

Review

Steven High, Concordia University

Alessandro Portelli. *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0-19-973568-6

“They say in Harlan County / There are no neutrals there / You’ll either be a union man / Or a thug for J.H. Blair.”

Lyrics from “Which Side Are You On?” (Florence Reese, 1931-2)

I first heard “Which Side Are You On?” at a political meeting in the mid-1980s when I was still a teenager. The song’s lyrics had been altered to support locked-out meat-packing workers in Edmonton, Alberta. As the Gainers standoff was a long and ugly one, the polarized world evoked in the song seemed to fit. It was only later in graduate school that I encountered the song’s original Appalachian lyrics and only in reading *They Say in Harlan County* that I fully grasped the context of horrific violence in which Florence Reese wrote these words. Today, “Bloody Harlan” has new meaning for me.

Without question, Alessandro Portelli is one of the world’s foremost oral historians. His first book, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, is a key text in the field. Its emphasis on subjectivity, memory and narrative contributed to a paradigm shift in oral history scholarship. The new book, the culmination of twenty-five years of summer visits, is therefore an important moment. Like E.P. Thompson’s classic book *The Making of the English Working Class*, Portelli places people and place front and centre. There is none of the jargon and scholarly name-dropping that one typically finds in academic scholarship. The theory structures the narrative and informs the author’s interpretation of the making of Harlan County, Kentucky. The result is a highly humanistic form of scholarly writing.

They Say in Harlan County begins with the creation stories told of early settlement, using family memories to explore place-making. In Harlan County, “you feel the nearness of the beginnings. The stories go back to a pristine wilderness, the first migrations and settlements, the Revolution, yet this is a living memory, entrusted to generations of storytellers” (13). Continuing, Portelli muses that “it’s exciting to be in a place where the beginning is still within reach of memory” (14). Of course, this is an illusion as the area’s aboriginal history that predated the arrival of the Europeans has been lost to today’s residents. The story being told is therefore a settler one.

For more than a century, Harlan County was coal mining country. Soot and dirt was everywhere – penetrating everything. Coal mining is hard and

dangerous work. Alessandro Portelli's interviewees spoke of gas explosions, roof-falls, childhood memories of sirens and ambulances, and the ever present fear. Over seventy-five years, 1,300 people died in the coal mines of Harlan County. Many more wasted away due to black lung. Dale Teeter's story was typical: "My dad was using a pick and a shovel. My dad died when he was fifty-five. He got hurt up there at the mine, and he had black lung, he had emphysema, kidney problem, he had everything. He had an autopsy report on him, three pages long" (139). In his decades-long relationship to this place, Portelli did not meet a single "working-class person who did not suffer personal injury, lose a family member or a friend, or witness death or injury in the mines" (147). Class is therefore central to the story being told.

By the time that Portelli began to visit Appalachia in the 1980s, the coal mines were mostly gone, yet the political, psychological, and environmental scars remained. Portelli's epic oral history tells us how class defiance turned to resignation over the course of the 20th century. Fatalism and shame now dominate Appalachian memories of poverty. The idea that "you can't fight the coal companies" was pervasive in the oral narratives recorded. Indeed, "the wounds of class are deeper than broken backs and broken lungs. They sink into the soul and erode people's sense of themselves and of their environment" (261-2). *They Say in Harlan County* tells us of political and cultural defeat of working people in the face of the raw power of the coal companies who were only too willing to resort to violence and even murder. Trade unionists responded with dynamite. At times, the class war resembled a civil war – coal country was deeply divided. Interviewees recall these labour defeats and betrayals in searing detail. In discussing the labour struggles of the 1930s, Portelli notes that a "deeper defeat took place on the cultural plane: as they lost the strike miners also lost their reasons for it" (202). "It's just pure power," concludes Jeff Tipton (215). The population of Harlan County declined from 71,751 in 1950 to 34,789 in 1980. Mine closures and modernization led to an exodus. It turns out that Harlan County residents did *fight* the coal companies, they just couldn't *win*.

To be honest, there is little to criticise in this book. Those hoping to find wise words about the oral historian's craft, however, might be disappointed. It is not that kind of book. Portelli calls it a "book of history" with a "broad chronological drift, with occasional flashes back and forward" (11). He tells this history through the voices of 120 residents, asking his readers to have patience as "much of the meaning is in the gaps and in the silences, to be extracted or filled in by the readers' cooperation and imagination." It is an epic story and one of the most powerful books that I have ever read. In this thick description of place, we hear how the past is not really the past. It shapes and structures what is remembered and what is not. Every turn in the winding roads of Harlan County seemed to reveal a new story. For example, Gurney Norman told Portelli that "...

and I realized that every stretch of road is marked with blood. There isn't a curve that doesn't have a story, and that's why I like to drive these roads, is to have the stories return to my own thinking" (229). *They Say in Harlan County* provides a model of how oral history can be engagingly written. It therefore represents an important new milestone in the discipline.