

Creating a Broader Context for Research on Coal Miners

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Creating a Broader Context for Research on Coal Miners

Price V. Fishback

Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008)

Leighton S. James, *The Politics of Identity and Civil Society in Britain and Germany: Miners in the Ruhr and South Wales, 1890–1926* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008)

Ronald L. Lewis, *Welsh Americans: A History of Assimilation in the Coalfields* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008)

THREE RECENT BOOKS OFFER an opportunity to consider the research on labour history in the coal industry. Thomas Andrews offers an absorbing account of the development of the coal fields in Colorado from their beginnings to the horrific events of the Ludlow Massacre in 1914. Ronald Lewis writes a lively account, chock full of individual stories, of assimilation of Welsh immigrants and their children in the coal fields of America. Leighton James performs a comparative analysis of the “lifeworlds” of miners in south Wales and in the Ruhr valley of Germany with a focus on the changing nature of discourse by union leaders and political leaders. All three works rely on extensive archival research from a wide variety of sources. Andrews and Lewis write for a more general audience and tell fascinating stories in ways that could allow them to reach an audience outside of academics. Leighton’s work is more explicitly driven by historical theory and thus is more clearly focused on a specific academic audience within labour history. All three provide valuable information on the experiences and perspectives of miners, and Ron Lewis provides some much needed information on the perspectives of miners who later became

mine officials, mine owners, and inspectors, material that is unusual within labour history.

Mining in Colorado

THOMAS ANDREWS' *KILLING FOR COAL* in some ways has the wrong title. Most of the book and the most valuable material that Andrews adds to the literature does not directly relate to the deadly strike of 1913 and 1914 in the Colorado coal fields. Other books provide far more detailed descriptions of the events of the strike, though Andrews does add some new material from a transcript of a key meeting between representatives of the miners and coal owners in November of 1913.

Where the book truly adds value is in the discussion of the development of the coal industry in Colorado from the beginnings. Andrews seeks to bring a broader perspective to the coal in Colorado. He tells a story of coal being central to the development of the U.S., while also focusing on the environmental dangers of mining coal and relying on coal. Although not in the labour history context, this has been a common theme over the past 40 to 50 years as worries about air pollution and then climate change have become major policy issues. The novelty here is to combine all of these features into a single whole. Andrews writes very well with wonderful turns of phrase abundant throughout. The pattern of short vignettes reminds me a great deal of Anthony Lukas' *Big Trouble*, which uses the story of a murder of an ex-governor in Idaho to describe the politics of labour and capital during the early 1900s.¹ Like Lukas, Andrews starts into a discussion of a topic – the organization of the mine, the development of the railroad, or the use of coal in the home in the late 1890s – and offers a several-page discourse. Having studied economic history and coal mining for a long period of time, I know most of this material, yet Andrews writes so well that the information seems fresh. The chapter on Thomas Jackson Parker and the opening of the coal fields offers excellent insights on the thinking of one of the key entrepreneurs who opened the Colorado Coal fields. On the other hand, despite occasional attempts to offer a balanced view, Andrews in his heart wants to tell the story from the miners' point of view. Labour agents are excoriated, and readers should probably read Joshua Rosenbloom's *Looking for Work, Searching for Workers* to get a sense of the valuable service that many of these agents did in matching workers with employers. The descriptions of the strike activities generally offer congenial views of the miners who faced stone-walling employers.

Those interested in the development of company housing will find Andrews' discussion of the changes in the extent of company housing in southern Colorado interesting and worth more exploration. Unlike many other mining

1. Anthony Lukas, *Big Trouble: A Murder in a Small Western Town Sets off a Struggle for the Soul of America* (New York 1998).

