

## Harlan County and Alessandro Portelli

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*They Say in Harlan County* is a book a quarter century in the making. Alessandro Portelli, author of such innovative works in oral history as *The Order Has Been Carried Out*, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, and *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, has spent 25 years learning from more than 150 interviews conducted with residents of Kentucky's Harlan County.<sup>1</sup> The book is clearly a labour of love, demonstrated in part by Portelli's characteristic unwillingness to deprive interview participants of their own voice by rephrasing their comments in his own words, or by intruding with too much critique or interpretation of their statements.

An exhaustive treatment of the history of the region, the book's 370 pages are divided into fifteen chapters that provide a detailed encounter with the social history of Harlan County, largely through the words of the residents themselves. The presentation is mostly chronological, and the history presented incorporates economic, political, labour, gender, religious, immigrant, cultural, and environmental history – as well as, of course, the history of memory. Chapter titles and subtitles are sometimes more artistic than descriptive, making the book one that can be difficult to navigate. The attempt to integrate a variety of topics into a single theme for a chapter is not always successful. The best chapters – that is, those with the most cohesive and coherent storylines – are those that discuss labour in some way.

The book begins with descriptions of ghost stories, tales of pioneer life, and encounters with nature (Chapter 1). Chapter 2 addresses geography, subsistence farming, family ties, gendered labour, and domestic violence. The third chapter explores African American and Cherokee slaves and their descendants, the U.S. Civil War, family feuds, music, quilting, and dialects.

In Chapter 4, Portelli discusses Appalachian religion's "opposition to the central authority of state and church, and values of grace and humility (as opposed to the mainline churches' focus on individual merit and achievement)" (70). But despite this opposition, religion in Harlan County had and has little revolutionary potential. Portelli ends this chapter with a brief consideration of the connections between class and religion:

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<sup>1</sup> *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (NY: SUNY Press, 1991); *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

“We never had no books in the house – all we had is the Bible. King James Version, you know? That’s anti-union, as far as I’m concerned.” (Jerry Johnson) “Moses, he was a good man, a great union organizer. All them people living in slavery, he went down there and he helped them get organized....” (Rev. Hugh Cowans) (90).

While individual church congregants may have made such connections between religious belief and class consciousness, church ministers rarely did so. “The only reference to labor I heard in Harlan was an African American minister in Lynch, in 1986, warning his congregation that ‘we can’t afford a strike’” (91).

Portelli notes that it is only in Harlan County that he attends church. He explains that he attends “for the intensity of feeling, for the music and the eloquence, for the fellowship with friends and community, and because I believe that one cannot begin to understand this place without appreciating its religious life and experience” (71). He shares his own religious history as one raised in the Catholic tradition but who does not profess religious faith, not as a means of self-assertion or critique or even of counterpoint, but to illuminate the religious perspectives of Harlan residents themselves. The effectiveness of this comparative technique is demonstrated by his (and his interview participants’) discussion of miracles.

In the Catholic culture in which I was raised, God is everywhere, but the world goes on in its appointed way sustained by God-made natural law.... But in Harlan, over and over I found traces instead of Jonathan Edwards’s vision: the natural world needs to be constantly sustained by the intervention of supernatural power and pleasure of God, and the miracle is that the earth *doesn’t* open (81).

In this brief passage, Portelli uncovers the simultaneous beauty and despair of the worldview of many Harlan County residents. Suffering is the norm, and any small piece of good fortune – even the successful functioning of appliances – becomes a cause of joy. “Catholic miracles are about life and death; Harlan miracles can be about refrigerators and cars” (82).

At times, however, Portelli’s engagement with Harlan County religion is problematic. How do Harlan church members feel about his participation in their church congregations? He observes, “They ask me to testify [to my faith] but do not call me ‘brother’.” (72) Are they merely being polite when issuing the invitation, then? And would it have been better for him to politely refuse to do so?

When asked to testify, I talk of the awful white scars of strip mining on the green landscape, and all nod in agreement when I say it’s a ‘sin.’... It is

easier for me to translate their symbols into my own terms than for them to have a clear sense of mine. They accept me almost like family but find it difficult to articulate my solidarity with my difference. I seek a common ground when asked to testify – environment, peace, fellowship, solidarity, equality – but they must notice that I never mention God. Lydia tries discreetly to save me. Brother Miller has a hard time separating me, a Roman, from the New Testament Roman who killed Jesus Christ, and from the Antichrist, the ‘mark of the beast’ – the Roman Catholic Church (72-73).

