

**Huw Beynon and Ray Hudson**, *The Shadow of the Mine: Coal and the End of Industrial Britain*, London: Verso, 2021. ISBN: 9781839761553 (cloth); ISBN: 9781839761577 (ebook)

In 1996, soon after the last large-scale round of pit closures in Britain, Peter Ackers reflected on the role of “mining history without a coal industry”. He observed that historians had been uniquely entangled in the politics of the industry. By the mid-1990s, however, miners “only inhabit our world as ghosts from a rapidly receding past, so that the near-death of the industry has freed the historian from the uncomfortable but compelling commitment to the day-to-day battles of the living” (Ackers 1996: 160). It may have been premature to consign the coalfields to the cemetery. Drawing on decades of research, Huw Beynon and Ray Hudson’s new book, *The Shadow of the Mine*, is a moving account of 150 years of coalfield history, focusing on South Wales and Durham. It is not, however, a detached study of the past. By tracing the “deep story” of the marginalisation of Britain’s coalfields, it aims to understand the continuing exclusion of working-class people in deindustrialised areas from political and social life.

The early chapters provide a very readable and useful account of the South Wales and Durham coalfields in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book emphasises the construction of a rich social life through the chapels, institutes, and libraries of the coalfield communities, and, of course, through the miners’ trade unions and their central role in establishing the Labour party. Nationalisation was a central aim of early 20<sup>th</sup> century mining trade unionism, finally achieved in 1947 when the National Coal Board took on the running of the industry. Yet, while mitigating for a period the most egregious abuses of management power, Beynon and Hudson argue that nationalisation was ultimately a “Trojan horse” responsible for running down the industry and its associated communities (p.48, 340). The multiple ways that the British state failed the coalfields is a theme running through the book.

In the inter-war period, Beynon and Hudson note, the coalfields were already losing their central position in Britain’s economy. Nationalisation did not fundamentally alter this

dynamic. From the late 1950s in particular, employment in the industry began to decline dramatically. With the concentration of production in the English Midlands, South Wales and Durham became “peripheral” areas. *The Shadow of the Mine* highlights how growing frustration found expression in the two victorious national miners’ strikes of the early 1970s. These events placed miners at the centre of political conflict over union power, making them a target for Thatcher’s Conservative government elected in 1979. Attempts by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) to challenge the relentless progression of pit closures and job losses culminated in the extraordinary year-long strike of 1984-5. The miners were defeated.

Particularly in the chapters on the 1970s and 1980s, the focus on South Wales and Durham is uneven, with the book tending towards a more general history. The story up to this point is well told but may be relatively familiar. Nevertheless, it sets up what is particularly valuable here, which is the detailed account of what defeat meant in South Wales and Durham after 1984-5. In the wake of rapid pit closures, unemployment, poor physical and mental health, drug use and more did extensive damage to the social fabric of these areas. An impressive job is done of covering a significant amount of material in a relatively succinct way while still making room for voices from the coalfields. What comes through relentlessly is the sense of loss, of grief, in the mining areas of South Wales and Durham over the last three decades.

Not only was the state pivotal in the confrontation of 1984-5 and in pit closures, Beynon and Hudson emphasise the repeated failure of “regeneration” schemes to deal substantially with the resulting issues – to produce good jobs and thriving communities – whether led by Conservative or Labour governments. These problems were intensified after the 2008 banking crisis with a renewed attack on jobs and cuts to public services. The authors note in a telling statistic that the state finances dedicated to the banking bail-out were 20 times those committed to closing and “regenerating” the coalfields (p.319). There are some hopeful stories: the miners who ran Tower Colliery as a cooperative from 1994 to 2008; the continuing vibrancy of the annual Durham Miners’ Gala; the significant compensation won by ex-miners who suffered industrial injuries; and some important smaller-scale community

projects. Still, such examples are overwhelmed by the broader, grim picture that dominates *The Shadow of the Mine*.