districts including northern Colorado, companies allowed miners to build their own housing near the mines in southern Colorado prior to the 1890s. After the extended strike of 1894 the companies began buying up the land around the mines and creating its own housing. Extensive thought was put into the development of the housing and the mine owners focused on building higher quality housing and providing a “model” town. From Andrews’ description of southern Colorado this appears to be a case where prevention of unionization was the highest priority. I would have been interested to know more about the nature of property rights to minerals and land during this period because the pattern of miners building their own housing in isolated districts was not common in many other areas. Although anti-unionism certainly played a role in the development of company housing and stores, my own research on the dynamic changes in company towns in many industries suggests that the initial development of company housing was a response to a large influx of population in an isolated area where new housing had to be built and that company housing generally died out as the area became populated by more mines and automobiles allowed commutes of longer distances.²

Welsh Immigrants in American Mining

RON LEWIS MASTERFULLY WEAVES together a large number of biographies of members of a particular ethnic group, Welsh immigrant miners and their descendants. Many studies focus on events at specific times and thus we often see people only at a specific point in time or for a short period during their lives. One beauty of Lewis’s study is that he offers life histories for a wide variety of people, so that we watch their careers develop over the course of their lives. One result of this approach is we have the opportunity to see men who started as miners become entrepreneurs and mining officials; therefore, Lewis’s book is much more than a history of labourers and becomes a story of entrepreneurs as well. The Welsh were unusual among immigrants to America because they started migrating relatively early and they typically were already skilled miners. In the mid-19th century American coal companies began bringing Welsh miners into the U.S. to help develop the coal mines and often to train Americans and other immigrants in mining methods. A relatively high percentage of miners of Welsh heritage moved up through the mine hierarchy to become bosses, mine managers, and developers of new coal companies. The Horatio Alger story often used to describe how people born in America advanced truly is exemplified by many to the narratives in the book.

The rise of the Welsh into the administrative ranks of the mines was matched by the rise of men of Welsh heritage in the union movement. David

2. Price V. Fishback, “The Economics of Company Housing: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives from the Coal Fields,” *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 8 (Spring 1992): 346-365; Price V. Fishback, *Soft Coal, Hard Choices: The Economic Welfare of Bituminous Coal Miners, 1890-1930* (New York 1992).

R. Jones and William T. Lewis both were important leaders in the union movements during the era of the Knights of Labor. Thomas L. Lewis was president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) from 1909 to 1912, and John L. Lewis (no relation) ran the miners' union for decades. Mary "Mother" Jones, whose public appearances served as inspirations to the miners in so many strikes, also came from Welsh stock. Ron Lewis uses the biographies of these people to illustrate how they moved through the hierarchy of the union movement. In the process we also see an extensive amount of internal disagreements among union leaders. Jones, William Lewis, and Tom Lewis all faced back-biting and dealt with controversies as they led the miners. Like many leaders of the UMWA before John L. Lewis, these three men all worked in industry after they left the union movement, and often served as advisors to industry leaders on matters relating to workers and the prevention of strikes.

A Cross Country Comparison

THE FRIENDS AND COUSINS of Lewis's Welsh Americans who stayed behind to mine in south Wales are one of the groups examined by Leighton James. In many ways James undertakes the most difficult task of the three book projects because he compares the experiences and discourse of the southern Welsh miners with the coal miners in the Ruhr Valley of Germany between 1890 and 1926. This requires him to be fluent in multiple languages and expert in the history of coal mining in two different countries. James is a careful scholar and walks through the various theories that have developed over the past couple of decades on what determines the cohesiveness of miners. He notes that there are many coal fields so that these comparisons may not be universal. Yet, these kinds of cross-country comparisons are fundamental to our understanding of the experiences of miners in various contexts, and the work he has put together is impressive indeed. His primary goal is to examine the discourse of the miners' leaders and how the miners interacted with and influenced the discourse of the political parties in their countries. He argues that "understanding of the discursive practices of the trade unions and political parties is crucial for explaining differences in party political and trade union development in the coal fields."³

Southern Wales tended to be dominated by one union. Even though there was internal disagreement among miners over policy, most of the debate tended to take place within the union rather than without. Meanwhile, in Germany the union movement was splintered along ethnic and religious lines into separate unions for Polish miners, Christians, and Catholics. The leaders of these separate unions consistently focused on these differences, making it difficult for the miners to develop a common identity as "miners." Once the U.S. experience is considered, it is clear that there is no linear continuum on

