

**Sanny Sloan, the Miners' MP and his Family of the First World War.**  
**By Esther Davies, 1 May 2015. With revisions to November 2018**



I am writing out what I can remember of family stories, particularly about my great-grandfather (Alexander) "Sanny" Sloan who died on 16 November 1945 when I was aged three. His funeral was the first-time double-decker buses ever came to Rankinston, the village where I was born.

I would like to collect family histories of ordinary Ayrshire people. As 25% of Scottish miners volunteered in the 1st World War, there must be many of their stories to find. My aim is to try and interest people in their own family histories and the centenary of the First World War seemed a good place to start. Many people were involved in the war effort, some were pacifists. All their stories are of value.

My personal recollections of Sanny are that he was always reading the newspapers or a book. He had two sets of glasses for reading and seeing and one eye was white and did not work. He was there when I got up on Saturday morning having arrived late on Friday night. He had lumps of sugar, which he had saved from his train journey from London, in his waistcoat pocket waiting for me. Sweets like most things were rationed then. He was good fun and played games, using his wisps of hair as a moustache and cracking his knuckles to order.

People came to the house all the time. My Granny, his daughter, did his secretarial work and she looked after me as well. I sat and listened while the visitor(s) talked of personal problems or political issues. I learned what peace time was as Sanny planned for after the war. I knew it wasn't a sandwich, as a "piece" was in local speech. I remember him saying the word "guarantee" and knowing the meaning from the context.

The 1945 election campaign meant lots of meetings and Sanny addressed over seventy according to Emrys Hughes, his successor as MP. One day I went with him and a few supporters on a little bus round the villages like Patna and Burnfoothill. They were all big meetings. At one meeting I shouted "clap my Granta" which they were doing anyway. The children round the village streets shouted, "Vote Sloan for a Tattie Scone", a potato scone. I only found out recently that Sanny had persuaded Parliament to give miners extra wartime rations of cheese because of the rigour of their work and the children must have been joking about that. The miners called a cheese piece (sandwich) a "Sloan" for a while.

I had no idea how busy he was. [Hansard](#) says he made 640 interjections in his six years in Parliament<sup>1</sup>. That is two for every week. He made a fourteen-hour train trip each Friday to come home to the constituency and had to walk the last five or six miles, mostly uphill. The last bus from-Ayr to Rankinston only went as far as the Kerse Road-end near Polnessan. An elderly man who had been evacuated from Glasgow to Rankinston as a teenager told only recently of walking with him and finding out later that he was the MP when he contacted the family to see if they needed any help. The elder son had been called up despite being a University student. He should have been allowed to finish his studies first. Sanny offered to take up his case. The family decided not to delay his army service then as his studies were already interrupted. Sanny was in his sixties and dying at the time of the 1945 election but kept on pushing himself. He was supposed to go on a parliamentary delegation to Belsen at the time of his death but collapsed and died not long after.

I always knew that Sanny Sloan was a firebrand socialist MP representing South Ayrshire from 1939 to 1945 and that he had been involved all his life in trade unions and local government as well as national affairs. He was a member of the Independent Labour Party. A Republican, he favoured Federal Home Rule ([Appendix A](#)), Proportional Representation ([Appendix B](#).) and equal rights for men and women. ([Appendix E](#)). I always knew that he had experienced great poverty and injustice and the dreadful effects of war. He fought against these evils on behalf of ordinary people, for individual rights for workers, for better working conditions, particularly compensation for death or injury, better housing, better education and training, freedom for the colonies, a Jewish homeland

and lots of things now accepted as reasonable but then regarded as radical. Old men would weep when they talked about him and recount what he had done for them. He was known as the “stormy petrel of Ayrshire politics” long before he became the “Miners' MP” because he fought so hard for people, as a union man, a county councillor, a politician and as a fellow human being. He was a teetotaler until he was about 60 years of age when he took up having a glass of wine when out with his adult grand-children. He also had an ironic sense of humour and was good fun. As an example, he was once registering at a meeting with the Earl of Glasgow, a fellow county councillor. When the Earl signed himself “Glasgow”, Sanny signed “Rankinston”. They all had a laugh at the meeting but there was a point.

I also knew that four of his youngest brothers died in the First World War in France and Flanders and one survived the fighting. It transpired that three of the soldiers who died had emigrated to Canada and two came back over with the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Four brothers had emigrated to Canada but were able to come home to visit after a year or two and take another brother back till there were four. Canada was a place of great opportunity for them and many others from the West of Scotland at the time. Two of them joined up in Canada when war broke out. The third of the young men who died first came home to visit and joined the Scots Guards. The fourth emigré Charles came back and joined the Highland Light Infantry, fighting from 1914 to 1915 and survived. He married a Rankinston woman and they went to Canada for good after the war was over. Another brother who had not emigrated to Canada also joined the army in Scotland, the Black Watch. I started to look not just at what these young men had done in the Great War but how they and their parents and families had lived. The family had such a lot of drive and intelligence.

The story unfolds, and I have discovered that most of the family goes back to Ulster Scots who came back to Scotland at the time of the Potato Famine and another branch traces back to Ayrshire weavers. Hand-loom weavers were a force in history for progress and democracy so that was a welcome discovery. Sanny Sloan's wife, Agnes Sloan had the same second name but was no blood relation. Her grandfather John Sloan was a weaver in West Kilbride, alive and well with a wife and three children in the 1841 Census. From being well paid and highly skilled, weavers had become victim to the machine and their income and status had dropped. They had to take other work if it could be found. There is no record of his death, but John Sloan probably died of cholera in the 1849 epidemic. His widow was working long hours as a pirn winder in a mill in the 1851 Census. With eight children and the three over 10 years also working she was still unable to maintain the youngest five children. She was classed a pauper in the Census because she got Parish Relief. This placed her in the records of the Parochial Board which tell that she died a couple of years later, leaving orphan children. These records show something of their struggles. ([Appendix C West Kilbride Connection](#)).

Moving to more recent times, just as Sanny Sloan was a county councillor for 25 years, his grand-daughter Agnes Graham/Davies was a Labour councillor in Ayr for twenty years. The radical values go on. Agnes's grand-daughter Katy Clark was MP for North Ayrshire & Arran for ten years until recently. She keeps on the courage, the fight and the independence of mind that Sanny personified.

