



DURHAM
In Time

Sam Watson - Miners' Hero

by Jane Hatcher

A friend's son is called Sam Watson. He had a famous namesake, a miners' hero for 27 years, who died almost 20 years before young Sam was born.

The miner Sam Watson was born on 11 March 1898. He grew up on the coast, and after attending elementary school in Boldon, went to work below ground in the mine there, when a 14-year-old earned 1s. 4d. a shift. At the age of 20 he became secretary of the Boldon Miners' Lodge, and continued to work underground until he became an agent of the Durham Miners' Association at the age of 38. He became Secretary of the DMA, a post he held until 1963. At the DMA's headquarters at Redhills he proved himself not only to have great intellectual ability but also to be a born teacher, and for many years organised tutorials for miners, known as "Sammy's class". He was also a public speaker, and a frequent correspondent to local newspapers such as *The Northern Echo*.

Sam Watson's many abilities were recognised when he was made a CBE in 1946 on the recommendation of the post-war Labour government. He was to be a member of the Labour Party's National Executive for 22 years, and was Chairman of the Party in 1949. He was also Chairman of the Labour Party's International Sub-committee, and in the 1950s was a staunch ally of Hugh Gaitskell on the trade union side of the party, opposing Communism and also unilateral disarmament. It emerged in the 1990s that Sam Watson had been, along with fellow right-winger Michael Stewart, later Foreign Secretary in the Wilson government during the escalation of US military action in Vietnam, a major target for penetration of the Labour Party by the American CIA as an 'agent of influence'.





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Sam Watson was a very popular speaker at the annual Durham Miners' Gala. Many may still remember his small, compact and sturdy figure, pink-faced and with clear twinkling eyes under bushy eyebrows, friendly ways and straightforward manner of speaking. He was honoured to be asked to unfurl several new mine banners in the 1950s and early 1960s, several in the presence of noted politicians.

One of his many memorials is the Sam Watson Rest Home in Richmond, which opened in May 1961 and was refurbished in 1992. Converted from a late-19th century villa on the town's Quaker Lane, it can accommodate 29 all-women guests. This is unique among the rest homes run by the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation, and it is said that it was not only named after him but also so designated because he felt strongly that the womenfolk of miners deserved special consideration. The home provides 11-day breaks for the wives and widows of mineworkers, and female employees, from Durham and Northumberland coalfields.

Among other compliments paid was when Durham University conferred on him the honorary degree of DCL. He was always a voracious reader, and however busy he was he always had a book in his pocket, so the Durham degree gave him particular pleasure. His entry in *Who's Who* after he retired gave his recreations as reading, walking – and unravelling knots! He had moved to Bede Rest, Beech Crest in Durham City. There he died in his sleep on Sunday 7 May 1967. There were many fulsome obituaries. He was described as one of Britain's greatest trade unionists. *The Durham Advertiser* said "Sam Watson had a vigorous and passionate devotion to the miners, and his other qualities of foresight, patience and wisdom made him a superlative advocate on their behalf. He saw the miners emerge from darkness into light of a greater social security, a progress which was reflected in the spirit of the great Miners' Gala." *The Guardian* included a tribute by the writer Sid Chaplin, who also wrote a piece for the first *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, recalling "However much you disagreed with him, you knew that he cared.





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He was not only Sam Watson the negotiator, Sam Watson the statesman and Sam Watson the advocate but Sam the fellow-writer and Sam the human being.”

There is also a small tribute to him in an unexpected context, in the Preface to the published catalogue of the papers of the Londonderry coal-owning family to be found in the Durham County Record Office, written by Robert McDarmont, Chairman of the County Records Committee, in 1969, two years after Sam Watson had died. The same archives contain a large collection of Sam Watson’s own papers among the DMA archives.

So young Sam, I hope you too have a remarkable career, and that your name also is remembered by future generations as someone who achieves a great deal for his fellow citizens of Planet Earth.

References

1 Sid Chaplin, “A Tribute to Sam Watson”, *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, No.1, October 1967.

2 Plain Talk, “A Miners’ Man who Served Humanity”, *Durham Advertiser*, 12 May 1967

3 Durham County Council, *The Londonderry Papers*, Catalogue in DCRO, 1969

4 Mr Sam Watson, Obituary, *The Guardian*, 8th May 1967

5 *Who Was Who*, 1961-70

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