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REVIEWS

Georgia Burdett, Sarah Morse (eds), *Fight and Flight: Essays on Ron Berry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020). Pp. 224. £24.99.

'These office blokes, they've never filled a dram, never cleared a top hole, they couldn't pack a waste or a cog, they've never cut up a rib face, they'd be smothered in diarrhoea working a low seam […] How they going to *think* like us, ah?' This question, from Gabe Lloyd, a character in the story 'The Old Black Pasture', begins a feast of essays on the work and life of Ron Berry (1920–97), produced on the occasion of his centenary. Gradually, responses such as these accrete attention and appreciation of this important author. Eight essays, an introduction from Dai Smith and a vivid reflection from Berry's five offspring, lend a sweep of critical perspectives and context to his life and writing. The range of subjects covered – gender, ecology, work and socio-cultural transition, sport and embodiment and disability – should kindle and stoke the discourse around Berry's oeuvre and highlight his relevance to today's biopolitical questions. Berry speaks meaningfully to the present and future, despite, as many of the contributors note, the way his work is utterly embedded, as 'boy inseparable from man in his time, his place' (*This Bygone*, p. 202).

The time and place is the Rhondda valley in the twentieth century, in the midst of a resurgence and then a decline in the coal mining industry which once dominated the region. Berry's particular world is the upper reaches of the valley, where he lived most of his life. His village, Blaencwm, is positioned in the crease of hills at the foot of a steep mountainside, surrounded by waterfalls, conifer plantations and views of the final traces of industry. Berry's lifespan saw the sinking of new pits right through to their closure and grassing over. His writing is confident in articulating this world: 'Unmawkish, unjudging, […] one completely unafraid to write from the centre of his own culture' (p. 79), writes Daryl Leeworthy in his essay on sport in this collection. And yet, though the work is deeply situated, Berry brings to his writing a cognizance of the long course of geological time and the dangerous energy encapsulated in the carbon deposits

whose extraction and brief ignition have given the world such a difficult heritage.

Restless Berry was remarkably prolific and innovative: that is, once he got to writing later in life during and after a series of odd, short-lived, low-paid jobs. This economic activity, which included a period underground in the 1930s and into the war years, gave him little by way of development or sustenance for his wit, intellect and creative verve. But underground work did give him visceral experience of and insight into the complex cultures of mining, cultures which were gradually becoming extinct as he wrote, and to which he would return for many years. Berry also had a surplus of physical energy for extracurricular activities such as cycling, rambling and bird watching, fishing and football, the last of which gave him a disabling injury to his knee which was exacerbated by poor working conditions and botched healthcare. When, from the 1950s onwards, Berry set to writing, he produced novels, short stories, an autobiography, journalism, environmental activism and other writings.

Berry's body of literary work, and the detailed essays in this volume, provide us with nuanced ways of thinking about the legacies and breakages of a heavy industry that stripped landscape and communities, bodies and cultures raw, only to bring us to our current environmental catastrophe. A number of the essays in *Fight and Flight* point to Berry's 'ecocentric' perspective and prescience. Sarah Morse and Tomos Owen reveal how Berry is a writer for our eco-depleted times. The afterlife of the extraction and burning of coal is still very much being felt in our ecosystems and bodies both in Wales and wherever coal is still extracted and burned. Berry both examined and sounded the alarm for the ecological destruction he could see ruining and scarring his (mostly artificially) green valley. The 'Flight' in the title of this volume most obviously refers to birds, to humans watching birds and birds humans, but also to a human way of taking flight from deadening work, into green pleasure, flights of language and the flights of desire for renewed life in the midst of hard toil. Berry observes the superficial greening of black pasture either in the form of the thin green moss over the coal tips or the afforestation that obliterated biodiversity in the uplands. His writing tunes into a birdless silence to try to find what life is left. Berry is critical of, and pessimistic about, the interventions in the valley, charting an ecocide of the other-than-human life that had sustained him in his early years and which he felt should be the

birthright of future generations. This collection should be commended for bringing forth an undersung working-class ecopoetics, a call from the midst of an earth- and body-maiming industry still marking our present and future. We can see in Berry's work and these essays the intimate intertwining of human body and production, society, ecology and climate.

Barbara Prys-Williams notes in her discussion of Berry's intense and curious autobiography, *History is What You Live* (*HIWYL*, 1998), that Berry was writing with 'an awareness of how little that has been thought worth human struggle endures' (p. 27). In *HIWYL*, Berry lists the men whose lives were taken prematurely. They would have been lost to history, but he names every butty he worked with in just one site, the Graig level. The names of those lives taken too young because of coal – through accident, suicide, emphysema, silicosis, pneumoconiosis and other lung diseases – in his cohort alone, take up a whole page. In the figure of the miner, especially in Britain in the era before nationalisation in 1947, we find what society and capital deem 'worth'. Berry's work shows how easily the miner is sacrificed to the coalfaces of carbon colonialism. Amongst the testimony of writers in the valleys such as Idris Davies, Rhys Davies and Berry's contemporary Gwyn Thomas, who also wrote about the human lives who dug out so much of modernity's combustible wealth, Berry's was unique, as Dai Smith and other contributors in this volume show. Berry's work stands out for its linguistic and formal invention and for bearing the trace of labour underground.

