

George Clarke, 1924-2015: NCLC organiser, T.U. educator

Richard Ross

George Anderson Clarke, who has died aged 90, was one of the last surviving organisers for the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), the organisation that dominated Independent Working-Class Education in Britain from the 1920s to the 1960s. The NCLC originated from the Plebs League, founded in 1908 by students at Ruskin College, Oxford, to further independent working-class education for trade unionists and the Labour Movement. Dissatisfied with the conventional economics education they were getting at Ruskin, the students went on strike in 1909 and set up a rival Central Labour College and other colleges which came together with the Plebs League in 1921 to form the NCLC.

Born in 1924 in Deskford, North East Scotland, George was the eighth-born of a family of nine. His family lived in a nineteenth century farm-house, where the water supply was a well on the roadside, and infant deaths were common. Indeed, three of his siblings died in infancy. George succumbed to pleurisy at the age of four and by the doctor's diagnosis was destined to die until, according to George's father, George was given a spoonful of whisky, the 'Water of Life'.

Educated as Deskford School and Buckie High School until 1942, but for World War 2 George would have gone to Aberdeen University. Instead he chose to volunteer for the RAF. Whilst awaiting call-up, he worked as a forester, but in 1943 started his introductory flying training on Tiger Moths. By early 1944 the RAF found that it had too many pilots and so he re-trained and served as a flight engineer, among other duties flying in Halifax bombers in 1945 in India to drop sacks of rice to the villagers whose crops had been destroyed to stop them falling into Japanese hands.

Demobbed in 1947, George worked as a tram conductor in Edinburgh and as a surveyor with the Ordnance Survey before, in 1949, starting work for

the NCLC, organising and teaching classes for trade unionists throughout County Durham.

In 1964 the TUC took over the NCLC's provision of trade union education and George was invited to become administrator of the new TUC Training College at Congress House, the TUC's headquarters in central London. As well as organising and teaching on courses in Britain, George also ran overseas training courses for trade unions in Brussels, Egypt, Cyprus, Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Guyana.

George worked at Congress House and subsequently at the TUC National Education Centre in Crouch End, North London until his retirement in 1985.

In 1949 George had married Rachel (Ray) Milligan and on his retirement they moved to Stirling in Scotland. George was active in the Labour Party (he had been a member since 1949 and in 1954 had been elected a councillor for Gateshead Borough Council) and in Stirling Chess Club. He became chess correspondent for the Stirling Observer and in 2002 organised the Scottish chess championships in Stirling, the first there for 48 years.

Ray died in January 1999 and in 2009, after being diagnosed with osteoporosis and myeloma, George moved to live with his daughter Rhona and partner John on the Isle of Mull. There he continued his chess activities, sending over 1,000 'chess teasers' to the Stirling Observer. He also helped to fund raise substantial amounts every year for his Labour Party branch. Even from Mull he phone-canvassed for Stirling candidates at election times.

George is survived by his daughter Rhona, four grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren.

In 2012 I interviewed George for the TUC Library Collections' web site, *The Union Makes Us Strong*. An extract from the interview, together with a transcript, is available at: <http://www.unionhistory.info>