

The Impact of Coal Mining in the Evolution of Appalachian Kentucky Literature: A Retrospective

James B. Goode

My topic is one dear to my heart because of my deep connection to the coalfields of Appalachia. Both my grandfathers were coal miners and my Daddy spent 40 years in the industry—much of that as a rank-and-file, union, underground coal miner at the International Harvester Mine at Benham, Kentucky. The drama that played daily in my family's life and community has been paramount in my writing and prompted me to a lifelong pursuit of reading, studying, and writing about the literature related to Appalachian coal communities.

A poem I penned about the emotionally intense drama of life for coal miners appeared in my 1993 book of poetry *Up From the Mines* and sets the stage for this brief talk*:

PIECING THE COAL QUILT

These are the laboring ones of the tired, the poor.
Tempting tons of fate poised above their battery lights
The sky so black, no seams of sunlight break across vision
To reveal the nature flaws waiting to claim a life to dust.
And spent for what?
For the survival of man?
For the whims?
For the pleasures?
From darkness they came into the world
To toil in darkness
And to darkness will return.
I have been to their funerals.
Sometimes in the coal camp houses
Caskets wet with tears
Roll from the detached steel hands of morticians
Across the vision of innocent children
Who wonder? And Why?
About a world of such sadistic appetites.
And What For?

About such games of chance.
They become wiser among the screams of grief.
Callouses form and thicken
As hundreds of pallid faces pass the motionless head
In the open casket.
Some pause in awkward silence,
Some in frenzied tears
Over the men who never look like themselves,
Were never taken because they wanted to be—
Never because God wanted them to be.
These are the union ones of the tired, the poor.
Brotherhood is in the cigar smoked space of union halls.

Sacrifice is there—
Quilts pieced for the yet unborn.
These are abstract ideas,
A religion the selfish corporate fat
Fails to comprehend.
Here, they fight oppression and discrimination
For a place in a world of hungry dogs lapping away the land.
These are the fearful ones of the tired, the poor.
Their hollow eyes watch them leave
In mountain fog.
Miners taken alive from the houses and
Pulled hard by the hungry mouths
To the black holes are watched
As they climb the hillside.
Women sit in empty rooms finishing coffee,
Counting years
Filled with each separate hour and minute.
All time passes . . .
Anonymity
Spent for the survival of men?
Spent for the whims?
Spent for the pleasures?
These are the dead ones of the tired, the poor.
Tombstones rise above the hill.
Names disappear here.
Deeds become lost
Emptiness resides in the sound of rustling grasses
Scratching across these cold stones.
Earth is the master—
Claiming back to dust all living things.
Rows of miners wither.
Coal cars rust on the side tracks
Beside the honeysuckle graveyard fence.
These are the young ones of the tired, the poor.
Their hair sweeps away the past.
In their ears mechanical mining machines grind eerie tunes.

These are siren songs
Whining through damp corridors.
Shuttle cars cough ripped coal on the long rolling belts
As they lick toward morning.
Tipples eat.
Young faces harden in the tunnels without end.
Coal dust traces the lines on their hands—
Maps of quilts telling stories
Of men
Spent for the survival and whims and pleasures.
I have been in their eyes.

Many times I have known their vision,
Spoken their words as they have thought them
Bathed in coal dust and immersed in dark caverns.
I have seen my quilt pieced long before my birth.
I have seen the toil soaked in every thread.
My battery light has been the words
Searched out of the darkness
And I write of them
Who from darkness came into the world
To toil in darkness
And to darkness
Shall return.

Thousands of coal themed literary and journalistic works have been published in the United States since the 1800s. Kentucky is more than an apt representative microcosm of the influence this industry has had on Appalachian letters over the two-and-a-half centuries. But because of time constraints, I can highlight only a few literary works that exemplify the canon of coal literature seated in the Commonwealth.

Coal has often been called “the rock that changed the world” and Kentucky is no exception. The mineral has had far-reaching effects at every social, political, economic, and environmental level within the Commonwealth and region. Even with the decline in the coal industry in the search for cleaner alternatives, the industry still remains prominently embedded in Appalachian culture.

Coal began to be mined in the early 1800s, but the real peak began at the onset of the 20th Century. From the turn of that century through the late 1960s, over 20,000 coal camps emerged in North America to support the voracious appetite for steel production and energy generation. Many were located in remote locations where, in the infancy stages, miners and their families lived in temporary housing, sometimes tents or quickly constructed bunk-house structures. Hence, the assignment of “Coal Camp.”

