Review Essay:

Many Miles to the Middle Class:
Reflections on Three Narratives of Life in Mine and Mill Towns

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By Thomas Bell. Out Of This Furnace.

By Muriel Earley Sheppard. Cloud By Day.
(Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991, Pp. 275, $34.95 cloth, $14.95 paper.)

By Helen B. Hiscoe. Appalachian Passage.

If the 1980s was a time for greed and smug self-centeredness for those who had made it in America, perhaps the early nineties will be one for anniversaries, reunions, and celebrations, maybe even for the once considerable blue-collar working force that helped make the United States the world’s mightiest industrial power. If so, the University of Pittsburgh Press may have taken the lead here. The press has recently published what it calls the 50th Anniversary Edition of the 1941 classic Out of This Furnace, Thomas Bell’s proletarian novel of immigrant steel workers and their families in Braddock from the 1880s through the 1930s.1 The press has also produced a “New edition with 62 new illustrations” of Cloud By Day, the 1947 book by Muriel Earley Sheppard whose subtitle “The Story of Coal and Coke and People” locates her account primarily in Fayette County, Pennsylvania. Two hundred or so miles south of Fayette County, the coal fields of southern West Virginia provide the setting for a complementary volume, Appalachian Passage, an almost day-by-day chronicle of a year’s sojourn there by a coal company doctor’s wife named Helen Hiscoe. All three remind us of the role working class people have played in the nation’s history.

For many western Pennsylvanians Bell’s novel is well known. His story of immigrant labor begins with George Kracha, a Hungarian immigrant who came to
the United States in 1881 and eventually ended up in the steel mills at Homestead earning ten cents an hour. Over half a century later his grandson, John Dobrejcak, an electrician at Homestead, rounded out Bell's saga by helping create the Steel Workers Organizing Committee which led to the historic formation of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO).

In spanning the three generations of his story Bell divides his novel into four parts, emphasizing a main character in each. Part one is primarily Kracha's and the first generation of workers who established roots in the new land, found jobs in the mills, began their families in Braddock and nearby, all the while learning, they said, to become "American." But for Kracha and the workers around him the accident rate was so high that the real "education" for them and ultimately for the sometimes reckless steel industry "was the lives and bodies of thousands of its workers" (p. 47).

Kracha, however, survived the dangers of the mill to raise a family, including his daughter Mary, who married Mike Dobrejcak, an immigrant steel worker struggling like Kracha to build a decent life. Part two, Mike's story, describes turn-of-the-century steel mills as booming; but long and dangerous hours in the mills deprive workers of family time, and poverty and meanness plague Slovak families whose occupational ambitions compete with the ethnic prejudices of bosses and the corporations. "But I'm a Hunky," Mike says, "and they don't give good jobs to Hunkies" (p. 185). They never did to Mike. He was killed in a mill accident and left Mary to raise four young children alone. "They buried her heart with him" (p. 209).

But she survived, had to, and part three is hers. It describes her survival, her struggle to raise the children (as the oldest of them goes to work himself in the mill), her own debilitating and finally terminal illness. In many ways hers was a harsh and dreadful life, filled with the ache and loneliness of her husband's absence. Sometimes, "she almost wished that the dead could take with them the memories of the living" (p. 254).

By this point in the novel the ethnicity of Bell's characters becomes a central issue. Their determination to survive the vicissitudes of an industrial-political system which discouraged their determination to improve their socioeconomic station becomes for Bell an ethnic virtue. The novel is, of course, a story of the Slovaks, their work ethic, their food and drink, their family traditions, and their prejudices, too. An oppressed people constantly denigrated as "Hunkies" by their oppressors, they soon enough learned to call "niggers" those dark-skinned strangers from the South who had migrated North, they believed, to take their jobs.
Later in the novel their political idealism and belief in American institutions are sharpened by corporate anti-unionism and the new political climate brought by the New Deal, which afforded them the opportunity to build the new union which they had established by the time Bell’s novel appeared in 1941.

Part four of *Out of This Furnace* belongs to Mike and Mary Dobrejcak’s son, Mike, or “Dobie” as he is called. Like his father and grandfather before him Dobie spends years in the mill hoping to improve his situation there and thus be able to raise the children he expects to have some day (at the end of the novel his wife is expecting their first born at any moment). Unlike his forebears, however, the 1930s afforded Dobie the opportunity to improve the steel worker’s lot, a chance that they never had.