## **A MINING FAMILY**

Alexander Sloan was born on 2 November 1879 soon after his family had moved to Rankinston. His parents were John Sloan and Esther McCloy who had married in Dalry on 27 December 1872. There were twelve children born to the couple, two daughters and ten sons ([Appendix D: Alexander Sloan](#)

and Agnes Sloan's families). The first three children were born in Dalry, a mining town in North Ayrshire and the rest were born in the south of Ayrshire in a small village called Rankinston <sup>2</sup>.

The ironstone miners and their families transferred when one old ironstone mine operated by the Glengarnock Iron & Steel Company shut in Dalry and Rankinston was opened as a village, with a new ironstone mine. Whole families from mothers with babes in arms, children to the elderly all had to walk the forty odd miles from Dalry through rough terrain. As the two sites were built to the same plan, they moved into the same street address. Any meagre belongings they had were sent on the mineral train. Some brought their front doors. These were the only doors in Rankinston in the miners' rows with numbers. Some of these were on Plantation Row which is shown in a photograph here. This was how it was then.



Photo supplied by D. Law. (Sanny's brother Henry lived in Plantation Row)

## EARLY DEATHS

Three of the twelve children died of natural causes before their time. The second child and elder daughter Margaret died aged ten years of tubercular meningitis, James died at thirty of tubular nephritis and the second last birth was of twins and one died. His name was Robert Thomson Sloan and he died at age three weeks of bilious vomiting. They named their next and last child after him <sup>3</sup>.

## LIFE IN AN AYRSHIRE MINING VILLAGE

Mining families lived in the appalling housing supplied by the mining company, miners' rows where the homes were tiny, one or two rooms with earth or brick floors and set-in beds. Often coal had to be stored under the bed if there were no coal-houses. In Rankinston they had coal-houses but no wash-houses which was a great problem, with all the filthy coal dust being brought home. Water was carried in buckets from stand-pipes in the village coming from the spring up the hill. Often in these villages the few outside earth toilets were shared with many others and sometimes were built without doors. They were stinking open middens. In Rankinston the earth toilets were shared among



only five families and had doors. They were still each used by dozens of people. They were however better built than in Dalry, easier to keep clean and so safer <sup>4</sup>.

### **THE TRUCK SYSTEM AS A METHOD OF CONTROL**

Until 1775 miners were sold with the mine. Scottish “Colliers, Coal bearers and Salters” were only freed from “slavery or bondage” by an Act of Parliament coming into effect on 1 July 1775 <sup>5</sup>. Similar UK legislation was brought in later to end colonial slavery when the slaves were freed but still tied to their plantation owners for periods of time. Colliers, coal bearers and salters here were obliged to remain with the same mine owner for seven more years, or three years if over 45 years of age. They also had to train someone to take over their jobs and then to go before a sheriff to show that they had satisfied the new law. The aim was to get more people to take up these unattractive jobs at a time when coal was much in demand because of the growth of industry but the Act didn't work, and few were freed. More was needed, and a further law came in twenty years later. In England freedom to miners had been granted under Elizabeth I.

Conditions had improved somewhat by Sanny's time in terms of hours, women and girls no longer carrying the heavy coal in baskets up many ladders etc. in the East of Scotland and boys under 12 years were banned but were still mediaeval <sup>6</sup>. Even as late as 1900 over a thousand UK miners were killed at work each year and tens of thousands were injured. The illegal ‘Truck System’ operated widely in Scottish mining areas when Sanny was young. It was a barter/exchange system. Earlier it had meant labour in exchange for the meagre necessities or tokens for the “company store”. The housing provided by the company was expensive. The mining company owned the village shop, the pub, the school etc. and provided a doctor which the miners paid a penny a week. Everyone was obliged to pay through the nose for whatever was needed and were forced to use the company facilities. In some places they had a “mark-up” of up to 30% in the company store. If the store did not stock an item and it had to be bought elsewhere, then permission was needed, and the surcharge often still had to be paid to the “company store”. No one was allowed to open a shop in the village or bring in a horse-driven mobile shop. Keir Hardie's mother had been stopped from opening a shop in her mining village in Lanarkshire. The miners lived in abject poverty in a strictly controlled environment <sup>7</sup>. The fact that the Truck System was forbidden by law did not need to bother the powerful mine owners.

### **FAMILY LIFE**

Despite having seven children at the time, the Census of 1891 shows that the Sloan family had an elderly lodger, a sixty-year-old ironstone miner from Inverness, to help make ends meet and this was common. It was surprising that so many of their children survived childhood. All the sons of the family left school at twelve years and went to work in the ironstone or coal mines <sup>8</sup>. Their only surviving sister Esther became a farm servant at the age of twelve, the only job open to young women there. She later married a miner, John Black from Burnfoothill.

The hard life was alleviated to some small degree by the closeness of families. Next door to the family of Esther McCloy and John Sloan lived Esther McCloy's younger brother and their widowed mother Esther Wilson. He had three young children, the youngest aged two years. His wife had died in childbirth. Life was a constant struggle <sup>9</sup>.



*Men and boys of Highhouse Colliery, Auchinleck, Ayrshire, c1890 – around the time Alex Sloan would have started work in an ironstone mine in Rankinston at age 12. He lost the sight of one eye in a roof fall soon after. Photograph copyright and courtesy of East Ayrshire Libraries.*

### **FAMILY AT WAR**

Four of the sons at the younger end of the family were killed in the First World War. Robert was the first to be killed. He died at the Second Battle of Ypres aged 19 years in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He had emigrated to Canada in 1913, along with another brother William who was returning to Burmis Alberta after a visit home. Robert had been a miner from 12 years and had been a reserve for a year in the Royal Scots Fusiliers. He worked for a couple of years in Burmis Alberta and was described in his army enlistment papers as a “motorman”. Please refer to [Appendix H](#).



*From his uniform, this is believed to be Robert Thomson Sloan, the baby of the family. He was in the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Alberta Regiment/Canadian Infantry/the Calgary Highlanders. The large feather indicates this. The photo was the only one in Sanny's family possession and was found in Sanny's son John's house when he died. Only subsequent identification of the regiment and family research clarified the position.*

Robert seems to have been killed when the Germans used chlorine gas for the very first time. Apparently French troops were holding the line when the gas clouds appeared, and they retreated. They knew what was happening. The Germans also moved back. The Canadians came up to replace the French and were gassed.

