

## The Country of Coal

David Frank

Volume 21, 1988

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt21re01>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Frank, D. (1988). The Country of Coal. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 21, 233–242.

## REVIEW ESSAYS/ NOTES CRITIQUES

### The Country of Coal

David Frank

John Benson, *British Coalminers in the Nineteenth Century: A Social History* (New York: Holmes and Meier 1980).

Royden Harrison, ed., *Independent Collier: The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered* (Sussex: Harvester 1978).

Fred Reid, *Keir Hardie: The Making of a Socialist* (London: Croom Helm 1978).

Angela John, *By the Sweat of their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines* (London: Croom Helm 1980).

Keith Dix, *Work Relations in the Coal Industry: The Hand-Loading Era, 1880-1930* (Morgantown, W. VA.: Institute for Labor Studies, West Virginia University 1978).

Carter Goodrich, *The Miner's Freedom: A Study of the Working Life in a Changing Industry* (New York: Arno Press 1977).

David Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1981).

John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1980).

David Frank, "The Country of Coal," *Labour/Le Travail*, 21 (Spring 1988), 239-248.

THE COUNTRY OF COAL is a discontinuous land. Like the black coal seams that outcrop on both sides of the Atlantic, it runs from the mining settlements of Scotland and Wales to the coal towns of West Virginia and Illinois. Its course carries us from the earliest stages of the Industrial Revolution to the most recent battles for economic democracy. The power of coal has been a founding force in the development of industrial capitalism, and the people of this relatively unrecognized country have shared much history in common. Throughout its development the coal industry has often appeared to illustrate some of the central paradoxes of industrial civilization, and as a result the historiography of the coal miners has a long and vivid history.<sup>1</sup>

The most recent explosion in coal-mining historiography has been the outcome of several converging influences in the 1970s. The energy crises of the 1970s reminded industrial societies that despite the advance of other forms of production coal remained a significant source of power. The coal miners erupted on the public consciousness in Britain (1972) and the United States (1978) in major strikes which demonstrated the extent to which the coal country remained a highly politicized territory within the contemporary working class.<sup>2</sup> At the same time the rediscovery of the working class by a new generation of students and historians awakened interest in the coal country, and the result has been a flood of new scholarly work. Indeed the output in the form of books, theses, articles, and documents is difficult to catalogue and even more difficult to appreciate in the pages of a review article. For the moment the discussion will focus on a small group of British and American studies.<sup>3</sup>

A useful starting point is provided in John Benson's survey of the social history of British coal miners between the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Institutional labour history has not neglected the coal miners, but, in the spirit of the new social history, Benson reminds us that the coal miner enjoyed a life of substance beyond the union hall. Even in the pages

<sup>1</sup>For useful bibliographies on British coal miners, see J.E. Williams, "Labour in the Coalfields: A Critical Bibliography," *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 4(1962), 23-32, and the subsequent sequel, Robert G. Neville and John Benson, "Labour in the coalfields (II). A select critical bibliography," *Ibid.*, 31(1975), 45-59. The American work can be approached in the entries in Maurice Neufeld, Daniel J. Leab and Dorothy Swanson, *American Working Class History: A Representative Bibliography* (Ann Arbor 1983).

<sup>2</sup>See E.P. Thompson, "A Special Case," *New Society*, 24 February 1972, reprinted in Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (London 1980), 65-76. In the American context, see James Green, "Holding the Line: Miners' Militancy and the Strike of 1978," *Radical America*, 12(1978), reprinted in *Workers' Struggles, Past and Present: A Radical America Reader* (Philadelphia 1983), 321-43.

<sup>3</sup>Serious students of the coal miners should not, however, overlook the important work by social historians working in other national contexts. See in particular Rolande Trempé, *Les mineurs de Carmaux, 1848-1914* (Paris 1971) and Donald Reid, *The Miners of Decazeville: A Genealogy of Deindustrialization* (Cambridge 1985).