Ironically, it was the Great Depression that brought steel workers that opportunity. The depression devastated steel, bringing two-or-three work-day months, reduced wages, and massive unemployment as most mills remained silent month after month: “Going into the mill was like entering a deserted city” (p. 269). But for Dobie and others, the villains in the drama were clear. The “rich and the powerful” had let it happen, and now insisted that the country was fundamentally sound. Lacking “even the decency to keep silent,” the power brokers “drooled their obscene mumbo-jumbo, . . . with doctors without faith in their own illogic imploring the betrayed to have confidence,” and urging “the despoiled to take pride in an America plundered, gutted and laid waste” (p. 266). Silence would have been better, for the obstinacy of the corporations enraged workers who formerly had accepted much of their lot. Now the modern union movement would begin.

The last sixty or so pages of Bell’s novel deal with Mike Dobrejcak’s role in the formation of the CIO in the middle and late 1930s. Among the labor organizers sent to Dobie’s mill to help the workers translate that rage into effective union action was a “visitor from Uniontown,” a “homely man, prematurely bald” whose name “was Steve something, a long Slovak name” (p. 354). Interestingly, in *Cloud by Day*, Muriel Earley Sheppard’s fictitious name for her representative coal miner is “Steve Kupca,” a wide-shouldered man with hair “that used to be thick,” but “thirty years under a hard hat have sweated most of it off” (p. 7). And when Steve, the organizer in Bell’s book, tells Dobie and others how he organized the coal fields he recalls what he once told a politician friend of the companies: “You’re twenty years behind the times. You ain’t got a bunch of Hunky greenhorns back in the hills there any more. They’ve been educated, I says. The coal companies have
spent thousands and thousands of dollars educating them with tear gas and machine guns" (p. 355).

With this education, "Steve's" union, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), by the mid 1930s was winning its long struggle to organize miners in the coal and coke region of Fayette County and elsewhere in southwestern Pennsylvania. Sheppard explains, the coal companies had long been entrenched there, and Pittsburgh owed much of its prominence as the nation's steel center to the city's proximity to the coke region around Connellsville.

The company-owned coal patches of southwestern Pennsylvania were among the last remnants of feudalism in America. Unlike independent small towns and communities over the nation, the coal patch was an adjunct of the Industrial Revolution and existed only for the purpose of producing coal. Not only the homes but most everything else in the patch was owned by the company; the land, the local (company) store, a recreation center or central hall, maybe even a small bank in some places. Roads through the patch were owned by the company, and the company store often served as landlord for the local post office. The company maintained a water supply and sanitation services, provided for the public safety with its private police, and promoted garden contests and sports events for miners and their families. In effect, the companies built their own villages, closed them to the public; and operated them in whatever manner they pleased. "The miners in the patch houses were much farther from town than the actual miles that separated them. They lived on feudal islands in the county" (p. 110), Sheppard has written, but were not part of it politically or socially. Such medieval paternalism was hardly known elsewhere in the United States.

Many patches were located in old farm hollows and provided a stark contrast between the company buildings covered with coal dust, and the once lush green hills surrounding them. Gray slag dumps, with their circles of smoke darkening the sky above, stood watch over the patches below. Long black lines of railroad cars cut through the hills on their way to the mine tipple and spread the smell and presence of coal everywhere. This constant pall was Mrs. Sheppard's cloud by day: in the patch "even the daisies . . . have dirty faces" (p. 5).

