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BILL PEARSON

1908 and All That: *Coal Flat*

Whether by coincidence or design, Bill Pearson's *Coal Flat* is set in 1947. To Pat O'Farrell, the year had marked the demise of his father's generation of political activism. From his Puketahi Street home in the Catholic quarter of Greymouth, he had been at the heart of working-class political organisation that had derived its energy from an alliance of the 'Reds and the Greens'. By 1947, whether looked at from Greymouth or Blackball, the tension between the two factions, once creative and energising, now seemed more likely to inhibit activity than to encourage it. Men and women whose political aspirations had both helped shape and been shaped by the evolution of the New Zealand Labour Party were beginning to draw up their individual balance sheets. To some, the achievements of the first Labour Government represented a fair if not formidable return; the state now provided a system of social welfare that offered to take the rough edges off capitalism, the coal barons had been stripped of their mines, the Reserve Bank now regulated the behaviour of the trading banks, the tyranny of the landlord was curbed by a state housing program and access to education and health provision had both been greatly improved.



Figure 3: A studio portrait of Bill Pearson shortly before the publication of *Coal Flat* in 1963.

Source: Courtesy Paul Millar.

To others, the full social dividend remained to be paid out. The trading banks had escaped nationalisation and the promise of free health provision remained just that. Nor had the Labour leaders honoured the party's opposition to military conscription. They had introduced compulsion sooner in World War II than the non-Labour coalition had during World War I. As the Cold War set in and the major powers lined up behind capitalist and communist banners, New Zealand labour leaders alienated many of their supporters by introducing conscription in peacetime. And, in their efforts to prevent a repetition of the rampant inflation that followed World War I, they had persisted with economic controls that seemed better at restraining wages than prices or the profits of employers. In sum, these tensions were irritants rather than matters likely to catapult the Grey Valley into ferment, as had happened in 1908, during World War I and in the 1930s. Yet, as always, irritants offered fertile ground for men with programs.¹

Bill Pearson's *Coal Flat* presents a community still working out the expectations of 1908.² In an environment that bred precious few heroes, the brief historical moment that was the 'Tucker Time' or 'Crib Time' Strike quickly assumed mythical status. The achievement of a 30-minute meal break by the Blackball miners emboldened coalfield radicals and led directly to the creation of a national union of miners and the Red Federation of Labour. Syndicalist in tone, the 'Red Federation', as it was soon dubbed, spoke the language of class warfare and promoted the general strike as an instrument of social transformation. When the state struck back with a vengeance in 1913, politics looked even more attractive. Paddy Webb, an Australian-born member of the 'Blackball Seven'³ who defied the Blackball mine manager, had been elected as the Social Democratic Party (SDP) member for Grey in 1913 before the crushing of the Great Strike. With progress on the industrial front for the moment blocked, the miners focused their attentions on coalface issues and threw their weight behind initiatives designed to produce a united working-class party. In this sense, the formation of the Labour Party in July 1916⁴

1 Len Richardson, 'Class, Community and Conflict: The Blackball Miners' Union, 1920–31', in Len Richardson and W. David McIntyre, eds, *Provincial Perspectives: Essays in Honour of W.J. Gardner*, Christchurch, University of Canterbury, 1980, pp. 106–27.

2 Nolan, "The View from Over the Hill", pp. 1–27; Brian Wood, *The Great '08 Blackball Coalminers' Strike*, Greymouth, Bright Print, 2008.

3 The others were J. Goldsmith, H.J. Fox, T. Milligan, G.R. Hunter, W. Bromilow, P.C. Webb and P.H. Hickey.

4 The definitive history of the New Zealand Labour Party is Peter Franks and Jim McAloon, *The New Zealand Labour Party, 1916–2016*, Wellington, Victoria University Press, 2016.

became a crucial part of the mythology of 1908. In 1935 M.J. Savage formed the nation's first Labour Government. Webb became Minister of Mines, and when he was joined in 1941 by another Blackball miner, Angus McLagan, the township nestled on the slopes of the Paparoas could claim to be more than bit players in the nationalisation of the mines that followed. The *Coal Flat* that Pearson presents is a community living out the realities that lay behind the myth.

Blackball had never, as Pearson knew well enough, been short of activists whose agendas extended well beyond the preoccupations of the coalface. In Paddy Webb and Angus McLagan it had produced the nation's most influential coalminer-politicians; one a product of the first wave of early twentieth-century industrial radicalism, the other inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution and the surge of international socialism that followed the end of World War I. An unlikely pairing, with Webb as genial as McLagan was intense, they were the voice of the coalfields in the Labour Cabinets of the 1940s. Familiar figures still in the mining towns with which they had once been almost synonymous, their mana as men who played their part in battles long ago was considerable. They returned to Blackball as miners who had got themselves into a position where they could implement two of coalmining unionism's fundamental objectives—a national workplace agreement and the nationalisation of the nation's major coalmines. If this stopped short of introducing pit committees to allow the men who worked at the coalface to share in the day-to-day running of the mines, to most miners two out of three was not a bad return for a generation of struggle.

