, the Barrhead medical officer, delivered a lecture in Foresters’ Hall on the “Care and Feeding of Children,” noting the high rate of infant mortality in Barrhead. He explained that in 1904, almost fifteen percent of the children under the age of one had died, and in 1905 the number climbed to almost twenty percent. These figures compare to an eleven percent infant mortality rate for all of Scotland during the same time period. Dr. Corbett noted that the higher death rate was among the community’s poorest residents. “…infant deaths occur almost altogether amongst our poorer and probably most ignorant inhabitants, in one- or two-roomed houses, where the parents earned from 18s (shillings) to 30s per week…” The doctor diagnosed the problem as poorly educated parents feeding their infants adult food. “…the greater number of deaths were due to digestive disorders – diarrhoea, indigestion, colic, gastro-enteritis, wasting away, and various other forms of diseases of the stomach and bowels, brought on,…in most cases by parents giving the children food which they could not possibly digest.” Dr. Corbett explained “It was quite a common thing to see young children being given potatoes and gravy, bread and milk, porridge, broth and other things like that – things that were good and nourishing foods for adults, but were simply poisonous when given to young children.”

Dr. Corbett’s comments reflect middle class attitudes of the time that sought to blame the high death rate among children on the ignorance of the parents, rather than the reality of working class poverty. The adult foods he listed were probably not the reason for infant mortality. A study of the poorest working-class families of London
published in 1914 noted that working-class women normally nursed their babies for the first year.\textsuperscript{49} It is far more likely that the cramped housing and primitive sanitation systems available to the poor during this time were simply inadequate to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, diseases which the immune systems of older individuals were more capable of successfully fighting. Further, Dr. Corbett’s lack of insight into the problem helps to demonstrate the inadequate level of medical care available to most residents. It also suggests that many landlords were more interested in earning the largest profit possible than in providing decent housing.

While Barrhead bragged about its “modern, scientifically designed (sewer) works, begun in 1860s, (as) the envy of neighboring towns and attracting attention from all over Britain,”\textsuperscript{50} the Dawsons, like most working-class families before World War I, probably depended upon the more primitive back garden privy and chamber pot. As a contemporary scholar noted, “…overcrowding and overhousing are directly and indirectly productive of insanitary conditions, making disease less preventible as well as generally lowering the physical health and vigour of those who live, voluntarily or involuntarily, amid such environments.”\textsuperscript{51}

Despite this rather bleak picture, Barrhead was a community where individuals within both the middle-class and the working-class actively sought solutions to the social problems that faced their community and their society. The best example of a local reform movement was the Barrhead Co-operative. The socialist theory of cooperative living had long been popular in Britain. Most Scottish cooperatives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were based on the ideas of Robert Owen. Owen, as manager and part-owner of a cotton mill southeast of Glasgow, recognized the value of what he termed “human capital” and as Barbara Taylor noted, Owen “established a programme of work incentives and welfare
measures (including model housing, health facilities and free schooling for the entire factory population) which transformed the village of New Lanark into a triumph of social engineering – and one of the most profitable enterprises in the country.” His success in the management of labor brought him international acclaim in the business world. Owen, however, had even more extraordinary ideas to test. As he wrote, “I saw all the steps in practice by which the change could be made…that if (the population of the world) were treated, trained, educated, employed, and placed, in accordance with the most plain dictates of common sense, crimes would terminate, the miseries of humanity would cease, wealth and wisdom would be universal.”

Owen’s steps were built around the creation of cooperatives, an idea that would ultimately spark the creation of utopian communities throughout Britain and America, and would help lay the foundation for many of the ideas associated with modern socialism.

In Barrhead, experiments with cooperatives dated as far back as 1837, when a Chartist cooperative was formed in the village. In fact, by 1900, Barrhead enjoyed a certain level of notoriety for the strength of its cooperative endeavors. As the leading cooperative publication in Scotland of the period – The Scottish Co-operator – noted, “Barrhead is a working-class town claiming many distinctions, but chiefly famous in the eyes of co-operators for the sturdy character of its co-operation and as the birthplace of more than one co-operative institution, the ramifications of which now extend many thousands of miles beyond the little Scottish town.” In 1900, when Barrhead had approximately 9,000 residents living in the town and its two suburbs, Grahamston and Dunterlie, the Owenite-based Barrhead cooperative had 2,100 members, operated nineteen businesses, and owned 114 local dwelling houses. Barrhead-based cooperative businesses included a laundry that served customers
throughout the Glasgow metropolitan area, a modern industrial bakery and a large mercantile store.\textsuperscript{54}

