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REVIEWS

Kirsti Bohata, Alexandra Jones, Mike Mantin and Steve Thompson, *Disability in industrial Britain: A cultural and literary history of impairment in the coal industry, 1880–1948* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019). Pp. 277. £25.00.

Kirsti Bohata, Alexandra Jones, Mike Mantin and Steve Thompson's book is a wide-ranging and interdisciplinary study of disability in Britain's coalfields in the period from the 1880s to nationalisation, years which saw first expansion and then crisis and the start of contraction in the coal industry in Britain. Informed by the social model of disability and by the broader field of disability studies, the book makes a clear case for the centrality of experiences of impairment and of the politics of disability to Britain's coalfields. It is also attentive throughout to the variations between different coalfields, making for a rich and nuanced picture of how experiences and politics played out.

The coal industry was at its peak in the years around the First World War. Just before the start of the war, numbers employed in coal mining reached over a million and 287 million tons of coal were produced in the course of a single year. In 1880, the Great Northern coalfield was still the most significant in the UK, but the deeper pits developed in the central part of the south Wales coalfield from the 1870s onwards led to a surge in production there, and by 1914 south Wales had just overtaken the Great Northern coalfield in terms of output, employing a fifth of all British miners and producing a third of all coal exported from Britain. The work processes of mining varied from coalfield to coalfield and underwent significant change over the period in question. These variations and changes had significant impacts on the dangers that miners faced and the chances of different forms of impairment.

Mechanisation, which grew across the period, meant that hewers or colliers (who actually got the coal from the face) had to exert less strenuous effort, but also carried new dangers with it: mechanised coal cutting was noisy and the noise could obscure the sounds of an impending roof fall; it also released more dust, leading to an increase

in pulmonary problems. Colliers in south Wales worked longer hours than those in most other coalfields and there were debates over whether longer shift times led to more tiredness and accidents. Miners' leaders claimed that accidents were highest in the final hour of work, though owners contested this, claiming faster working rates meant accidents were more common at the start of shifts. The authors demonstrate how such debates were given life in a variety of forms, quoting a ballad from the 1890s campaign for a shorter working day:

Yn nghanol awyr afiach
 Drwy'r dydd mae'r Glowr hy',
 Ac yn ei amgylchynu
 Y mae peryglon lu;
 Llefaru'n nghlust y *Collier*
 Mae Iechyd teg ei wawar,
 'Rho'r *Sledge* a'r *Mandrel* heibio
 Ar ben yr Wythfed Awr.'

Down 'midst foul air and gases
 The Collier works all day,
 And many are the dangers
 Which ever round him stay;
 But, hark! He hears a whisper,
 From Health it now does come:—
 Throw down the sledge and the mandrel
 When Eight Hours' work is done. (p. 29)

Work processes also meant that miners undertaking different jobs faced somewhat different dangers. Roof falls and explosions were the most dramatic and well-known dangers that miners faced underground, but 'beat' conditions, caused to the limbs of hewers by the constant repetition of impact, were also a significant cause of disablement, as were the eye condition known as miners' nystagmus and the chest condition caused by the inhalation of dust, which was known as 'miners' asthma' or 'miners' lung' in the 1880s. Later it became known as 'silicosis' and then, by the 1940s, as 'coal workers' pneumoconiosis'. Hewers working at the coal face were the most likely to suffer from the condition and it was also most prevalent in south Wales. Official statistics held that 1,334 south Wales miners were killed by pneumoconiosis between 1937 and

1948, though the trade union put the number at 2,088. Indeed, south Wales had higher rates in general of accidents and occupational disease than other coalfields.

Disabled workers remained in many cases employed in the coal industry, often doing lighter work, such as above-ground work. The volume of such work grew during the First World War, with high levels of demand for both labour and coal, but diminished in the interwar period as contraction began in the industry and unemployment soared, with the result that disabled workers found it more difficult to find light work. Bohata et al. thus challenge simple narratives that associate industrialisation with the inevitable exclusion of disabled people from the workplace and their economic marginalisation, demonstrating that in mining, the picture was more complex. They also demonstrate that the politics of disability were closely linked to the politics of unemployment and that disability grew in political significance in the period from 1880 onwards, particularly driven by the introduction of government-mandated compensation schemes and the increasing power of the labour movement. Again, however, the politics of disability varied from coalfield to coalfield; in north east England, for example, a more consensual relationship between the unions and owners prevailed in relation to compensation, in contrast with coalfields like south Wales, where contests over compensation were more conflictual.