3. James, *The Politics of Identity*, 189.

splintering of union movements due to ethnic diversity. American mining districts, particularly nonunion ones, had much greater ethnic and racial diversity than in Germany or south Wales. Yet, after 1890, the UMWA was the dominant national union. It still faced problems because it had not succeeded in organizing several major coal fields in the South and west. At the national level the UMWA knew that it had to accept all comers to succeed in meeting the goal of unionizing the whole country. The nonunion coal fields that they sought to organize included blacks and whites from a long list of countries, and a failure to include them in the organization would have sharply limited any hopes of success.

Since mining was a significant feature of the Ruhr and south Wales, the discourse among mine union leaders carried over into the discourse in the political parties as well. For example, between 1890 and 1914, the political discourse in Wales tended to focus on a broad core constituency that grouped workers and industrialists together in the Liberal party in opposition to the landowners in the society. In contrast, in the Ruhr the political parties were more splintered and emphasis was more on one's identity as a Catholic or a Protestant. Some of this was driven by the differences in political structures because Germany's political structure was more amenable to incorporating minority parties into the political structure.

The differences between the two coal fields did not mean that there was no change in the union and political structure over time. In south Wales the identity of the leading political party changed after World War I as the Labour party became much more successful at swinging miners to their side. Meanwhile, in the Ruhr there were dramatic shifts in discourse as the communists and socialists began playing more prominent roles in the political discourse.

I agree with James wholeheartedly that the discourse used by leaders in seeking to strike a chord with the people whom they were trying to draw to their cause was important. However, it seems like the environments in the two areas were doing more to drive the discourse than the discourse was driving the solidarity of the miners. When James compares the two areas, the contrasts are far more striking than the similarities. South Wales was dominated by coal mining, while the Ruhr had a much more diversified economy with a variety of industries and types of workers in the area. The organization and technology of the mining underground differed, the Ruhr had much more ethnic and religious diversity, and there were differences in the extent of company housing. Unions were recognized in bargaining with employers in Wales early on, while German unions did not obtain recognition until the middle of World War I. The Allies won the World War and imposed harsh conditions on the German economy; therefore, the miners in south Wales fared much better than the German miners. After the War, Germany's proximity to Russia and the harsh conditions in Germany associated with hyper-inflation and the destruction of the economy meant that communism was a much more serious threat to the

political parties in the Ruhr than in south Wales. In the end, though, differences on the direction of causation is a minor quibble, because James provides extensive detail on both the discourse and the environments in the two areas.

Placing the Miners' Experience in a Broader Context

ALL THREE BOOKS PROVIDE some evidence on wages, working conditions, and some quantitative measurement of the extent of different types of activities. They are following a useful trend in the labour history literature. When starting as a scholar in the late 1970s, I often found the literature to that time to be sorely lacking in such information, particularly about wages. The older literature might offer a wage rate from one period and one from 30 years later in a different place and then draw conclusions from it. Over the past decades the use of quantitative information has improved greatly.

Even so, I think all three books and the literature in general would benefit from more concerted efforts to compare wages and working conditions across space and time within the mining industry and especially between the mining industry and other industries at various points in time. None of the books offer time series on the earnings of the miners they examine, nor do they make comparisons with contemporary workers. Wages are a central feature of every job and the prior paths of the level of wages and the miners' wage relative to wages in other industries strongly influence miners' and employers' expectations of the appropriate future path of wages. In many cases union leaders and employers talked about high minded issues and framed their messages to the broader public in terms of morality and the greater good, but in the back of everybody's mind was still the wage demand. Certainly, working conditions, autonomy, and respect are important issues. As I discuss below, the nature of working relations often is a key issue in what drives a strike to become violent. In the final analysis, however, a discussion of wage trends is central to understanding the miners' economic conditions and attitudes.

As an example, Leighton James's discussion of the discourse of miners and how it changed over time would have benefitted from more discussion of wage trends. He does note that during World War I the Welsh miners saw rising wages and the Germans experienced declining wages, and this illuminates the discourse of those periods. Adding wage information in other periods would have helped explain those changes in discourse. I was surprised that James did not spend some time talking about how the miners and employers handled the extreme hyperinflation after the war. Did they switch to barter or use scrip internal to the company?