No Barrhead Cooperative Society membership records have been found, so it is impossible to determine for certain if members of the Dawson family were active participants. However, Betty Dawson, Ellen’s niece, believes the family were members. This is supported by a variety of evidence. Comparing the cooperative’s membership with the population of the community indicates that approximately one in every four residents was a member, a number that jumps to one in two when children are excluded. Recognizing that many single adults lived at home with their parents seems to indicate that most families had at least one cooperative member. In addition, one of the cooperative’s two retail outlets was located in the Dovecothall area of Barrhead, less than a hundred yards from where the Dawsons lived.\textsuperscript{55} Finally, as one local historian noted, “the society organised a gala day for all the townspeople for many years.”\textsuperscript{56} So, even if the Dawsons were not active members of the cooperative, they were certainly aware of its numerous community activities and were influenced by the opinions of its members.

One of the most significant aspects of the cooperative movement at this time was the social reform efforts directed toward enhancing the role of women in society. This is not surprising, since one important idea shared by many of the early utopian groups was reaching for, if not always grasping, greater equality among the sexes. As one early twentieth century columnist for \textit{The Scottish Co-operator}, a writer who signed his/her\textsuperscript{57} columns with only the initials A.B., noted, “The co-operative movement has done a great deal in the world in general, but in particular it has done more to bring out the women than any other movement of the century. Indeed, it has created a new woman – a woman with an ideal, that being the emancipation of her sex
in a rational and practical way.” Not defenders of the radical approaches taken by the
suffragettes who chained themselves to the gates of government offices and endured
imprisonment and forced feedings, Scottish cooperators such as A.B. counseled a
more cautious approach to the emancipation of women. Consider some of the writer’s
other comments on the role of women. “…the athletic woman, in reverting to the
merely primitive type (for muscle is the most primitive of all our faculties), loses
delicacy, individuality, spontaneity, impressionability – in a word loses temperament
– which is naturally woman’s most delightful attribute.” A.B. concluded, “If women
have energies to spend and seek for womanly occupation, they will not need their
bicycles to bring them to face with it.” These comments clearly ignored women
factory workers who were required to use their muscles in order to do their jobs, as
were the women who worked as domestic servants, and those who remained at home,
cooking, washing and caring for their families in an era before labor saving devices
were common to every home. In a third column, A.B. espoused a way women might
participate in the political process without the vote. “Understand me, ladies, that I do
not wish to create a political monster out of a woman, but simply appeal to you to
drop the old fashion (sic) notion that politics is a sealed book to women, and to use
your intelligence in advising your husband in this as you would in any other important
affair that affects the welfare of your home”58

The perspective offered by A.B. demonstrates one of two different views
found within the cooperative societies – the middle-class, male perspective of the
leaders of the cooperatives and the middle-class, female perspective of the leaders of
the women’s guilds. The Women’s Co-operative Guild was an autonomous
organization, founded in 1883, that operated in association with the cooperatives.59 In
1901, the annual meeting of the Women’s Guild of Scotland was attended by more
than two hundred delegates, each representing a local branch. “The class of women
(attending these meetings) is not the class one sees at a women’s meeting where they
have a titled lady presiding and a few in the audience as an attraction…(women who)
have not to make an effort to find the time necessary;…and the outing is more a
fashionable function than a serious meeting.” Rather, the Guild delegates were far
more representative of the ordinary women of Scotland. “…a glance at the
appearance of the average delegate at once speaks for itself, and one has the feeling
that they are in the presence of women who are fully alive to the necessities of hard
work and…that they are there in the true capacity of delegate to represent her sisters
and not for diversion.”