Webb and McLagan were products of the communities they now represented, and as such they were explicable and acceptable. Idealists who stood outside the mining fraternity were a different matter. Like many a mining township, Blackball attracted a range of individuals for whom the decision to live among the miners was born of a mixture of faith, hope and compassion: faith in the potential of the collective and communitarian nature of the isolated mining towns to serve the interests of 'the people'; hope that the miners' struggle might engender a wider commitment to social justice; and compassion expressed in a desire to enrich the lives of the communities they entered. The 1920s brought a number of such visitors to Blackball. The miners' opposition to compulsory military training and their anti-conscription campaign during the 1914–18 war had led military defaulters to seek sanctuary in

the bush beyond the township. After the war, the convergence between the 'No More War Movement' and the Communist Party brought individuals from both groups to Blackball.

Alfred William (Fred) Page best illustrates the former. He had grown up in a Quaker, pacifist and prohibitionist family that was arguably the fulcrum of the middle-class radicalism that flourished in the Christchurch labour movement during the first two decades of the twentieth century. In 1918 his elder brother Robin, a university student at Canterbury College, was imprisoned as a military defaulter after his appeal against call-up on conscience grounds was rejected. Too young for call-up, Fred supported his brother by visiting him weekly in prison and 'frequently expressed the wish that he [too] could have suffered in the cause of peace'.⁵ To Page and his family, who stood at the hub of Christchurch's middle-class radical community, the anti-conscriptionist stance of the miners provided a point of closer contact with union leaders from the coalfields. The arrest and imprisonment of Paddy Webb, the MP for the Grey, as a military defaulter in 1918 personalised the sense of common cause with the miners.

Among the pacifist, socialist circle in which Page moved, the coalfields possessed a reputation as a sanctuary for defaulters 'on the run'. Early in 1918, with his brother Robin and a group of friends, Page had cycled through the West Coast and saw something of the mining communities first hand. This personal experience was reinforced in 1919 by the publication of a Board of Trade Report on the coal industry that painted a grim picture of life in mining towns and drew particular attention to the primitive and sometimes squalid nature of housing, especially that available for single men.⁶ Two aspects of the report struck a responsive chord within the socialist movement: its support for nationalisation of the coal industry and the support it provided for greater attention to the environment in which the miners lived. The interest in the mining community as an entity embodied in the report was shaped, in large part, by Samuel Hurst Seager.⁷ He had presented a blueprint for reform that reflected the thinking of the American garden suburb movement and

5 Jim Gardner, 'Tradition and Conscience: Canterbury College and R. O. Page, Conscientious Objector, 1918–1919', *History Now*, vol. 9, no. 2, May 2003, p. 8.

6 'Board of Trade Report', *AJHR* (NZ), 1919, H44A; Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, pp. 181–84.

7 Ian J. Lochhead, 'Seager, Samuel Hurst', in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 1996, updated May 2002, *Te Ara—the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3s8/seager-samuel-hurst; Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, pp. 181–84.

would have required the destruction of existing coaltowns and the creation of model communities supported by the amenities of a middle-class utopia—library, theatres and debating clubs. The idealism that infused this program of reform was common currency among Christchurch's middle-class radicals who saw municipal and state intervention as necessary to moderate the worst excesses of capitalism. And it was a mixture of pacifist principle and socialist idealism that led Page to the Grey Valley in 1925. A science graduate, he had taught for a while at Christchurch Boys' High School, but resigned his position after the school refused to accept his request to qualify his taking the mandatory oath of allegiance with the phrase 'so long as this undertaking continues not to conflict with the dictates of my conscience'.⁸ After a period as a 'University coach',⁹ he became a trucker in the Blackball mine.

Page brought to the pits the fitness of tramper and athlete, an understanding of the techniques of mining and a keen sense of his own practical limitations:

I thought at first that the work just about suited my level of intelligence, but found later that a good deal of science was involved. It is quite a nice point to know when to put a spurt on in order to surmount a rise in shoving the empty trucks, and when it is safe to let the loaded ones go at full speed ...¹⁰

Of more concern to Page 'than the dark and dirt and heat and bad air of the mine', was a 'monotony ... so deadly' as to 'become insufferable'. With 'no educational advantages' and 'very few interests', the miner, in his view, had little choice but to take his leisure in the pub. To counter the attractions of the bar rail, Page arranged social gatherings and organised a debating society whose meetings discussed 'important public questions' and drew audiences of 'fifty to sixty'.¹¹ The vitality and idealism of Fred Page is clearly exhibited as he leads a Blackball social gathering in song and, to the tune of 'On the Ball', coaxes them through:

8 Elsie Locke, *Peace People, A History of Peace Activities in New Zealand*, Christchurch, Hazard Press, 1992, p. 76.

9 Alfred William Page, 'He's for the Morning': *Alfred William Page, His Journal; also Some Recollections of His Life by His Aunts, Ellen, & Ann Saunders*, Christchurch, A. Wildey, 1939, p. 49.