Robert was lost without trace on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1915 and is commemorated at the Menin Gate <sup>10 11</sup>. Interestingly the Canadian military records contain some personal details of appearance from the medical details taken on enlistment. He was 5'11" tall with fair hair, fair skin and blue eyes and there is a photocopy of a photograph in these records. The UK forces do not have this information.





*Family gravestone in Coynton Cemetery. The original red sandstone one unfortunately was replaced anonymously in 2004. Sanny Sloan is buried nearby with other members of the family.*

## FOR LINKS TO MILITARY RECORDS <sup>12</sup>.

William, the surviving twin, died next. He had gone to Canada with an older brother, Thomas in 1910 and worked there for two years. William had then come home briefly and returned taking his younger brother Robert back with him. They both lived in Burmis Alberta. He described himself as a miner when he joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force. A sapper in the 2nd Tunnelling Company of the Canadian Engineers, he died aged 23 years on 28 June 1916 although at the time he was only declared missing. He has a grave at Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (Transport Farm in West-Vlaanderen Belgium) <sup>13 14</sup>. The Canadian Volunteer War Records include information on appearance and a copy photograph. He was 6-foot tall, had fair skin, blue eyes and light brown hair.



Thomas was the next brother to die. He had gone in 1910 to Canada but after two years had come home to Scotland to visit. He returned to Canada with his brother Charles in 1912. He married in 1913 but came back to Scotland in late 1915 with his wife and son and worked briefly at Woodmuir Colliery south of Bathgate. He could not get work in the Ayrshire mines as the Sloan's were all blacklisted. He joined the 1st Battalion Scots Guards at Fauldhouse. He fought in France and Flanders. He was killed aged twenty-eight on 15 September 1916 and was lost without trace<sup>15 16</sup>. He is remembered at Thiepval Memorial, the Somme, France.

There had been a family story that one of the three "Canadian" soldiers had been married to a French Canadian Catholic and she had come over to Scotland after the war but in the course of researching this story it transpired that when Thomas came home during the war, he brought his Scots born Canadian wife with him, Mary Anne Murphy. She was a Catholic and they had a small son and she turned out to be the young woman in question.



*Mary Anne at her second wedding with her son John James. He spent the whole of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War in the navy and died aged 42 years as a result of his experiences. His family live in Canada mainly in British Columbia.*

Mary Anne had emigrated from Scotland in 1911 with her father and brother and was joined by the rest of her family in 1913. Her mother was of Irish origin, but the rest of the family had been born in Scotland. She met and married Thomas Sloan in Drumheller Alberta and their son was born there. They later returned to Scotland with their son John James. Whether this was for Thomas to say good-bye before going to war and to let his wife and son spend time with his family or whether they wanted to settle is not known. When Thomas joined the Scots Guards, Mary Anne and their son John James returned to Canada. Although she later married again, and it was a happy marriage, she was carrying Thomas Sloan's love letters in her handbag at the time of her death as an old lady. This is such a poignant story and illustrates the heartbreak of the times.

The descendants of Mary and Thomas's son John James made contact on reading this story. They had been trying to find out about their Ayrshire family for many years. They sent the photograph of

Mary Ann and her son. Tragically John James died young after spending the Second War in the navy which badly affected his health. He left a family which thrives in Canada with a son Thomas and granddaughter Patti in Vancouver who has supplied information for this story and is keenly interested in the family history.



*Donald Sloan in the uniform of the Black Watch (Picture courtesy of Peter Sloan)*

The telegrams telling their mother that both the missing William and Thomas were dead came on the same day. She was destroyed. Her hair apparently went white overnight. Sanny wrote to the War Office explaining the position and requesting that his brother Donald who was fighting at the Front be moved to a slightly safer posting. The response came back refusing, saying that it was an honour to die for your country.

Donald died three months later on 1 January 1917. He was the oldest of the four brothers who died. He was in the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion Black Watch (Royal Highlanders). He fought for 15 months at the Front surviving Longueval and Butte de Warlencourt only to be killed on return to day-to-day trench warfare. A heavy German mortar bomb fell on his dug-out causing it to collapse, killing the five men in it including Donald. He died at the age of thirty-three and is buried at Arras <sup>17</sup>

He was married with a nine-year-old son Donald and a seven-year-old daughter Esther, both born in Belfast and James aged four years who was born in Shettleston Glasgow. His fourth child Robert was born in Shettleston while he was at the Front and was a year and three days old when he was

killed. The baby died three months after him of whooping cough, pneumonia and meningitis. His wife Edith Emily Page and the three surviving children returned to Belfast where she came from. One small comfort for her was that Esther the only sister lived in Baillieston and was able to give support to Edith in Shettleston and her husband John Black registered her baby's death. What a tragic story! Apparently, Everton Football Club had tried to support her by helping her open a shop but the loss of Robert coming on top of that of her husband was too much to bear. She needed her family. She never remarried.



*Donald Sloan's widow Edith Emily Page and grandson Peter Sloan. (Picture courtesy of Peter Sloan)*

Donald played professional football for a number of years, for Ayr District, for (Greenock) Morton, then Belfast Distillery, a non-sectarian team from 12/08/1903. He was known as “the Young Giant” there as he was 6' 1" and 13 stone. Later he played with Everton from 17/04/1906 who paid £250 for him and then with Liverpool from 04/05/1908. His transfer fee from Everton to Liverpool was £300 when £40 was the usual maximum. He retired in May 1909 and went on to be a coach/player back with Belfast Distillery in August 1909. He then played for Bathgate. He had played goal keeper in a 1905 League Match for Ireland vs England in Manchester and he can be seen in a clip of the game



### **Don Sloan**

**Birthdate:** 31 July 1883

**Birthplace:** Rankinston, Ayr, Scotland

**Date of death:** 1 January 1917

**Other clubs:** Distillery (1903-06), Everton (1906-08),  
Distillery (2 / 1909-10), Bathgate

**Bought from:** Everton

**Signed for LFC:** £300, 02.05.1908

Liverpool and Everton Football Clubs are presently researching their former players who gave their lives in the First World War. Donald's descendants are mainly in the Belfast area, but one grandson emigrated and lives near Thomas's family in British Columbia, each unknown to the other until this family research started. (Family stories indicate that another, yet unidentified Sloan boy was also a professional footballer.)