According to historical documents, the first recorded person to discover and use coal in Kentucky was the Virginia physician and explorer Dr. Thomas Walker who, in April of 1750, used the mineral to fuel his campfires near where Barbourville in Knox County is located (“Historic Sites”). In 1820, the first commercial mine, known as the “McLean drift bank,” opened in Kentucky near the Green River at Paradise in Muhlenberg County, producing 820 short tons. Production totals in Kentucky grew to 100,000 tons by 1843, one million tons by 1879, and 42.1 million tons by 1920. By 1923, the all-time high United States employment of 704,793 bituminous coal and lignite miners was reached. For the last several decades, Kentucky has consistently

ranked among the top three states in total coal production. In 2011, 400 mines in Kentucky produced just short of 107 million short tons of bituminous coal, putting it behind West Virginia with 135 million, and Wyoming with 336 million. The number of full time miners in 2011 was 19,102 (Kentucky Coal Education). This incredible rapid growth of the coal industry had a significant and lasting impact on the theme, setting, plot, characters, and arc of the literature of Kentucky in American letters.

The effects of coal upon the literature of Kentucky—particularly across genres—has been significant. For purposes of this paper, literature is loosely defined as poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and drama—what is generally referred to as Belletristic writing, as well as the considerable academic writing that has examined the region from a historical, political, psychological, sociological, and critical perspective. A 1988 article written by Stephane Elise Booth titled “The American Coal Mining Novel: A Century of Development” offers an important look at a historical accounting of the evolution of the American coal mining novel. Booth divides the article into five time periods: 1) The rise of industrialization, 1876-1895; 2) The ascendance of the United Mine Workers of America, 1895-1910; 3) The era of opulence versus poverty, 1910-1929; 4) The Great Depression and World War II, 1930-1945; 5) The postwar era, 1945-1981 (125). Since the publication of Booth’s article, one could add at least one additional overlapping time period: The Rise of Environmental Awareness 1962–Present.

Booth credits Upton Sinclair’s 1917 novel *King Coal* for bringing coal camp issues to national attention by illuminating the plight of the rank-and-file miner. His examination of the feudal state created by mining companies beginning in the early twentieth century highlights how coal companies exacted control of workers like they were ruled by medieval lords in an ancient kingdom. Most of this practice resulted from an effort to maintain the skilled workforce required to populate the remote isolated locations of the coal mines and to produce the maximum profits for their shareholders.

In these feudal states called coal camps, workers and their families were treated brutally. There was no democracy and little or no privacy. Many companies employed spies and kept detailed records of such things as marital infidelity. Miners, in some locations, were required to purchase all their needs from company stores and often remained continuously indebted to the management who owned them. Every worker was expected to show total loyalty and give their lives to the enterprise, if need be. If a coal miner were to be killed, the family would immediately be asked to move from the camp. No one who didn’t work for the enterprise was allowed to remain there. Sinclair’s book led the call for social reforms at a time when industry moguls were at the zenith of their power.

Although Sinclair was not an Appalachian, his novel sets the stage for what was to follow in major works by Kentucky authors.

Prominent themes during these periods included: 1) a persistent romantic mythology; 2) the tension and conflict generated by an outsider/insider cultural phenomena; 3) a strong cross-cultural context; 4) unionization and conflict; 5) the politics of paternalism; 6) violence associated with coal mining; 7) health issues including black lung, trauma injuries, and death; 8) land ownership, including the passionate debate over mineral and surface rights; 9) coal’s impact upon environmental issues. Highlighting a dozen major works that expertly develop a number of these themes, including eight novels and four historical/social commentary works, spanning a period from the turn of the 20th Century to the early years of the 21st Century, captures an important snapshot of these themes.

One of these early literary works influenced by coal was 1908 novel *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* written by Paris, Kentucky native John Fox, Jr., which examined the impact of the coal industry on Appalachia and the boom-and-bust cycle of the period. Fox had first-hand knowledge of this period, for his family had coal interests in Southwest Virginia near Big Stone Gap at the foot Black Mountain, the highest elevation in Kentucky.

