David M. Turner and Daniel Blackie, *Disability in the Industrial Revolution: Physical Impairment in British Coal Mining, 1780-1880*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018, pp. xii +228, h/b, £80, ISBN 978 15261 18158

David Turner, Steven Thompson, Kirsti Bohata, Vicky Long, Arthur McIvor, Mike Mantin, Daniel Blackie, Ben Curtis, Angela Turner, Victoria Brown, Alexandra Jones, and Anne Borsay, *Disability and Industrial Society, 1780-1948: A Comparative Cultural History of British Coalfields: Statistical Compendium*, no date, http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.183686 (accessed 11 March 2020)

Kirsti Bohata, Alexandra Jones, Mike Mantin, and Steven Thompson, *Disability in Industrial Britain: A Cultural History of Impairment in the Coal Industry, 1880-1948*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018, pp. ix +277, h/b, £25, ISBN 978 15261 24319

Turner and Blackie present a cultural history of disability in the British coal industry before 1880, the year of the Employers' Liability Act. As a cultural history it attempts to focus on perceptions, experiences, and responses. It emphasizes the agency of disabled miners and former miners claiming that this has been neglected (4, 7). Disability scholars, economic historians, and labour historians are lambasted for failing to 'adequately recognize the productive contributions of disabled people' (8).

'Disability', as the authors note in a valuable discussion (14-15), is a modern term. Nineteenth century people spoke of the deaf, the dumb, and the blind; the lame, the maimed, and of 'cripples'. Nevertheless the authors continue to use the modern term, limiting themselves largely to physical disability with an occupational basis in coal mining, and defining this by example: amputation, mobility impairments, visual impairments and chronic diseases such as 'asthma', later known as pneumoconiosis. In short, these are permanent or chronic conditions acquired at work which limit physical activity. The central hypothesis with which the authors engage is the idea that disability was 'created by industrial capitalism' or, rather, to use the somewhat opaque language introduced by Brendan Gleeson, 'somatic flexibility' was limited by industrial capitalism. To possess 'somatic flexibility' means to have autonomy in making decisions about one's work and one's body. This autonomy Gleeson associated with eighteenth-century domestic production. Such flexibility, Gleeson argued, enabled the newly disabled to find new roles which remained socially valued. As domestic production declined in the face of the new factories such possibilities also declined and the disabled were forced to take up 'less socially desirable positions', a processes aided and abetted by an increasing recourse to institutionalization (5, citing Brendan Gleeson, *Geographies of Disability*, London, 1999, 80-98).

The evidential basis for this history in so far as it concerns British coal mining is not as strong as one would have hoped. There is much data on fatal accidents which, though imperfect in many ways, have been collected under statute since 1855. Reports on accidents causing 'serious personal injury' were called for under the same statute but were produced only sporadically and patchily until the twentieth century. For data on chronic disease there is little easily available apart from statistics on the cause of death by occupation. One turns therefore in eager anticipation to the *Statistical Compendium* published online in association with this book. This is an enormous collection of data extending over several hundred pages. On inspection, much pertains to the period after 1880. However, there is gold here even from the earlier period. There are data on

accidents and injuries to men and boys at East Holywell, Northumberland, from 1841, and at Haswell Colliery, in Co. Durham, in 1849 and 1850. There are data derived from hospital records, poor law records, and company records; from the Rest Convalescent Home in Porthcawl from 1878 and for the next sixty years. But almost no use is made of this data in Turner and Blackie's book. One is reminded of the 'orphaned' data appendices of Davidoff and Hall's *Family Fortunes*: constructed with immense labour only to be all but abandoned when it came to writing the book. The authors reasonably point out that disability is difficult to quantify. And yet the numbers are crucial, if only in general terms, even to a cultural history. The risk of disability would hang like the sword of Damocles over every collier's household if miners could expect to end their lives missing limbs, suffering coughing fits from respiratory diseases, or impaired sight from nystagmus. But if these were rare events one could carry on with one's life without these fears and anxieties. If these were rare events, one might refuse to pay a subscription to a friendly society, a trade union, or a provident fund; one might not bother to enquire whether the person soliciting one's vote would support a more rigorous employers' liability act or a better funded and organized health service. People do not live their lives in disregard of the numbers, however much cultural historians might wish that they did.