To return to the Rankinston story, the Sloan boys' mother Esther McCloy was later given the unwelcome honour of unveiling the Rankinston War Memorial. She was also supposed to unveil the Rankinston section of the Coyllton Parish War Memorial because she had lost the most sons. The ceremony took place on 19 December 1920, but she was too ill to go, and a son represented her (See Appendix H, concerning the opening of Coyllton War memorial and the war records of the brothers who died in the Great War and of the only son of Charles Sloan who survived. He was Thomas Sloan who died aged 20 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> WW).

### **AFTER THE WAR**

There were five siblings left at the end of the war. The only sister Esther was bringing up a family. She began her married life in Rankinston with her husband John Black, and her six children were born there apart from one born in Dalry. They moved to Addiewell West Calder around 1906 when Sanny and his wife were evicted and blacklisted along with all their relatives. Esther and John later went to Glasgow for work Joseph their eldest child did well. He studied at Coatbridge Mining College for six years. He fought in the Scots Guards in the 1st World War from age 19 to 23 years. He worked in the Swedish Centre in London from 1922, married a Swedish woman and they had a daughter Ingrid. He volunteered for the army at age 44 years gaining a commission in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. He was commended for bravery. He spoke four languages and served as an interpreter in Belgium in 1945. His daughter later settled in Stockholm. He stood as a Labour candidate unsuccessfully after the war.

Sanny's brothers Henry and John were checkweighman and miners' agent respectively and lived and died in Rankinston. Henry lived on Plantation Row (photograph shown above). Both were involved in the union, Henry almost going to prison with Sanny in the 1921 Hunger Strike. This was really a lock-out when there were large coal stocks<sup>19</sup>. The case against Henry was found "not proven", interesting as everybody said that he was not even there at the scene of the crime. John died in Rankinston in 1943 and some of his family lived on for some time in Rankinston. Henry the last survivor died in 1953.

Charles had been to Canada in 1912 in Burmis, Alberta. He returned at some point to Scotland and joined the Highland Light Infantry from 1914 to 1915. He had married a young Rankinston war



widow Jane Young in 1923. She had been married to Thomas Clifford, also of Rankinston and they had four daughters. She and Charles had a son Thomas Wilson Stewart Sloan <sup>20</sup>. Charles returned alone to Canada in 1926 first to Nova Scotia and then Oshawa Ontario <sup>21</sup>. They all joined him in Canada in 1929. Thomas was their only child together, and he died with another Canadian Expeditionary Force in World War Two aged twenty years <sup>22</sup>.

Charles seems to have worked for General Motors once he was back in Canada with his family and lived in Oshawa Ontario until his death in 1941.

## **DEFIANCE AGAINST INJUSTICE**

Sanny Sloan was the fourth child and second son. Soon after he started working down the ironstone mine at the age of twelve there was a pit accident. He lost the sight of an eye. He only found out when the bandages were taken off after his operation and he looked in the mirror to wash his face. He then got a lighter job with less money. That was the company looking after you.

He became involved in the struggle for the rights of ordinary people through fighting the injustice which he had first experienced himself. He was just as concerned about injustice to others. The union was his main focus. He wanted equal opportunity for all. He was passionate about education. He joined his local School Board in 1900 and was later elected to Ayr County Council and served for twenty-five years. He was on the Education Committee for the whole of that period and held several council convenorships, including Housing and Education. He was on various public bodies as well as secretary of the Scottish Mine Workers Union, part of the Mineworkers Federation of GB, for a number of years. He stood for Labour in 1929 and 1931 in North Ayr & Bute but did not manage to unseat the Tory incumbent. He was MP for South Ayrshire for six years from 1939 to 1945.

He had married Agnes Sloan who came from Dalry where his family had lived before Rankinston (see Appendix D. Alexander and Agnes Sloan's families). She had left school at age ten years to work in a mill in Dalry. You could get permission to leave school early if your family was very poor and needed you to work. She was short in height and had to stand on a box to reach the machinery.

She was a bright go-getting woman and once she had settled in Rankinston she purchased a piece of land from a farmer. It was just below the bottom of the miners' rows and outside the village. Unlike everything else, the land did not belong to the mining company. She built what was to become a thriving grocery/general store/drapery. She ran it until the General Strike of 1926 when all the stock was given away to the starving miners in return for union promissory notes. After the strike the union was bankrupt. The stock was worth a considerable amount then, but they preferred to give it away. What else would they do?

This act of defiance, opening a shop, was ignored by the powers that be for some unknown reason. She did well as her prices did not have the mark-up of the company store. Shortly afterwards a new doctor came to the district to look after the farming community. The miners already had a doctor chosen by the company and paid a penny a week for this. However, Agnes felt that the new doctor, Dr Alexander McRae was much better than the existing one, so consulted him instead although it meant paying twice. When no sanction was imposed on her, other wives followed suit.

This was frank disobedience and went against the system so Sanny, Agnes who was pregnant and their two small children were evicted from the company house and he was sacked. Anything they owned was put out in the open. He was barred from working in any pit in Ayrshire. His family was also black-listed.

Agnes and Sanny lived in a cowshed rented to them by the farmer who had sold them the land for their shop. They built a house, Kerse Cottage beside the shop. The new doctor guaranteed their mortgage, or they would not have got a loan at all. The income from the shop kept them going. They already had two children, Robert and Esther and while they were living in the cowshed their last child John was born. He later became a mining engineer and then a teacher so the bad start in life did not hold him back. Robert the eldest became an insurance agent and Esther a shorthand typist in an office, which was a prestigious job at the time. She was goalkeeper in a women's football team at her work, Templeton's Mill in Ayr.

### **EVICTED AND WATER CUT OFF TO MORE THAN 700 PEOPLE**

The building of Kerse Cottage was difficult for Agnes and Sanny. They wanted to put running water and sanitation into the house, neither a feature of village life at the time. Nobody had running water and the coal company supplied water from a spring up the hill to communal stand pipes in the village. Everybody shared earth toilets which had to be emptied and were very unhealthy and smelly.

The couple asked the mining company for permission to access water. This was refused. Sanny found that the water pipes ran through their land, so they tapped in to the supply. Some months later when they had hot and cold running water and all mod cons, someone happened to say in front of a manager that Mrs Sloan was so lucky to have such amenities. He passed the information on. The company response was to cut off the water to the whole village of almost 800 people. They wanted to ensure that the Sloan's did without and did not care about anyone else.