Fox's novel develops one of the early refrains found in Kentucky coal themed fiction—the pioneer “insider” challenged by the flatlander “outsider.” This conflict resulted when the capitalist/industrialist came into the isolated areas of the Appalachian Mountains in search of the rich timber and coal reserves still abundantly available in the post-Civil War period and who clashed on various levels with the established rural mountain people who had settled there in the 1800s.

The novel's central love story, between the “insider” mountain girl June Tolliver, a member of the Tolliver clan who has been feuding for over thirty years with the Falin clan, and the outsider, flatland “furriner” John Hale who is a geologist/coal prospector determined to develop and exploit the vast coal reserves in the area. The novel is set in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, although one of the clans lives in the adjoining mountains of Eastern Kentucky. This area was replete with lawlessness resulting from feuding and tensions spawned by increasingly intense outside investment in industry, of which Fox himself had been a part. But the novel also records and illuminates the local way of life: simple entertainments, religion, agriculture, and crafts.

Another of Fox's novels, *Trial of the Lonesome Pine* turned the tables and brought a young boy from the mountains of Eastern Kentucky to the Bluegrass to set the contrast between two vastly different cultures. This novel was also a national bestseller. After advance sales of 100,000 copies, the book eventually sold two million copies. It was adapted for the stage and produced at the New Amsterdam Theater in New York in 1912. Cecil B. DeMille wrote, directed, and produced a film version in 1916, while other versions appeared in 1914, 1923, and 1936 (“John Fox Jr. (1862–1919)”). All this exposure helped perpetuate the local color movement in American literature and a national interest in this mysterious, isolated culture.

Many major works focus on a sociological cross-cultural contexts, primarily because of the recruitment of experienced ethnic miners from the older, well-established coal fields such as those of Pennsylvania and Birmingham, Alabama. This allowed for race and class to become prominent in the literature. David Duke in his seminal work *Writers and Miners: Activism and Imagery in America* suggests that many of the novelists who had coal culture as a central theme “were both fascinated and disturbed by issues of class, ethnicity, and race; most wrote about these themes from a decidedly middle-class perspective” (68).

James Still's novel *River of Earth*, published in 1940 during The Great Depression and World War II period, clearly poses the conflict of rural Appalachian Kentucky life with the then firmly established industrial mining camp of the Depression years in America. In this novel, the socio-economic nature of the setting produces the preponderance of the conflict. Brack Baldrige, a skilled coal miner, thrives in the industrial milieu of the coal camp. His wife Alpha, on the other hand, is in clear contrast to Brack who is mostly inept at farming and, despite the obvious risks and unpredictability of his wage paying job as a coal miner, continues to pursue the illusive job and subsequent economic rollercoaster with the coal company:

the narrative supports Alpha's lament for the loss of place and roots, warning of the new

lifestyle's treacherous unreliability. Thanks to coaligarchy Appalachia's old socioeconomic fabric of extended family ties, self-sufficiency, and barter was torn apart by the feverish spread of corporate-ruled boom towns and an intoxicating influx of cash currency. When the winds of finance capitalism inevitably shifted and camps withered, the natives found themselves with neither cash nor land upon which to support their families. (Salyer)

At this point in Kentucky history of coal mining literature, there was not yet an emphasis on the environmental impact of coal mining. The cultural and social shifts coupled with the economic flux brought on by coal mining was more at the center of the arc of this story. This novel is more about socio-economic issues and the attendant politics. "While Brack Baldridge is generous, hard-working, and even philosophical at times, he sees no danger in the industrial forces transforming the hills" (Salyer). It is interesting to note that the story is told from the viewpoint of the Bladridges' unnamed seven year old son. This allows a more objective view of what is being played out before the eyes of a boy who does not understand everything that is happening in his tumultuous life. This acts as a kind of symbolic bridge between the preindustrial naiveté and the brutal reality that coal mining brings to the equation. In some ways akin to John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, *River of Earth* is set in a similar time, during the brutal years of the Depression. "Still devotes much of the novel's first and longest section to exploration of the conflict between farming and coal mining, between establishing an 'enduring' home and accepting constant migration" (Turner 72).

One of the most important books in the post-war era was Harry Caudill's 1962 *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s, a stinging indictment on the exploitation of men and nature by the richest coal barons in the United States. This book drew national attention and is credited with having gotten the attention of John F. Kennedy, prompting the War on Poverty movement of the 1960s. In 1973 Caudill published his only work of fiction set in the coalfields of Kentucky, *The Senator from Slaughter County*, a revealing novel that chronicles the story of a shrewd, powerful Appalachian political boss, Dr. Tom Bonhom, M.D., who is vastly better educated than his fellow mountaineers.