The book shows that across the first half of the twentieth century, the attention paid by the medical profession to miners' injuries and diseases increased considerably. This can, from one perspective, be seen as a process of medicalisation, whereby doctors assumed more power over miners' bodies – and over the compensation they might be paid for an illness or injury. However, the authors challenge a simple 'medicalisation' narrative. Where narratives of medicalisation assume a diminishing agency for the ordinary individual, in the case of mining, the miners' trade unions (brought together in the Miners' Federation of Great Britain from 1889 until shortly after the Second World War, when the MFGB became the National Union of Mineworkers) allowed the miners to exert significant collective agency. The medical provision workers made for themselves and their families through friendly societies, works' clubs and, in south Wales, medical aid societies – like the Tredegar Workmen's Medical Aid Society which influenced Nye Bevan in the setting up of the NHS – were a further source of collective power. In addition, though doctors had significant power

to certify injuries and illnesses, giving workers the ability to claim compensation, the medical profession had few breakthroughs in treatments of major conditions affecting miners, like miners' nystagmus and pneumoconiosis in this period. This probably contributed to the continuing popularity among injured and sick miners of self-treatment and alternative sources of care, like 'bone-setters', who manipulated limbs to 'give relief to stiff joints, dislocations, sprains and fractures' (p. 86). There were developments in orthopaedics, however, and these produced a greater degree of medicalisation of miners' injuries as orthopaedists focused on surgery and rehabilitation to restore the miner's body to 'normalcy' rather than training to allow the miner to live with an injury and prepare him for different forms of work.

Bohata et al. illuminate the range of strategies that disabled workers turned to in order to cope with periods of unemployment arising from their illness or injury. Family and collective, community support (for example, through friendly societies) were probably the first resort for most. The Poor Law was usually a last resort, though throughout this period a large majority of miners receiving relief under the Poor Law were given it in the form of outdoor relief, rather than being forced to enter the workhouse. From the 1880s, the state began to intervene in the relationship between employers and workers injured or harmed by their work, starting with the Employers' Liability Act of 1880 and moving on to the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1897. This gave disabled miners a route to claim compensation from employers, but within a legal system that was in many ways stacked against them. The payments made were much lower than the wages men had earned before their disablement and could often be stopped or reduced by employers with little notice or cause.

In considering the social relations of disability, the authors argue that disablement necessarily brought about major changes in the relationships within a family and in a man's sense of self: 'the strength of the breadwinner model and ideals of masculinity in mining communities meant that physical impairment that prevented work and social interaction was disabling in social terms' (p. 146). Work and strength conferred masculine status, as did being the household breadwinner and participating in the public sphere. However, the strength of shared understandings of gender roles and the vital part that women played in nursing injured, sick and convalescing men in the home meant that the reconfiguration of roles was not absolute where men experienced

impairment. Furthermore, though the evidence for the quotidian experiences and interactions of disabled men in the coalfields in this period is not extensive, the authors mine evidence from literary sources to suggest that many disabled men may not have found themselves completely socially isolated, receiving visits from family, friends, other workers and friendly society brethren and also spending time outside the home, in the community or returning to work. The study thus challenges historical accounts that have suggested that in the industrial era, disability meant inevitable social isolation – though it emphasises that for many disabled miners, this was the reality of their experience.

Importantly, the book integrates women's experiences alongside those of men. Women had been banned from working underground in Britain's coal industry in 1842, but mining still had a major effect on the health of women married to miners and the authors spell out how the poor housing found in many coalfields, the shift work patterns of miners, and their large families all contributed to a plethora of health problems. One south Wales miner's wife, 'Mrs. Y', was described by a health visitor as 'in very poor condition, she says she always feels tired and disinclined to do anything. I think she was probably anaemic before marriage and five pregnancies in five years have drained her vitality'" (p. 40). Maternal ill-health and disablement were major problems in the coalfields and Bohata et al. note that across their period, campaigns to improve the health of mothers and babies and to alleviate women's work in other ways, most notably through the provision of pithead baths, had considerable success; indeed, these campaigns had more success than campaigns for improved compensation for disabled miners. It is clear that many women bore the brunt of caring for injured and disabled miners, to the detriment of their own health, but the authors point out that there are few sources shedding light on the social relations of disabled women, a mark of their invisibility even relative to disabled men. The authors point to a contrast between the limited advances in medical science pertaining to many miners' conditions in the first half of the twentieth century and the greater medicalisation of other areas, like women's health, particularly in pregnancy – here it would have been interesting to return to a more detailed comparison between miners and their wives and to examine how miners' wives experienced this medicalisation of their bodies.

Throughout, the book draws on coalfields literature, autobiography and other cultural productions like ballads as a key part of the source

base. The final chapter turns to a direct examination of the place of disability in coalfield literature, both realist and modernist. It argues that disability was central to coalfields writing: authors followed Marx in using disability as a powerful metaphor, often to stand in for the working class and to suggest how workers were marginalised and oppressed. For many realist writers, the disabled worker – male or female – was also a ‘typical’ central character, meaning a character on whom all the economic, political and social forces of a mining community and industrial economy converged. By presenting disability as ubiquitous and as the result of social and economic structures, many authors questioned whether disability could be seen as the opposite of ‘normalcy’. The book thus nuances some of the claims found in disability histories, while presenting a dense and evocative picture of the place of disabled people and the politics of disability in Britain’s coalfields in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

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