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Book Review: B.L. Coombes, *These Poor Hands: The Autobiography of a Miner Working in South Wales*. With an Introduction by Bill Jones and Chris Williams. Pp. xxxix + 207. First published by Victor Gollancz in 1939, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2002 edition, 2011 reprint. ISBN 978 0-7083-1563-7, e-ISBN 978-0-7083-2317-5

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Cases such as these are frustrating, because Peach's text has the potential to be an important one, and to cover new ground in studies on the work of Emyr Humphreys. This is the first significant volume on his work to be published which can respond in full to *The Woman in the Window* (2009), and perhaps, therefore, the first volume to discuss his novels and short stories in their entirety. In this, it is somewhat successful: the readings of more recent publications, on the whole, reach the same standard as those of more recognizable texts such as *A Man's Estate* (1955), *A Toy Epic* (1958), and *Outside the House of Baal* (1965), and include a satisfying amount of comparison and cross-referencing between texts from different time periods. However, although Peach is not attempting to write an all-inclusive survey of Humphreys's work, but rather seeks to stimulate further discussion of his fiction, more references to his poetry and drama would have added immeasurably to the text. These absences come as something of a surprise, given that this work is highly praised at the beginning of the volume: Gerwyn Williams, for example, is quoted as having described Humphreys as one of the most important and prolific dramatists ever to have contributed to Welsh-language television channel S4C. Perhaps this is too harsh a condemnation, however, as it is made clear that this is a study of Humphreys's novels and short stories, which should not be criticized in itself. It is merely frustrating that the poetry and drama of Emyr Humphreys is not given sufficient critical attention, and that the simple act of republishing them would go some way to correcting this imbalance.

Some small additional points, both positive and negative, could be raised with sufficient space. In general, although Linden Peach should be applauded for his application of many original ideas, many small errors prevent his text from being essential for all with an interest in Welsh Writing in English, making it merely of interest to those who wish to study Humphreys's work in some detail. Perhaps most importantly, it becomes clear from reading the text that it represents a series of very specific readings (which is recognized by its author), and in order to come to a full understanding of the truly multi-faceted work of Emyr Humphreys, we need many more readings, of more texts, from many more scholars.

**B.L. Coombes, *These Poor Hands: The Autobiography of a Miner Working in South Wales*. With an Introduction by Bill Jones and Chris Williams. Pp. xxxix + 207. First published by Victor Gollancz in 1939, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2002 edition, 2011 reprint. ISBN 978 0-7083-1563-7, e-ISBN 978-0-7083-2317-5**

**Reviewed by Keith Laybourn, University of Huddersfield**

My father was a Yorkshire miner who started work at Monk Bretton pit near Barnsley in 1938 at the age of 14 and retired in 1983 at the age of 57, after two protracted bouts of rheumatic fever. For much of his early life he was a shot firer, drilling holes and filling them with powder before firing them to open up the coal seams. Later in his life the new technology, the coal cutting shearing machines, transformed his job. Mining was always a dangerous job and he had three colleagues killed at the side of him in the pit as a result of rock falls. My father's three brothers

were miners. Both his father, and one of these brothers, were pit pony men at Monk Bretton pit. My father's three brothers were miners, and his father and one of his brothers were the pit pony man at Monk Bretton pit. Indeed, I remember riding the bucking pit ponies as they ran around the pit fields in the fresh air and brought sunshine when they were recuperating above ground. My grandfather, father and, indeed, the coal mining industry have now all gone. It is therefore with some nostalgia, pleasure and reflection that I have read, for the first time, Bertie Louis Coombes' classic autobiography *These Poor Hands*, first published in 1939. Like other books of its kind and time, including G. A. W. Tomlinson's 1937 autobiography *Coal-Miner*, this book examines the conditions of coal mining in the inter-war years and has established the appalling conditions and exploitation that miners lived under. This 2002 edition, reprinted in 2011 for the third time, with an excellently informed introduction by Bill Jones and Chris Williams, is a perceptive, slightly anonymized, version of his life much along the lines of Laurie Lee's autobiographical novel *Cider With Rosie*. It might not compare in quality with the imagery of Lee's work but it was an immensely important example of inter-war working-class autobiography deeply steeped in the life of the South Wales mining district.

