



Jörg Arnold

The British Miner in the Age of De-Industrialization.
A Political and Cultural History

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reviewed by

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When were Britain's coal miners? It's easy to think of the industry as a fundamentally Victorian one, the continuous decline of which during the twentieth century reflected an inevitable process of modernisation. Arnold's excellent, engaging new book is a convincing challenge to such views. This is centrally a study of the complex temporal imaginaries that circulated around coal. Arnold argues that the miners' story between the 1960s and 1990s was cyclical, not linear. The miners progressed from losers of history to winners, and back to losers again. This was in part about material realities, about the shifting dynamics of the energy market, technological change, and so on. But it was also about competing perspectives on the meaning of the past and the present, and horizons of expectations for the future. That the residents of Britain's coalfields carried with them a powerful sense of history has been a mainstay, perhaps even a cliché, of the literature. Arnold's sustained attention to, and broader framing of, this subject produces important insights that move us forward significantly. As such, it is a major contribution to our understanding of coal mining in Britain, but more broadly a compelling example of how studying perceptions of time opens up new ways of approaching labour histories.

The British Miner's eight chapters narrow in on individual years between 1967 and 1997. Each deal with roughly similar questions: how was the present state of the industry viewed? How was the past being understood and mobilised? What futures were envisaged? Most straightforwardly, the perspectives of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the National Coal Board (NCB), and politicians are sought out. There is also attention to broader ideas circulating in the public sphere, from journalism and academia to popular culture. Most importantly, Arnold attempts to ascertain the views of miners themselves, which overlapped but were not synonymous with their union's. This is certainly the trickiest task, and Arnold is at times forced to acknowledge the limits of his sources. Nevertheless, he draws on some fascinating material—including miners' fictional and autobiographical submissions to a writing

prize—to explore the lifeworld of the British miner. The book usefully deploys Raymond Williams' »structures of feeling« to interrogate this research, although a little more space could have been dedicated to elucidating what is far from being as self-evident a concept as historians sometimes appear to assume.

In the second half of the 1960s, Arnold argues, coal mining was widely viewed as a relic of the past that was in long-term decline. Collieries were being shut on a substantial scale. Large number of miners made their expectations clear by leaving the industry and seeking alternative employment. This was an individualistic solution. The left within the NUM, however, drew sustenance from the struggles of the interwar period in imagining a more confrontational, collective response to pit closures that could reverse the decline. The two highly successful national strikes of the early 1970s, particularly in 1972, seemed to fulfil this promise. Miners in the early 1970s were initially viewed across the political spectrum with sympathy, which reflected a sense that they had little agency. After the impact of their strikes, the NUM became an object of awe and not a little fear. They were now makers of history, not merely its victims. Partly because of this, but also due to the oil crisis, coal was envisaged to have a future that had seemed unimaginable less than a decade before. As the 1970s progressed, the image of the miners bifurcated. Were they now affluent workers, as the NCB and the right of the NUM tended to view them, with its implication of modernity, individualism and a largely instrumental relationship to the industry? Or were they archetypal proletarians, as the NUM left wanted to view them, committed to the industry itself and collective action to sustain mining communities?

That fear of the miners' industrial power continued to motivate politicians into the early 1980s was exemplified by Thatcher's Conservative government backing down from a potential confrontation in 1981. The disputes of the early 1970s served as inspiration for the NUM left, and a disturbing lesson for the Conservatives. Of course, this was simply a conflict delayed, and in 1984-5 an epic strike against pit closures was defeated. For many contemporary commentators this marked a rupture, a moment when the old succumbed to the inevitable march of progress. Arnold's account is admirably nuanced here, pointing out, for example, that the Conservatives continued to exhibit a wariness about the NUM's power throughout the 1980s, while the broader Left that had supported the strike seemed to accept that the fight was lost. Gradually, the dominant public perception of the miners began to revert to one in which they were underdogs. As the closures continued throughout the 1990s, the dwindling number of coal miners still working largely disappeared from view, while the ex-miner and the depressed former coalfields increasingly drew the attention of film makers, academics and policy makers. The ongoing tension between the miners' uniqueness and their role as representative of something bigger entered a new phase. They became »special« in so far as they represented in concentrated form the disruptive but inevitable impact of deindustrialisation. By 1997, miners only had pasts, not futures.

A popular talking point at any gathering of British mining historians is the need to shift the focus away from the 1984-5 strike, ideally as soon as one's own definitive book on the subject has been published. A central goal of Arnold's work is to reinsert the 1970s into the story in more than a superficial manner. The sense of the miners' power, and the belief that there was a real future for the industry, was not a mere blip. This is a vital contribution. At the same time, Arnold's attempt to decentre 1984-5 by arguing that 1981 was, in fact, the key pivot year feels less convincing. That Thatcher avoided a strike in 1981 reflected a continuation of the worldview shaped by the 1970s; it was 1984-5 that shattered this outlook. Particularly in a book concerned with the political and cultural image of miners, it seems an overcompensation to attach such importance to 1981. By the second half of the 1980s, and through the 1990s—in Arnold's own account—the strike cast a long shadow, while the averted conflict of 1981 was forgotten. Interestingly, the book itself slows down in the 1980s, with the time skipped over between chapters narrowing, before stretching out into the 1990s again. The late 1960s and

1970s aren't presented as mere preamble, nor the 1990s as coda. Nevertheless, the 1980s still figure as the crucial decade.

More substantively, the notion of British coalfield history as »cyclical« rather than »linear« in this period jars a little given—as Arnold obviously knows—there was a mere 22 collieries employing 17,000 miners by 1997, the final chapter of the book, compared to 395,000 men working at 420 pits when the narrative begins in 1967. The decline is undisputable, and undisputed. If we're trying to recreate the worldview of the 1970s, it is of course important that we do so without ahistorically imparting retrospective knowledge. It is also right to avoid a sense of predestination. But we also can't not know what we know. The 1970s did prove to be a temporary retrieve, not an equal turn of the wheel. The coal industry in Britain did come to an end (notwithstanding current plans in Cumbria for a minor revival).

We might add something here, though, if we ask: Where are the coal miners? Arnold briefly mentions coal imports and acknowledges the global intensification of coal mining in the second half of the twentieth century, but these are largely afterthoughts. The trajectory of Britain's coal industry, the book suggests, is unexceptional when compared to the rest of Europe. Yet, the notion of coal as a Victorian industry is most convincingly exposed as a mirage when viewed from a broader international perspective. As Jean-Baptiste Fressoz has written, globally, 95% of coal was mined since 1900, 86% of it outside Europe. Coal extraction grew by 300% in the two decades from 1980, and the greatest number people working in the industry, so far, was during the 2010s.¹ *The British Miner* positions coal's decline, not uncritically, as the archetype of deindustrialisation in both popular and academic narratives. But deindustrialisation itself, as a concept, suffers at times from methodological nationalism. If the historian's job is to make the past seem strange, as Arnold suggests, it is also perhaps to push at the limitations of a temporal imagination constrained by the lens of the nation state.

Zitierempfehlung

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¹ Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *More and more and more. An All-Consuming History of Energy*, London 2024, p. 3.