

## **Classics down the mineshaft**

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The miner and painter Gilbert Daykin's painting 'The Miner Enslaved' (1938) stands in the long iconographic tradition which equates miners, slaves and other manual labourers with Prometheus in chains. The Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound* was first translated into modern languages in the 1770s, just at the time when the mining industry really took off in the modern world. In it, following a long list of the benefits he has bestowed on mortals, Prometheus says:

...But, chief / of all, unequalled presents, brass and iron, / Silver and golden ore, hid in the ground, / Who shall pretend he gave to man but me?

Both born and reborn in times of high mining activity, Prometheus is the undisputed god of the mining industry.

The excavation and trade of minerals from the earth's crust formed the economic basis of the flowering of classical Athenian culture, of which *Prometheus Bound* was part. The money that financed the leisure that made possible Athenian philosophy, drama, and architecture was the vast revenues produced by the silver mines of Laureion. The same goes for the relationship between the rise of Macedon and the mining of Macedonian gold. The map of the Roman Empire, at least in the north-west, is remarkably commensurate with the map of their mining activities. The literature and art of Greek and Roman antiquity consistently obscures and often erases completely the reality of the labour—often slave labour—which financed the upper-world lives of the free. There are a very few startling exceptions, including Diodorus' account of the suffering of the labourers in the gold mines of Roman Spain. But we lack entirely any first-hand account of the subjective experience of an ancient slave miner. We therefore have no access to the insides of the heads of the people

who worked in the extreme conditions of the ancient mines, extracting the metals and minerals which made the classical world possible. But we do have some access to the intense relationship between the history of mining and the history of post-Renaissance Classics.

There was an intimate *historical* relationship between the rediscovery of the ancient mines and mining technology in the Renaissance and Early Modern worlds. Re-opening the apertures into the world beneath has often coincided with—or rather, precipitated—archaeological investigations and collecting activities. The *Ways and Means* of Xenophon, with its discussion of the Laureion mines, was a popular text in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Britain during the period when mining activity intensified in the run-up to the industrial revolution. The re-opening of the Laureion mines as commercial operations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century went in tandem with a dynamic new archaeological interest in the outlying areas of ancient Attica. In Britain, mining prospectors identified with Pliny the Elder, who was in charge of the Roman mines in Spain. Modern-world mine-workers themselves—whose voices are very slightly more audible than those of ancient mine-workers—often took an interest in ancient mining, indentifying themselves with their ancient forebears (as can be seen in this NUM banner from the Lanchester division) and sometimes became amateur archaeologists.

But mining, especially shaft mining, has always had a *conceptual* relationship with the ancient world which goes far beyond material experience. Descent down a mineshaft is a *katabasis* par excellence. It is a journey to the world of the dead, repeated on a daily basis. It is an incredibly dangerous industry, and there have always been tragically high numbers who sooner or later do not return alive, which has reinforced the katabatic associations. For the families of mine-workers, their katabatic bread-winner is in effect *a daily revenant*. From Renaissance infernos to Zola's *Germinal*, Tony Harrison's film-poem *Prometheus* and the contemporary artist Peter Howson's *Sons of Pluto*, the mine-shaft has been reconceived as the

place of descent to the Underworld, and the caverns and corridors which corrugate the infernal world from which gold or lead or coal is extracted have provided the imaginary architectural plans of many of our culture's vision of the world of the dead.

Classicism also informs the *aesthetic* expression of the relationship between mine labour and leisure, especially in our primary area of focus, late 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain. Land-owning and mine-owning individuals made rich—often fabulously rich—by the sale of metals and minerals mined by working-class labourers on their property liked to express it in aesthetically classicising form. There are countless examples in the regions of the British mines and coalfields of the mine-financed stately home built in a style which presented the mine-owner as a Hellenistic philosopher-king. One of our prime examples is Nostell Priory near Wakefield.

A vertical cross-section of the Nostell Priory area, therefore, would show an Underworld peopled by miners whose labour is extracting the physical material which is then brought above ground and transformed into financial surplus which pays for art collections and libraries of fantastic classicism. It also creates a world in which the classical *education* operates as an exclusion mechanism to maintain the boundary between leisured and labouring classes. One of the reasons why the man—or woman, or child—down the mine will never be able to get out of the infernal world is that he or she can never acquire the expertise in the arcane ancient tongues which are the mark of the ruling-class male. In Siegfried Sassoon's 'The Case for the Miners' (written in 1921) the poet angrily parodies his 'port-flushed friends [at high table, who] discuss... [a miners'] Strike'.