Coombes was born in Wolverhampton in 1893, the son of a miner whose father became involved in agriculture. He himself worked as a groom for a doctor in Herefordshire countryside until he moved to Resolven in the Vale of Neath in Glamorgan, where he married Mary Rogers, the daughter of a prominent official in the South Wales Miners' Federation. He became a miner, lost his job after the 1926 coal dispute, regained work but faced serious injury in underground accidents in 1930 and 1934, and was also employed as an ambulance man in his pit. Coombes started writing in the 1930s, particularly for left-wing journals and was finally invited to write this book by Victor Gollancz, the famous left-wing publisher of the books of the Left Book Club. It sold 50,000 copies and Coombes later wrote other books and plays about the coal industry and his life, though none of them ever achieved the recognition of the first, before settling down into farming. His writings were generally well received, striking the authentic note of the life and tribulations of a working-class miner.

*These Poor Hands* was obviously a watershed moment, indeed the high point, in Coombes's career as a writer. It offers a detailed study of the life of coal miner in South Wales, the problems of exploitation, the appalling living and working conditions they endured, the strikes they fought, and the political attitudes they endorsed. It is essentially a book about the life of a miner and there is comparatively little about Coombes and his family. As a miner he was forced from his modest income to pay insurance and various charges and to work a week in hand. These were potential restraints on his ability to take industrial action but that did occur. There is comparatively little directly on the 1921 and 1926 coal disputes, and the 1926 General Strike, but Coombes particular notes how the blacklegs were brought into his pit in the 1926 coal lock-out and their abuse of the property of the miners: 'Several times I saw a hatchet, the handle of which had been broken, carried out by the blacklegs as they went home, and the picketing miners would see their own tools

carried away past their noses, yet were prevented by the police from interfering. (p. 125). Indeed, he noted that one miner's hatchet, worth twelve shilling, more than one day's pay in 1926, was taken by a blackleg and that if the picketing miner who owned it had complained he would have been arrested.

This sense of grievance and unfairness pervades the book. Coombes was all too aware of the way in which collieries often had stakes in railways, sales agencies and other related businesses which meant that it did not matter that 'they sell their own coal to themselves at a loss' to their their associated companies, and forced the wages of miners downwards, because they would get a high return elsewhere.(p. 92). He noted how 'The concern of coal owners was to fix the price so that the men in good places should not earn much more than the minimum wage....' (p. 56) and how he, and a friend, were tricked into setting higher targets for payment which ultimately reduced the basic wage rates of most other miners (p. 57). He also ranted against a system which employed many young boys who not only suffered injuries, such as the loss of fingers, but were also exploited by the adult miner they were attached to: 'I feel disgusted because these men, who are often critics of the conditions under which they work themselves, should be willing to exploit other people's children for the sake of a few shillings per week' (p. 166).

Above all, Coombes's description of conditions in coal mining is haunting. The long walk underground to the pit face in dark and damp conditions and in standing water: 'There was nothing pleasant about water underground. It looks so black and sinister' (p. 19). The stiffness and soreness of working in such conditions gives rise to the title; hands after all became arthritic and callous-ridden. Of course such conditions were dangerous and there is appalling evidence of rock falls and the new coal-cutting machinery causing accidents killing miners. Coal mining was possibly the most dangerous industry in Britain during the inter-war years and compensation for the injury or death of a miner was often less than that for the death and injury to a pit pony.

*These Poor Hands* is rightly considered to be a classic book of its kind. It may not compare with the classic literature of a Laurie Lee and his reflections on the rural life of Slad near Stroud but there can be few working miners who have written a finer testament to their work in the mines. The introduction, substantially drawn from Chris William's book on *B. L. Coombes* (Cardiff, University of Wales, 1999), is an excellent complement to the autobiography. Anyone interested in coal mining generally, or particularly coal mining in South Wales, should read, with admiration and pride, the history of a now defunct industry and way of life.

**David Lloyd, *Boys: Stories and a Novella* (Syracuse University Press, 2004)**

**Reviewed by Daniel Williams, Centre for Research into the Literature and Language of Wales, Swansea University**

Chris, the narrator of David Lloyd's novella 'Boys Only', is intrigued by Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Tell Tale Heart'. Like many of the emotionally and socially repressed boys in this collection, Chris 'never said much in classes', but the teacher's