The book builds to a political climax: the strong vote to leave the EU in the Durham and South Wales coalfields in 2016, and, not unrelatedly, the demonstration of the increasing weakness of Labour support in these areas in the 2019 general election. The institutions that once sustained labourism have largely disintegrated so that, as the former Neath MP Peter Hain is quoted as observing, the “organic link between the party and those community roots has basically just dissolved” (p.333). This has been more pronounced in Durham than South Wales, however, particularly with the loss of three seats to the Conservative party in 2019. Adding the Scottish coalfields into the story, where labourism has been overtaken by Scottish nationalism and the SNP, not the Conservatives, complicates matters further, suggesting that the outcomes of these processes are far from pre-determined.

One of the most interesting elements of *The Shadow of the Mine* is the contrast it draws between the west and east of County Durham. In the east, coal mining survived longer, and in places like Easington, where the union was more radical, the NUM continued to play a significant local role after the mines were shut. This side of the county had the strongest vote for leaving the EU but support for Labour has held up comparatively well. It was in the west Durham constituencies, where the mines closed in the 1960s, that the Conservatives had their historic victories in 2019. The decline of the NUM as an organisation through which miners shaped their working and community environment is crucial for understanding the alienation in coalfield areas. As Beynon and Hudson emphasise, pit closures “weakened people’s sense of living their lives as active citizens, able to participate in the political process through their own institutions and to influence outcomes” (p.337).

The power of miners’ organisations, though, was held primarily by men. So strict was the gender division of labour in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century coalfields that Beynon and Hudson argue we should think of a “coal mining regime of production” that extended into the household (p.14). This regime began to weaken in the 1960s, particularly as women’s employment in factories grew. Women’s increasing participation in work outside the home –

often low-paid and tedious work – was hardly liberation, but the book makes clear that it was welcomed by many. The break with entrenched patterns of nuclear family life was even more dramatic after the end of the industry. This fed into the frustrations of some men. One former pit deputy is quoted as complaining in the 1990s that “now we’re the bloody housewives” (p.194). This does not mean that deindustrialisation has not meant great loss for women as well, but it does highlight the specifically gendered dynamics of this transformation.

The resentment evident in the pit deputy’s reflections on shifting gender roles may also help illuminate an aspect of the coalfields’ political trajectory that is not considered here in great depth. If the decline of labourism is well accounted for, the rise of a right-wing vote – especially the strong support for the Conservatives in parts of Durham – is largely unexplained. As well as the transformation in gender dynamics, hostility towards various outsiders is touched on: from post-war migrant labour and Eastern European workers after EU expansion in the 2000s, to the housing of the “wrong sort of people” from other parts of the area in coalfield communities by local authorities (p.245). This combination of masculine resentment, anger at outsiders, hostility towards “undeserving” benefit recipients – all in the context of decades of post-industrial decline – could be a potent mix. In the absence of political alternatives, and where the influence of institutions like the NUM are weakest, this may help explain the ability for reactionary politics to take hold.

Is there an answer to the deep inequities evident in the ex-coalfields and the political decline of the Left? Solutions are only sketched out very lightly by Beynon and Hudson: greater devolution of political power; significant state investment; and democratic ownership that goes beyond the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century forms (pp.338-340). Resources of hope are in short supply at the moment. But the success of Community Wealth Building approaches by Labour councils in places like Preston and, at an earlier stage, in North Ayrshire, are some cause for optimism and could be a template for the Left in de-industrialised communities (Brown and Jones 2021). There are no simple solutions though. Even taking account of the shifting ideological dynamics of the Conservative party, it is difficult to see where the kind of large-scale investment in former coalfield areas Beynon and Hudson call for is going to come from.

It is perhaps even harder to imagine a successor to the powerful political and workplace organisation developed in Durham and South Wales during the long history of Britain's deep coal mining. Nevertheless, if the current Labour leader wants to understand the challenges facing him, he would be far better reading *The Shadow of the Mine* than listening to PR companies telling him to wrap the party in a union jack.

### References

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