*'Why should a miner earn six pounds a week?  
Leisure! They'd only spend it in a bar!  
Standard of life! You'll never teach them Greek,  
Or make them more contented than they are!'*

The very *perceived irrelevance* of Greek and Latin to contemporary reality and the struggle for economic survival worked to prevent many miners from seeing that Classics might create *advocates* for the working class, and help to form minds which could argue the miners' case and – by speaking the *language* of the ruling class – achieve real political power.

While it is true that the markers of an expensive classical education were in common use throughout our period of study to help identify and segregate the 'haves' from the 'have nots' in British society, this does not mean that the excluded lower-classes never engaged with classical culture. Nor does it mean that from time to time workers did not acquire a similar, if not more complete, mastery over the raw material behind the cultural phenomenon of the classical education.

There were throughout our period diverse routes by which exceptional individuals could gain sufficient experience of this restricted cultural zone to become, at least in this respect, the equals of their ruling-class peers. In our classics and class project we are uncovering numerous stories of inspiring autodidacts who did manage to rise from the great unknown to occupy respected and influential positions in society. We are also finding stories, though far fewer, of those who made the attempt but found the social gradient just too steep. These stories are fewer, not because the outcome was less common, but simply because it is more rare for people to record failures than triumphs. In a rigged educational and social system, many mute Miltons remained ingloriously mute, despite efforts of epic proportion.

The 'classics as social exclusion' model, even when we build in the tortuous and/or fortuitous paths to high classical attainment beaten by exceptional under-privileged over-achievers, we still do not have a true picture of the relationship between classics and class in Britain. There exists a whole range of classicisms between the false and floating poles of cultural illiteracy and the ideal of high classicism.

To illustrate this range we have selected today five encounters with classical culture, which take place if not always actually *down* the mineshaft, then certainly within a stone's throw of the pithead. And, since we're in Durham, our examples all come from within the Great Northern Coalfield.

Ernest Rhys was a coal viewer turned socialist poet and man of letters who was chiefly responsible for early-twentieth-century Britain reading good English translations of the best of world literature, including the Greek and Roman classics. Known primarily as the series editor of Joseph Malaby Dent's hugely influential Everyman Library, Rhys – at the age of 20 – established what he called the 'Winter Nights Club' in the coal village of Langley. Driven by the desire to do something to remedy 'the plight of the pitmen who had precious few resources of amusement after their day's work', he got permission to turn a derelict miners' cottage into a clubhouse and library. He recalls years later that he was so proud of his achievement that he 'even drew up a catalogue of the books I meant the pitmen to read, and you may laugh to hear that Plato's Republic was one of them'.

But why should we laugh? Presumably because the surface narrative of working-class disinterest in perceived 'high culture' was so pervasive, that it even survives in the writing of a man who did so much to challenge that lazy narrative. Rhys learned early on in life both that there were many working men, especially miners, with a thirst for knowledge, and that there was a deeply ingrained resistance to this notion. When he first took his idea of the miners' reading room to his colleagues, he tells how he was met with derisive snorts of contempt: 'A libery, begod! What do they want with books? Papers now, with the betting news, and a billiard table, but books!' Tolliday, who said that, was of the school that considered workers to be interested only in drinking and gambling. To say that both modes of diversion were rife among mining communities across Britain in the 19th century would be an understatement, but this was largely because there was often little else to do.

Another colleague, however, Tom Hepburn, the overman of Langley Park colliery, warmed to Rhys' idea. Hepburn was, Rhys tells us, 'a good Methodist, and hated the public house like the devil, and here was a good rival'. Together Rhys and Hepburn 'managed to get round our chief [that is Tolliday] and the directors of the colliery'. It is no coincidence that it took the vision of a young literary enthusiast with strongly socialistic tendencies, and the support of a Methodist foreman bent on Temperance to push through such a radical idea. Both political and religious groups, often one and the same, were largely responsible for the spirit of reform, which would eventually bring about changes securing a far more equal British society.

The first class-conscious classical encounter, then – although it was focused on the figure of Ernest Rhys – was really that of the pitmen of Langley Park, who used to meet up and discuss politics and philosophy from Plato to Ruskin in the 'Winter Nights Club'.