10 Page, 'He's for the Morning', p. 49.

11 Page, 'He's for the Morning', pp. 49–50.

Oh, Workers, no more be content to be led,
 Just think for yourselves or you'll fall,
 Education's the way to bring nearer the day
 When each man gives his best to help all.

Chorus:

Come the day!
 Come the day! Come the day!
 When Class has been banished away,
 And we dig at the coal for the good of the whole
 Working for joy not for pay.

We'll work for a system where everyone helps
 And chances for all are the same;
 Where no man will fight, but all nations unite
 To make brotherhood more than a name.¹²

The particular form of idealism that propelled Page to Blackball was the product of a unique set of personal circumstance. Other individuals came imbued with different hopes and expectations. Among those to arrive at much the same point in the 1920s as Page was a cluster of communist activists, whose objective was to build a headquarters for the New Zealand Communist Party. Blackball appealed as a launching pad for the party's campaign to establish a stronger base within the organised labour movement. Standing apart from the main body of unionist ideologues was a young Scot and sometime student of the University of Edinburgh, Allan Eaglesham (1902–1935).¹³ A son of the manse, he had been born in Dumfriesshire and his socialism was grounded in an amalgam of democratic Protestantism, the intensely moral socialism of the Independent Labour Party and the revolutionary ferment associated with the 'Clydeside Reds'. While a student at Edinburgh University, he was drawn to the revolutionary strand of Scottish politics that surrounded John Maclean (1879–1923). A Glaswegian schoolteacher and university graduate, 'The Fighting Dominie' traced his family heritage back to the Highland clearances. Dismissed from teaching after denouncing World War I as an imperialist war, Maclean thereafter immersed himself in introducing Glasgow workers to Marxist theory. His radical analysis drew upon what he called the 'communism of the clans' and he came increasingly to argue that the Scottish working class possessed greater revolutionary

12 Page, 'He's for the Morning', p. 51.

13 Gavin Bowd, 'Comintern Cadre: The Passion of Allan Eaglesham', *Socialist History Society Occasional Paper*, no. 22, 2006.

potential than the workers in England or Wales. Only by going 'back to communism' would Scotland move 'forward to communism' and ultimately to the Communist Republic of Scotland.¹⁴

This was the heady environment in which the 18-year-old Eaglesham joined the Communist Party and committed himself to a life of activism that was to lead him first to Australia and subsequently to New Zealand. The road to Blackball was very much that of the itinerant party man familiar in the annals of radical activism, with periods spent working as seaman, wharfie, agricultural labourer, railway navy and coalminer. He arrived in the Grey Valley in mid-1926, as part of the New Zealand Communist Party's attempt to establish its headquarters in Blackball and, like Page, worked in the mine as a trucker. With at least a quarter of the party's 120 members, the coaltown became a virtual 'Little Moscow'. Within that community, Eaglesham's proselytising zeal was channelled into 'educational work'. He wrote copiously for the *Workers' Vanguard*, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party, printed by the miners' daily newspaper, the *Grey River Argus*, and for 'Young Comrades', a roneoed magazine designed to counter the influence of both the Boy Scouts and the capitalist comic and provide suitable socialist activities for the young.

If, as O'Farrell suggests, the energising force behind the moderate wing of the Grey Valley labour movement emanated from Greymouth's Catholic quarter, the socialism of predominantly Protestant Blackball did not flourish in a Mecca of non-conformist radicalism. The heavily Presbyterian Scots undoubtedly injected an element of democratic Protestantism, but Pearson's *Coal Flat* accurately presents a community in which the churches maintain a fragile presence. The Presbyterian minister lived outside the coaltown in Ahaura, 'a settlement on the river flat several miles up the Grey Valley' where a 'few prosperous farmers ran sheep',¹⁵ and visited the coaltown fortnightly for Sunday services. The only link drawn between union and religion is attached to Arthur Henderson, an elder in the Presbyterian Church, secretary of the school committee and writer of the 'Coal Flat Notes' for the *Grey River Argus*. These roles bring him into contact with the 'improvers' and place him outside the political or industrial mainstream of union activity. There is not the slightest trace of socialist evangelism about him. He is depicted as something of 'a social

14 James D. Young, *John Maclean: Clydeside Socialist*, Glasgow, Clydeside Press, 1992.

15 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 310.

and psychological misfit¹⁶ and is taunted by the younger men as the 'village queen'. Similarly, Catholicism's presence in *Coal Flat* is as a marker of difference rather than as a contributor to coalfields radicalism. The Catholic Herlihy family are presented as 'outcasts', living on the fringe of Coal Flat and each deeply troubled. The priest is an infrequent and at times unhelpful visitor. There is no Catholic school and the nearest Catholic church is across the Grey River in Ngahere.