Bonhom's start is as a well-paid coal company doctor who has an unsuccessful run for a local political office as a reform candidate. His defeat turns him to gathering political power from the influential rich instead of from the voters. He amasses a political machine that controls Slaughter County for over three decades. He brings jobs, schools, roads, and millions of state and federal dollars into his county. At the same time, he unwittingly creates a society of people who become hopelessly dependent on government aid and unthinkingly encouraged to destroy the countryside through strip mining. His critics claimed that Doc Bonham was an opportunist who rose as his community sank. Yet through it all, he remained as American as apple pie, and when the governor appointed him to fill an unexpired term in the U.S. Senate, he went there a hero.

The 1976 book *Watches of the Night* was Caudill's sequel to *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s. In this commentary, Caudill recounts the federal and volunteer efforts to "save" Appalachia that occurred during the 1960s and early 1970s, finding the efforts largely lacking in effectiveness. In 1983, Caudill also published *Theirs Be the Power*, a book chronicling the power moguls who built the coal industry in Eastern Kentucky.

An important work in the study of American labor history in the coalfields of Kentucky is Alessandro Portelli's *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* which examines a broad spectrum of issues within a culture that has often been beset with violence and bloody confrontations in its long history of class struggle, poverty, labor conflict, industrial exploitation, rural isolation, and questions of absentee land own-

ership. Italian oral historian Portelli's attempt to research the music of labor protest emerging from Appalachian Kentucky (including such voices as Florence Reece, Aunt Molly Jackson, and Sarah Ogan Gunning) also led him to a deep interest in writing about the complex issues infused in coal culture of Appalachian Kentucky.

According to Jesse Wilkerson, a reviewer of Portelli's book:

chapter themes include the living memory of the Civil War; religious traditions and what they tell us about culture and class divisions; timbering and mining in Appalachia and the tension between having a job and respecting the land; the development of company towns and coal mining culture; how miners experienced life in the coalfields, from finding work to surviving the physical dangers of mining; the discrimination and social changes experienced by women, immigrants, and African Americans in the coal towns of Harlan; the 1930s labor struggles of the communist-led National Miner's Union; the United Mine Workers of America in Harlan; the music and literary traditions of Harlan County and their role in the folk revival of the 1960s; migration and the Vietnam War; the civil rights tradition and the War on Poverty; and the Miners for Democracy movement and the Brookside Mine Strike of the 1970s.

James Sherburne's 1973 novel *Stand Like Men* explores the struggles in the coal fields of Harlan County, Kentucky during the years of the Depression. Quentin Begley Keen in his review of this novel says that "[Sherburne] . . . has written a stirring story of love and hate, good and evil, hope and despair around a central theme of oppression and depression" (67). This is the story of the first 26 years of protagonist Breck Hord's life, a young miner who is facing numerous dilemmas in his life in the Harlan County coalfields—forced to participate in decimation of his ancestral land abandoned by his family because of the Broadform deed; becoming the principal supporter for two families because of a crippling coal mining injury to his father and the marriage to his pregnant girlfriend Bonnie Brae Burkett; the onset of the Depression which led to the coal companies reeling back with wages, work hours, and benefits; the emergence of unions and the attendant strife created with the coal companies, most prominent being the Battle of Evarts where four people are killed and dozens wounded.

Keen says that this novel is filled with "shootings, lootings, burning of soup kitchens, ambushings, fist fights . . . It is the retelling of the Harlan mine troubles which were presented to the world by novelists, and reporters for the *New York Times*, *New Republic*, *Nation*, state newspapers, and other publications" (69). Sherburne's novel is a commentary on poverty, power, greed, strong mountain people who resist the coal company oppression, and those who trade their birthright for a few paltry dollars.

Karen McElmurray's 1994 debut novel *Strange Birds in the Tree of Heaven* plowed a new furrow in the literary fiction of Appalachian coal mining. McElmurray, a highly educated and award winning novelist and creative non-fiction writer, has deep roots in the coal mining county of Pikeville where her parents and grandparents were born and lived. The story is set in Mining Hollow, Kentucky, with three central characters: Ruth Blue Wallen; her husband, Earl; and their son, Andrew—each with paramount struggles in their past and present.