Sanny did his homework and discovered that there was a local bye law that said that all schools had to have access to running water. The infant school was next door to Kerse Cottage and its stand-pipe been deprived of water for several days. Sanny went to court and forced the mining company to restore Rankinston's water supply.

Actually, the village had a healthy supply of gravitational spring water at a time when many other mining villages had water that was black and discoloured the food. This was the case in nearby Burnfoothill and in Addiewell Lanarkshire where the only Sloan sister had to go when they were blacklisted.



Kerse Cottage was the family home from 1906 to 1995. When Sanny died in 1945 his daughter Esther who had kept house for him and had done his secretarial work remained living there and later her daughter Nellie lived there until her death in 1995.

### **AGNES SLOAN'S DEATH**

The shop thrived but had to close in the 1926 General Strike as all the food etc. had been exchanged for union promissory notes. The union printed tokens which could be used to buy food, promising to pay later. Of course, this was not possible as the union was bankrupt. The soup kitchen for the village had been in their wash-house. The family had no regrets about losing all the stock and a great deal of money. The failure of their fight was a blow. A bigger loss that year was Agnes Sloan's death at forty-seven years of age of phlebitis and heart failure as well as gall bladder problems.

Her family background in Dalry was more typical of the time than Sanny's, with five siblings dying of TB, three in their early twenties. The average life-span was thirty-eight, about the same as Sanny's which was thirty-seven years. War was not to blame in this case. Only two of the nine children reached old age. Horrific housing conditions in Dalry, lack of sanitation, poor water, no health care and poverty all contributed.

Agnes Sloan was a remarkable woman in her own right with considerable business acumen but sound ethics. Apparently, she used to go to auction sales and buy items like porcelain to sell in her shop. While she was at it she would buy furniture to give away to people who had none. She was always a giver, typical of her community. In many ways she was more of a driving force than Sanny. They both were forward-looking. They had a radio and piano and even a motor-bike and drove it to London. Agnes had a great disappointment when they went to a theatre to see Douglas Fairbanks.

He was only 5 feet 2 inches tall and she burst into tears. She must have been quite brave to be driven by Sanny all that way with him and his poor eyesight.

### **1921 INDUSTRIAL DISPUTE /THE HUNGER STRIKE**

During all these years, Sanny had problems finding work because of his reputation as a union activist and because of his poor eyesight. He sold Singer sewing machines, he was an insurance salesman, he was Registrar of Births Marriages & Deaths, and he was also a union check weighman in the mines which was a union paid job to ensure that miners were paid properly for the weight of coal produced. Later he was a miners' agent. He was already a county councillor from 1919 to 1945 although that was unpaid.

In 1921 he became involved in an industrial dispute when in the middle of a strike. This was more of a "lock out". It followed the Sankey Commission Report. The Commission was set up to examine the mining industry which was badly run down, and which had been under government control during the war. A majority report had recommended nationalisation, but Lloyd George did not implement this, causing great disappointment. There followed huge pay cuts when the mine owners were given back control. Wages were now cut by 60%. There were large stocks of coal, so the owners wanted the miners to stop work altogether but wanted the pits to be in good working order for when the coal stocks ran out. The miners went on strike and the owners used "volunteers" to maintain the pits at the ready.

Sanny had been asked by a group of seventeen miners to go with them to Houldsworth Colliery, at Polnessan near Patna which he did. They had come to his house at about one o'clock in the morning on their way to stop volunteers from pumping out water. On arrival at the colliery at approximately 2.30 am, five of the men went into the office and confronted about sixteen or so volunteers. The leader of the five, Sanny, was said in court to have advised the volunteers that there was a large crowd outside, that they should stop work, put out the fires and close the pit. The volunteers cooperated and went home. Sanny denied exaggerating the numbers and said that the man who greeted him on his arrival had talked of them expecting a much larger number of miners than he had brought. He denied using threats.

The five men were charged with mobbing and rioting and were taken to Barlinnie Prison. If found guilty of this charge at that time it could mean imprisonment until death. One of the five seems not to have been prosecuted, George McFadzean. He gave evidence at Ayr Sheriff Court. Henry Sloan, Sanny's brother was prosecuted and his case was found "Not Proven". He was said not to have been at Houldsworth Colliery at all. Sanny, his elder son Robert and a miner called James Nimmo were found guilty. They appealed. The case went to the High Court of Justiciary and in a Stated Case in 1921-22 they lost the appeal. Their argument was that five could not form a mob. Sanny was sentenced to two months' imprisonment, James Nimmo to one month and Robert to two weeks <sup>23</sup>. There was legal discussion and doubt about the appropriateness of the charge. See appendices K and L for Sanny's Court case.

Sanny had a library of books, plus articles he had written and letters from then prominent people like Aneurin Bevan, Ernest Bevin, Sir Hugh Robertson of Orpheus Choir Fame, Clement Attlee, Krishna Menon who later was in Nehru's Cabinet in an independent India and others. Every scrap of paper was burned on his death, common apparently with working class activists. The family were therefore unaware of the importance of this legal case until one of them studied Law and went to a lecture on the use of the Criminal Law in industrial disputes. She recognised the story. There were many miners imprisoned in this strike and others, but punitive measures to break them and other workers did not stop then.



A reminder of the strike of 1921 also known as the Hunger Strike and the hard times of those years are on two stones at the side of the road near Waterside by Patna. Whitewashed and maintained to this day by the family of Joe Ireland of Patna who carved them, the stones are there in memory of the unemployed of 1921, 1922 and 1923.