History is What you Live charts this coming to an understanding of what society deems as human 'worth' and tells of Berry's brush with death-by-dust in the 1940s. Waiting to be assigned work, Berry repeatedly rejected the job the manager wanted to assign him, the hard heading. After another frustration with the bosses who were only too happy to send men to their certain deaths at the silica face, Berry punched a foreman. 'Miners were expendable in 1940. And all the men who worked in that hard rock heading are in Treorchy cemetery', he writes (*HIWYL*, p. 87). This altercation with authority ended Berry's career underground. It was a misfortunate fortune which may have saved his life and undoubtedly enabled his later writing.

The way industrial capital depended on the 'expendable' bodymind of the miner (and their families and descendants it might be argued) is brought out in Georgia Burdett's excellent essay on disability in

Berry's work. This was a culture where men worked extremely hard with the constant possibility of suddenly being torn to shreds and the inevitability of the slow silting of their lungs. So often a character in Berry's work is noted for the percentage of dust in his lungs. Berry was himself a disabled writer, writing about disability in a society where disability and chronic illness were very common. Burdett shows how Berry's characters embody a range of different conceptions of disability, health, wellbeing (and welfare) and the social consequences of mining's ideologies. A maiming in the pit can change a man's social status, may lead him to self-education but not necessarily economic advantage. Berry's disabled characters gossip and debate, they might or might not form political solidarity around the uses and abuses of their bodies and minds by the industry, but they are active agents in the culture of the valleys. Burdett argues that there is a 'revolutionising of relationships between texts and ideology that results from Berry's shaping of disability as a majority presence in everyday life [which] produces a more real depiction of his and our continuing reality' (p. 109).

As Burdett and several other contributors point out, the physical strength, hypermasculinity, homosocial bonding and intensive bodily production upon which the industry, and thus valleys society, depended, was immensely damaging to its workers but also to their families, ecologies and, to some extent, the intergenerational inheritance valleys communities live with today. Berry's work explores the masculine culture central to this world and its gender dynamics are discussed here from a number of angles by Burdett, John Perrott Jenkins and Tony Brown. The 'fight' of the anthology's title is there in the literal boxing of protagonist Hector Bebb, an apex-model warrior of myth and legend. *So Long Hector Bebb* (1970) charts flawed boxer Hector Bebb's fall, 'a protagonist,' writes Perrott Jenkins in an essay on the novel,

> at once functioning within acceptable parameters of realism but enriched with mythic patterns and trajectories … [the novel] with its … densely textured mythic echoes, serves as a requiem for and an enquiry into the passing of a cherished but problematical Valleys hypervirility. (p. 65)

SLHB queries what happens to fighting men whose lives can only find meaning through a culture of competition and physically-demanding

economic production. But aside from Bebb's spectacular overreach, there are other fights in different forms. Daryl Leeworthy's essay notes the centrality of sport and the possibility it offered to Berry and his characters. Sport is a compounding of masculine norms but also offers Berry's characters a form of play at agency, a rare chance for creativity and a release, a pleasure. So central is sport that Berry ends his autobiography, *HIWYL*, by charting the fate of the winning football team he was so proud to play for in 1937.

Mining in the south Wales valleys was an intensely homosocial culture where men spent most of their lives together underground, dependent on each other's physical strength, skills and collaboration. Sometimes Berry's male characters align with and sometimes they question rigid traditions of masculinity. Some of his characters are not entirely comfortable with women. Women are often absent, representative of a repressive respectability or dangerously sexual and destructive. Curiously missing in the autobiography *HIWYL*, as Prys-Williams points out, is any mention of Berry's personal relationships. His wife Rene and five children are only mentioned once in the whole autobiography. This is one reason why the contribution of Berry's family to this volume is so precious and opens new insights and lines of enquiry. Prys-Williams also touches on the possibly strained relationships Berry had with his parents, particularly his mother Ann-Marie. Although it is not always possible or wise to firmly connect fiction with biography, Prys-Williams makes an interesting suggestion that in his depiction of relations between women and men Berry was exploring a haunting of some kind of maternal rejection.

Tony Brown also writes about Berry's depiction of gender politics, focusing on the short stories and noting that,

> Berry's refusal to be constrained by the niceties of literary decorums, one feels, is of a piece with the obstinate refusal of protagonists like Gabe Lloyd to be subject to the constraints of social codes and conventions, the writing a version of their stubborn, often lonely, struggle to shape, control, *man*-handle a world. (p. 46)

This poses the question then: does Berry align women with either the niceties of decorum and convention or with the disruptive force of sexual power? Sometimes Berry's fictions align with this tediously sexist dichotomy. At other times, his characters wonder agog at a female

complexity they cannot claim to understand. Hector Bebb's wife Millie makes an interesting case for future enquiry on this question. And Berry's 'hypervirile' male characters like Bebb are ultimately vulnerable to collapse. Gabe Lloyd, Brown writes, is left in the end with only a 'bloody-minded sense of male selfhood' (p. 40) and a 'lack of recourse to any notion of transcendent hope' (p. 41). Brown also describes a scene in the story 'Comrades in Arms' where two 'feral' men 'have sex' with the landlord's daughter after which she 'scurries home' (p. 35). Some clarity from Brown about whether this scene, which he describes as 'one of the darkest episodes in Berry's short fiction', is in fact a rape scene would help Brown's discussion of the misogyny in the texts and the world they depict.

