

Alessandro Portelli. *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 446 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-973568-6.



Reviewed by Jessie Wilkerson

Published on H-Southern-Industry (March, 2011)

Commissioned by Tom Downey (Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Princeton University)

Harlan County, Kentucky, has long inspired historians and documentarians, who have been drawn there by the stark juxtapositions that characterized the place: poverty in a land owned by wealthy coal companies, a striking landscape tragically scarred from strip-mining, and the bloody labor struggles that have inspired music and poetry. The residents of Harlan County received international attention and captivated audiences in the 1976 film *Harlan County, USA*, Barbara Kopple's award-winning documentary about the 1973 coal miners' strike against the Brookside Mine of the Eastover Mining Company owned by Duke Power Company. In one moving scene, a Harlan County miner who has traveled to New York to protest Duke Power explains why he is picketing to a New York City policeman: the miner points across the street and says, "That electricity burning over there, there's somebody dying every day for it." The two men then engage in a poignant discussion, comparing their experiences as workers and connecting over their belief that workers deserve good wages, benefits, and respect. In this scene

and others, Kopple develops the theme that what happens in Harlan matters for all American workers. Like Kopple, Alessandro Portelli uses a case study of Harlan County in *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* to explore American perceptions and experiences of class conflict, poverty, and labor struggles.

Portelli, long regarded a master and innovator in the field of oral history, is an ideal scholar to grapple with the stories that people tell about Harlan County and themselves. He captures the complexity of place that is easy to simplify with stereotypes of Appalachia. With his widely read collections of essays, Portelli has led the charge in establishing oral history as a legitimate and fruitful methodology in historical research and the study of memory. In *The Order Has Been Carried Out* (2003), he convincingly put into practice his theory in the critically acclaimed history of a Nazi massacre in Rome, in which he explores how communities construct collective memory. He again shows the rich possibilities of oral history in *They Say in Harlan County*. Unlike *The Order Has*

Been Carried Out, however, no single event dominates the narrative of his new study. Instead, Portelli considers the living memory of a place “partly mythologized, but full of meaning” (p. 4).

Portelli found Harlan County through music. In the early 1960s, he discovered the labor anthems of Harlan women Florence Reece, Aunt Molly Jackson, and Sarah Ogan Gunning. Gunning’s “I Hate the Capitalist System” stood out especially, for, in contrast to his preconceptions of a classless United States, its lyrics revealed stark class conflict. Portelli eventually made his way to Kentucky in 1973 and met activists and academics, many of whom, like him, went to eastern Kentucky in search of grassroots struggles for democracy in the coal fields. They introduced Portelli to the individuals who would become the key figures in this study: the women and men who set up a survival center following tragic floods, stood on UMWA picket lines, fought strip-mining, and experienced vast changes in the coal towns over the course of the twentieth century as first mechanization and then deindustrialization swept the region. With their stories Portelli “attempts to paint a huge canvas, covering the whole swath of U.S. history, with the pointillistic detail of microhistory” (p. 9).

Though he originally went to Harlan in search of class struggle in the U.S., Portelli quickly found a “more complex and contradictory” reality, in which the memory of dramatic labor struggles of the twentieth century had been silenced in the stories that Harlan County residents told (p. 4). Thus, the chapters on labor and unions analyze how stories about violent labor struggles have been written and rewritten, and even expunged from history. The scope of this book is much broader than labor struggles, however. It reaches into family history, religious tradition, women’s and African American history, and environmental history as well. Given the depth of his research (he conducted interviews with around two hundred people) and the time he devoted to

the book (traveling to Harlan almost every year for twenty years), Portelli is able to achieve what few historians can: a longitudinal study of a place that allows him the space to study the complexity of living memory. The result is a sprawling work that captures the history of Harlan County, beginning with “creation stories” and settlement and ending with present-day hopes and struggles.