This problem arises most obviously in the question of the prevalence of disability among miners and ex-miners. At first one might assume that the terrible accident record of the industry would imply that the prevalence of disability was high. Yet dead men do not count among the disabled. Nor do those who only slip and fall, bang their heads, and pass out concussed, only to rise fit and well again a day or two later; such are injured but not disabled. Surveying the major disasters of the nineteenth century, one wonders if many miners were disabled when so many were killed. In the disaster at Wall's End Colliery in 1835 for example, 103 were killed outright and only four brought out alive, all seriously injured and one of whom did not survive the amputation carried out to try and save his life (James Everett, *The Wall's End Miner: Or a Brief Memoir of the Life of William Crister*, 5th ed., London, William Reed, 1868, 78-9, 94-5, 96, 97). Turning to the types of injuries sustained by miners in the routine of the industry, as listed for example in the 1880 *Report of the Inspector for Mines for the Manchester District (Mr Dickinson)* (C. 2903, London, 1881, 46ff.) one sees many such as 'Leg broken', 'Leg hurt', 'Thigh broken', 'Crushed by a railway waggon', 'Collar bone broken', 'Dirt falling from face of coal', 'Arm broken', 'Arm caught between railway waggon buffers', 'Jaw and arm fractured. Falling 18 feet', 'Slightly burned', 'Ribs hurt. Kicked when feeding the ponies', 'Fingers crushed'. These days one would not expect to be permanently disabled by a broken bone, or a 'slight burn' but one wonders whether in 1880 there was a high chance of a broken bone or crush injuries leading to a limb amputation, or a 'slight burn' leading to an uncontrollable infection. One looks for an account of the treatment of such injuries in the nineteenth century which might help one assess this question but there is none given here.

Despite these evidential limitations, Turner and Blackie imply that the prevalence of disability was high. They cite John Buddle's evidence to the House of Lords in 1829 where he refers to 'an immense number of cripples' (33) and Thomas Burt's memories of Murton Colliery, Co. Durham, in the 1850s: 'Never had I seen so many crutches, so many empty jacket sleeves, so many wooden legs' (23). But other evidence points to other conclusions. In 1864, the Northumberland and Durham Miners' Permanent Relief Fund spent about a quarter of its expenditure on those with permanent disablements but this covered only nine

men and two boys; in 1880 the fund was supporting 232 permanently disabled members. There were nearly 100,000 miners in county Durham at this date, so, on this measure, the prevalence of permanent disability was only about 0.2 per cent. How can we reconcile this with Buddle's evidence and Burt's memories? By noting that the men Burt saw were actually at work; the men supported by the Relief Fund were regarded as incapable of work. In short, it appears that most disabled miners found work, often in or around their former workplace. It may be, therefore, that the prevalence of disability depends on how one defines it: very low if one means 'permanently incapable of remunerated work'; high if one means 'suffering from some partial physical impairment'.

That most disabled miners returned to work is a point which Turner and Blackie stress and, indeed, celebrate. But this celebration involves some strange value judgements. First, it is always assumed that it is a good thing that disabled miners went back to work (201, 206); one might prefer a situation in which compensation payments were sufficiently generous that disabled miners did not have to return to work and could spend some of their days, or even the rest of their days, looking after their children, painting, going fishing, writing poetry, tending the begonias, reading Dickens, or racing greyhounds. Second, it does not seem to matter for Turner and Blackie what work the disabled were driven to, including strike-breaking. The authors offer an account of the role of disabled miners as strike breakers which is carefully balanced (175, 180) but when we come to the concluding chapter, strike breaking becomes 'seeking to supply shortages of labour during strikes', disabled miners who did so are called 'proactive' and their actions lauded as a means by which they 'asserted themselves' (205).

So what of 'somatic flexibility'? The authors argue that it declined (41-6, 203) over the period they examine and thus conclude that the modified 'capitalist industrialism produces disability' thesis is correct. The evidence they put forward for this is indirect and, I think, mistaken. They point to the spread of longwall mining and an increased reliance on winding machinery as factors tending to curtail miners' autonomy and note that the increasing statutory regulation of the industry tended in the same direction. This is to misunderstand the progress of industrialism in the mines. As Daunton has argued and as Tailby has amplified, the key change was not from pillar and stall mining to longwall. This might or might not be accompanied by management changes which increased supervision and discipline and reduced miners' autonomy. Similarly, whether or not a miner could ascend the pit at a time of his choosing depended on the management rather than whether or not there was a winding engine to raise a cage up the shaft. Nor was the key change the introduction of mechanical coal cutting from the 1890s; instead, the big change was the introduction of machine mining as an integrated system of cutting, loading and transport. It was this that transformed the mine underground from a pre-industrial scene of pick and shovel, horse and cart, to a scene of 'modern industry', like 'nothing but a God damn factory' as Carter Goodrich phrased it in *The Miners' Freedom* (New York, 1926, 155). Machine mining was not introduced in the UK until after 1913, beyond the end of the authors' period (Martin Daunton, 'Down the Pit: Work in the Great Northern and South Wales Coalfields, 1870-1914', *Economic History* Review, 34 (4), 1981, 578-97; Stephanie Tailby, 'Labour utilization and labour management in the British coalmining industry, 1900-1940', doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 1990). But all this is, I think, ultimately irrelevant. As Turner and Blackie themselves note '[c]oalmining remained an industry receptive to the re-employment of men after serious injury well into the twentieth century'