Blackball was not only Red, it was also Tartan. From the early twentieth century, Scottish coalfields contributed a significant portion of the newcomers entering the township. Of their number, Angus McLagan has left the clearest historical footprint. His road to Blackball and his experience of it illustrate a pattern familiar on coalfields everywhere. Born in Mid-Calder, Midlothian, in 1891, he had entered the pits as a 14-year-old. Six years later he joined the exodus of young mobile miners seeking employment on the newer and expanding coalfields of Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand. By 1911 he was in Blackball working as a trucker. In the aftermath of the 1913 General Strike he lost his place in the Blackball mine, spent a period in a variety of labouring jobs and, after the death of his mother, sailed for Scotland in 1919. His return to Blackball in the early 1920s came as poverty was becoming widespread on the Scottish coalfields. Emigration was no longer dominated by the young and mobile but increasingly presented the best option for entire families and extended families. It was an exodus that was stimulated further by the wholesale retrenchment that followed Britain's disastrous 1926 General Strike. For this second infusion of Scottish miners the timing was unfortunate. The golden weather of the late 1920s that brought a brief burst of activity gave way to the 'troubles' of the 1930s and the impoverishment of the town. And, if most of the newcomers were more familiar with Burns than they were with Marx, they were a familiar and receptive audience for Scottish radicals like Eaglesham and McLagan who sought to nurture a 'Little Moscow' in the shadow of the Paparoas.¹⁷

The times were to become increasingly out of joint for idealism, whatever its variety. The New Zealand coal industry had at first been sheltered from the worst of the downturn that beset the coalfields internationally, but as the decade ended pit closure, the rationing of available work and

16 Kenneth Prebble, 'Coal Flat', *Comment: A New Zealand Quarterly Review*, no. 18, January 1964, p. 37.

17 See Richardson, 'Class, Community and Conflict', pp. 106–27.

unemployment brought poverty and shrinking expectations. As young men with little mining experience, Page and Eaglesham were among those culled from the pits. Page left to become the first secretary of the No More War Movement, a pacifist organisation in search of a new, socialist-orientated international order, and died in 1930 in Paris where he had linked up with the War Resisters' International. After a period in Wellington, Eaglesham returned to Britain, continued his work for the Communist Party and was sent to Moscow in 1930 to attend the Anglo-American E-Section of the International Lenin School, assuming the underground name of William Murphy, a former comrade in New Zealand.¹⁸ After contracting tuberculosis, he returned to Britain and died in Scotland in 1935.¹⁹ Thus the departure of the two idealists and the withdrawal of the New Zealand Communist Party's headquarters from Blackball in 1928 coincided with the end of a phase of heightened expectations and the onset of perhaps the grimmest years that Blackball miners experienced.

The idealism that had attracted 'outsiders' to Blackball in the 1920s had been based, in different ways, in a belief in the capacity of mining communities to hasten social change. In the 1930s there was little in Blackball to attract observers, idealistic or otherwise. The one notable newcomer who has left his impressions of the place was a young medical practitioner, Dr F.O. Bennett.²⁰ In the straightened economic circumstances of the late 1920s, he was attracted to Blackball by the financial security of a position as salaried medical provider for the Blackball Medical Association: 'A roof and five hundred pounds a year'.²¹ His expectations were few and his first glimpse of main street Blackball dispiriting:

less of a street than a rough road with deep ditches on either side. The houses were small, unpainted and all with tarred roofs. Weeds were often window-high and the scrub and gorse filled the many vacant sections ... Halfway up on the left was a street of high rusted pylons, relics of an earlier aerial railway for coal.²²

18 Locke, *Peace People*, pp. 75–76.

19 Bowd, 'Comintern Cadre'.

20 See Geoffrey W. Rice, 'Bennett, Francis Oswald', in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 2000, *Tē Ara—the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/5b24/bennett-francis-oswald.

21 Francis Bennett, *A Canterbury Tale: The Autobiography of Dr Francis Bennett*, Wellington, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 124.

22 Bennett, *A Canterbury Tale*, p. 124.

The township was connected by pathways of ‘crushed cinders’;²³ ‘soot’ and a ‘sulphurous smell’ were everywhere.²⁴ Bennett’s five years in Blackball were years in which the township was sucked into the coal crisis that engulfed the coalfields of the Western world and brought intermittent employment and mine closure. Work-sharing schemes that attempted to give most work to those with families meant high levels of youth unemployment and only short-term relief. Disputes about union strategies brought division. A dissident fraction broke ranks and returned to the pits on terms rejected by the union leadership. A police contingent was stationed in the township to ensure those returning to work could do so.