of standard labour histories, he finds a condescending image of the coal miners as a simple folk, concerned with only a few basic needs, living hard, difficult lives interrupted by bouts of drinking and violence. To illuminate the social life of the coal miner and his family, he takes us from one coalfield to another, down the pit and into the pay office, and into the miner's home and family, his pubs and his clubs. Of course, the development of the coalfields was uneven and subject to regional variations, and there was a wide range of individual behaviour among the coal miners, but this does not prevent Benson from challenging an array of easy stereotypes about the social history of the mining community. Most coal miners, he points out, did not live in the isolated, homogeneous pit villages which have dominated the imagination of novelists and sociologists. The work force itself was far from uniform and most mining settlements featured a vigorous community life. Particularly through their voluntary associations, including cooperatives, relief societies, and trade unions, the coal miners succeeded in establishing a rudimentary system of social security in the coalfields. By the end of the nineteenth century, the coal miners worked in greater safety than they had a century earlier and their standard of living had improved. This volume reminds us that, even when they did not join unions in large numbers, the men and women of the coal country lived and worked in a world in which they often attempted, with some success, to improve the quality of their lives. The strength of this book is in the scope of its treatment, which examines a wide range of topics and reveals numerous opportunities to pursue local comparisons. It is hard to think of a more useful introduction to the social history of the coal country.

The conventional image of the coal miners as company slaves receives its closest scrutiny in the collection edited by Royden Harrison, *Independent Collier: The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered*. The volume emerges from the work of the Centre for the Study of Social History at the University of Warwick and amply demonstrates the sophistication of recent work in British social history. This book, Harrison writes, "was not conceived in terms of a response to Adam Smith, although it might be read as one." In *The Wealth of Nations* Smith had drawn a sharp contrast between the independent workman and the dependent wage-slave, for whom the collier served as a convenient prototype. By contrast this volume stresses the uneven transformation of conditions in the British coalfields and portrays the collier as a skilled workman with his own claims to membership in the labour aristocracy. It is not clear how broad a claim the authors would stake for this theme, and it obviously deserves further application and exploration. As Harrison himself cautions, "the Independent Collier tended to be an ideal type rather more than a securely rooted character." Indeed it may be that the independent collier was most important for his later residual cultural symbolism.

Among the eight specialized studies in this collection the myth of the independent collier is best summarized in the studies of the Scottish coalfields by Alan Campbell and Fred Reid.<sup>4</sup> Rooted in the emancipation of the coal miners from serfdom in 1799 and reinforced by the skills and individualism required of the coal miner in his daily work, this was the outlook of the self-improving, skilled collier, a man who regarded himself as an independent producer contracted to the coal companies. It was his belief that with proper understanding his employers could be persuaded to allow him and his fellows the wages, status and respect to which they were entitled. In trade union policy, Alexander MacDonald, the dominant miners' leader of the 1860s and 1870s, reflected this hopeful quest for a state of harmony between masters and men. Their outlook translated into support for sliding scales to govern wages, restriction of output to govern the coal market, conciliation and arbitration to settle differences. The problem was that in the context of the economic and social changes taking place in the nineteenth century coal industry, this approach was a failure. Small operators were being replaced by large iron companies, with extensive technology and new ideas about work-discipline. Chris Fisher's study of the "Free Miners" of the Forest of Dean offers a dramatic illustration of the expropriation of the small producers in one corner of the industry, while Alan Campbell shows how the recruitment of large numbers of unskilled, inexperienced labourers in Lanarkshire undercut the position of the traditional colliers. By the 1870s and 1880s the world of the independent collier was in full-blown crisis. The political dilemma of "the moral workman" would be resolved by a new generation of labour leaders who would be supporters of independent labour politics, and nationalization of the coal mines. Culturally, however, the outlook of the independent collier would remain a residual part of working-class culture, closely associated with ideals of working-class respectability among the coal miners.

From the outlook of the independent workingman to the ideal of class solidarity: this was the crucial transition in the rise of the coal miners' union in Scotland in the late nineteenth century. In British labour history no individual is more associated with this change than James Keir Hardie. The story of Hardie's progress from pit to Parliament has been one of the staples of British labour history and readers might wonder if there was anything more to be said on the subject. In fact, Reid's biography, which focuses entirely on Hardie's formative years culminating in his rise to national prominence as a Member of Parliament and leader of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in the 1890s, has much to reveal about Hardie's development. In trac-

<sup>4</sup>A brief early statement of the theme was provided by Fred Reid, "The Independent Collier," *New Edinburgh Review*, (1975), 30-3. A review of Alan Campbell's book, *The Lanarkshire Miners: A Social History of Their Trade Unions, 1775-1874*, is found in *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985), 238-9.

