

Disability in industrial Britain: A cultural and literary history of impairment in the coal industry, 1880-1948

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Danger, disaster and the loss of life are emblematic features of Britain's cultural memory of coal mining. Netflix's hit series, *The Crown*, prominently reinforced these motifs through its recent portrayal of the 1966 Aberfan disaster in South Wales. Collective traumas arising from major mining disasters and efforts on the part of trade unionists, politicians, and industry officials to improve health and safety conditions have featured prominently in British coal mining's extensive historiography. Less has been written about the experience of disabled miners and former miners, and their place in coalfield societies. Men disabled through coal mining were a concentrated and visible presence in the early years of the 20th century, when the coal industry reached its peak, employing around one in 10 occupied men. Their conditions were the subject of politicising efforts by trade unions and became enmeshed in both complex tripartite systems of compensation, as well as structures of authority and caregiving in families and communities. *Disability in Industrial Britain* illuminates a hitherto under-examined history from which we can learn much about industrial society and disability in modern Britain.

Disability in Industrial Britain came out of the Wellcome Trust funded 'Disability and Industrial Society: A Comparative Cultural History of British Coalfields, 1780-1948'. This cross-institutional project challenged existing accounts of work, community, and welfare during the industrial era. It suggested that disability should be understood as a central animating feature of coalfield societies in England, Scotland, and Wales, rather than a marginal feature or a minority experience. Kirsti Bohata, Alexandra Jones, Mike Mantin and Steven Thompson's monograph innovatively examines the history of disability in the coalfields using highly original research and theoretical perspectives. The authors trace the evolution of disablement in the coalfields through the coal mining industry's technological development, underlining the industrial and political relations through which industrial injuries and occupational health conditions developed. This book's emphasis on the 'rather mundane' elements of the coal industry's routinised experiences of disability underline one of the authors' central contentions: Disability was a widespread factor in coalfield lives. Miners and their families lived with disability as a normalised and visible feature of their collective

existence. Bohata et al.'s ambition is not limited to illuminating the central role of disability to mining communities. They also interrogate evolving cultural representations of coalfield disability, emphasising the role of miner-writers and poets who developed a 'unique body of industrial writing' (p. 7).

By concentrating on the late 19th and first half of the 20th century, this volume incorporates the period when the British coal industry was at its height of employment and production and in terms of its national political importance. These were the years when coal industry employment peaked at over a million men in the run-up to the First World War. Large regional economies became thoroughly dependent on coal mining, and settlements were either thrown up by the industry or expanded greatly under its influence. Miners' unions became increasingly strong, nationally orientated, and party political over this period. By the early 1920s, county unions were unified in the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) which was locked out by mine owners in two titanic industrial disputes in 1921 and 1926. The book starts in 1880 when the Employers Liability Act was passed. Along with the Workmen's Compensation Act 17 years later, this legislation began to formalise tripartite structures whereby coal owners, the state, and unions arranged compensation for disabled miners. *Disability in Industrial Britain* ends in 1948, the year in which the National Health Service was established, and the year after Britain's colliers were nationalised. Focusing on the later years of the private industry illuminates important trends during a period when coal was central to British industry and public life. The time period is concise enough to allow for a meaningfully detailed overview of coal mining's development, and the contribution of changes in production to experiences of disability. Mechanisation is discussed in terms of the dangers it posed to miners' limbs but also through the effect that boring processes had in spreading silicosis. These observations are accompanied by reviews of other important factors such as housing, health provision, and the organisation of medical care and compensation for disabled miners.

In the introduction, the authors present their work as a contribution to the emergence of 'a more radical historiography' (p. 5). Coalfield history has advanced beyond its traditional focus on institutional accounts of unions, government, and coal mining firms, to incorporate a new emphasis upon gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. The voices and experience of disability on the part of miners and of their families deserve to be heard within a more pluralistic social and cultural history. There are significant methodological challenges to achieving this ambitious objective. The growing historiography of the nationalised coal industry has made extensive use of oral testimonies, but these are less abundant for earlier periods and less likely to focus on this volume's thematic concerns. Some oral testimonies were used in this book, but the emphasis was placed on other sources. Local newspapers and relevant specialist publications, as well as the records of Boards of Poor Law Guardians, courts, trade unions, contributory benefit organisations, coal owners' associations, and medical institutions are combined very effectively. Their use demonstrates the benefit of writing this volume as a multi-author endeavour within the context of a large project.