Our second example gives us the closest thing we have to evidence of discussion of classics actually taking place at the very coalface. Due to the dark, damp, cramped and noisy conditions, I had thought our hunt for classics actually at the coalface would be futile. But, that was before I was introduced to the Durham collier, Jack Lawson. We find him only 16 miles north-east and around 30 years forward in time from Rhys's Langley in the Durham pit village of Bolden at the turn of the nineteenth century. Lawson, who was later to become Financial Secretary to the War Office in the first Labour government, began working life at the age of twelve as what he would later call a 'two-legged mule of industry'. Lawson's example challenges the distinction between those working men who gamble and those who took to books. When he lost his money he would skulk back to his house and lose himself in his steadily growing library, shelved in orange crates. He spent his penniless weekends 'in following the Goths over Europe, right into old Rome, or marching with Attila's "Huns"'. His father worried for his mental health.

Lawson was a glutton for history and this is what formed the major part of his orange-crate library. Among his history books was the ever-popular (or at least then) Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*. But he wasn't reading Gibbon at the coalface. What *did* happen down the mine was an especially formative discussion with his fellow collier Jack Woodward, which Lawson reports in his memoirs:

I can see Jack now... I can see the wraith-like figure of him as he talked books. The shovel squealed against the hard stone floor, then leaped over the tub its burden of coal, coming back for more almost before it had started... The pick was biting the coal as though driven by a machine. Thus we worked and talked, swallowing our peck of dust every minute... I timidly turned the subject to Ruskin, who was just at that time receiving my homage. His plea for art, education, and a decent life for the toiler aroused mutual enthusiasm in us.

No classics, admittedly, but this evidence of 'talking books' down at the coalface suggests that classics down the mineshaft was both possible and indeed probable, especially when we consider that many of the books read by such men were related to the classical world.

Before long Lawson was embarking on an undergraduate course at Ruskin College, and was soon enjoying the newly won privilege of Ruskin men of attending Oxford University lectures, finally benefitting from the same educational practice as the children of the wealthy power-holders. Lawson declined post-graduate education, in spite of every encouragement. He preferred to return to the pit, from where he would begin his successful political career.

In case we should think Lawson too much of a one off, we ought to note the experiences of those other men with whom he talked books in Bolden. Not only does Lawson mention the wise Jack Woodward, but also an unnamed man, whose wife taught him to read in his 30s and who – we are told – would wait to walk home from the pit with Lawson so that they could discuss his reading. This long-illiterate collier spoke memorably to Lawson about his passionate appreciation of Nietzsche. Lawson wrote admiringly: 'This man read the New Testament in Greek and oratorios were as easy to him as the latest song is to the man in the street'.

Our third tale of classics amid extreme deprivation takes place in the pit village of Ashington, in Northumberland. Here, although we find no evidence of *discussion* of classical culture down the pit, we do discover that it was not unknown for miners to take their classical reading material down with them in the cage. Since the formation in 1898 of the Ashington Debating and Literary Improvement Society, classical Greek and Roman authors were included on the reading list and discussed at its regular meetings. Harold Laski, soon to be appointed professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics and co-founder of the influential Left Book Club, visited their group in September 1924 and the same time the following year.

After his second visit he wrote to his friend the American jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes: 'I gave them four lectures, but I learned more from them than I could ever teach. It was sometimes grim talk, for there are hard times ahead for the mining community in England. But, in general, it was of books and men... There was one... who had learned Greek in order to read Homer in the original... These twelve every Friday for thirty-six years have met to read and discuss a book. They argue grimly with text and counter-text and you have to know your piece to get by them. They were saddened, while I was there, by the death of a miner who was found killed by a fall of coal; in his coat was found a translation of Thucydides with the page turned down at the Periclean speech.'

In the 1930s the colliery community at Ashington also saw rise a tradition of painting facilitated by Robert Lyon, then master of painting at Armstrong College, Newcastle. It all began with the formation of an art appreciation group. The unlikely voyage of a group of colliers to artistic discovery, and a certain amount of fame, has been well documented by William Feaver in his book *The Pitmen Painters* (first published in 1988), which in turn inspired Lee Hall's successful play by the same name. When Lyon arrived in Ashington under the auspices of the Workers Educational Association he began to lecture the class as he



would his undergraduate students. He showed them a series of lantern slides of old masters, but he quickly learned – or more likely was taught – that this was not the way to go about teaching this tightly knit group of adults, who had their own ideas about what they wanted from the class. Oliver Kilbourne, a founding member of the group and one of the most acclaimed painters among them, spoke of how the old black and white pictures Lyon showed them in those first sessions were ‘mainly of Renaissance paintings and either religious or mythological subjects. As we didn’t know the Greek myths then we were rather baffled and didn’t really get anywhere with this.’