### **VOICE FOR THE POOR**

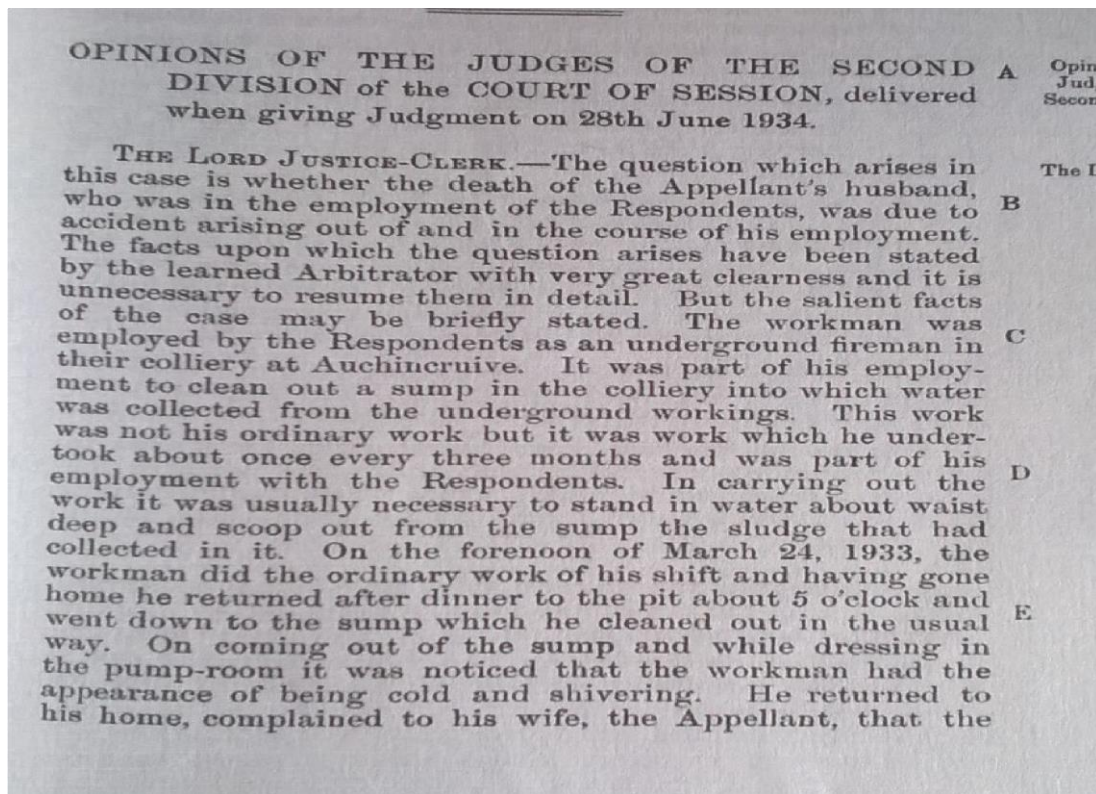
Alexander, always known as ‘Sanny’, went on to become a powerful voice for the poor and the under-dog. He often appeared in compensation cases in court and got good results for union members who had been injured or for their families if they had been killed. Roof falls, gas explosions and the use of explosives to mine the ironstone and coal, all meant frequent accidents. There had been a long history of compensation being denied by the courts, even when safety measures were the clear responsibility of mine owners, like providing safe cages for men to use to get down the pit. Apparently, safety was worse under Scottish mine owners.<sup>24</sup>

Even in the Nineteen Thirties the mining companies appealed to the Higher Courts if they lost a compensation case at the Sheriff Court and the Mineworkers’ Federation of GB would usually pay the legal costs of those fighting them. The minutes of the Federation where cases were discussed, and money allocated for miners’ legal costs are in the Mitchell Library in Glasgow. So is the employer’s trade magazine, the Colliery Guardian which gives a rosier slant on mining conditions which are described as better than many industries. This, when eyes and eyesight loss were common as were other major injuries and deaths.

Some thirty years after his death a relative contacted the National Union of Mineworkers in Edinburgh to ask about records concerning Alexander Sloan. The receptionist said that they had no records, but when Sanny Sloan’s name was given, she asked if it was an enquiry about a compensation case, as she had heard of him. Like other miners’ agents he had argued many cases in sheriff courts successfully, with no legal qualification. He was well remembered as he was particularly good.

One example was a case which he took in Ayr Sheriff Court of a woman Mrs Mary Currie McCrorie or Walker whose husband John Walker, a miner at Auchincruive Collieries Prestwick (Glenburn) had died because of undertaking an extra maintenance task on 24 March 1933. He was asked to do this task as an extra shift once every three months. He became ill after the work and died some days later on 30 March 1933. The case was lost at Ayr Sheriff Court where Sanny had represented the widow against the Baird & Dalmellington Company. The union appealed to the Court of Session and won. The company took it to the House of Lords. This poor woman and her children would have had no compensation and no income. The Mineworkers Federation discussed the case with Alexander Sloan present and agreed to pay the legal costs. She won her House of Lords Hearing and she and her children were awarded compensation and costs. It was hard won and in those days that was the way. The coal company legal team argued that the extra task undertaken every three months of cleaning the sump was voluntary and not part of Mr. Walkers usual work, so he was not entitled to compensation.

Edinburgh Court of Session, Judge says task part of Mr Walker's job.



Courtesy of Parliamentary Archives

Also, he died of pneumonia which was not an industrial injury. His death was not due to work. There were no industrial tribunals and no legal aid apart from that given by Trade Unions at this time.

*Awarded compensation and costs.*

the said Appellants :  
 It is *Ordered* and *Adjudged*, by the Lords Spiritual and Temporal in the Court of Parliament of His Majesty the King assembled, That the said Interlocutor, of the 28th day of June 1934, complained of in the said Appeal, be, and the same is hereby, Affirmed, and that the said Petition and Appeal be, and the same is hereby, dismissed this House : And it is further *Ordered*, That the Appellants do pay or cause to be paid, to the said Respondent the Costs incurred by her in respect of the said Appeal, the amount thereof to be certified by the Clerk of the Parliaments : And it is also further *Ordered*, That unless the Costs, certified as aforesaid, shall be paid to the party entitled to the same within One Calendar Month from the date of the Certificate thereof, the Cause shall be, and the same is hereby, remitted back to the Court of Session in Scotland, or to the Judge acting as Vacation Judge, to issue such Summary Process or Diligence for the recovery of such Costs as shall be lawful and necessary.