A significant volume of manuscript material has been consulted but is also very effectively synthesised. In the book's opening pages, the stark reality of coalfield disabilities is established through the story of Frank Eaves, a South Wales miner whose regular compensation payments for an accident he experienced in 1906 were rescinded two years later by Judge Roberts, who felt 'he needed to try harder to overcome his impairment' (p. 2). These sources also sustain a complex understanding of disability and disablement. Impairment was a common experience, with approaching one in five miners injured to the point of at least temporary impairment each year in the lead-up to the First World War. Miners often worked on through injuries and disabilities; depending on the severity they could be supported by workmates. More seriously injured workers could still be redeployed from the coalface to lower wage and lower status jobs on the surface. Permanent disablement, either through the effects of industrial accident or the crippling onset of occupational illness, led to their complete removal from mining, and often the labour market itself. The assessment of ballads that were sung by begging disabled miners (some translated from Welsh) demonstrates how men in these positions attempted to support themselves economically, and articulated moral arguments about the injustices they had experienced. Ballad singers anticipated the miner-writers of the 20th century. Some had been forced to retire from the industry through disablement and used their literary role to voice their cause.

Britain's coalfields remained highly varied across the industrial era. By presenting research from three distinct coalfield regions with differentiated geographies, cultures, and traditions, Bohata et al. illuminate a diverse range of disability experiences. The North East of England was Britain's oldest large coal mining region, whilst South Wales was the largest region by employment and production at the industry's zenith in 1913, following intense development in the preceding decades. Scotland's coalfields were a patchwork of different regions that had developed at different points in time, experienced varied fortunes, and faced distinctive markets. Some important trends are brought out in comparative assessments of these regions across Britain. Housing was universally 'small, crowded and frequently lacking adequate sanitation' (p. 142), but conditions were especially poor in Scotland, where single-room cottages were more common than elsewhere. Conversely, housing in South Wales tended to be in better condition due to bylaws that acted to limit overcrowding. In the North East of England, the operation of an arbitration committee between unions and management was emblematic of the Durham Miners' Association's 'more consensual politics', whereas unions in Scotland and Wales were more inclined to adversarial approaches (p. 188). Across Britain, a moral economy of disability, which operated at firm level, tended to give way to formalised approaches to compensation, established by legislation from the late 19th century. Under the earlier regime, managers combined their assessment of injuries with the character of the miner when considering compensatory payments and redeployment to appropriate work for injured men. More detail on this moral economy would have been helpful, especially on whether it was stronger in older coalfields or smaller firms, where paternalism may have been more strongly embedded. In the conclusion there are also indications that the moral economy survived the formalisation of compensation systems from the late 19th century in a diminished form. That corroborates recent research on the nationalised industry which indicates that a strongly-held collective sense of social contract and mutual obligations structured industrial relations in British collieries into the late 20th century. Practices such as mutual support for older miners also continued to survive at workgroup level. Rather than juxtaposing the moral economy with legalistic approaches, it may have been more productive for the authors to trace their overlapping nature.

Rich sources and powerful stories animate this volume. However, there is also a tendency towards hyperbole in assessing the book's place in coalfield historiography. This is most apparent in criticisms of the institutionalist focus of coal mining history: 'In none of this labour history is there much attention given to the material circumstances of life for miners or their families, or the more mundane but crucially important work carried out by branch or lodge officials' (p. 183). Furthermore, historians 'have not studied labour politics from the viewpoint of individual union members' (p. 183). Those observations may have been more valid around 20 years ago. In recent years, a more holistic labour history of coal mining has evolved that is concerned with familial experience, shifts in living standards, and daily experiences of health and safety. The work of Scottish coal mining historians who address these themes include Alan Campbell's two volume

history of community formation and workplace politics, which covers approximately the same time period as this volume.(1) Robert Duncan's highly readable single-volume history emphasises major alterations in labour relations, housing, and family relations, as well as immigration.(2) Jim Phillips' recent monograph on Scottish miners in the 20th century includes a highly original assessment of the coal industry's health and safety record, examinations of gender relations, and considerations of the spatial experience of community that is shared in this work.(3)

