



INTERVIEW: ELIZABETH CATTE TALKS AFTER COAL WITH TOM HANSELL

Elizabeth Catte—editor at large at West Virginia University Press and author of What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia—talks with author and filmmaker Tom Hansell about After Coal: Stories of Survival in Appalachia and Wales (West Virginia University Press, November 2018).

EC: Readers of your book might be surprised to learn that cultural and knowledge exchange between global mountain regions has a long history. Can you tell us a little about the people who participated in earlier exchanges between Appalachia and Wales and what motivated them to make those connections?

TH: My book is the result of decades of exchange between coal mining communities in Appalachia and Wales. In 1974, an American student named John Gaventa arrived in the Welsh coalfields with early portable video equipment. He enlisted the technical help of a young Welshman named Richard Greatrex and received assistance from historian Hywel Francis at Swansea University. They started documenting the national miners' strike in Wales with the idea of sharing these stories with striking miners in Harlan County, Kentucky. Appalachian scholar Helen Lewis joined them, and she lived in Wales until 1976 as part of her research on international coal mining cultures. When a delegation of Welsh miners visited the US in 1979, Helen Lewis reached out to Pat Beaver from Appalachian State University to help support their visit. Eventually, the videotapes recorded in Wales by Gaventa, Greatrex, and Lewis were archived in Appalachian State University's W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, where Pat Beaver brought them to my attention and started the After Coal project. The book is one manifestation of that larger ongoing project. My documentary film of the same name, released in 2016, is another.



EC: *After Coal* required you to balance shared experiences against elements that make both regions unique. What are some of the key differences and similarities between mining communities in Appalachia and Wales?

TH: The most striking similarities between the coalfields of central Appalachia and south Wales are the tight-knit communities and the strong regional identity that have formed in each place. Regional singing traditions highlight these similarities. The biggest difference between Appalachia and Wales is the legacy of the nationalized coal industry in the UK. When the Welsh coal industry was privatized in the early 1990s, many mines were turned over to local governments to use in the public interest. In Appalachia, private corporations still own the vast majority of property in the coalfields. This high degree of absentee ownership severely limits the resources Appalachian communities have to revitalize their economy.

EC: De-population is a concern in both Appalachia and Wales. How are young people embracing or rejecting a future without coal?

TH: In Wales, many young people have not witnessed active coal mining. To them, coal is clearly part of the past. In contrast, many Appalachian youth felt limited by how strongly the region is still identified as coal country. “Is that all we are?” one young woman I interviewed asked. “I appreciate every miner that has ever lived, but we are more than just a rock in the ground—and so is this place.” It is clear that young people have a strong desire to create a new identity for the region and new opportunities for their future.

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EC: Your book discusses the pressures of engaging with communities that demand both clear-eyed realism and hope. How did you navigate those tensions in your work? What do you say to people who ask, “but where are the jobs?”