*Courtesy of Parliamentary Archives*

See Appendix J

## PARLIAMENT

During his twenty-five years on Ayr County Council, with great efforts to improve Housing and Education, he was, at the same time, Scottish Secretary of the Miners' Union for some years and Labour MP for South Ayrshire for six years. Known as the Miners' MP, he defended them valiantly. A man of wide interest he was involved in the fight for equal rights for women, for colonial freedom particularly working with the India League and what became the Movement for Colonial Freedom. He wanted a Jewish Homeland. He favoured Home Rule of the Federal Plan as well as Proportional Representation for the UK. He argued for the Scottish Grand Committee to meet in Scotland and have financial powers. He was a pacifist all his adult life being one of only eight MPs to vote against the Second World War. It is not clear now what he thought of the Spanish Civil War, but many believed in the ILP advocated self-defence. In Parliament he raised many of these issues<sup>25</sup>. He had concerns about poor treatment of serving British soldiers as when Dunkirk evacuated troops were not given their fares to visit home<sup>26</sup>, arms profiteering, children getting time off school to harvest potatoes<sup>27</sup>, etc. Another issue he was passionate about was Prestwick Airport. In a debate he requested on 29th March 1945, he argued for Prestwick Airport remaining the principle transatlantic airport has it had been during the war<sup>28</sup>. He had the support of all Scottish MP's (See [Appendix N](#)).

In his six years in Parliament he made 640 interjections<sup>29</sup>. He was always very active locally in taking up constituent matters and went out of his way to help anyone in trouble (See [Appendix E](#)). He stood for that seat in 1929 and 1931 unsuccessfully. He was elected to South Ayrshire when James Brown died in 1939.

He wrote on many topics particularly in Forward, (see [Appendix I](#)). This article quite scathing about the establishment view of the miners and follows on from his pursuit of nationalisation of the mines once elected to the Commons. In three long speeches in a two-day debate on 12 and 13 October 1943 which he instigated, Sanny defended the miners and argued the case for nationalisation of the mines<sup>30</sup>. Certainly, in the decades after nationalisation what happened was that accidents reduced, and deaths halved compared to the decades before and working conditions were much better in every way. He was right.

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War coal was privately owned, and owners were free to make decision, but miners were restricted by for example Order 1305. There was a ban on strikes, and wages were frozen. One example of what sort of thing was going on happened in September 1943. There was a crisis when a young man in Cardowan Colliery Lanarkshire was ordered to do the work of two men and refused unless given extra pay. He was sacked. Thirty four of his thirty-five colleagues went on strike, were fined and then jailed for non-payment. There was a two-week strike of 10,000 miners in Central Belt pits in support, only settled when a trade union official paid the fines. Some of the miners' union leadership wanted to support the establishment and did not want industrial action even when it was more than justified. Leaders like Sanny wanted social justice and a fair deal for the miners which was not in conflict with good industrial relations as far as he was concerned. Sanny denied the newspaper view that miners were endangering our fighting men because indeed their own families at home and in the Dominions had been decimated by the previous war and plenty of them were now fighting in this War. The fighting men were "their own" Scottish coal production was up anyway. He indicated that it was the private owners who were endangering productivity and were for example, exploiting difficult seams on the cheap at miners' expense and were hoping to leave good seams for their own future market benefit. This would be if the mines were nationalised and they got more compensation for better coal stocks. If they retained ownership after the War was over and had these better coal stocks to exploit they would benefit. Either way the owners would do well

<sup>31</sup>.

## STRANGE MEETING

Perhaps Sanny's greatest obsession was education. He had educated himself throughout his life. He was apparently a passionate speaker on the political stage and a great Burns man, popular at Burns' Suppers and well read. It was not about expecting public provision, which he wanted, it was also about personal commitment. Long after he died, Sanny's granddaughter, Agnes Graham Davies met a fellow head teacher on the bus. She asked Agnes where she came from and she said Rankinston. Then the stranger asked if she knew any Sloan's and Agnes said that she was a Sloan on her mother's side. The woman recounted her great debt to Sanny Sloan.

It turned out that Sanny had been asked for advice by her father, a miner with several children. She was in Sixth Year at school. He could not afford to send her to University. The fees could be got as a loan from the Carnegie Trust, but he could not pay her living expenses any longer. It was before the day of grants. Sanny said that he would send him the money quarterly for this and if the daughter ever became rich she could pay him back but if not, she should forget all about it. She had never met



him. None of his family knew of the story, which only came out thirty years later the Patna bus. He had a habit in a discreet way of helping people.

### **FAMILY WHO CARED**

So, what do you make of such a family of ordinary working-class heroes? They struggled and fought for their country, struggled and fought for a better life for everyone and for a dream of an egalitarian society. There were many like them in the mining and other working communities where the injustice was so great. Many of their aspirations were achieved after the Second World War by Labour under Clement Attlee and some more in the Wilson Government in the Sixties. As a result, we got the NHS, the Welfare State, council houses were built, education opened, discrimination against women reduced and opportunities for ordinary people improved. The Sloans along with everyone else benefited.

They were a close lot. In Alberta when four of them were before the Great War they lived in the same place when possible, one being Passburg. At home they were supportive to one another. They were into musicals, Burns and sporting especially keen on football and were political. They seem to have been active and hard working. They showed the kind of attributes that Scots folk in general showed at the time. The things they did were being done by thousands of Scots.

Are the people who fought through the centuries for progress, human rights for all men and women, for dignity and an end to poverty really the “enemy within” as the Tories say. The Sloan family shows the resilience and courage of the ordinary working family whether they might be fighting a war or pacifists fighting for peace or socialists fighting a cause or just ordinary folks struggling to get by. We should honour our working-class heroes and not forget them.

### **POST SCRIPT**

Over twenty years after his death an early N.U.M. Banner was discovered in Auchinleck under a community hall being demolished. The National Union of Mineworkers replaced the Mineworkers’ Federation of Great Britain on 1 January 1945, and Sanny Sloan died on 16 November 1945. The banner is for Auchinleck NUM and shows Sanny’s face on it. It also has a coal wreath round Sanny’s neck so may have been made just after his death.

Sanny went on the Hunger Marches of the Twenties and Thirties and some stopped at Auchinleck. The miners were involved in many struggles so the local man who found the banner kept it folded up under his pigeon hut for twenty years until the 1980s when the hut fell down. He advertised in a local paper for a home for the banner and it was saved by Sanny’s family and stored in a garage for another twenty years. It is now likely that it will be conserved in a year-long process at Manchester People’s History Museum (see [Appendix G](#)). The process is complicated by damage due to damp plus pigeon droppings and the measures necessary to protect the conservators’ health because of the mould and droppings. It is hoped that this family history and the banner will encourage local interest in working class history.