The ‘troubles’,²⁵ as these events came to be called, provided Bennett with a unique perspective on the functioning of the township. He witnessed first-hand the failure of employers to engage in any way with the miners’ efforts to build a community:

The Company paid the wages and nothing more ... All the town possessed in the way of amenities—medical association, doctor, domain, football team, football grounds, swimming baths, miners’ hall and pictures twice a week, debating clubs, sickness fund—had come from a scraping off the wages.²⁶

Moreover, the coal proprietor’s presence in the township was as limited as its contribution to community well-being:

[They] came to Blackball only at intervals of a few years when the contract would need renewing. They would pick their way through the cinders to the miners’ hall and there confronting the executive across the table would thrash out a new agreement and then make for their car at the door.²⁷

Such indifference bred appalling industrial relations. In Bennett’s view, the miners brought ‘a deep implacable hatred’ and a ‘fervently uncompromising’ attitude to their dealings with their employers. Politics were played out in ‘black or white, with rarely a hint of grey’²⁸ and class warfare kept ‘surging’ to ‘battle plans’ that had been ‘drawn up by Karl

23 Bennett, *A Canterbury Tale*, p. 126.

24 Bennett, *A Canterbury Tale*, p. 127.

25 For a fuller account of the ‘troubles’, see Richardson, ‘Class, Community and Conflict’, pp. 106–27.

26 Bennett, *A Canterbury Tale*, p. 131.

27 Bennett, *A Canterbury Tale*, p. 131.

28 Bennett, *A Canterbury Tale*, p. 130.

Marx'.²⁹ Such a world view rarely bred compromise, and conflict became as 'inevitable'³⁰ as it was frequent. The 'miner as a citizen', 'zealous custodian of his little cottage' and 'staunch family man' was more attractive, to Bennett, than 'the miner as a unionist'.³¹ A neat distinction, it was nevertheless not one the miners would have recognised. The union was more than an instrument for and of industrial relations, it was a vehicle for the negotiation of life's circumstances as they confronted them here and now. It was precisely this connection between life and work that gave their collective solidarity its stubborn and unyielding edge.

Thus it was that, when Pearson sat down in Hampstead Heath, London, to conjure up Coal Flat, he was entering a terrain as familiar in Blackball as it was on unionised coalfields everywhere. How did idealism stack up against the harsh realities of time and place? What space was there in the collectivity of unionism that would at bedrock insist upon loyalty and label as 'a scab' anyone who deviated from union policy? It was a question that Pearson explored in a somewhat different manner in arguably one of the most sustained pieces of polemical writing of his generation, 'Fretful Sleepers'. In this essay, he argues that during the 1951 waterfront dispute the gullible nation was led by the radio pep-talks of a prime minister, cynically determined to exploit the communist bogey, to accept actions that were potentially fascist. In this apparent willingness to conform to the dictates of authority, Pearson detected a reluctance within the wider community of the 1940s and 1950s to tolerate dissent or difference. *Coal Flat* was largely written before the events of 1951, but it has been seen by commentators as the working out of a similar set of concerns. Its essence is an individual at odds with a community whose central values he shares.

Unlike Page and Eaglesham, Paul Rogers, the central character of *Coal Flat*, is not so much an outsider as, to employ Richard Hoggart's words, an 'anxious' and 'uprooted'³² individual set apart, by education and opportunity, from a community to which he returns. Accepting a position as a teacher in the local primary school brings with it a set of expectations within the community. Rogers has to demonstrate that his status as a representative of 'authority' has not blinded him to his roots. Pearson depicts this tension as a clash of ideas and ideals in which the

29 Bennett, *A Canterbury Tale*, p. 129.

30 Bennett, *A Canterbury Tale*, p. 130.

31 Bennett, *A Canterbury Tale*, p. 134.

32 Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 291.

mining community is presented as ‘a hard puritan society, materialistic to the point that it was afraid of ideas because ideas were not material’.³³ To Rogers, the young idealistic teacher, this pragmatism was buttressed by an ingrained suspicion of all that came from outside their own community. The miners’ children he was about to teach had, he believed, been ‘brought up to sneer at authority and vaunt their intransigence’. In this respect they were preferable to country children who accepted ‘their parents’ beliefs as unquestionable’.³⁴ To Rogers, this opened up the possibility that they might be moulded in accordance with the ethical foundations of his particular brand of socialism. It was indeed only when these values—tolerance, service of the common good, consideration for others, self-sacrifice—were widely held that real socialism would, he believed, be possible.

