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## Unsuitable for Miners: Trauma in contemporary British mining narratives

Robert Edgar, York St John University

*I have more than a passing interest in this topic. My paternal grandfather went down the mines in the North-Eastern coalfields of Spennymoor and Bishop Auckland when he was 15, moving to the South Riding of Yorkshire in the 1930s. This was to what was then the new pit village of Rossington, near Doncaster. This was where my father and his siblings were born and raised. The mine is no longer there, the pit head has gone and in its place a housing estate built on top of the mineshafts.*

This paper has developed from consideration of 'Hinterlands' in the forthcoming *Routledge Companion to Folk Horror* (Edgar 2023). This chapter redefines the spaces that appear to be on the border of towns and cities as something other than 'edgelands'. In contemporary narratives these are not 'liminal' spaces between the rural and the urban. The argument is that these represent a third space; post-industrial spaces which have been left to rot at the hands of neo-liberal policies.

In a number of narratives these are depicted as places which are eerie, in part as they are emptied of people. Or at least people exist within flat roof pubs., etc.

Similarly. in hinterlands horror. The process of decline has already happened. but we are witnessing the result as present in a recognisable and familiar world, and there is no need for any fantastical extrapolation. The hinterlands represent a form of society which is perpetually stuck in decline with a pervading sense of bleak daily ritual. This is the underlying narrative form of Littler's *Scarfolk*: 'Scarfolk is a town in North West England that did not progress beyond 1979. Instead, the entire decade of the 1970s loops ad infinitum' (Littler n.d.). In hinterlands horror, Rather than trudging through the 'ruins and relics' [as we would expect with some form of post-apocalyptic landscape], people are living perpetually within them. (Edgar 2023, 371)

The most intrusive and ecologically invasive of industrial activities is at the centre of this depiction of spaces. And there is a contradiction. The industry that once caused these small towns and villages to thrive has gone, and its presence is just under the ground. The paradox in its representation is that, for a contemporary audience, we are aware of the ecological damage that fossil fuel has done.

## Mining in (Folk) Horror Literature

*My mother grew up in Doncaster, a South Yorkshire town ringed with mining villages. She tells the story of a neighbour who claimed to be able to hear the miners working just under her house. When people said they couldn't hear anything she would simply suggest that they had gone for their lunch. And she wasn't telling a tall tale to unnerve the local children, this was folklore transposed to an urban area in the 1950s.*

These are, of course, the tales of the 'knockers' Being 'In the Earth' has long featured in horror literature:

Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) and Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) both explore races driven to exist underground as 'monstrous tribes' – the Morlocks of *The Time Machine* being the brutal and primitive descendants of the Victorian working class (in being characterised as such, bearing striking similarities to the cannibals in *Death Line*) and the Vril-ya of *The Coming Race*, the revenant descendants of an ancient super-race who pose a threat to humanity in their need for future living space and their destructive abilities. (Evans-Powell 2023, 124)

The connection between mines and a descent into the infernal is something which is, as noted above, an aspect of horror fictions. The specific reference to the intrusion caused by industry is a lesser used trope and one that we are perhaps seeing with increased regularity. In a British context its roots are in a post-industrial northern landscape. Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960) is an evocatively claustrophobic portrayal of being underground and is indeed referenced by Robert McFarlane in *Underworld* (2019) in these terms. However, in the context of this paper it is the description of the post-industrial that is so significant.

Later, at the end of the midday meal, Gowther asked the children if they had any plans for the afternoon.

"Well," said Colin, "if it's all right with you, we thought we'd like to go in the wood and see what there is there."

"Good idea! Sam and I are gong to mend the pig-cote wall, and it inner a big job. You go and enjoy yourselves. But when you're up th'Edge sees you dunner venture down ony

caves you might find, and keep an eye open for holes in the ground. Yon place is riddled with tunnels and shafts from the owd copper mines. If you went down theer and got lost that'd be the end of you, for even if you missed falling down a hole you'd wander about in the dark until you upped and died." (Garner 1960, 23-24)

The fantasy voyage that Colin and Sarah go on is caused by the intrusion of people into the land. A familiar trope of the invasion of the natural world which will inevitably unearth something ancient, and dangerous.