## List of Appendices

- [Appendix A](#) – Home rule devolution and Scottish Affair committee.  
[Appendix B](#) – Article Future of British Politics by Alexander Sloan (Proportional Rep)  
[Appendix C](#) – West Kilbride Archives  
[Appendix D](#) – Alexander Sloan and Agnes Sloan families  
[Appendix E](#) – Election Address 1929 County of Ayr and Bute, South Ayrshire By-election 1939 and County of Ayr and Bute 1945  
[Appendix F](#) – Belfast Distillery Team/Donald Sloan  
[Appendix G](#) - Estimate for N.U.M Banner  
[Appendix H](#) - Coynton War Memorial, Advertiser Article and Links to War Records  
[Appendix I](#) - Article Be careful Mr Bevin. Forward 15/4/1944.  
[Appendix J](#) – House of Lords Appeal compensation for death Mossblown Miner.  
[Appendix K](#) – Barlinnie log.  
[Appendix L](#) - Stated Case 1921 Lockout. Houldsworth Colliery.  
[Appendix M](#) - List of Speeches by Alexander Sloan.  
[Appendix N](#) - Historic Prestwick Airport speech by Alexander Sloan and letter of Appreciation from AEU (Amalgamated Engineering Union).

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/people/mr-alexander-sloan/>

<sup>2</sup> Scotland's People Website: Births Marriages & Deaths.

<sup>3</sup> Scotland's People Website: Births Marriages & Deaths.

<sup>4</sup> Ayrshire Miners' Union Report 1911, Thomas McKerrell & James Brown. See Ayrshire Miners Rows 1813. [www.ayrshirehistory.org.uk](http://www.ayrshirehistory.org.uk).

<sup>5</sup> A Mining Chronicle; Annals of the Coal Mining Industry of Great Britain from earliest times - 1984 George Montgomery P18.

<sup>6</sup> [https://mininginstitute.org.uk/links/links\\_history/](https://mininginstitute.org.uk/links/links_history/) Royal Commission on mines 1842, Coal Mining Resource Centre

<sup>7</sup> a) The History of the Working Classes in Scotland, Thomas Johnston. Reprint 1976 of 4th Edition 1974. P327. b) Scottish Mining Website Report on the Truck System, CSW Bowen & AC Sellar 1871 [www.scottishmining.co.uk](http://www.scottishmining.co.uk)

<sup>8</sup> 1891 Census.

<sup>9</sup> 1911 Census.

<sup>10</sup> Canada Passenger List 1881-1922: Family Search.

<sup>11</sup> Ancestry: UK Soldiers Died in First World War.

<sup>12</sup> Links to military records:

Robert Sloan

<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/1596051/SLOAN,%20R>

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/1596051>

William Sloan

<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/490666/SLOAN,W>

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/490666>

Thomas Sloan

<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/1553403/SLOAN,%20THOMAS>

Donald Sloan

<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/575000/SLOAN,%20D>

Thomas WS Sloan

<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2060229/SLOAN,THOMAS,W,S>

<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/2060229>

<sup>13</sup> Canada Passenger List 1881-1922: Family Search.

<sup>14</sup> Ancestry: UK Soldiers Died in First World War.

<sup>15</sup> Canada Passenger List 1881-1922: Family Search.

<sup>16</sup> Ancestry: UK Soldiers Died in First World War.

<sup>17</sup> Ancestry: UK Soldiers Died in First World War.

<sup>18</sup> Articles:

<https://playupliverpool.com/1917/01/27/donald-sloan-killed-in-action/>

<https://playupliverpool.com/1917/01/01/donald-sloan-don-sloan/>

<https://playupliverpool.com/1917/01/26/fourth-brother-to-fall/>

<https://playupliverpool.com/1909/08/07/coaching-irish-clubs/>

<https://playupliverpool.com/1909/04/26/liverpool-reserves-v-everton-reserves-5-1lancashire-combination/>

<http://www.footballandthefirstworldwar.org/donald-sloan-service-record-2/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don\\_Sloan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Sloan)

<http://lfcstats.co.uk/donsloan.html>

<http://www.lfchistory.net/Players/Player/Profile/845>

<http://www.scottishleague.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=4135>

<http://www.11v11.com/matches/leicester-fosse-v-liverpool-10-october-1908-57789/>

<http://www.evertoncollection.org.uk/search/results?q=Donald%20Sloan>

Film clip: <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-england-v-ireland-atmanchester-1905-1905-online>

Postcards of Belfast Distillery team: in Appendix F

<sup>19</sup> a) Minute of Case High Court of Justiciary 1921-22. b) Ayrshire Post 10 June 1921 P 4. c) The Mineworkers, Robert Duncan P 202.

<sup>20</sup> Scotland's People: Births Marriages & Deaths.

<sup>21</sup> Ancestry: UK Soldiers Died in First World War.

<sup>22</sup> Commonwealth War Graves Site.

<sup>23</sup> a) Minute of Case High Court of Justiciary 1921-22. b) Ayrshire Post 10 June 1921 P 4. c) The Mineworkers, Robert Duncan P 202.

<sup>24</sup> The History of the Working Classes in Scotland, Thomas Johnston. P335 and P341.

<sup>25</sup> [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1939/may/04/military-trainingbill#S5CV0346P0\\_19390504\\_HOC\\_418](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1939/may/04/military-trainingbill#S5CV0346P0_19390504_HOC_418)

<sup>26</sup> [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/mar/05/campsscotland#S5CV0358P0\\_19400305\\_HOC\\_192](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/mar/05/campsscotland#S5CV0358P0_19400305_HOC_192)

<sup>27</sup> [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/jun/18/evacuatedtroops#S5CV0362P0\\_19400618\\_HOC\\_93](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/jun/18/evacuatedtroops#S5CV0362P0_19400618_HOC_93)

<sup>28</sup> [https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1945/mar/29/prestwickairport#S5CV0409P0\\_19450329\\_HOC\\_271](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1945/mar/29/prestwickairport#S5CV0409P0_19450329_HOC_271)

<sup>29</sup> [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1945/apr/10/potato-harvesting-schoolchildren#S5CV0409P0\\_19450410\\_HOC\\_10](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1945/apr/10/potato-harvesting-schoolchildren#S5CV0409P0_19450410_HOC_10)

<sup>30</sup> [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1943/oct/13/coalminingsituation#S5CV0392P0\\_19431013\\_HOC\\_348](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1943/oct/13/coalminingsituation#S5CV0392P0_19431013_HOC_348)

<sup>31</sup> Scottish Labour History, Volume 52, 2017, Pg 85, Editor's notes.