Information on wage trends also helps the reader assess the demands the miners were making. Were the miners seeking to catch up with other workers or were they pushing the frontiers of earnings in negotiations? To provide more of a context for the discussions in the books, particularly the activities in Colorado described in *Killing for Coal*, I offer some information here on wage

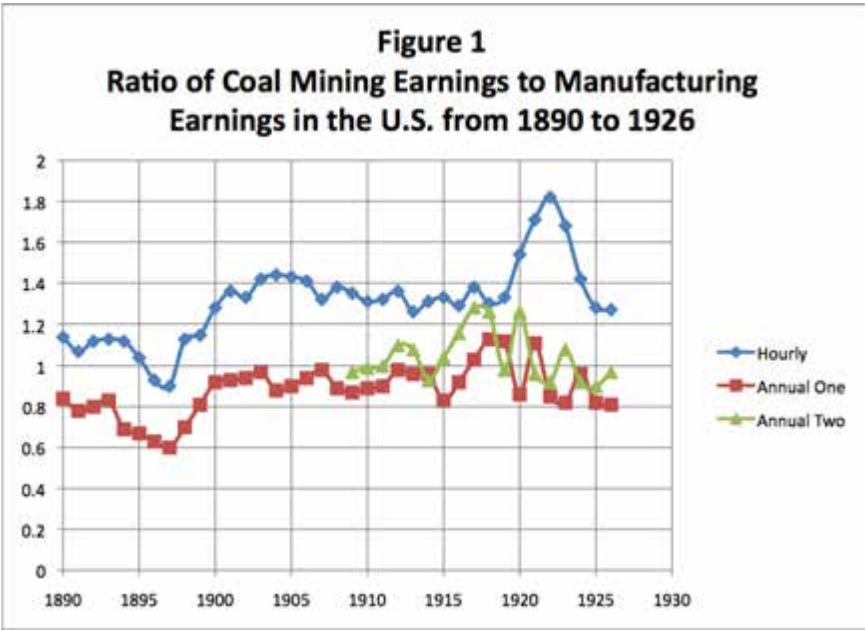
trends and relative wages. Andrews notes that Colorado miners were well paid relative to many contemporary workers, but does not provide much evidence. In June 1913, when the calls for a strike in southern Colorado heated up, Colorado mine workers paid by the hour were earning about 10 per cent more than coal miners in the eastern unionized fields and 50 per cent more than in nonunion fields in West Virginia.⁴ Meanwhile, the ratios of the national averages of coal mining earnings to manufacturing earnings in Figure 1 show that the average hourly wage rate for coal miners was roughly 26 per cent higher than the average for manufacturing workers in America. The hourly wage had to compensate for miners taking greater risks than most manufacturing workers and the fact that miners often worked many fewer days per year. The average annual earnings of miners in that year were slightly less or up to 8 per cent higher than for manufacturing workers, depending on the series used. When compared with the rest of the world, American workers were far better paid. Comparisons of the wages for urban unskilled workers across countries that adjust for differences in the cost of living suggest that the wages of American workers were double German wages and 1.5 times wages in Great Britain.⁵

It is clear then that the striking miners in southern Colorado in September 1913 were among the best paid workers in the industrialized world by a substantial margin. There are likely some adjustments that need to be made to the comparisons. Maybe there were differences within Colorado in the pay in the south and north. Store prices were higher but rents lower in company towns. Andrews' description of the housing at Colorado Fuel and Iron suggests that the quality of housing was good. Certainly, cross-county comparisons of costs of living are imperfect, but the cross-country differences are so large that it is doubtful adjustments will change the finding. Large numbers of people were moving to coal fields in the U.S. precisely because the wage differentials were so large. Essentially, the Colorado strike was a battle between highly paid workers and their employers.