Lions then embarked on a purely practical style of teaching: to learn by doing. It didn’t take long for the group to start painting scenes of life in the pit village. One of the first pieces of work produced by the group was this linocut by Harry Wilson. As you can tell by this image, they were not predisposed to paint copies of old masters, or famous classical casts, as was the common learning method taught in the art colleges of the day. This was not because they were following any self-consciously working-class aesthetic, or knowingly contributing to any agitprop directive or Communist realism. They simply avoided engaging with classical themes because they knew what they wanted to paint and that was what they knew and saw about them.

Even though these pitmen painters gave classical tradition the cold shoulder, they still encountered classical culture at every turn in their artistic development. The *then* of Kilbourne’s dismissal of Lyons’s lantern slides (‘we did not *then* know the Greek myths...’) is indicative of the fact that through their exposure to the art world, which included educational trips to columned, Regency-built London galleries, meetings with formally-trained artists, the study of artistic techniques from books, and practical art classes, for example, in King’s College, Newcastle, they did before long become familiar with the Greek myths. As you can see from this picture taken in a room in King’s College, lined with

sections of the Parthenon Frieze, their passion for art literally surrounded them with classical culture, which cultural presence seeped into their lives, even when their attention was very firmly fixed elsewhere.

We enter our fourth story by following the Durham collier, Joe Guy, walking to class. In 1952 every Saturday during term time Joe left his pit village of Sacriston and headed to a class on Palace Green called 'The Working of Democracy in Britain' under the guidance of P.R. Kaim-Caudle, who would later become Professor of Social Policy here at Durham. During the week, Joe worked as a pitman. COAL Magazine, the PR organ of the National Coal Board, tells us that Joe was 'a typical Durham miner' in all ways apart from one 'small accomplishment' – 'he has taught himself to read Greek and is a regular contributor to a theological magazine'. The piece continues:

Joe Guy is a member of a class of 25 Durham miners. It has been organized jointly by the Durham Area of the NUM and the Durham Colleges Board of Extra-Mural Studies. Students are drawn from collieries in all parts of Durham... Their average age is 30. Some have attended NCLC and WEA courses, but the majority have little or no adult educational experience.

Although most Political Sciences courses did begin with Plato, there is nothing conclusive to suggest that this extra-mural class in Durham made any reference to the classical world. From its tentative beginnings, however, in 1886 the University Extension Lectures in Durham often did have classical subject matter. In the first programme of these courses, 'designed to bring some of the benefits of University teaching within the reach of persons, of either sex and of every class, who have been unable to join the University as Matriculated Students', there are on record courses on Roman poetry, Ancient Drama, Roman History and Greek Philosophy.

In 1911 the University joined forces with the WEA 'to foster and supervise tutorial classes in the area'. In 1916 Rev. E.G. Pace took charge of the extra-mural teaching. For Pace, 'one major ambition... [was] to interest more pitmen in Extra-mural work'. In 1924 45% of students in the tutorial classes were manual labourers and 33% colliers. These tutorials were conducted in an astonishing number of the mining communities surrounding

Durham. Ever popular were classes that incorporated some local Roman history, which provided abundant opportunity for day trips to Corbridge and Housheads, where lecturers in raincoats could point and declaim earnestly from walls before admiring crowds of more optimistically-dressed students. [JP Gillam and Walter Taylor].

In 1947 Harold Boyden took Pace's place as head of Extra-mural studies. He collaborated successfully with local media and local trade unions to drum up even greater participation from the harder-to-reach communities of coal and steelworkers. It was under his leadership that Joe Guy found the funding and opportunity to continue his education at the university. In 1955 Boyden explained to a reporter: 'We are pleased that more working class people – many of them miners and steelworkers – are taking advantage of the courses...' He continues: 'In a manner of speaking, there are miners and steel workers who will take a course in Elizabethan literature or the history of the Near East virtually 'at the drop of a hat'. By looking at the extra-mural syllabuses of the time it is clear that 'Elizabethan literature' and 'the history of the Near East' could just have easily been 'Greek philosophy' and 'the history of the Roman Empire'.