Looking at publications such as *The Scottish Co-operator*, and Robert
Murray’s *History of the Barrhead Co-operative Society*, the Women’s Guild may at
first appear to be a middle class organization, because middle-class women held the
leadership positions, but as Jane Grant has documented, “it was distinctly working
class, grassroots, and…highly political.” While the leadership tended to be reform-
minded, middle-class women, the vast majority of the guild’s members were not. In
fact, as Virginia Woolf’s husband Leonard observed, the guild was “the greatest
working women’s organization of modern times.” The reality of this working-class
base can be clearly seen in *Maternity: Letters from Working Women*, published by the
Guild in 1915 as part of their efforts to improve the level of medical care available to
working-class mothers and their infant children. The book includes 160 letters from
working-class women, all members of the Guild and most with family incomes of less
than thirty shillings per week. The book also listed the occupation of the husbands.
The list included foundry worker, stoker, weaver and colliery worker (miner) – all
occupations found within the Dawson and Haldorf family. Ellen’s mother Annie
and the other Dawson women may well have been Guild members, but without the local membership rolls there is no clear evidence. At the very least, they were exposed to the various educational programs that the Women’s Guild offered to the community of Barrhead.

Of greatest interest, at least in understanding Ellen’s early life, are the educational activities directed toward the bairns (children) by the local Women’s Guild. The cooperative’s second annual children’s picnic on Saturday, May 26, 1900 was one example, and while Annie was pregnant with Ellen at the time, Ellen’s four older siblings – Edward, Mary, David and Michael – probably attended. A comparison of the number of children living in the village with the number of children reported to have attended indicates that few were excluded from such events. “The children, numbering 1,200, formed in procession, and headed by the Busby brass band, marched through the principal streets of the town to Fereneze braes (a hillside meadow on the outskirts of the village), where buns and milk were served.” During the day, “football, cricket, swings, and donkey races were indulged in, whilst many of the grown-ups tripped it gaily on the grass to the splendid music of the band. About 7 o’clock the children were again formed into order and marched home, everyone tired but happy.”

There were many similar events, including “A cinematograph and gramophone entertainment…crowded with little ones. The picture displayed was of a high order, all the latest as well as some of the old favorites being put up on the screen, many of them being shown with musical accompaniment…” These events, at least in the minds of the leaders of the local cooperative society, had a purpose greater than just entertainment. The Women’s Guild conducted these programs for the “emancipation of the working-classes.” Another example of such an event included
a variety of entertaining presentations. “Miss M. Stewart sung (sic) two solos in a cultured manner… Master Cameron, a youth of talent and muscle, delighted the audience with a display of Indian club swinging and axe manipulation. Miss Campbell danced the Highland Fling, a sword dance, and an Irish Jig …(and) Harry Adams, (a ventriloquist) introducing the usual gruff old man and the prim damsel, was a great treat and had to be repeated.” But, the event was also educational, as the reporter noted, for in addition to the show on stage, the children also received a lecture concerning the need “to form character, of a noble and unselfish kind.”66

These educational efforts, at least in the minds of the leaders of the Guild, had a positive influence on the children. In an article detailing a children’s field day, it was reported that “The children gathered in a large number at the Society’s premises, a procession was formed, and, headed by a pipe band, marched to Dyce Farm. A feature of the procession was the motto flags carried by the children, the one finding most favor being ‘The Future Co-operators,’ all being anxious to get one with this motto.”67 Regardless of the motivation of the children who wanted one flag over another, which may have been for reasons other than a desire to be “future co-operators,” it does seem evident that the children were learning the basic skills associated with mass demonstrations, and given the skill she would later demonstrate as a union organizer in America, it is not difficult to imagine a young Ellen, flag in hand, marching triumphantly at the head of such a parade. In fact, Ellen was responsible for organizing a field day in New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1928 that was strikingly similar to the events staged by the Barrhead Co-operative Society.

Although this study of the Barrhead community during the first two decades of the twentieth century unearthed only shreds of evidence related to Ellen as an individual, it reveals much about the larger groups to which she belonged. Like most
of Scotland, the village adhered to a system in which the roles of men and women were clearly defined. Working-class women received minimal education. Ellen’s mother Annie, for example, never learned to read or write.\textsuperscript{68} Women worked in wage-earning jobs until they married, at which point they assumed the domestic responsibilities – cooking, cleaning, childcare, shopping and laundry – for the family. Most working-class men “displayed their virility by never performing any task in or about the home which was considered by tradition to be women’s work. Some wives encouraged…this and proudly boasted that they would never allow the ‘man of the house’ to a ‘hand’s turn’.”\textsuperscript{69} Ellen’s attitudes about marriage and the relationship between men and women were shaped by lessons such as these learned during her formative years in Barrhead.