The form of this book is striking. Portelli weaves the voices of his interviewees into the text, alongside and often intertwined with other interviewee’s voices, with Portelli’s narrative voice connecting the strands. Sometimes a subject’s story is set off in a block quote, and other times various voices are strung together in one paragraph. At first, the form can be disorienting; yet, Portelli skillfully and thoughtfully places the subjects in conversation, often with stunning results that subtly reveal both continuities and tensions in collective memory. Portelli organizes the book into fifteen thematic chapters that progress in semi-chronological order. In each chapter, multiple voices address the theme and produce a collective history. For instance, in the chapter “Hardship and Love,” the subjects reject an image of stark poverty and instead describe how their families survived hard times with cooperation and reciprocity between families, folk knowledge, hard work, and discipline. Oral traditions on the topic of survival are especially prominent. Portelli interweaves these stories, however, with others of repression, domestic violence, and shame about one’s shabby clothing. At the same time, Portelli provides the historical context for the oral narratives—a history of rural isolation, industrial exploitation, and absentee land ownership. The result is a complex narrative of families attempting to survive the structural forces of poverty in the rural United States. Other chapter themes include the living memory of the Civil War; religious traditions and what they tell us about culture and class divisions; timbering and mining in Appalachia and the tension between having a job and respecting the land; the development of com-

pany towns and coal mining culture; how miners experienced life in the coalfields, from finding work to surviving the physical dangers of mining; the discrimination and social changes experienced by women, immigrants, and African Americans in the coal towns of Harlan; the 1930s labor struggles of the communist-led National Miner's Union; the United Mine Workers of America in Harlan; the music and literary traditions of Harlan County and their role in the folk revival of the 1960s; migration and the Vietnam War; the civil rights tradition and the War on Poverty; and the Miners for Democracy movement and the Brookside Mine Strike of the 1970s.

Though Portelli covers a broad range of topics, it is clear that his passion is for labor struggles and how stories of those struggles persist, evolve, and hibernate. Most of the chapters include numerous stories and anecdotes that reflect a particular theme, but don't constitute a bound story. Portelli bases his two best chapters, however, on Harlan strike narratives. In chapter 9 "No Neutrals There," he constructs a narrative about the 1930s "Battle of Evarts," when violent conflict broke out between striking miners and company police. In chapter 14, "Democracy and the Mines," he describes the United Mine Workers Brookside Mine Strike and shows how labor struggles become community struggles. He also considers the role of the film *Harlan County, USA* in people's memories and how they reacted to young outsiders joining their struggle. Both chapters showcase Portelli's ability to seek out multiple perspectives to show how contradictory stories and memories reveal meaning in history.

Portelli's guides are women. He writes that Annie Napier, who hosted him each time he went to Harlan, is in some regards a co-author. Women's voices are strong in this story, and one gets the sense that women in Harlan hold the community memory and act as the community storytellers. In one excerpt, Napier describes how women handed down information about love and

marriage: "What I got from Mommy and lot of other people, back when they was growing up their grandmothers would hand it down to 'em" (p. 41). For as much storytelling as the women do and for the way they shaped his narrative, Portelli rarely explores why women in particular play such a prominent role in the collective memory of Harlan. More commentary on women's storytelling could have enlightened the reader about the process of oral history research and how gender influences it.

They Say in Harlan County is an important book; it is also an enjoyable read. The range of topics and its accessibility will make it useful to scholars and classrooms across disciplines, including history, literature, and folklore. Historians of the twentieth-century United States will find chapters on the development of coal towns and the union struggles of the National Miners Union and the United Mine Workers helpful in teaching U.S. labor history. For historians in general, *They Say in Harlan County* provides compelling examples of how oral history fieldwork can reveal topics and themes that might otherwise go unnoticed. Overall, this book will prove a model for other historians interested in oral history-based community studies.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-southern-industry>

Citation: Jessie Wilkerson. Review of Portelli, Alessandro. *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History*. H-Southern-Industry, H-Net Reviews. March, 2011.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32514>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.