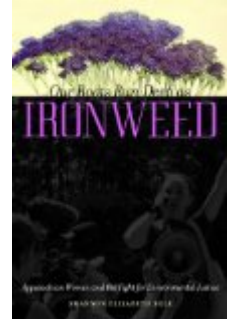


Shannon Elizabeth Bell. *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed: Appalachian Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013. xii + 210 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-07946-7.



Reviewed by Laura M. Westhoff

Published on H-Environment (March, 2015)

Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

All too frequently those of us living outside of Appalachia hear news reports of environmental and mining disasters in that region. Recently, a chemical spill from a coal processing plant on the Elk River left hundreds of thousands of residents near Charleston, West Virginia, without safe running water for several weeks. As Shannon Elizabeth Bell's new book, *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed: Appalachian Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice*, reminds us, such incidents are all too familiar for residents of West Virginia and Kentucky coal mining communities. For decades, women in Appalachia have stood on the frontlines of struggles with coal mining companies and their employees who threaten their water supplies, their homes and schools, and sometimes even their lives. Bell offers readers rich oral histories of twelve simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary women. Together their stories, with Bell's thoughtful framing in the book's introduction and conclusion, demonstrate the power of activism on local communities and on individuals.

A sociologist at the University of Kentucky, Bell structures the book around seamlessly edited oral histories. The stories describe the impact that companies like Massey Energy and Elk Run Coal Company have had on communities and especially the individuals featured in the book. Women in small mountain towns in central Appalachia describe the environmental problems created by industrial coal mining practices and their human costs: Joan Linville faces mountain top removal in her home in Van, West Virginia, which triggered landslides, ruining homesteads and water supplies; Mary Miller and Pauline Canterbury of Sylvester, West Virginia, fight coal dust so dense that home and school filtration systems are unable to keep air breathable; Donetta Blakenship confronts contaminated household water from underground slurry and waste byproducts injections from coal processing that violates the federal Clean Water Act in Rawl, West Virginia; and Patty Sebok of Coal River Valley fears dangerously loaded monster coal trucks that descend the mountains at high speeds, sometimes losing con-

trol and threatening the lives of children, residents, and property when they careen out of control. While many of the women featured in the book come from coal mining families and understand the industry's vital economic role in their communities, they have found the current practices and what they see as deliberately neglectful behavior of coal companies so threatening as to inspire their activism against the Goliath of coal in the region.

The power of these environmental activists rarely accrues from their victories. Yes, they win battles, as the women's inspiring stories attest. For example, activists worked together to pass a moderate coal-truck safety law. Maria Lambert joined with her community members to develop the Prenter Water Fund to ensure clean water in their West Virginia town. Lorelei Scarboro has built the Boone-Raleigh Community Group to encourage reconciliation and a more sustainable economy in her region. But their communities face long-term threats on an extreme scale from global corporations supported by millions of dollars and powerful individuals and groups. Such stakes make it difficult to believe that these women and the many others like them will win the war against corporate indifference toward them and their communities anytime soon. But it is also their activism in the face of such odds that gives them power—power that brings political and media attention to their communities, that inspires others to act, and that draws them into a larger web of environmental justice activism without which any democratic hopes would be impossible.

I found Bell's sociological and gendered framing a smart and important addition to literature on women's activism. Gendered analysis of women's environmental activism, like other types of activism, reveals a maternalist identity motivating many women activists. Bell expands this framework of maternalism. She notes that women draw more broadly from a "protector identity" that instilled an obligation to protect their com-

munities, the land around them, their heritage, their way of life, and their family homes (p. 9). Gender plays out in other important ways, as many of the participants note that Appalachian women, more so than men, are in the vanguard of environmental activism. While frequently their identities as mothers and protectors overlap, there are some differences, making the articulation of the protector identity a valuable way to understand the motivations of activist women (and potentially men).

The self-transformation these women experience is perhaps the most inspiring and hopeful aspect of their stories. For most of the informants, becoming activists triggered significant changes in their lives and self-understanding. Speaking out against big coal is risky in a region where the industry dominates the economy. Many of the women spoke of being intimidated and threatened—some even with death—anonymously or in person. For all, the decision to act, and to continue acting despite the threats and the odds against them, led to new feelings of confidence, pride, and power. They also hint at the importance of networks in this transformation, as many found friends and colleagues who have sustained them and helped them see their activism in less isolated and more collectivist terms.

I wonder, too, about the role of Bell's project in their transformation. Telling stories and taking pictures, some of which were included in the book and others which became part of community exhibits and a website (www.WVPhotovoice.org), not only produce evidence but also provide opportunities for reflection and voice that are important parts of learning. In each of these steps, from their initial decisions to take action to the publication of their photos and Bell's book, they found new friends and built supportive communities that sustained them in the face of insults, threats, and harassment. In sum, they were building new selves and communities of democratic activism that help us see the

multilayered dimensions of environmental justice movements in recent decades.

As I read the book, I did wish for more concrete context and historical background about the companies, struggles, politics, and communities. The women's stories interweave references to major players in the conflicts, such as Massey Energy and the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, but Bell leaves it to readers to stitch these stray references together. There are other works readers might examine to fill out the picture, of course, but an appendix of such sources of further information would have complemented the oral histories and would have provided an even richer and more thorough study of what these women have been up against. I also found critical terms—like “injustice”—that recur in both Bell's chapters and the women's stories unexamined, creating the implication that these are not complex issues with an array of meanings in various contexts, or at least not complex to the actors with whom she is concerned. But taking on the matter of the shifting meanings of justice is a much larger story, and would include many more actors whose ideas about justice clash with the activists.

But these are tangential issues to Bell's work. *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed* has done plenty on its own terms; indeed, I learned plenty from the book she did write. These women's stories are powerful, and students, historians, sociologists, activists, and policy analysts will benefit from expanding their existing frameworks of maternalism that shape scholarship on environmental activism. Students at all levels will find the book engaging and thought provoking.

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

Citation: Laura M. Westhoff. Review of Bell, Shannon Elizabeth. *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed: Appalachian Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. March, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40860>



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