Women who worked outside the home were mostly young and unmarried, normally working at occupations that were closely connected to traditional domestic roles, such as textiles, domestic service and garment making. It is within this group, however, that some women at least attempted to establish their own identity – be it at their own peril. The vast majority of working women remained in the home of their parents until marriage, under the protection and control of their father. Some, like Ellen’s mother, Annie, and her aunt, Mary Halford, ventured out on their own, their wages giving them a modest level of independence, something that most young women did not enjoy before the Industrial Revolution. In Barrhead, women who bucked the system too hard, such as Mary Halford, found life extremely difficult and were usually forced back into step with the social customs of the community. Like her mother and aunt, Ellen would emerge as an identifiable individual during her years as a young, unmarried woman. Marriage, however, would draw her back into anonymity.
Men lived equally restricted lives. They were the primary bread winners of the family, working at occupations that were traditionally masculine in nature – construction trades, metal and machine works, and transportation. At marriage, men assumed responsibility for earning a wage large enough to support the family, a task which was difficult in the best of times, often impossible in the worst. Most men worked until extreme illness, age or death removed them from the labor force. For example, Patrick Dawson died of work-related stomach cancer at the age of 53, his father, Edward Dawson, worked in the local water works until he died at the age of 62, when the cause of his death was listed as gangrene of the foot and exhaustion. Ellen, interestingly, did not relinquish her position as a worker when she married. Instead, she worked until age sixty-five and died within a few months of a work related illness.

Children were both a benefit and a burden to their families. In the early years of their lives children were totally dependent upon their parents for support, yet when they went to work, normally in their early teens, they were expected to contribute to the financial resources of the family until they married and started their own families. Ellen never had children of her own. This may have simply been the result of being in her mid-thirties when she married, or it may also have been a result of her childhood and having witnessed the burdens that children brought to a family.

For Ellen, growing up in a working-class family in the industrial village of Barrhead provided her with a clear understanding of the plight of workers in the modern industrial state and the unique challenges faced by women in such a society. There can be little doubt that her childhood included large doses of hunger, cold and want. It was an environment that instilled the basic skills needed to survive in the face of immense obstacles, skills that would serve her well in later years. As her
niece Betty later observed, Ellen was a very hard worker. Through the socialist ideas of the local cooperative movement, Ellen was able to imagine a better life, a better world – a place where people worked together for the common good. As Margaret Llewelyn Davies, president of the Women’s Guild from 1889 until 1921, noted in her introduction to the original edition of *Maternity*, “The roots of the evil lie in the conditions of life which our industrial system forces upon the wage-earners.”

Finally, I must add a point that comes from one of those mystical aspects of biography that traditional historical scholars will question. It reflects the personal relationship that evolves between biographer and subject, as explained by scholars such as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall. If there was any magic in the grime and soot of Barrhead in the first years of the twentieth century, it was locked inside the mysterious Arthur’s Cross, described as “an ancient Celtic cross like those in Ireland and Iona, dating from the time (around the sixth century) when Irish missionaries brought Christianity to Scotland.” The part of town where the cross stands is called Arthurlie, and local legend says that the legendary King Arthur once visited the Levern Valley where Barrhead is located. Regardless of the true origins of the cross, it is difficult to imagine a child growing up in the village, hearing the mystical tales of Arthur, who failed to touch Arthur’s Cross, hoping to absorb some of its magic. I suspect that a strong and courageous woman such as Ellen must have touched the cross for inspiration more than once.
Brooksbank, Mary, *Sidlaw Breezes* (Dundee: David Winter & Son, 1982), p. 29. Brooksbank was a contemporary of Ellen Dawson. Born in Aberdeen, she lived her life in Scotland, working as a textile worker and a communist activist. Where Ellen later retreated into silence, Mary was an outspoken social critic of capitalism throughout her life. This difference, I believe, reflects the vulnerability of immigrant worker activists in the United States, as compared with those who remained in their native land.

2 *The Scottish Co-operator*, July 12, 1901. The Co-operator was the publication of the cooperative movement in Scotland during this period. Barrhead was one of the leading communities in the Scottish cooperative movement and will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.

3 The cause of the air pollution was not explained. It was probably a normal occurrence in a city as highly industrialized as Glasgow, where there was with little or no environmental protection.

4 Under the monetary system used in Britain until the late 1960s, eight pence (d) equaled a shilling (s) and twenty shillings equaled one pound sterling (£). In 1900, one pound sterling was equal to five U.S. dollars, based on the exchange rate reported in the *Economist*, March 31, 1900.

5 *The Glasgow Herald*, December 14, 1900.