While Sheppard includes several chapters dealing with coal and financial baron J. V. Thompson and his estate at Oak Hill in Uniontown, accounts of other business leaders in the area, a chapter on a contemporary subsistence homestead program, and a few potpourri chapters about Fayette County, her work primarily deals with the men and women of the coke and coal industry. She ably describes
the control the coal corporations had over the miners, not only in the discipline of the work place below the earth, but also in the lives of their families above it. Several instructive chapters describe the miner's work day in the time between the world wars, when back-breaking, hand-loading work was being replaced by more mechanical but still-dangerous mining. As a mining engineer's wife, Sheppard instructs on the production of coke, the changes in its technology and the by-products it produced over the years. There are the details of mine accidents, the grisly results of explosions, slate falls, and the many deaths from deadly gases, all a grim record of below-ground industrial mortality rates to more than match the above-ground totals in Thomas Bell's steel mills. She details the major strikes from Connellsville in 1894 through those of the twenties, when, due to the political and economic power of the companies, labor lost in almost every instance. In doing so, she concentrates on such corporate presences as the notorious Coal and Iron Police—the "Cossacks"—and the company store as major ways the coal companies determined the pace of life in the patches. But, just as the streets of Bell's Braddock echoed with the deadly silence of the Great Depression, and the mines had virtually stopped producing coal, the New Deal forged a new political landscape. The 1930s witnessed the resurgence of the miner's union and the creation of a new and significant steel union in Pittsburgh and beyond. Sheppard describes the coal industry's recovery from the Depression, the union gains, and the historic confrontations between UMWA president John L. Lewis and the federal government during World War II and the immediate postwar years.

Just as Sheppard ends her story in the coke region, Hiscoe begins hers in West Virginia. Her husband was a physician whose government-sponsored training had occurred during World War II and his obligation to the Navy had ended with a final tour at the Great Lakes Naval Hospital. When this stint ended he accepted a position as the company doctor in the West Virginia coal camp at Coal Mountain. It was the summer of 1949, in the midst of a labor-management showdown which resulted in the historic contract which ended company ownership of coal patches and established full implementation of the Welfare and Retirement Fund which soon eliminated the company doctor—the position which had brought Hiscoe's husband and herself to West Virginia in the first place.

As in Pennsylvania, the paternalistic oppression of West Virginia coal companies drove miners to unionize. During the 1930s and World War II they were able to eliminate the worst features of the work place and the company towns. The company doctor remained as an employee of the coal corporations
and was paid by a checkoff from miners's wages. In many cases health facilities, services, and sanitation were woefully inadequate. They provoked considerable unhappiness among union leaders and miners who were convinced that some companies actually realized financial profit from their less than adequate medical care.

It was in this climate of suspicion that the Hiscoes ventured into West Virginia. Yet, Hiscoe coped, and survived admirably in her year or so there, and lived to write about it—forty years later. She writes not only from the perspective of a company doctor's wife but also as his day-to-day aide; thus, most of her recollections deal with the daily travails of miners and their families. In that way the “Steve” of Bell’s novel and Muriel Earley Sheppard’s “Steve Kupca” are replicated in Mrs. Hiscoe’s account. Like theirs, her characters have fictitious names, but she tells a story no less compelling.

With detachment mixed with some affection she describes her initial shock at the rugged country to which she had come. Eventually she learned to negotiate the impossible roads and impassible streams, the precipitous roadside drops and the endless mud. She felt hopelessly isolated at first; but her husband’s position kept her home anyway, and rarely did they travel to towns outside where they imagined a modicum of civilization existed. Getting used to the terrain and the isolation came earlier and easier than feeling comfortable among the people. As her husband’s aide she shared his house calls—at all hours, day and night—delivering babies, tending to the sick, and ministering to the victims of mine accidents and family disputes. With him she entered the hovels where the crowded families lived (West Virginia Protestants seemed just as prolific as southwestern Pennsylvania Catholics). In many of them, she noted, the rooms were small and dingy, ceiling and wallpaper torn, cracks in floors, and flies so thick she was kept busy swatting them away with her hands “as unobtrusively as possible” (p. 52). Yet the women in those places “seemed oblivious of the flies, the crowding, and the lack of comforts I took for granted” (p. 52).

While Mrs. Hiscoe constantly watched her step dodging cracks in floors, crossing swollen streams, and swatting overindulged flies, most of all she watched what she said to these mountain people. She had to be careful not to voice the slightest criticism or any hint of an affront, not only concerning their personal hygiene, care of their children, or criticism of her husband, but any untoward comment about a neighbor as well. It seemed to her that the intricate inter-marriage relationships in the camp made just about everybody related to each other, and the omnipresent
family feuds added to the general suspicions of the people, the time, and the place.5

As an outsider and an employee of the company Hiscoe's husband like herself were always suspect by union leaders and many camp dwellers as well. Nevertheless, by the end of their stay, she managed to get close to some of these families, particularly the women. She marveled at their serenity: "perhaps it was their innate sense of dignity or a spirit of fatalism. Whatever it was, they provided a lesson in accepting reality and making the best of it" (p. 52).