This is the first trauma. A scarring of the land by industry.

### **The Miner's Strike and Collective Memory**

The miner's strike itself is rarely presented in fictions about the strike. Narratives which appear a few short years afterwards even then seek to discuss the legacy of the strike and subsequent decline. This is evident in a film such as *Brassed Off* (Herman 1996) which charts the subsequent decline of remaining pits and the inevitable impact on the local community. The film is bleak in outlook, what happens to the community is tragic and whilst contemporaneous it artfully predicts what the future would hold. (We perhaps forget how dark it is due to Mark Herman's script which undercuts the darkness with fleeting moments of 'comic relief'.)

The depiction of the collapse of these communities, due to become narrative 'hinterlands', sites of permanent decay, is also developed in a further contemporary text, Tony Harrison's *Prometheus* (Harrison 1998), of which Edith Hall suggests:

.. that the eye of history will later view Harrison's *Prometheus* as the most important artistic reaction to the fall of the British working class as the twentieth century staggered to its close, a fall symptomatic of the international collapse of the socialist dream. (Hall 2002, 131)

In this narrative the Prometheus myth is applied to contemporary Yorkshire and depicts the landscape as a post-industrial wasteland.

These narratives depict the decline of an industry as it happens and show communities that are left to their fate by a neo-liberal government.

*Brassed Off* also features a narrative device that a number of subsequent fictions will later use. Gloria is from the town of Grimley, but the outside returns. Gloria a member of management, sent to

assess the viability of the pit. The seed of destruction is sown from within. The Miner's Strike is rarely depicted but it is present. It exists in as spectral. Crucially though it exists in the collective cultural memory as traumatic. The inability of areas to move on from the effects of the strike – time stands still. The very definition of hauntology.

### **The Miner's Strike as a site of Civil War**

The place the Miner's Strike holds in the collective memory of, in particular, the North of Britain is significant. As with much that is traumatic it is difficult to represent and this is perhaps why it remains elusive in literature. Emery discusses what he calls 'wounded cities'. These are discussed as:

urban environments “that have been harmed and structured by particular histories of physical destruction, displacement, and individual and social trauma” ... In urban environments, the “social ecologies of place” – embodied, affective, symbolic and material – are critical. Damaging this ecology through violence results in “root shock”, a term conceptualising the “traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one's emotional ecosystem” ... (Emery 2022, 642)

This is a second level of trauma rooted in the communities that are displaced through policies relating to a change in industry, not necessarily the change in industry itself. In narrative terms the Battle of Orgreave presents a dramatic representation of a longer period of conflict which in reality meant days of miners standing on picket lines and degradation and poverty for many people. It is natural perhaps that the 'battle; would be the element that forms the centre of discussion of the strike.

Tristram Hunt described the events of the 18<sup>th</sup> June 1984:

As a majority of miners headed off to Orgreave village for a drink, the police sweltered in the sun. Those miners still picketing the plant played football and goaded the police lines. As the hours passed, the police became increasingly frustrated. Now it was no longer about keeping Orgreave open; the police wanted it out with the miners.

Massively outnumbering the pickets, they started banging their shields with truncheons. Then came the PSUs. Then came the cavalry. Then came the charge. As miners fled the field, across railway lines and into the village, the police closed in. Miners were beaten on the field as they

lay. But when the cavalry entered Orgreave village, they came under renewed attack from scrap-metal missiles. Clement's response was extraordinary: he ordered a mounted police canter through this small Yorkshire village. An out-of-control police force now charged pickets and onlookers alike on terraced ... streets. (Hunt 2006)

Fictional attempts to represent these events have been limited. David Peace adopts a fragmented style in *GB84* (2014) where chapters are introduced in a fragmented narrative where we hear the voices of two striking miners.

The other significant representation of the Battle of Orgreave is Jeremy Deller's reenactment in 2001, filmed by Mike Figgis for a Channel 4 documentary. (Deller n.d. For this Deller used members of the Sealed Knot, as well as miners and other Rotherham locals who had been present at the time.