6 Industrial villages such as Barrhead were a common aspect of early industrialization. They were constructed throughout Britain and the United States, not only to provide housing for the earliest factory workers, but as a way for mill owners to maintain tight controls over their workers.


8 Lancashire will be discussed in Chapter Five – “Migration.”


12 Census records for Barrhead were tabulated in two ways. One focused on Barrhead the village, while the other incorporated the significantly larger Neilston Parish. When available, the village statistics are used. When they are not available, the larger Neilston Parish numbers are used.


14 It must be noted, as will be documented later, that the dividing line between rural and urban life in a young industrial village such as Barrhead was still muddy.


16 This is the region where Barrhead is located.

17 Devine, T. M., *Irish Immigrants and Scottish Society in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, pp. 48 & 100.

18 The large number of metal workers was due to the Shanks’ Foundry, an international maker of bathroom fixtures. It was here that Patrick Dawson labored most of his life. Working conditions at the Shanks’ Foundry will be described later in this chapter.

19 Scottish Census, 1901.


21 Lindsay’s comments come from *Housing the Heroes* (Barrhead: Community Council, 1983), an edited collection of oral histories published by the Barrhead Community Council, p. 68.

22 *Housing the Heroes*, pp. 68-69.

23 Ibid, p. 69.

24 Pneumoconiosis is a lung disease that was common among industrial workers during this time.

25 *Housing the Heroes*, pp. 70-71.

26 Work in a Scottish textile mill will be discussed in the next chapter – “Red Clydeside.”

27 According to the 1891 Census, Annie’s parents lived with nine of their children in a two-room house.


29 Patrick may have lived at home longer than Annie. His parents, Edward and Mary Dawson, lived on Main Street in the same area Patrick and Annie lived – both before and after their marriage. During part of this time, they may have all shared a single home. If so, it would have allowed Annie to work even after the birth of her first child. She could have left him in the care of his grandmother, Mary Dawson. This, of course, is all speculation, because no conclusive evidence has been found.


32 Scottish Census, 1901.
35 Reeves, Round About A Pound A Week, pp. 151 & 153.
36 General Register of the Poor, Paisley, Record 4638. Mary Halford’s experience was discussed in the
previous chapter. Unmarried, she and her children were in and out of the poorhouse for a decade.
38 Scottish Census, 1901. pp. 302 & 304.
39 Reeves, Round About A Pound A Week, p. 74.
40 A limited national health insurance scheme was introduced in Britain in 1911. It was not, however,
until 1948 that the National Health Service was created. (British Public Record Office, National
Digital Archive of Datasets, Health Departments: Administration History)
(http://ndad.ulcc.ac.uk/datasets/AH/health.htm#Gen).
41 Reeves, Round About A Pound A Week, p. 69.
43 Housing the Heroes, p. 16.
44 Housing the Heroes, pp. 15-17.
45 Housing the Heroes, p. 17.
47 Scottish Census, 1891.
49 Reeves, Round About A Pound A Week, p. 102.
50 Hughson, Barrhead and Neilston in old picture postcards, card 50.
24.
54 The Scottish Co-operator, Jan. 26, 1900.
55 This connection is based on a 1913 map of Barrhead published by the Director General of the
Ordinance Survey Office, Southampton. This map has also been used to locate various sites discussed
in this thesis.
56 Dewsnup, Barrhead and Neilston in old picture postcards, card 41.
57 I have read the works of A.B. in the Scottish Co-operator and I am reasonably certain the writer was
a man, however, I found no clear evidence as to the individual’s gender. It was not uncommon at the
time for newspaper columnists to write anonymously.
58 The Scottish Co-operator, Sept. 7 & 21, 1900.
59 Grant, Jane, “The Woman with the Basket” (unpublished conference paper, Women and Labour
60 The Scottish Co-operator, Oct. 18, 1901.
61 Grant, “The Woman with the Basket.”
63 Davies, Maternity, pp. 192-193.
64 The Scottish Co-operator, June 15, 1900.
66 Ibid, April 19, 1901.
68 1930 Census, Passaic, N.J.
69 Roberts, The Classic Slum, p. 36.
70 General Register of Scotland: Deaths, 1906.
71 Davies, Maternity, p. 4.
72 This bond between biographer and subject was discussed at length in the introduction to this thesis.
73 Burgess, Discover Barrhead and Neilston, p.4.