ing Hardie's early route through the Lanarkshire coalfield, Reid has given the theme of the independent collier its most thorough and sensitive application. Relying on the rich local sources and the methodologies of social history, Reid shows that Hardie was nurtured not only by those mainstays of Scottish democracy, Robert Burns and the Holy Bible, but also by the traditions and values of the coal mining community. Hardie's conversion to socialism in the 1880s was a significant development, but Hardie never fully abandoned the romantic, élitist views of the independent collier. This moral and social outlook continued to inspire his personal quest for heroic achievement and it also influenced his strategic hopes for alliances between organized labour and sympathetic middle classes. "Some of the seeds of socialist disunity were thus sown in the consciousness of the frustrated labour aristocracy of the Scots coalfields," Reid concludes, "The Lanarkshire collier who set more store by the support of sympathetic middle-class opinion than by the solidarity of working-class agitation had emerged as the leader of a new socialist party which emphasised the importance of the moral conversion of the rich and the uplifting of the degraded poor." After the establishment of the ILP, there would be little change in Hardie's fundamental outlook, and the whole history of British social democracy bears the imprint of his legacy. These are compelling conclusions which show the close connections between culture and politics. The result is "social biography" at its best.

Equally revealing insights into the country of coal are provided in Angela John's revisionist account of women's work in the nineteenth-century British coal industry. Feminist scholars have devoted relatively little attention to the mining community, and it has been easily assumed that mining society can be treated exclusively as a species of male culture. Yet as late as 1841 there were probably as many as 6,000 women mineworkers in the British coalfields, about 4 per cent of the total work force. In the pits they usually performed harsh, heavy work, dragging loaded tubs of coal and, like the children working in the mines, contributed in this way to the family wage. Although an investigation of women workers was not among their terms of reference, one of the strongest and most effective recommendations of the Children's Employment Commission of the 1840s was the exclusion of female workers from work in the coal mines. Excluded from work underground, in some districts women established a presence as surface workers at the pithead, and in the 1890s there were still more than 4,000 women employed in the industry, usually engaged in tasks such as sorting coal on picking belts. These female workers violated Victorian expectations about the proper functions of womanhood, and were even reputed to smoke pipes and wear trousers. The evidence offers a fascinating case study in the Victorian double standard regarding the role of women. Each for their own reasons, employers and suffragists tended to defend the women's right to work; others idealized the "pit brow lasses" in full romantic fashion; still others were concerned about

the low wages and physical hazards of the industry; and well-intentioned philanthropists sought to deprive the women of their livelihood by extending the regulations banning women's work. The attitudes of male miners were ambivalent. From the viewpoint of the independent collier, a miners' leader such as Alexander MacDonald opposed female pit work, regarding it as a symptom of the degraded condition of colliery labour; from this viewpoint the presence of women in the industry could even be regarded as an affront to the breadwinning ability of the collier and a violation of his ideals of domesticity. At the same time these women came largely from mining families and were the mothers, daughters, and sisters of the coal community; thus there was a natural tendency to defend them against attacks on their virtue and their wages. The issue became a kind of test case for the right of women to work, and efforts to extend the laws banning women's work were narrowly defeated in 1887. The eventual decline of women surface workers in the twentieth century owed more to mechanization than legislation. This is a solid, memorable study in social history, a genuine achievement in rescuing a forgotten group of workers from the past and shedding light on the larger world to which they belonged. It only needs to be added that paid employment was never the most typical form of women's work in mining society, and this study should prompt scholars to devote greater attention to the women of the coal country.

On the other side of the Atlantic, a modest publication issued by the Institute for Labor Studies at West Virginia University offers an excellent short introduction to the work process in the coal industry during the historic heyday of the American industry. This is the period Keith Dix describes as "the hand-loading era." Despite various innovations in the mining of coal, mechanization proceeded unevenly and the loading of coal proved an exceptionally difficult challenge. In the 1920s the coal miners were still loading coal by shovel much as they had in the 1880s or indeed in the 1830s. As long as this remained the case, the coal mines could not be restructured as underground factory assembly lines and the coal miners were able to escape close managerial supervision. Thus a relatively minor technological lag in one phase of the production process preserved traditional work relations in the coal mines and provided the structural opportunity for mineworkers to exercise certain forms of autonomy within the workplace. In doing so, the miners employed institutions such as the pit committee and the union and resorted to collective actions such as restriction of output and localized work stoppages. In considering the safety question in the mines, however, we are reminded of the ambiguities surrounding the miner's position and the dangers of regarding his independence from an excessively romantic perspective. The reluctance of companies and governments to take responsibility for reducing the devastating death toll in the industry was nicely complemented by the doctrine of individual responsibility for workplace safety. Since the coal

miner was paid under a piece-work tonnage system and safety measures were, technically, unproductive labour, he was forced to calculate the daily trade-off between safety and income. Dix concludes that "we are left with the rather depressing conclusion that had miners not fought hard and long for union protection and had they not been willing to refuse to work and to prevent others from working during local stoppages, the death toll in this industry might have been substantially higher than it was." The well-known militancy of the coal miners, then, was in part rooted in the structural opportunities and necessities of the industry.