Our fifth and final example of classics in extremis focuses on the former industrial boomtown of Spennymoor. When a man called Bill Farrell, fresh from the University Settlement Movement headquarters at Toynbee Hall, arrived in Spennymoor, he saw that the unemployed miners, which made up 35% of the insured population, needed encouragement (in his words) 'to think of other things and other spheres of possible work besides the defunct or moribund mine'. At its peak the town had boasted the largest ironworking mill in Europe; in the 1920s and 30s it was an industrial boomtown gone bust.

Farrell's Settlement, with the backing of the Pilgrim Trust, set out 'to encourage tolerant neighbourliness and voluntary service, and give members opportunities for increasing their knowledge, widening their interests, and cultivating their creative powers in a

friendly atmosphere'. What it achieved was perhaps even more important. As the reporter-activist Arnold Hadwin put it: 'The Settlement gave an impoverished community the will and means to fight back against the failings of the State, with assurance and dignity.'

In January to March 1936 the Spennymoor Settlement, established in a disused shop on the high street, was the scene of an encounter with Plato by employed and unemployed Spennymoor inhabitants alike. Each Tuesday evening at 7.30 the men would gather around the radio and listen to two young Oxford fellows 'examine modern society in the light of Plato's teaching'. It was part of a series of BBC broadcasts of what was essentially an adult educational course entitled *If Plato Lived Again*. The two young philosophers were R.H.S. Crossman and Charles Morris. Crossman (1907-1974) the lead writer of the programme, was - at the time - a fellow of New College, Oxford, writing his first book entitled *Plato Today* (1937) and wowing undergraduates with his 'special gift for the toughest sort of dialectic' (*ODB*). He became a Labour MP in 1945 and won fame posthumously as a political diarist. Morris (1898-1990) was fellow and tutor of philosophy at Balliol College, Oxford, and later became a knighted university administrator.

Settlement members formed a listening group around this programme; not all of them were miners, but every one of them lived in the extreme deprivation of a failing Durham coal town during the Depression. This kind of programme was clearly an invaluable point of access for individuals and groups such as the Spennymoor listening group, nationwide – not only access to University-style education but to a common cultural inheritance of which they might otherwise have known nothing about.

One of the great strengths of the *If Plato Lived Again* series is the balance of ancient and modern: the grounding of Platonic philosophy in the familiar world of the present. In the sixth talk entitled *Who Can Save the World?* following a lucid summary of Plato's plan for the salvation of the world, Charles Morris takes Crossman to task for appearing to have too

fully absorbed his Athenian teacher's doctrine. In an entertaining Socratic exchange, when the Christian Socialist Morris suggests that 'Nobody can really regenerate the social life of a people except the people themselves', the skilfully antagonistic Crossman replies: 'Yes, but isn't it just the great political leaders, like Cromwell, or for the matter of that Hitler, who do get under people's skins and make them do things they could not possibly do otherwise? I can see you haven't heard Hitler speak! [*clearly responding to enthusiastic objection from Morris in the studio*] You may not like it, but he does get at his hearers and make them do things.' It was perhaps Crossman's gift for 'upping the anti' that barred him from Atlee's front bench.

Through the prism of Plato's philosophy, contemporary events and dilemmas were presented in an accessible and provocative way. Fears relating to the rise of fascism abroad (and at home) swim beneath, and from time to time leap clear from the surface of this philosophical series. A little further submerged, but still very much discernable, lurks the spectre of Communism – which, with the apparent success of the young Soviet Union and the increasingly intense opposition to Fascism – looked far from fearful to those impoverished self-educating workers, those unforgettable forgotten men sitting around the radio in Spennymoor learning about international relations through Plato, while the steelworkers and shipbuilders of Jarrow planned their historic march south.

Gilbert Daykin, with whose Promethean miner we began, said that as an artist down the mine, he had 'lived in eternal dread of injury to my eyes or hands in the pit, but that has been my lot in life'. Just as he feared, disaster struck, and he lost not his sight but his life when he was among six men killed in Warsop Main Colliery just before Christmas in 1939. He knew this might happen: he also said, 'There is a siren at the pits, and it rules my life'.