Campbell and Duncan's emphasis on ethnicity in the Scottish coalfields only gains limited reciprocation in this book. In the introduction the authors note the difficulty they experienced in tracing direct links between race or ethnicity and coalfield disability experiences. One area where perhaps more development could have been made is in relation to religion. Assessments of the engagement of disabled miners in religious processions and events are made, with the emphasis on dissenting Protestantism in South Wales. Whilst the authors note that suspicion towards Catholicism characterised the Scottish, English, and Welsh coalfields assessed in this book, less consideration is given to whether there was a distinctive Catholic experience of coalfield disability. Significant Catholic diasporas were certainly present in Scotland and the North East of England, including Irish and Eastern European migrants and their descendants. This may be a task for future researchers.

Religious narratives of disability, especially 'overcoming' stories, were influential (p. 41). Judge Roberts was not an isolated figure. Assessments of disability based on individual character traits and with strongly Christian overtones never fully dissipated in the time period addressed by this book, and strongly informed the quintessential British coal mining film, *How Green Was My Valley* (1939). Yet these religious outlooks were challenged. The entire final chapter of the book is given over to an assessment of disability in coalfield literature, which figures heavily in earlier in the book, in examinations of industrial politics and compensation, community, and family experiences of disability. Literature is not merely used to exemplify trends visible elsewhere, it is at the centre of this monograph, alongside extensive archival research. This integration is perhaps the book's biggest single achievement, and an important example for working-class historians across time periods and subjects. Bohata et al. identify the emergence of the miner-writer as integral to the 'industrial novel' (p. 212). In Raymond Williams' terms, such works are necessarily an 'insider' account, and therefore distinct from the paternalistic writing of elite 19th century authors who wrote in response to their horror at the social landscape of an industrialising society (p. 213). Miner-writers developed affective accounts of injury and disability that were products of their embeddedness in coal mining culture. They came to reject overcoming tropes, instead narrating powerful stories of class injustice. Communist influence encouraged the radicalisation of coalfield literature in the interwar period, but it remained characterised by ambiguities, especially the distinction between the potentially powerful collective and the decaying bodies of individual miners. The crest-fallen 'big hewer' (p. 147), whose daily routine earned him increased social status but eventually eroded his ability to provide for his family, was a ubiquitous character in coal mining novels. The 'historicist literary methodology' of *Disability in Industrial Britain* is pioneering (p. 9). It anticipates the outcome of other major recent projects on working-class literary studies such as the Piston, Pen and Press project [<https://www.pistonpenandpress.org/>] [2], which is also researching miners' fiction writing across a similar time period.

Disability in Industrial Britain is a major contribution to our understanding of the British coalfield when it was at the heart of a leading industrial economy. Bohata et al.'s emphasis on disability as a centrally constitutive part of coalfield life is highly original and forms a logical extension to the evolution of the historiography towards community, embodiment and cultural production. At least three major provocations arise from this volume. Rather than a marginalised minority experience, Bohata et al. convincingly implore us to view disability as a condition that was lived with and widely anticipated in the coalfields. In turn, this observation questions, or at least repositions, the straightforward binary between 'disabled' and 'normalcy' (p. 221). Miners were 'temporarily able-bodied' workers who faced the daily risk of accident and the longer-term danger of occupational diseases (p. 221). They were not powerless victims, however, despite the common positioning of the disabled in social theory and historical writing. Miners' unions were powerful

forces in shaping the governance structures that awarded compensation and they marshalled support within the medical profession. *Disability in Industrial Britain* provides a methodological example of how archival and literary sources can be used to understand working-class experiences through examining structures of political economy, 'everyday life', and their contested cultural representation.

Notes

1. Alan Campbell, *The Scottish Miners, 1874-1939: volume i: Industry, Work and Community* (Aldershot, 2000); Alan Campbell, *The Scottish Miners, 1874-1939: volume ii: Trade Unions and Politics* (Aldershot, 2000).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Robert Duncan, *The Mineworkers* (Edinburgh, 2005).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jim Phillips, *Scottish Mineworkers in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh, 2019).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/327592> [2] <https://www.pistonpenandpress.org/>]