In pursuing this connection, Dix is following in the footsteps of Carter Goodrich. *The Miner's Freedom* (1925) was a sequel to Goodrich's earlier study of workers' control in Britain and is now available in a facsimile reprint edition. This was perhaps the first attempt to explore the relationship between the spectacular upheavals of the coal miners' strikes and the more obscure everyday workplace experience of the coal miners. Goodrich found that coal-mining in the United States in the 1920s remained a largely traditional craft in which the individual coal miner remained "a remarkably unbossed workman." The contradiction between the coal miner's autonomy in the workplace and his position of economic dependence in the outside world helped fuel the periodic rebellions which mark the history of the coalfields. In this light it is tempting to ask to what extent the subsequent transformation of the coal industry under the impact of loading machinery and the advent of longwall mining, which began in the late 1920s, tended to undermine the sources of working-class resistance in the coal industry. In 1925 Goodrich had posed the question in an optimistic vein:

The coming of factory methods into the very strongholds of the miner's freedom may well be expected to lead to even greater restlessness and discontent. And as the onward sweep of the machine process carries away the old indiscipline of the mines, that discontent may take the form of a movement toward what the operators would doubtless call the *new indiscipline* of increasing workers' control, — a demand, that is, for a miners' freedom to take the place of the miner's freedom they are losing in the change.

Unfortunately, the question remains beyond the scope of Dix's short study; and the theme has not been adequately pursued by other researchers. For the most part coal-mining historiography remains focused on the classic era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

While the coal miners exercised some independence inside the workplace, they were often subjected to the most effective social controls in the outside world. This was particularly true in the newer, most rapidly industrializing, areas of the American coal industry. In the company-owned towns of West Virginia the social structure was dominated by company housing, company stores, company churches, and company police. Some of the most violent episodes in American labour history took place in West Virginia in the 1910s and 1920s, and the subject easily lends itself to sensationalism and a neglect



of the larger dimensions of the coal miners' history. Fortunately, the influence of the new social history is apparent in David Corbin's lucid study, which traces the transformation of southern West Virginia from a territory of company towns to a working-class battleground. The independent-minded coal miners were slow to rally to the United Mine Workers of America, largely because they were not primarily concerned about the issues of shorter hours and higher wages which the union was advancing. When they did unite behind the UMW in 1912, the local rank and file overwhelmed the traditional leadership with their militancy, and the coal operators began to fear the prospects of "armed revolution" in West Virginia. Concerned about their competitive position in the coal markets, the employers embarked on a crusade to drive the UMW out of their territory, using both barbed wire fences and social welfare experts to strengthen the paternalism of the company town system. In this context the UMW achieved the status of something near a secular church, the repository of the miners' hopes for the respect and dignity of which they were deprived in mining society. Corbin's treatment of some aspects of working-class culture, such as the remarkable solidarity of white and black coal miners and the significance of popular religion in their idealism, is particularly illuminating. The confrontation exploded in violence at the end of World War I. Union organizers and private police, ordinary miners and strikebreakers alike were gunned down during three years of guerilla warfare. By 1921 the miners were organizing their resistance in armed marches which ultimately brought out federal troops and bombing planes. More than 500 miners would be indicted for murder, insurrection, and treason. And yet, Corbin concludes, the miners were not revolutionaries seeking to overthrow the capitalist system. For the most part their idealism was framed in quotations borrowed from the Bible and in assertions derived from the Bill of Rights. Their aim was not to socialize but to Americanize the coalfields, but their idealism was rooted in a powerful consciousness of oppression and exploitation. To be sure, Corbin does not go on to examine the future fate of those hopes beyond 1921. The decade of the 1920s would find the UMW retreating from explosive situations such as that in West Virginia, determined to preserve the union in only the most secure of its districts. This fine local study is at its best in explaining the underlying struggle for power within coal mining society which was at the root of the UMW's many battles for union recognition during this era.