Pearson’s central character, in this sense, is a recognisably Blackball one. Rogers stands comfortably in the tradition of Page and Eaglesham. Set apart by occupation, he takes his place within the larger community without joining his idealistic predecessors alongside the miners in the pits. Pearson was later to explain that, as he wrote the novel, Rogers became of less interest to him than the community of *Coal Flat*. It is also recognisably a West Coast one. As writer, Pearson tells us, he had been aware that there was an ‘expatriate’ dimension; Hampstead Heath was a long way from the Paparoas. And, at times, Pearson has recalled, writing of the bush, gullies and creeks that made up the Blackball he knew made the writing process a ‘labour of love’.³⁵ Critics have uniformly emphasised the dominance of ‘the Coast’ and pointed to the ‘finely evoked ... insistent, laborious detail’ with which its ‘personality’ dominated all in a ‘uniform, panoramic’.³⁶

It is perhaps just as pertinent to note that the bit of Pearson’s ‘West Coast’ that the critics singled out for praise was not the coaltown in which *Coal Flat* is set but its antithesis: the unspoiled, thinly populated, rural wilderness of South Westland. As ‘mere land and seascape, few parts of New Zealand can have as concrete and credible an existence in literature as Bill Pearson’s South Westland’.³⁷ It is here that Pearson sets, in a ‘serene

33 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 9.

34 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 9.

35 Alex Calder, ‘An Interview with Bill Pearson’, *Landfall* 150, vol. 47, no. 1, April 1993, p. 57.

36 Stuart Johnston, ‘Review: *Coal Flat*. Bill Pearson’, *Landfall* 67, vol. 17, no. 3, September 1963, pp. 299–301.

37 Allen Curnow, ‘Coal Flat Revisited’, in Cherry Hankin, ed., *Critical Essays on the New Zealand Novel*, Auckland, Heinemann Educational Books NZ, 1976, p. 121.

chapter', a whitebaiting sojourn. It stands, as one reviewer put it, apart from the action of the novel, 'placed as (one imagines) a composer might place a contrasting lyrical movement or passage in a symphonic work'.³⁸ And its descriptions of the 'hard-slogging of the journey, the hut life by the Maori Creek mouth' and the 'labour of netting, of setting and emptying the whitebait traps' were interpreted as offering a 'redemptive' and contrasting setting to the tyranny of the pits and the harshness of the coaltown.³⁹ Thus, Pearson's 'West Coast' offers hope, or at least a part of it does. Pearson was later to reveal that the interlude was in part an attempt to redress what was thought by some to be the unflattering image given to the only Māori in the initial drafts—Mrs Palmer, a matriarchal and bossy individual.⁴⁰ In this sense the whitebaiting expedition draws upon the notion that the Māori offer a wisdom and alternative path to the suffocating normality that predominated in the coaltown and nation.

In *Coal Flat*, however, mine, union and pub shape existence. The narrative brings them together in a way that is reminiscent of Pat Hickey's celebrated recounting of the Tucker Time Strike of 1908. A group of Pearson's fictional miners decide, almost casually, as they make their way along an underground roadway to the coalface, to boycott the pubs until they abandoned a projected increase in the price of beer.⁴¹ This 'spontaneous' decision provides the framework around which the place of unionism is explored. To Rogers, the idealistic socialist seeking a higher purpose for the industrial muscle of the miners, the issue was comic: 'A town sulking over an extra penny a glass'.⁴² He rationalises his initial decision to ignore the boycott: had he been a miner, he would have happily abided by 'a union ruling';⁴³ as a teacher, he considered himself free to regard the issue as a conscience one. His attempt to support the collective and democratic decision of the miners' union to engage in 'peaceful communal action' while himself acting in ways that undermined the effectiveness of such action provides a dramatic tension that suits Pearson's purpose as novelist. It also raises a spectre of the recent past. Little more than a decade earlier, in the midst of the Depression, Blackball had been torn apart as the union was unable to prevent a dissident faction from within the town setting up

38 Curnow, 'Coal Flat Revisited', pp. 119, 121; Frank Sargeson, 'Conversation in a Train', *Landfall* 21, vol. 84, no. 4, December 1967, p. 361.

39 Curnow, 'Coal Flat Revisited', p. 121.

40 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 14.

41 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, pp. 206–7.

42 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 213.

43 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 213.

a 'tribute' company and thereby threatening the integrity of the union and working conditions in the mines.⁴⁴ Pearson draws in part on the residual animosities of these past battles as he explores the relationship between union, community and the individual. In *Mrs Seldom* he creates a tragic embittered by-product of such a conflict living in self-imposed isolation, an ever-present reminder of troubles past.

