Review

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Alessandro Portelli. *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0-19-973568-6

Set in the heart of Appalachia and eastern Kentucky, *They Say in Harlan County* is the result of an impressive labour of love. From the start, the author of the prize-winning *The Order Has Been Carried Out* (2003) informs the reader that his introduction to Harlan County was made through folk music. Although this is a useful way to understand how myths about class struggle are built, how one's own sense of belonging and pride is developed and questioned, and how people survive in a region whose economy is bolted to the changing fortunes of the coal industry, the hundred and sixty living voices patiently recorded by Portelli over a period of twenty years provide a much better standpoint to examine such issues. Looking at well-known and untold stories through oral history, or a "Love Story" with Harlan County and its people, does not produce a one-dimensional book. In fact, the individuals interviewed for *They Say in Harlan County* not only bring to life a narrative of modern America that hones the historian's insight into working-class and community, they also highlight the illusiveness of industrial peace in a resource-based economy serving the world.

The narrators of the book are descendants of pioneers who tamed the risks of the frontier environment, or died trying so. Imprinted on the local markers of geography, the ancestors' names are a vivid and constant reminder of a past whose predicaments could not be mitigated by the following generations. By growing up in hardship, however, these individuals and their descendants who were recruited from the landless proletariat to mine coal not only became hard, but gained "strength, and learned tenderness"; a shared experience that contributed to a tradition of reciprocity and solidarity between neighbours and co-workers. Relations among Harlan County residents were far from harmonious, obviously. In this border region with "the lowest percentage of slaves in Appalachia," (50) local families were involved in their own guerrilla warfare during the Civil War because land was a key source of power and capital. The diversity of faith, places of worship, and religious practices noted by Portelli on his initial and later stays in Harlan County reflected the century-old divide between the social classes historians tend to focus on. More importantly for members of the Holiness, Baptist, and Pentecostal churches, religion supplied a common and stable dose of stamina to confront daily dangers and challenges, or, at the least, a social network to deal with them. The entry into the industrial age would test and strengthen this connection.

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The commercial exploitation of forests and the building of mills to serve the lumber industry brought a form of progress to Harlan County and its residents at the turn of the century. The process that was accentuated after 1910 not only created jobs in the community, but environmental hazards and a perverse political tradition that foreign landowners ignored, disputed or engineered. By allowing companies to purchase rights to the mineral resources through the "Broad Form," the State of Kentucky agreed to a vertical and horizontal partition of the land. From 1921 to 1988, every time its Supreme Court stated that the major ruling interests belonged to those who owned the underground rights, a sizable portion of local landowners was added to the ranks of the powerless. The number of those who fell through the cracks was raised to historic levels when twenty years or so of "flush times" brought on by coal were stopped in their tracks by the Depression. Around this time, it was estimated that two residents out of three lived in one of the company towns that had been established all over the county by Ford, the U.S. Steel or small coal operators. If these company towns contributed to a sense of solidarity in Harlan County, it was mainly because oppressing conditions and accumulated debts removed the last barriers that kept people separate and in awe. The ubiquitous nature of death – quick and slow, accidental and criminal – tipped the scale for those still pondering whether or not they should fight a paternalist employer to save their job, if not their own life.

The "state of war" described by Harlan County narrators was closely connected to the region's competitiveness on the coal market. When it lost its edge because the price of transporting coal was standardized, unemployment and hunger reached historic levels; and so did violence. The Evarts incident (5 May 1931) then became a symbol of fear, desperation as well as pride. In fact, the persecution of union members by company thugs, the murders and shootings from both sides were as intolerable to Harlan County residents as the presence of outsiders such as Theodore Dreiser and other celebrated authors who thought they could help patch things up; or as welcomed as the historical problem of foreign ownership of the land. This was especially true for those who understood that the struggle with the coal operators was never only about working conditions, but also a matter of control – over the meaning of patriotism, religion, and race. When the coal operators regained their competitive advantage as a result of crumbling workers' rights and wages, the United Mine Workers leadership decided to take back control of their men through paternalist strategies and intimidation, which, in the short and long run, proved futile in a region where political corruption was as widespread as environmental damage. Skilfully preserving the balance between popular and obscure stories, Portelli introduces the Crummies incident (15 April 1941) at this juncture. Kept alive and kicking by the memories of the workers and their families, this tragic event – costing the lives of miners, company thugs and some of their officials – has never before filled the pages of history books. Its

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narrative presented in *They Say in Harlan County* is a true pleasure; albeit a guilty one, as the joy of reading about violence may be cause for concern to anyone. Portelli also thought it constituted the perfect opportunity to display the imagined and material Harlan; a place that one can leave, but never forget. The tales of the past found in songs and books, and the clichéd representations of the region and people reinforced by television, make a strong case for the need to view exodus and memories as conflicting and closely linked metaphors. Because dismissing *The Dukes of Hazzard* from one's collective thoughts is as much an act of remembering and being rooted as singing the *Hungry Ragged Blues* from outside the region.

The material and objective exodus included young men leaving the county for battle in World War II and victims of workforce rationalization heading North to Chicago or Detroit. In the latter case, the exodus was caused by the pressure put on coal's market share by other sectors of the economy that were providing new ways to meet the global needs in energy consumption. As a defensive strategy, unions and employers decided it was better to band together and share in the postwar prosperity. The UMW went a bit further, however, when it decided to finance the building of ten hospitals. Every time a miner lost its health benefits, or its hospital card, confirmed that this investment was a lost opportunity for miners, their families and the community. Further, the class collaboration between the unions and the employers did not mean that it guaranteed social peace. The 1959 strike, for instance, as well as the ones that miners supported in 1962 and 1964 reminded Harlan County residents that guerrilla warfare was a bridge to the past, not the future. The *War on Poverty* of the 1960s may have given hope to those who believed in community development projects. The feeling dissipated as soon as the targeted beneficiaries confirmed that the social, cultural, and ideological gaps separating them from the young volunteers were as wide as the craters produced by strip mining. Set in the larger context of the civil rights movement, this narrative contributes to a better assessment of the difference between being and feeling poor, between shame and pride, and between those who are subjects and objects of political change. With almost half of its population considered functional illiterates in 1980 (shame), Portelli reminds the reader that oral skills represent a great source of pride for Harlan County residents. This balancing act fails miserably, however, when strip mining is at the center of the analysis. For this domestic Vietnam, guerrilla warfare (again!) became a way to protest. Not unlike the actual Vietnam, it ended in defeat… at the hands of new powerful companies.

They Say in Harlan County was not meant to recreate the eerie darkness of an actual coal mine. But, strangely enough, the reader will discover its bleaker chapters as he/she gets deeper into the book. The first part is a familiar story that Barbara Kopple captured on film during the Brookside strike of 1973-1974. It is

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complemented by the confrontations at Jericol and Arch. The second part includes themes like death from wars or mudslides; sickness from pollution and contamination of the soil and water sources; economic development built on the tourism industry and shopping malls; and hope from people talking about what they'd like to change. *They Say in Harlan County* that drugs and pain killers are not enough to fight or escape the impact of its historical dependencies. It may be right. Yet, the true desperate souls will not be found in Harlan County, but among those who waver to say which side they are on after reading Portelli's magnificent book.

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