But Berry's work is not going to provide clarity or simplicity; the world he writes is muddied with human contradiction and woundings. Dai Smith, who interviewed and corresponded with Berry, reminds us that this was a writer not simply documenting history in realist terms but rendering a language capable of carrying the weight of life's contradictions. Berry was aware, Smith writes, that 'the "evidence", his term for that individual ingestion of the history which lived you, was deep inside him, and that to make it outwardly known he had to "crystalise" it, his descriptor, into books' (p. 7). John Pikoulis's republished biographical portrait comments briefly on Berry's style which at once gave voice to the language of the Rhondda but also extended 'the boundaries of the realistic novel' (p. 170). But except for these brief perspectives on linguistic play and where decisions of 'style' are commented on, there is little discussion in this literary critical anthology of Berry's practical experimentation and processes of writing. For me, though, this living writing practice, a 'crystallisation', is crucial; it is the process of rendering language both embodied and new - Berry's techniques of poesis 'all things alive-O alive-O gouted sap and spunk' – that make this history-as-art and art-as-history alive and kicking. But aside from some influences (largely north American fiction and cinema, especially Westerns) and what you can glean from his archives, Berry himself hardly discusses what must have been an arduous, time-consuming process of writing. *HIWYL* mostly chronicles his friendships, failed odd jobs and the pain of his working life; he discusses little of what must have been an immersive experience of eavesdropping, notation, drafting, editing and conceiving his formally daring projects. In this collection then, I would have welcomed a perspective from novelists or creative writers influenced by his work,

such as Niall Griffiths who introduces the latest edition of *SLHB*, or a contemporary on Berry's patch like Rachel Tresize.

Brown quotes a passage in *HIWYL* which others in the book also refer to and I myself have underlined and returned to. Here Berry rejects any easy religious or political transcendence:

> Life's the clincher, inner and outer yeasting the matrix of YOU and ME. Christian adults preached cramp while trees, plants, fowls of the air and fishes in water, all things alive-O alive-O gouted sap and spunk. (*HIWYL*, p. 58)

How to crystalise in language this inner and outer yeasting of life? There are valuable beginnings in this volume in the considerations of ecopoetics in Berry's writing, but I was left wanting a further step in the exploration of the implications this ecocentrism might open up in our literary discourse at this current juncture. How can we move with Berry from 'concern' for the other-than-human and recognition of our 'entanglement' with other forms of life towards writing about our pasts with our futures in mind, and imagining more biophilic ways of living and working after heavy industry? Fiction and poetic prose such as Berry's might offer ways to think about how to live and write the contradictions and complications of 'greening', especially by taking seriously the damage wreaked by seriously unjust extractive economies and the often hollow attempts of greenwash regeneration. Perhaps Berry's work points to possible future research into Welsh writing in the context of an 'energy humanities' and 'just transition' by showing us what an extractive economy like coal can do to human bodies, to other animals and to our land.

The brilliant *HIWYL*, published by Gomer in 1998, is currently out of print and I struggled to find even a library copy. Now might be the time to reissue this work, but Gomer no longer operates as a publishing house. As I finalised this review, Port Talbot's last blast furnace closed. A green just transition is desperately needed, but instead of recognising that culture and creation are central to this process, heritage, arts and publishing in Wales are taking more cuts, starving future generations of the expertise and knowledge built up in our existing and future cultural ecosystems. Meanwhile globally there is the news that we are burning more coal than ever, even in the moment that we know how lethal coal is to planetary wellbeing.

Intergenerational exchanges are a theme in Berry's work. He writes of a cycle of sap and spunk, reminding us that history is what we live and that we are part of ecosystems of bodymind, language, animal, vegetable and mineral continually feeding into and out of a yeasting creation. What will we pass on? The novel *So Long Hector Bebb*, writes Niall Griffiths in his introduction to the Library of Wales edition, is a 'trail-blazer, a ground-breaker; those of us who feel driven to explore structure and voice, to barge at the boundaries of the novel form, we are all Ron's progeny' (*SLHB*, p. xii). But it is not just those who 'barge' at the novel form whom Berry's writing might 'help', as Griffiths notes, 'to survive somehow'; there is even more to learn about work, bodies, energy, language, sexuality, society and ecology here. Perhaps not many of us now in south Wales have ever 'filled a dram', 'cleared a top hole', 'packed a waste or a cog' or 'cut up a rib face' and we would likely 'be smothered in diarrhoea working a low seam'. So most of us cannot really answer Gabe Lloyd's question: 'How they going to *think* like us?' But we can *read* and write and inhabit this experience through Berry's languaging and yet create untold crystalisations, future yeastings.

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