Even highly paid workers strike when they find their expectations disappointed, when their wages are not rising as fast as the wages of other workers, or when they anticipate that the employer was going to be earning more profits that could be shared with workers. There is not much sign that the profit margins on coal mining were rising. Colorado coal prices had risen by 7 cents per ton from \$1.45 to \$1.52 between 1911 and 1913. After adjusting for inflation, however, the real price of coal was down a couple of cents. Further,

4. Waldo E. Fisher and Anne Bezanson, *Wage Rates and Working Time in the Bituminous Coal Industry, 1912–1922* (Philadelphia 1932), 250–1; Fishback, *Soft Coal*, 227–8.

5. Jeffrey Williamson, "The Evolution of Global Labor Markets Since 1830: Background Evidence and Hypotheses," *Explorations in Economic History* 32 (1995), 178–180; Joshua Rosenbloom, *Looking for Work, Searching for Workers* (New York, 2002), 138.

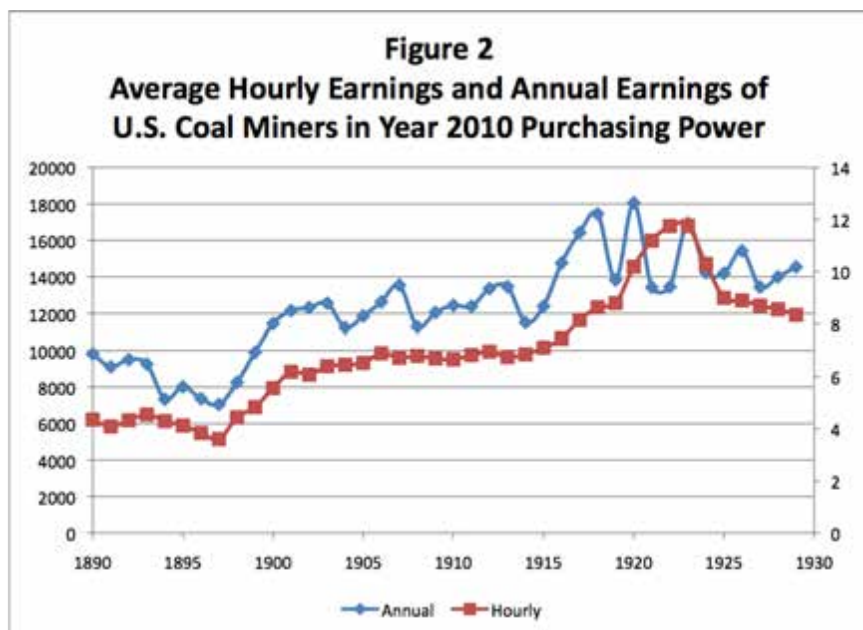


Source: Price Fishback, *Soft Coal, Hard Choices: The Economic Welfare of Bituminous Coal Miners, 1890-1930* (New York 1992), 80–81.

prices had risen by 20 cents between 1905 and 1908 without much mention of strike activity.

On the issue of past trends and expectations, Figure 2 shows average hourly (squares) and annual (diamonds) earnings in year 2010 purchasing power for U.S. Coal miners. Over a forty year period miners earnings rose sharply, but the disastrous Colorado strike came at the end of a period of several years of relatively slow growth in earnings for miners. Between 1890 and 1923 hourly earnings (squares) more than doubled, rising from \$4.36 to \$11.75.⁶ Meanwhile, annual earnings rose from nearly \$10,000 to a peak of \$18,000 in 1920. Not only was the purchasing power of a miner's earnings rising, but the ratio of miner's earnings to manufacturing earnings in Figure 1 also rose. Even though the long term changes looked good, there were times when coal markets fell apart and miners suffered greatly. Average annual and hourly earnings bottomed out in 1897 at around \$7,000 and \$3.60, and coal miners were hit harder than manufacturing workers. The Colorado strike of 1894 came in the midst of this downward slide in coal earnings. After 1897 a demand boom drove coal

6. For comparison purposes, coal miners in 2010 were earning around \$20 to \$28 per hour (add about 15 to 40 per cent more for benefits): (<http://technology.infomine.com/articles/1/6642/salary.wages.coal/us.coal.mine.aspx>, accessed 6/24/2011).