and it was this aspect of labour management, not the technology, that was the main support of the 'somatic flexibility' of which the authors speak and which continued despite the capitalist organization of the industry.

This is therefore a work with significant weaknesses. Nevertheless, it has major strengths. It has one of the few sustained discussions of miners as patients not agents (*pace* the authors, labour historians have discussed miners as agents for well over a century). It is to be congratulated in noticing the part that religion paid in the experience of suffering. It has an illuminating discussion of the impact of disablement on miners' masculinity. It has accumulated an impressive collection of quantitative and qualitative sources and has made novel uses of the latter. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it will encourage labour historians to re-engage with the history of the body.

The second book under review here, by Kirsti Bohata and her colleagues, derives from the same research project as the first and takes the story up to the nationalization of the industry in 1947. It, too, eschews numbers. Although the *Statistical Compendium* is listed in the book's bibliography, I could find no reference to it in the text. Official reports are described as 'dry and statistical' (4), a trope which was already tired and worn out when Dickens used it in the 1830s in his 'Visit to Newgate' (in *Sketches by Boz*, ed. Michael Slater, London, 1994, 200) and which only serves to suggest a certain lack of imagination by the authors. To this reader, the statements that, according to official statistics, pneumoconiosis caused the death of 1,334 miners in south Wales alone between 1937 and 1948 and the permanent disablement of 18,297 others in the same area and the same period (37) are not dry but shocking. Nevertheless, despite themselves, the authors make good use of previous work which has engaged with the numbers and excellent use is made of qualitative material in the archives and elsewhere. Thus, on the question of the prevalence of disability in the industry, the authors are able to point to a wide variety of evidence of many different types from many different sources which is all consistent in pointing to the presence of a large number of disabled individuals in twentieth-century mining communities (248-49).

This volume is well-written and has a clear structure which drives efficiently and engagingly to the authors' conclusions. They are, first, that disability was ubiquitous in mining communities. Second, that this powered the activity of coalfield trade unions and engendered a politicization of unions and the miners they represented, producing a critique of capitalism and a demand for nationalization and, specifically, that in coalfield societies people with disabilities were, in turn, empowered by their trade unions. Third, that one of the 'major shibboleths' of disability studies, that capitalism conspires to deny the disabled productive work and instead conspires to institutionalize and thereby isolate and marginalize people with disabilities, is incorrect insofar as this, major, industry is concerned. Fourth, and this, though perhaps stated in a somewhat exaggerated form, is argued persuasively, that disability became the 'organizing principle' of coalfield societies. Fifth, that women suffered disability in these communities alongside the men; although the available sources focus on disabilities deriving from child birth, the gruelling work involved in 'reproducing the labour power' of the industry also took its toll. Finally, the reasons for celebrating the ability of people to return to work, despite the scepticism I have expressed above, are laid out; work in coalfield societies was, as it still remains elsewhere, a source of identity and status and a means of participating in the society of one's fellows.

Nevertheless, this book, like the book by Turner and Blackie, suffers from one fundamental problem. As Turner and Blackie point out, 'disability' is a modern term. Its

rise coincides with the rise of pressure groups concerned to improve the circumstances of disabled people and of legislation designed to do that. With that has arisen a new academic specialism, 'disability studies' of which the present authors declare their membership. But the working conditions that gave rise to disability in coalfield communities were also those that gave rise to death, and injury, and it was the dead and their dependents that were the first focus of humanitarian and later trade union activity. Every appeal for charity after a colliery disaster stressed the numbers of the dead and the widows and orphans that they left behind. Yet the dead have no pressure groups. That we have an academic specialism focused on disability alone tends to wrench coalfield disability out of its historical context in which it was surrounded by death and injury into an isolated and thus misrepresented aspect of experience. The wife who fed and washed her collier husband and waved her son off to work at the mine every morning worried not only that her husband would lose a limb but also that her son would never again return home and that she would never more see his bright, cheerful face. The experiences were inseparable and so should be the history.
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