This particular attempt to change the balance of power in mining society failed, and in the popular imagination Appalachia has continued to appear as the land of the hillbillies, the neglected victims of a world that has passed them by. According to John Gaventa's study of another Appalachian mining area, this only demonstrates the extent to which perceptions of power and powerlessness have themselves been subject to manipulation and control. This book emerges out of the author's studies in political theory, in

which he is concerned to demonstrate the extent to which attitudes and participation in the democratic system are determined by extrinsic power relationships. Unlike many theoreticians, however, Gaventa employs oral history and demonstrates a good command of local sources. This study focuses on the Clear Fork Valley, situated on the border of eastern Kentucky and Tennessee. During the formative years of this mining district, the political system of the tiny unincorporated coal camps had little to offer the coal miners: "The vote was like a franchise in a foreign election." This study is particularly insightful in analyzing the role of the local élites in establishing ideologies of industrial solidarity and regional consciousness which supported the hegemony of the absentee coal companies. Gaventa also shows that the coal miners were prepared to engage in collective action. His discussion of the working-class upsurge of 1931-32 in Kentucky and Tennessee, however, notes the ways in which the meaning of this rebellion was redirected and reduced by local élites, by liberal sympathizers, by Communist organizers, and by John L. Lewis. Although all excursions into the coal country are marked by an awareness of the continuities between past and present, this study makes the most concerted effort to draw the historical connections between past and present. The second half of the book is devoted to the contemporary situation, examining such issues as the miners' uncritical loyalty to the UMW and conflicts with the coal companies over land ownership and strip-mining. What appears to the outsider as a culture of fatalism emerges, on closer inspection, as the despair of a colonized society paralysed by its very lack of power. Discontent remains latent, emerging only occasionally in the form of challenges to the surrounding inequalities. In the 1970s the local coal industry was more productive than ever before: "The Appalachian coal valley of today is not poor; yet its people remain so. They are not 'on the outside looking in,' but very much on the inside, at the bottom, looking up at the nation's inequalities." The social historian might have preferred a less selective account of local history and a more systematic examination of the working-class culture represented by the miner-mountaineers. Nevertheless, the study achieves its central purpose and demonstrates how a strong conceptual framework can provide insights into the sources of accommodation and resistance in the coal country.

In its own way each of these individual studies identifies significant landmarks and offers points of entry into the country of coal. Perhaps the most significant achievement of the recent historiography has been the reconstruction of the historical image of the coal miner in the light of the sources and methods of social history. As John Benson points out, the history of the coal miners cannot be regarded as synonymous with the history of their unions. The social history of the coal miners has a richness, a variety, and a complexity that can be too easily overlooked. As these studies illustrate, there are not only continuities but also striking contrasts to be found across time

and from place to place, and we must be wary of transferring conclusions from one context to another. Indeed, attempts at comparative analysis have been relatively rare.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, a judicious use of the international literature can prove helpful in framing questions and developing an analysis of the Canadian experience. It is obvious that the pace of technological change varied greatly from one coalfield to another, and from one enterprise to another, and it will be illuminating to view the changing work relations in the Canadian coalfields from the international perspective. Given the significance of British immigration among the Canadian coal miners, especially among the leadership of the coal miners' unions, it will be useful to explore the outlook of the independent collier in the Canadian coalfields. Similarly, studies of Scotland and Appalachia provide some standards against which we can begin to measure the social structure of the coal mining community and the dimensions of working-class culture in the coalfields. The Canadian research agenda is full of possibilities. The most successful recent studies in the social history of the coal miners have demonstrated that local studies and national contexts can shed light on issues of broad concern to historians of the working class. For students exploring the Canadian terrain, this literature offers rich guidance, and expectations are correspondingly high.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>One early effort was Harold M. Watkins, *Coal and Men: An Economic and Social Study of the British and American Coalfields* (London 1934). See also the review article by John H.M. Laslett, "The Independent Collier: Some Recent Studies of Nineteenth Century Coalmining Communities in Britain and the United States," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 21 (Spring 1982), 18-27.

<sup>6</sup>For a listing of recent work on the coal miners in Eastern Canada, see Ian McKay, "The Realm of Uncertainty: The Experience of Work in the Cumberland Coal Mines, 1873-1927," *Acadiensis*, XVI, 1 (Autumn 1986), 4-8, n. 2-7. Work on Western Canada is identified in Allen Seager, "Socialists and Workers: The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-1921," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (Fall 1985), 23-59.