Ruth has made a fanatical turn to God and religion in a world that has ostensibly defeated her spiritually, emotionally, and sensually. Ruth's past includes a mother who ran away, leaving Ruth with her father, Tobias, who then is driven deep into fundamentalist religion, an act that deeply impacts Ruth, following her into adulthood and affecting her marriage and relationship with her son.

Earl, a frustrated World War II veteran and former musician, is now married to the unhappy Ruth and locked into making a living as a coal miner. He has had to

forego his dreams of being a successful musical performer. Their son, Andrew, has discovered that he has homosexual desires and affections toward a handsome boyhood friend, but is faced with the dilemma and consequences of expressing something that is considered sinful and abominable in rural Kentucky.

Much of the story of these “Strange Birds” is told in dreamlike narratives and through symbolism. This novel tells a more personal, familial story of dysfunction, propelled by life dealing disappointment at every hand, not all of which is a result of the setting in which the characters find themselves. Albeit, that the low point for Earl is to be a coal miner and not a musician; for Ruth, to be married to a man who is depressed and disappointed by his fate; and for Andrew, to be present in a place that is highly moralistic and does not allow for more liberal views of self or others.

Appalachian author Silas House has published two novels that have coal mining at their center—*Clay’s Quilt* (2001) and *The Coal Tattoo* (2004). The latter is set in Kentucky coal mining country in the late 1950s and spans 11 years to the end of the 1960s. The novel focuses upon two sisters who are orphaned when their father is killed in a coal mine accident. Their mother, insane with grief, takes her own life. Twenty-two year old Easter, the older sister, is conventional, a churchgoing woman who sees her life as performing her duty. Seventeen year old Annet is fun-loving, somewhat wild and scornful of authority. Annet marries twice and divorces twice. Her second marriage, to the mine manager and son of a mine owner, ends violently when she learns that his company plans to strip mine the ridge above the home her family has occupied for more than a century. A “Coal Tattoo,” is the mark coal leaves on a miner when it strikes hard enough to cut his skin and leave a coal impregnated scar that signals that he is a survivor of a dangerous accident. House based his title on a country song of the same name written by Berea composer, Billy Ed Wheeler (Gordon).

The protagonist of *Clay’s Quilt* is four year old Clay Sizemore who, after his mother is killed, finds himself orphaned and alone in the small Appalachian mining town of Free Creek. He slowly learns to lean on the residents of this coal camp as he adopts them as his family. Matronly Aunt Easter is always filled with a sense of foreboding, bound to her faith, and to the Appalachian art of quilt making, a symbol for the patchwork that the community contributes in what becomes Clay’s life. Characters such as Uncle Paul, Evangeline, and the fiddler Alma, help Clay fashion a quilt of a life from the seeming hodgepodge of treasured pieces that surround him.

Rapid industrial development spurred by two World Wars and the subsequent demand for steel production led to emergence of the unique culture of the coal camp—a society that became a kind of urban-like mix of ethnicities living in close proximity in the wilderness of eastern Kentucky whose sole purpose was to mine the rich veins of abundant coal found there and ship it north to the Chicago and Pittsburg steel mills. The remoteness of the place demanded much of the coal companies and their employees.

In order to maintain a stable workforce, the company had to front a considerable investment in domestic infrastructure required to establish most of the conveniences that life at the turn of the 20th century demanded. The nature of the enterprise and its location brought about stifling coal company paternalism, the absence of democracy, labor strife between emergent unions and their adversaries who held the purse strings, physical dangers leading to persistent health issues, an alarming incidence of alcoholism and mental issues, environmental concerns endemic with an extractive industry, contentious land ownership struggles, conflict between insiders and outsiders, and ethnic divisions and segregation within the social structure of the camp, to name a few. All this gave rise to the raw material of engaging writing, creating the

landscape that provides the drama that is the impetus for the arcs of great stories, the conflicts that want resolution, the characters who will move through the scenes, and the indelible plots rich in the life of this place called Appalachia.

Although the primary focus of this short paper has been to present a retrospective on how these themes have been handled by a sample of prominent writers, it also draws attention to the dearth of a more in-depth scholarly study of the significant impact coal mining has had in the evolution of Appalachian Kentucky literature. I encourage someone, much younger than I, to go therefore and write a comprehensive work on the numerous volumes of the past and those emerging as part of this rich literary heritage.

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