### **The fear of the folk – ‘There’s a Tory MP now in Ashfield.’**

*In a cupboard in the corner of my parent's living room are a number of artefacts from the past, included amongst them are the remnants of the miners' strike. Pieces of political protest and folk art which seem now to belong to a different age.*

As a generation cast their minds back to their childhoods in the 1980s there is a different perspective placed on the miner's strike and the real and fictional representations of events and the aftermath. The political, social and personal traumas of the strike become part of the hauntings of that period. The distance afforded by time and by generation allows for more representation of the trauma involved. This is perhaps best exemplified in the television series, *Sherwood* (Graham 2022)

In this BBC series set in a contemporary Nottinghamshire village, tensions ferment following the miner's strike in 1984–1985 and when the 'industry' of the area no longer exists. Loosely based on a real murder, this powerful drama plays out the tensions that remain following the dismantling of the mining industry ... In James Graham's script, folklore is evoked in the name of the killer who, appropriately for the location, kills with a bow and arrow and is, thus, named Robin Hood. (Edgar 2023)

The drama presents a complicated dual narrative where the murder works alongside family turmoil, intergenerational resentment between members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Nottinghamshire Miner's Association (NMA).

However, what sits behind this drama is a contemporary 'betrayal' beyond the history of the Miner's Strike. Sherwood depicts a community that has transformed and has been cut adrift from its past. An early horror presented to us in this drama is that 'there is a Tory MP now in Ashfield', referring to the recently elected former Labour local councillor and now Conservative MP Lee Anderson.

The fear that is presented in this drama is that maybe the prospective Conservative candidate, Sarah Vincent (Joanne Froggatt) is right and that deep down the people of the town were always a moment away from voting Conservative. The very philosophy that brought their town to its knees nearly 40 years before has now been embraced. The battle was for nothing.

### **The Spectral presence of mining**

As environmental concerns grow and there is an increased resistance to fossil fuels the battles of the recent past seem increasingly confined to a different age, with different attitudes. The desire to preserve a community of people set against an industry that is contributing to climate change and the destruction of the natural environment.

However, in this there is a further trauma, and one which will not leave us. This is the inseparable relationship of the people and the land through industrial relations.

In our age of the Anthropocene ... with its deforestation, pollution, nonnative introduced species, planetwide spread of industrial particulates, and mass extinctions, it has become impossible to distinguish altered from non-altered environments, making nature a construct of human fantasy and projection rather than an actual site or place. By entitling [this] ... dirty nature, we would like to draw attention to this construct: rather than pure nature, i.e., an environment without contaminants or adulteration, we pose that nature is invariably dirty, i.e., fraught with remnants of human intervention. (Schaumann and Sullivan 2011, 107)

The pitheads that once stood at the centre of mining villages have long since been demolished and the mines, sealed 'in the earth' and with them the traditions they represented. What has replaced them varies; housing estates, occasionally children's parks and often uncanny statues.

Although the spirits of the miners are not silent, as can be seen in Mark Jenkin's *Enys Men* (2023). Miners have morphed into the 'knockers' of folklore, as they had started doing in the 1950s in the story told to my mother.

Former mining landscapes represent a tension between the recent industrial past, sites of economic and social battle and destroyed communities often represented through the trauma of the miners' strike of 1984-5. Whatever happens the land and communities are literally scarred by this industrial activity and metaphorically scarred by the trauma caused by change and the battles that were fought to try to stop that happening.

There is perhaps an inevitability that things will change and narratives of the 1980s perhaps give us a narrative so we can negotiate what happens next:

I know the ghosts industrial change unearths. As a young lawyer, I worked with mining communities to challenge the Tories' pit closure programme but deep down, we all know this has to happen eventually and that the only question is when. (Starmer 2023)

*My Aunt still lives in the house that she, as well as my father, was born in. It was bought many years ago under Thatcher's right to buy scheme. She recently traced our family tree back from Doncaster, through the coalfields of the North East and down to Cornwall. It turns out my great, great grandfather was a copper miner who had to move North as the local industry wound down.*



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