

COOMBES, BERT LEWIS (1893 - 1974), coal miner and writer

Name: Bert Lewis Coombes
Date of birth: 1893
Date of death: 1974
Spouse: Mary Coombes (née Rogers)
Child: Rose Coombes
Child: Peter Coombes
Parent: James Coombs Griffiths
Parent: Harriett Griffiths (née Thompson)
Gender: Male
Occupation: coal miner and writer
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Business and Industry
Author: Seth Armstrong Twigg

B. L. Coombes was born on 9 January 1893 in Wolverhampton, the only child of James Coombs Griffiths - then a grocer - and his wife Harriett (née Thompson). He was christened Bertie Louis Coombs Griffiths, but the family subsequently adopted the surname Cumbes or Coombes. Coombes spent most of his childhood in Herefordshire; however, when he was around ten years old, he lived for a period in Treharris, Glamorgan, where his father and uncles worked in the Deep Navigation Colliery. After receiving all his formal education in the Taff Bargoed Valley, Coombes and his family moved back to Madley, Herefordshire, where they obtained the tenancy of a small farm. Consequently, when Coombes properly left England at the age of seventeen to work in the anthracite mines of Resolven, Vale of Neath, his move was more of a return than a new beginning.

In comparison to Coombes's experience of Treharris, Resolven was in a more rural area which clearly suited the Herefordshire boy. Coombes married Mary Rogers - a local woman of similar age - at St David's Church, Resolven, in September 1913. As was commonplace in the area, Mary was a Welsh speaker and over the years, Coombes acquired enough Welsh to hold a conversation. A year after their marriage, Mary gave birth to a daughter, Rose, and in 1924, their son Peter completed the family. Although Coombes began working as a miner at a relatively young age, it would be well over two decades until he was finally compelled to write, at the age of forty.

Coombes was driven to write after witnessing the traumatic death of two close friends in a mining accident. As was customary, he was called to give evidence at the inquest as a witness, a pivotal episode which Coombes would later document in the powerful short story, 'Twenty Tons of Coal' (1939). Speaking at the enquiry, it suddenly dawned on Coombes 'that neither coroner, solicitors, or hardly any one present had the least idea of what happens underground'. This was a turning point for the miner, who wrote later in an unpublished autobiography, *Home on the Hill* (1959): 'I must do something to let the world know more about our way of life.' After ruminating at length on possible next steps, Coombes came to the conclusion that writing was the most effective response to public ignorance.

His first published work was a critique of the National Government's Distressed Areas Policy in the political magazine, *Welsh Labour Outlook*, in January 1935. Two years later, Coombes's literary ambition became evident, and the working miner published his first short story, 'The Flame', in the magazine *New Writing*. The London-based, left-wing publishers were clearly impressed by Coombes's ostensibly authentic accounts of working life in the south Wales coalfield. John Lehmann - founder of *New Writing* - expressed interest in printing an extended piece by Coombes in a new series. When this fell through, the publisher Victor Gollancz accepted the miner's manuscript, which was extensively reshaped into what Coombes would call 'an autobiographical novel'.

Published in June 1939, *These Poor Hands: The Autobiography of a Miner Working in South Wales* was an immediate success, selling 50,000 copies by the end of the year. It also achieved the near impossible feat of garnering widespread admiration from coal miners themselves as an accurate portrayal of colliery life. Although largely read from a social and political perspective, *These Poor Hands* also has a great deal to contribute towards contemporary debates about the environment. In its stark depiction of polluted communities and diseased miners, the text - along with other works of Welsh industrial writing - articulates the consequences of society's addiction to fossil fuels.

These Poor Hands remains Coombes's most significant work. However, the writer continued to publish short stories and documentary pieces during wartime, throughout which he also wrote scripts for radio broadcasts and began his long-term involvement with the *Neath Guardian*. As a committed socialist, Coombes used his writing to advocate for political changes that would secure a better society after the war, such as nationalisation of the mines. In 1944, he contributed to *The Life We Want*, a pamphlet sponsored by the Liberal Party, but was not a member of any political party. In the same year,

Coombes published his second book, *Those Clouded Hills*, and a year later, *Miners Day* was printed by Penguin, both of which provide significant contributions to the literature of coal mining. Coombes remained a coal miner throughout this period of creativity, and published articles for a range of magazines and journals. He finally retired from mining in the mid-1950s following a serious back injury, but continued his writing, winning literary competitions and posting his weekly column for the *Neath Guardian*. In 1963, Coombes was honoured by the National Union of Mineworkers for 'outstanding contributions to working-class literature'. Mary Coombes died on 3 July 1970, and this loss had a profound impact on her husband, who had cared for his wife in the years prior to her death. B. L. Coombes died on 4 June 1974, at the age of eighty-one. He was buried alongside Mary at the same church where the couple were married over sixty years earlier.

Author

Seth Armstrong Twigg

Sources

Bill Jones and Chris Williams, (eds.), *B. L. Coombes* (Cardiff 1999)

Bill Jones and Chris Williams, (eds.), *With dust still in his throat: an anthology of writing by B.L. Coombes* (Cardiff 1999)

Stephen Knight, *A hundred years of fiction* (Cardiff 2004)

Neath Guardian, 27th September 1963

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Bertie Louis Coombes](#)

Wikipedia Article: [B. L. Coombes](#)

Additional Links

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