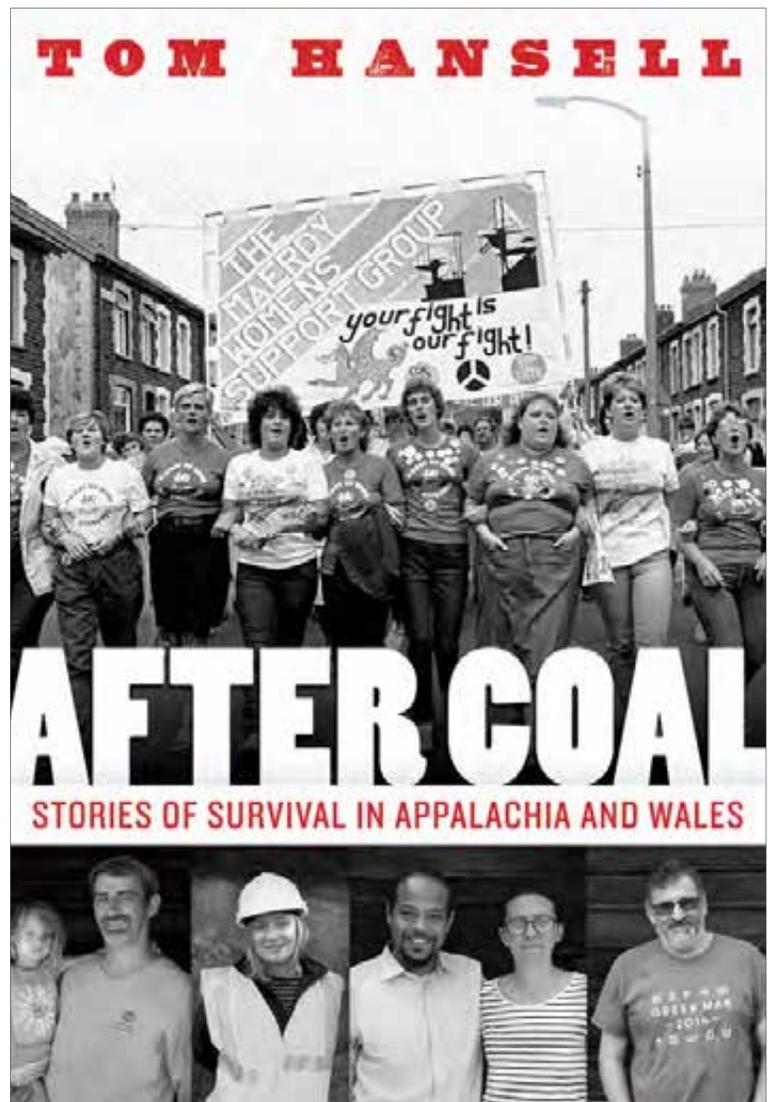
TH: First, it is important to understand that the twentieth-century model of industrial economic development that supported many middle-class American families is not today’s reality. This is not just a coalfield phenomenon—the auto industry, furniture factories, even commercial fishing have been outsourced to developing countries. Next it is important to recognize that, although there may not be many jobs in the coalfields, there is plenty of work. By work, I mean essential tasks like providing clean water, healthy food, and opportunity for youth. The challenge is to figure out how to create an income around that work. Many people have come up with innovative business models to reclaim mine sites, support sustainable agriculture, or provide job skills training. I encourage people to explore these models and adapt them to meet needs in their home communities.

EC: How is media-making an important part of creating energy for community development?

TH: I don't see documentary as a passive form of entertainment. Media and the arts help me connect with diverse groups of people around important issues. My approach to filmmaking is as much about the process as it is about the product. For example, I often screen drafts of my film to people in the communities that I am documenting. Most mainstream filmmakers advise against this, but I think these screenings strengthen my relationships with the people and places I document. More importantly, these work-in-progress screenings add energy to ongoing conversations about how to create a better future. A combination of short film screenings, public forums, and radio reports can deepen the impact of a documentary and support local efforts to build healthy communities.

EC: I confess that I was more optimistic about Appalachia's future before the 2016 election. What's next for you, and how are you holding onto the optimism that ends your book in our current moment?

TH: The 2016 presidential election clarified a lot of powerful negative forces such as racism and authoritarianism that have been amplified by economic uncertainty across America, including the Appalachian coalfields. These negative forces have existed throughout American history, but the election brought them to the surface. Although the election may seem like a step backwards, I find this clarity helpful. It may not improve the current situation, but it gives us a better understanding of the obstacles to a sustainable future. As a result, I am making a conscious effort to deepen connections with my neighbors. I am currently working on a multimedia project that explores how features of the mountain landscape, such as the New River, can connect Appalachian people across political divisions. Rivers and mountains have the power to sustain people regardless of political affiliation. Their presence reminds us how temporary and fragile human life is and how essential it is to find simple ways to support each other during our brief time in this place.



AFTER COAL: STORIES OF SURVIVAL IN APPALACHIA AND WALES
TOM HANSELL

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