Part of that reality for both the women and their husbands was a commitment to the union, and the union-management tension present in the coal camp added to the strain Hiscoe experienced in dealing with her husband's patients and their relatives. They understood which side she represented. Consequently, even though the doctor's office was one of the social centers of the camp she heard little of union affairs from miners or their wives (and not much more from the mine superintendent, her neighbor and friend). Yet, when the almost conspiratorial code message "the dog died at four o'clock today" (p. 105) was whispered through the camp, just about everybody knew what it meant. The short-lived strike of 1949 had begun, and it led to the March, 1950, contract that soon ended the company town as way of life.

All three volumes reviewed here are interestingly written, as could be expected from the backgrounds of each author. Thomas Bell, the best known of the three, was born in Braddock, later worked a few years in the mills, and began to write while still there. He left Braddock in 1922 and eventually settled in New York City. Besides Furnace, he wrote five other novels and an autobiographical memoir, In the Midst of Life in 1961, the year he died. Unlike local son Thomas Bell, Muriel Earley Sheppard and Helen Hiscoe were from the outside, well-educated, wives of professional husbands who enjoyed professional careers of their own. Daughter of an upstate New York lawyer, Muriel Earley graduated magna cum laude from Alfred University where she met and married Mark Sheppard, a mining engineer. While the couple lived in North Carolina she wrote the highly-acclaimed Cabins in the Laurel (1935), a story of North Carolina hill people. In 1947—the year Cloud By Day first appeared—she and her husband moved to West Virginia, where she died in 1951. Even more than Sheppard, Hiscoe was in every sense an outsider to the coal country. Oddly enough, she also grew up in a small town in upstate New York, was the daughter of an attorney and school teacher, and was even more formally educated than Sheppard. She graduated from Vassar,
received a master's degree from Boston University and a Ph.D. from ULCA. While obviously an intelligent and disciplined woman, nothing in Hiscoe's past could have prepared her for the life of a company doctor's wife with a young daughter in the harsh back country of the southern West Virginia coal fields.

As wives of company men, Sheppard and Hiscoe might be expected to betray a company bias, particularly during labor conflict. If so, they disguise it well. While not nearly so passionate as Bell in portraying the interests of the working class, they do not appear as mouthpieces for management either. On the whole, they write even-handed accounts of labor-management discord. Perhaps in the end, like the companies they came with, they went to the coal fields to do good, and then left with whatever rewards they found there, just part of the mixed blessing of the coal and steel industries.

Similar in several ways, all three works are in a sense autobiographical. Sheppard and Hiscoe write first-hand accounts of their experience in coal country. But if in that way their narratives are autobiographical, Bell's fiction may be even more so. After all, he grew up in the surroundings he describes, and leaves little doubt of his sympathies for and love of the working people he writes about. He was determined to use his fiction to inform America of his pride in his ethnic heritage and the contributions his people made to their country.

Since his work is fiction, understandably his characters are imaginary despite their being representations of his own family—as he himself often admitted. Hiscoe and Sheppard also use fictitious names in describing their real-life characters. The former explains that she altered circumstances of patient's problems and their names to protect confidentiality, but not why all names except that of the author's family were changed in her book. Perhaps the endless air of suspicion that permeated the coal camp as much as did the dull and black coal dust, affected not only her experience there but her account of it as well. Sheppard offers even less reason for changing the names of her people, or for not giving them names in the first place. "Names and persons and places in this chapter," she early explained, "are not intended to indicate any actual persons and places" (p. 7). In beginning a later chapter she wrote that its names "are fictitious are not intended to designate any specific individual" (p. 171). Even in her chapter describing the lives of miner's wives she elaborates: "All names and identifying details have been changed purposely so that the characters and places . . . may not be interpreted as representing any actual persons and places, and any similarity is unintentional and accidental" (p. 194). There is no explanation for this. At least one reviewer of
Clouds By Day's first edition complained that while considerable space described the coal and coke industry's industrial captains, workers were not identified; they were merely stereotypes. Perhaps too much can be made of this. Or was there a reason for it, particularly the anonymity of union organizers and those more militant miners who demanded greater economic rewards for workers in the nation's capitalist system? Could Sheppard have anticipated McCarthyism and its ugly reach into Pittsburgh and the coal fields beyond? "Are you now, or have you ever been?" One can only speculate.