Source: Price Fishback, *Soft Coal, Hard Choices: The Economic Welfare of Bituminous Coal Miners, 1890-1930* (New York 1992), 80-85, 226-32.

miners' earnings up much faster than manufacturing workers' earnings to over \$12,000 and \$6.41 in 1903, raising expectations of continued good times. The Colorado strike of 1903-04 came just at the end of this rapid rise in wages, when they asked for a 20 per cent increase in tonnage rates.⁷ In the period just before the Colorado strike of 1913, however, hourly earnings rose only about 7 per cent and average annual earnings fluctuated around \$12,300 over the period. U.S. coal markets boomed during World War I and its aftermath, and miners shared in the boom as hourly earnings rose 71 per cent between 1914 and 1923. When the mines ran near full capacity coal miners were earning over \$18,000 by 1920. Hard times then struck again when the demand for coal fell, driving large numbers of mines and miners out of the industry, and hourly earnings fell to \$8.34 by 1929 and annual earnings fell below \$15,000.

In 1913 after several years of slow wage growth the Colorado miners may well have been disappointed and pushing for higher wages. They may have thought that it was time for an increase because manufacturing earnings had risen enough to cause the ratio of miners wages to manufacturing wages in

7. Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, 229.

Figure 1 to fall between 1912 and 1913. When we examine the situation in Colorado mining more carefully, however, the trends in wages were already upward. Payroll data collected by the U.S. Coal Commission shows that the average rates for Colorado miners had risen twice between January 1 of 1912 and June 30 of 1913. Inside men paid by the hour saw their hourly pay rise by 5 per cent between January 1, 1912 and June 30, 1912 and then rise another 2.5 per cent by June 30, 1913. Machine miners received an increase in their tonnage rate of 3.8 and 2 per cent, and loaders saw increases of 4.1 and 2.7 per cent in the same time frames. Pick miners fared somewhat differently with a 7 per cent rise from January 1 to June 30, 1912 but a 1.5 per cent cut over the next year that left their tonnage rate only 5.5 per cent higher than it had been on January 1, 1912.⁸ If all parts of Colorado shared in this, coal miners had experienced a substantial increase in earnings over the year and a half before the strike. Then, the miners sought an additional 10 per cent increase in wage rates along with extra payments for extra work required that did not produce coal in the Trinidad Convention in late summer 1913.

Maybe this was a standard negotiating ploy to ask for the moon and settle for less. Andrews argues that the essence of the 1913–1914 strike was about union recognition. It was the first demand in the list from the Trinidad Convention, while the wage increase was second. In the November 1913 settlement conference that followed the calling in of the National Guard in October, John Osgood, representing the operators, stated, “The meat of the whole thing” was union recognition. “A man who can make more money in mining coal... is quietly told not to exert himself, as by his superior skill he will injure some other fellow, and the cause of one is the cause of all, and that he should hold himself back a little.” Meanwhile, the miners’ representatives complained that the company should rely on the unionized miners to reform the operations of the mines and make them safer and stop boss’ favoritism in assignment of workers. When the operators mentioned that the mine bosses were all former miners, the striking miners argued that the former miners had become toadies to the owners and were uninterested in the proper operation of the mine. In fact, when the owners offered a deal with everything but union recognition in November, the miners turned it down.⁹ Given all of the information about wages I have presented, I agree with Andrews that the main issue was about union recognition. That was clearly a key issue in 1903–1904 as well, and it was often the primary issue in most cases where coal mining strikes turned violent.

8. Fisher and Bezanson, *Wage Rates and Working Time*, 234, 238, 246, 252.

9. Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, 259–261.