The boundary between union and community is a shifting one. As an idea the union permeates all that occurs in *Coal Flat* and Pearson understands its dynamics. The formal decision to boycott 7d beer is taken at a bathhouse meeting as the miners sit in their pit-clothes ready to begin their shift, 'their batteries on their belts and lamps on their helmets'.⁴⁵ The good-natured banter of the meeting contrasts with the stark reality of work underground:

Down below you took on the mentality of citizens whose sleep might at any time be disturbed by an air-raid siren, who had lived like this for years. Extracting the earth's frozen power, you lived at enmity with it. At any time it might fall and bury you. A random spark might strike off an explosion, or a race of boxes run loose downhill. You were always on the alert; though you had worked here without a scratch for twenty years and though you hardly acknowledged the thought you never knew that you would see the sun again that afternoon. The town that lived off raiding the earth carried its casualties—Alec, carpentering on the surface, limping because of his heel torn to the bone by a winch-cable; Sandy with three fingers bitten off where two trucks collided, reared from their bumpers and kissed where his hand tried to hold one of them back; Fred with an eye torn out when a badly-aimed sprag flew back from the spoke of a downhill truck; and the graves in Karoro, from falls of stone, and explosions. Underground you had to settle your habits into realizing that you were a cog in a lumbering inefficient machine for gutting the earth and that any mistake you made might cause a breakdown or an accident to other men. An error of judgement was a sin, an oversight inexcusable. When you were broken into the mine mentality you had what they called pit sense.⁴⁶

44 Richardson, 'Class, Community and Conflict', pp. 106–27.

45 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, pp. 205–8.

46 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, pp. 205–8.

Mining unionism gained most of its gritty hardness from these realities, and Pearson's union leaders have no difficulty placing the beer boycott squarely in the tradition of legitimate working-class activity: 'We don't want any scabbing in this thing. Either we're all boycotting the beer, or we take no action at all. Not some *in* the pubs and some out'.⁴⁷ The younger men, writes Pearson, 'were glib about it' but 'knew they would have to abide by their decision'.⁴⁸

Pearson's interest in the union is, of course, bound up with his preoccupation with the individual who attempts to stand out from community norms. Rogers understands the historical loyalties that bind the miners to their collective decisions but finds himself caught up in the fringes of the political struggles that both shaped and were shaped by the union. Pearson presents these struggles in both generational and ideological terms. Representative of the district's radical, if not heroic, age is Bernie O'Malley, now an ageing member of parliament. Once a fellow-traveller of Red Fed firebrands, he had been imprisoned during the anti-conscription campaigns of World War I. He was now losing touch with the younger men whose ideological framework had been honed by different circumstances and different ideas. And among the 'Clydeside, Yorkshire and Tyneside accents' that reverberate throughout Pearson's *Coal Flat*, the voice of Jock McEwan is that of the 'damp, filthy, disease ridden warrens' of the Gorbals, whose notorious backlands had been noted by Friedrich Engels in his celebrated *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845). He is the representative of the 'Clydeside Reds' and, in 1940s Blackball, as elsewhere, this was a phrase that continued to conjure up images of the Glasgow rent strikes of 1915 and what one recent historian has described as 'the nearest thing to a revolutionary situation seen in twentieth century Britain'.⁴⁹

It was a moment when 'a few strategic moves by the Red Clydeside leaders *could* have led to a local seizure of power by workers'.⁵⁰ Thus, in *Coal Flat*, McEwan's voice carries the conviction that experience confers and conveys a 'toughness' that was, in its origins, a reflection of historically harsh working and living conditions. To this historical legacy newer arrivals in the 1920s added the lessons drawn from the nine-day General

47 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 209.

48 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 209.

49 Sean Damer, *Glasgow: Going for a Song*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, p. 117.

50 Damer, *Going for a Song*, p. 117.

Strike of May 1926 that had taken British coalfields into a winter of starvation. The ultimate terrible defeat in December had ended the industrial militancy of the 1920s and smashed the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) as any kind of force for more than a decade. This was the 'miners' history' that shaped the lives of many in the community that Pearson describes. Grounded, as it was, in an instinctive recognition of the nature of capitalist exploitation, it was a history that peppered 'pit talk' and took its place alongside and helped shape a rich and sometimes inspiring local tradition. And, like idealists of the real world who had gone before (Page and Eaglesham), Rogers struggles to find a way of putting the collective authority of the miners' union to work for improving purposes. His dilemma, as one commentator reviewing *Coal Flat* remarked, is that of a 'priest without a religion' attempting to use the miners' union as a substitute Church.⁵¹