It is not speculative to note that all three volumes are enhanced considerably by ancillary features. Indeed, the additions to the texts add so much to the literacy and historical record that they become almost perfect pedagogical tools. For instance, Barbara Ellen Smith's Foreword in Appalachian Passage well sets the stage historically for Hiscoe's story. Further, the Afterword in Out of This Furnace by David P. Demarest, Jr., of Carnegie Mellon University, offers a most interesting and useful summary of Bell's novel, his use of autobiographical material, and something of Bell himself. Finally, the sixty-two new illustrations in Cloud By Day not only add to the instructional value of the book (and, one suspects, its commercial attraction), but are a pleasure to look at. Moreover, University of Pittsburgh Press editor Frederick A. Hetzel, who was raised in Connellsville, has added a very useful coda to the volume which includes suggestions for further reading, a brief guide to historic sites in the coke region, and a summary of the decline of coke and coal in the forty-five years since Sheppard's book was first published.

Toward the end of her book Sheppard lamented that the coal and coke region "has only a mild interest in its past" (p. 250). Perhaps the availability of these volumes will stimulate some, occasioning an anniversary or even a reunio of a sort. But with most of the mills closed, mines sealed, and coke ovens gone, it might be difficult to find an available place where the celebrants might meet.

Nevertheless, further reflection might help the people of southwestern Pennsylvania explain for themselves what happened: how a vibrant past filled with economic activity and movement, a society from its earliest frontier days noted for its physical and muscular energy became to a large extent an aging and unemployed population suffering from years of economic decline now defined by a do-not-fold-spindle-or-mutilate population dependent on monthly checks at the local post office.
Notes

1. In recent years college faculties and students have so rediscovered *Out of This Furnace* that something of a cottage industry has emerged. Besides the hard-cover edition reviewed here, the University of Pittsburgh Press published a paper edition a few years ago enabling more students than ever to learn of the saga of the Dobrevcak's and their struggle to realize the good life in America. The press has complemented the works with a twenty-minute video, "Out of This Furnace: A Walking Tour of Thomas Bell's Novel." For a review of the video see *Pennsylvania History*, 58 (July 1991), 253-254. Also in the spirit of celebrating anniversaries, the University of Pittsburgh Press has just published two new books on the historical steel strike at Homestead in 1892. They are "The River Ran Red": *Homestead 1892*, edited by David P. Demarest, Jr. and Fannia Weingartner, and *The Battle for Homestead, 1880-1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel*, by Paul Krause.


4. For a study of the miners' union see Maier B. Fox, *United We Stand: The United Mine Workers of America 1890-1990* (Washington, D.C., 1990); Carl I. Meyerhuber, Jr., *Less Than Forever: The Rise and Decline of Union Solidarity in Western Pennsylvania* (Selinsgrove, 1987), deals with the unionizing efforts of both coal miners and steel workers in the region.

5. As stated elsewhere all names except those of the author's family were changed in Hiscoe's book. But Hatfield was the most common surname in the area, a name that evokes memories of family feuds and labor warfare in southern West Virginia. For a recent account of the bloody events at Matewan and Blair Mountain see Lon Savage, *Thunder in the Mountains: The West Virginia Mine War, 1920-21* (Pittsburgh, 1990). The University Press of Kentucky has published many works on this part of Appalachia, including books by Harry M. Caudill.

6. Well disposed to speak to issues concerning career coal miners, Smith is the author of *Digging Our Own Graves: Coal Miners and the Struggle over Black Lung Disease* (Temple University Press, 1987). In it she discusses the long and acrimonious struggle among miners, the United Mine Workers of America, coal companies, the federal government, and any number of lawyers and politicians over who is responsible for the care of black lung victims.

7. The decline of the steel industry has been described recently in *And the Wolf Finally Came: The Decline of the American Steel Industry*, by John P. Hoerr (Pittsburgh, 1988), and *The Decline of American Steel: How Management, Labor, and Government Went Wrong*, by Paul A. Tiffany (New York, 1988). For an excellent analysis of the above see Mark McCulloch, "The Case of The Silent Furnaces," *Pennsylvania History*, 56 (July 1989), 213-222.