Context for Violent Strikes

THE HISTORY OF THE COAL INDUSTRY is marred by several violent strikes. Ron Lewis describes some violent episodes and Leighton James mentions the occasional violent strike in his study, but the essential message of *Killing for Coal* is that the history of Colorado mining set the stage for the horrifying conflagration in 1913 and 1914. The tenor of Andrews' book is that the violence was the fault of the coal companies. He offers evidence of the mine owners' intransigence, their attempts to keep union organizers out of their towns, and their willingness to fire workers who want to join the union. You can read *Killing* to see all of the bad stuff the gun thugs and mine owners and militia did. Such egregious efforts by the mine owners certainly made my blood boil.

On the other hand he seems to hold the miners, the union, and organizers harmless in this process. In his heart of hearts, Andrews is with the miners and focuses heavily on the miners' viewpoint. And why not? The miners were a hard working, hard playing bunch who skillfully faced enormous danger as they worked. When they went out on strike in Colorado in 1913, they suffered in tent colonies, and whenever the state or militia was sent out to establish peace, the miners were typically seen as a major source of the problem. In picketing and mass meeting, they sang rousing songs of solidarity, and listened as their leaders lambasted the scurrilous scum who took their places in the mine as strikebreakers, the head-bashing gun thugs, and skin-flint bastards who owned the mines.

Filmmaker John Sayles wrote a book about the making of his movie *Matewan*, a riveting film centered on a gun fight between Baldwin Felts Detectives and Two Gun Sid Hatfield and miners involved in a strike in West Virginia. In his introduction to the book, he noted that he read numerous accounts of the events surrounding the event. In making the movie, he decided to focus on the more dramatic version and told the story from the miners' point of view.¹⁰ That is essentially what Andrews has done here.

But is Andrews telling of the Colorado events really the whole story? When hundreds of miners carrying clubs and stones, some with shotguns, march on a mine with the purpose to close it down, is that just the miners having fun or is not this really a very threatening situation designed to strike fear in the people still working? In his sketchy description of the events of 1913 to 1914, Andrews mentions a few deaths, but he does not mention several episodes in which miners set up in the bluffs above coal towns and spent hours shooting into the towns. Nor does he mention the destruction of machinery and property that was meant to keep miners who did not join the strike from working. The vast majority of UMW leaders and organizers were fine men, but the union also had its share of hotheads, and the union leaders seemed to turn a blind eye to their activities.

10. John Sayles, *Thinking in Pictures: The Making of the Movie Matewan* (New York 1987).

Was the Colorado Strike a common occurrence? Were miners seething about their treatment everywhere and the occasional violent strikes were temporary explosions when they finally got the opportunity to vent? I do not believe that to be true. The turnover in coal fields was so high that only a small share of the men in the fields in 1913 had been there in 1904 for the previous strike. In an article in *Labor History* I reported on the results of a study of a large set of narratives of coal mining strikes both violent and nonviolent.¹¹ The vast majority of time miners were not on strike. The vast majority of strikes lasted only a handful of days. In the vast majority of strikes, people were not removed from their homes, strikebreakers were not brought in, and no violence was committed. There were a small number of strikes, however, that turned violent. The vast majority of both miners and mine owners were not interested in fomenting violence, but mining was tough work done by hardened people, and past episodes always led to the fear that violence could happen. Personalities played a big role in these situations. As an example, Ron Lewis describes the different experiences at the mines run by James Roderick who was respectful of miners and Gomer Jones who was not. I believe that the James Rodericks of the world were far more common than the men like Gomer Jones. Aside from personalities, the extreme conflagrations often developed because either bad luck or a small group of people willing to foment violence initiated a violent episode that each side thought the other had started. Everyone armed in self-defense and then a series of eye-for-eye strategies followed that could only be ended when an external force like a militia came onto the scene. In the history of coal mining the events in Colorado in 1913 and 1914 were extremely unusual. I still see far too many studies that focus on the dramatic events and draw broad conclusions from the exceptions.

Concluding Remarks

MY GOAL HERE WAS to add some additional context to the three studies of coal mining. All three books are well worth reading for anyone interested in the history of labour and labour movements. They each offer valuable new information to the literature.

11. Price Fishback, "An Alternative View of Violence in Strikes: The Bituminous Coal Industry, 1890–1930," *Labor History* 36 (Summer 1995), 426–56.