Clearly Lydia and Brother Miller are dissatisfied with what Portelli has shared. What do other Harlan church members think of his ‘testimony’? And how true is the judgment that it is easier for him to understand their perspective than for them to understand his? It is evident that at least some of his interview participants doubted his ability to appreciate fully their religious experiences. Lydia Surgener, in the midst of an explanation of salvation, asks him: “Am I talking so you could understand it?” (75) Donald Hensley, also talking about being saved, asks mid-explanation: “You understand that?” (75) In an exchange with Thea Carter, Portelli asks, “Do you believe in the literal truth of the Bible?” Carter is suspicious of the motive behind the question, and replies defensively: “I believe they went [to the moon], yeah. I’m not that dumb” (79).

The gulf between Portelli and his interview participants with respect to religious understanding is evident as well in his account of an incident in Macedonia Baptist Church. He describes a preacher’s targeting of the church pianist for spiritual revival:

I catch myself rooting for him: *Resist, don’t give in...* But Mrs. Brown has set her eyes on bigger game: me. . . . Only now does my respect falter. *You don’t imagine how far I am from you, sister. Not because I don’t believe in your God, but because I can see that this is not about God but about your pride. Imagine if it were known that you converted the white professor from Rome...* She understands and lets me go (76).

It is the honesty of such passages that make Portelli such a delight to read. Too few scholars are willing to ‘bare their souls’ in this manner. At the same time, one is left wondering how the pianist and Mrs. Brown would have described and analyzed this same encounter.

Other chapters address the origins of the lumber and mining industries, the environmental impact and the denial of surface owners’ rights, transportation, moonshine and marijuana (Chapter 5). Such diversity of subject matter is typical of the various chapters, and Portelli’s attempt to connect these subthemes is not

always successful. The formation of coal camps and company towns, and the operation of paternalism, are the subject of Chapter 6. The next three chapters discuss the labour process and work-related deaths and diseases; women's work in the mines, sexism, immigrant identities, racism, slavery, unions and strikes; and miners' unions in the 1930s, violence against strikes, the Wobblies, and communism. Chapter 10 provides a clear account of the 1930s activities of the United Mine Workers and its president, John L. Lewis. An interesting comparison of historical memory of the Battle of Evarts versus the Battle of Crummies is included, one which is reminiscent of similar work Portelli has done on memories of battles in Italy. A discussion of influenza in this chapter, however, is difficult to reconcile with the chapter's other contents.

Chapter 11 takes advantage of Portelli's skill as a professor of literature, as it surveys literature, poetry, music, television, and cartoons about Harlan, and Harlan County residents' reaction to their depiction by others in these media. The next chapter contrasts the abandonment of the county by residents due to war and job loss with the unions' abandonment of the residents in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Chapter 13 explores Harlan County residents' encounters with other Americans: government and non-governmental organizations' social programs, civil rights and racism, poverty narratives, illiteracy, and strip mining. The penultimate chapter addresses the history of the United Mine Workers in the 1970s and 1980s. The final chapter is about survival and death, the Vietnam and Iraq wars, natural disasters, the local environmental movement, the mining technique known as mountaintop removal, attempts to diversify Harlan County's economy, drug abuse, and reasons for hope.

Hope is plainly a message Portelli wants readers to draw from this book. A final personal reflection would have been a logical conclusion, particularly one that would address his assertion that "all oral history should [focus] on changing the interviewees through the experience of listening" (363). Instead, a sustained reflection on how his two decades of research in the county has affected him personally is provided as the foreword to the book, one he fittingly terms "a love story." The last word he instead appropriately leaves to the Harlan County residents themselves. He notes that the time may not be right to successfully transform "economics, politics, power," and that the first step needs to be "the recovery of the people's and the culture's sense of self-esteem" (362). Harlan County resident Robert Gipe realistically observes: "It took us a hundred years to get into this, and then it'll take a hundred years to get out. Maybe not even the seed has been planted, but the ground has been turned" (365). *They Say in Harlan County* is a part of that recovery process, that breaking of ground, and Portelli and his interview participants should be thanked for sharing both their stories and their hope.