



The Appalachian Tragedy

Harlan Miners Speak

Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields by Members of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners. Reprinted by da Capo Press, 348 pp., \$12.50.

Coal Mining Health and Safety in West Virginia

By J. Davitt McAteer.

West Virginia University Press, 689 pp., \$20.00.

Harlan Miners Speak, first published in the hunger-ridden November of 1931, is important for two reasons. It reminds a now affluent middle age of the horror of the Great Depression and preaches to the rebels of the Woodstock generation a powerful sermon on this country's capacity to punish and repress dissent. An American saga emerges from its pages.

Harlan County, Kentucky, is the geographical heart of troubled Appalachia. Its name has passed into legend for the cruelties of its overlords and the bloody and protracted struggle of its underclass to free themselves

This article originally appeared as a book review in The New York Review of Books. Reprinted with permission from The New York Review of Books; copyright © 1970 The New York Review.

and to secure at least a tolerable standard of living. To this day newspaper references to the county generally designate it as "bloody Harlan." Harlan Miners Speak tells us how it acquired that somber sobriquet.

There is probably no lovelier place than the Appalachian heartland, a wrinkled maze of steep, rock-capped, timbered hills. Harlan is different from the huge territory north of it because an unusual terrain feature, the Big Black Mountain, shoulders boldly across it. The Big Black, like the lesser Smokies, rises to 4,400 feet and looms in dark majesty above the hills nearby.

The Big Black is significant for more than its beauty. Three thick veins of superb metallurgical coal run through it and with the beginning of the twentieth century the hill beckoned to industrialists and their hungry furnaces and power plants.

The county--and the region around it--stumbled into tragedy by processes conventional American history has all but glorified. The territory was the home of scattered bands of Cherokees, Shawnees, and Choctaws who warred against ever-encroaching white settlers from the East. The first cabin builder was Elisha Wallins, and he and those who followed him brought the simplistic, Calvinistic, and ferocious backwoods mores and culture into the shadows of the Big Black. They cleared patches for corn, tobacco, beans, and squash, set up their whis-

by Harry Caudill