This is clearly demonstrated when Rogers attempts to persuade a meeting of a Labour Party branch addressed by Bernie O'Malley, the local member of parliament, to take some action to limit the sale of comics in the town. His suggestion that the comics, 'full of war and crime; sex, violence and cruelty',⁵² would cause a lot of harm came during question time after a knock-about meeting in which O'Malley and local Communists had confronted each other. To O'Malley, the Labour program was imperilled by a changed international situation: 'half of Europe lived in terror of the iron heel, the secret police, forced labour, the knock on the door at three o'clock in the morning'.⁵³ Describing his opponents as 'power-hunting hirelings of Joe Stalin' bent upon breaking up the meeting, he asks his *Coal Flat* audience whether they wanted the 'world to be submerged in the system of atheistic communism—the system that denied God and Christianity'—and the work of the Labour Government imperilled by industrial disputes engineered by the Kremlin.⁵⁴

Rogers was caught in the crossfire. He had rejected the red-baiting tone of O'Malley's speech and then, in the manner of the middle-class academic, had argued that there was 'plenty of evidence to suggest that Russia has betrayed the principles of socialism'. The socialist cause was not advanced by 'the grey monolithic state imposing itself on the lives

51 Prebble, 'Coal Flat', p. 35.

52 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 115.

53 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 111.

54 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 112.

of ordinary citizens'.⁵⁵ In a burst of point scoring, he drops in the names Arthur Koestler and Ignazio Silone—two of six ex-Communist, left-wing writers who after the war had contributed to *The God That Failed*. An explicit reference to Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940), with its powerful exposé of Stalin's show trials, brought a stern rebuke: 'You can't argue from a work of fiction'.⁵⁶

In tone and in substance, Rogers's intervention affirms his marginality in *Coal Flat*. His introduction of the comic question is an artless and clumsy afterthought coming as it does after the ideological cut and thrust of the clash between O'Malley and the Communists. The miners had manoeuvred the politician into promising that a seven-hour shift would be introduced in the mines before the end of the year and most stood up and prepared to leave 'without clapping', dismissing the evening's performance from their minds.⁵⁷ In the dialectic of the meeting and the sound of the miners 'clapping half-heartedly', Allen Curnow, writing in the mid-1970s, detected the origins of Labour's 'modern labour dilemma'. As a political party, he argued, it was torn 'between apologising *to* or *for*, the more militant spirits of its past' and 'its present power-base in industry'.⁵⁸ For Pearson, the meeting, and especially the exchange between Rogers and the Communists, established the fragile nature of the young teacher's idealistic socialism.

The pub even more than the mine is the hub of the story. One of two in the town (the other, 2 miles away in Paparoa), its function is clearly established. It acts as a boarding house for two of the primary school teachers and allows them to stand, as it were, slightly apart from both the miners and their families and the single miners in their huts. Pearson invests talk in the bar with a 'greater range' of subject than was the norm.⁵⁹ The pace and pattern of its day is set by the shifts of the miners as much as by the strictures of the licensing laws. Commercial viability rested upon after-hours trading and, as one publican explained to Licensing Commissioners, a coalfields pub acted as a meeting house where men had

55 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 114.

56 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 114. *Darkness at Noon* (1940) was the second of Arthur Koestler's trilogy that dealt with idealism going wrong. The other two were: *The Gladiators* (1939) and *Arrival and Departure* (1943). *The God That Failed* (1949) brought together six testimonies by journalists and writers who had become disillusioned with Communism.

57 Curnow, 'Coal Flat Revisited', pp. 105–27.

58 Curnow, 'Coal Flat Revisited', p. 112.

59 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 23.

an opportunity to have a drink. Few miners came directly to the pub at the end of a shift. Most drinkers attended to 'a lot of household duties', had a meal and headed for the pub sometime after 6 pm. In short, the coalfields public house was cast, at least in the operation of its bars, in the English rather than the colonial mould. That it could function in this way required a gentleman's agreement—a commonsense set of conventions that saw the bar operate until 10 pm.⁶⁰ Local practices notwithstanding, the miners collectively supported the proposition that just as the mine in which they worked had been nationalised so, too, should the nation's liquor industry.

That the issue around which Rogers's idealism is put to the test should be a 'beer boycott' serves to highlight the dilemma of the 'improvers'. Among local communists there was a cynicism about the cultural question. The humanists and communists shared the belief that the lure of the bar-rail blinded workers to the all-pervasive capitalist oppression and weakened the capacity of unions to use the strike as a weapon of anything other than last resort. They nonetheless shared the hope that the working-class community could liberate itself. As thoughtful corporals in the class war, they were, of course, anxious to hasten the process. Men like Eaglesham and Page had, in the 1920s and 1930s, been at the forefront of left-wing educational activities. They arranged the publication of extracts from left-wing literature in the pages of the *Grey River Argus*, organised discussion classes for the Workers' Educational Association and maintained after 1939 a 'freely patronised' library of over 150 books for the Left Book Club as part of an attempt to make literature available to 'even the humblest worker'.⁶¹ Pearson contrasts this cultural socialism with the more rigid attitudes of 'Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism' for which class struggle is the only 'justifiable activity' and to whose exponents 'community centres and play-acting and all the rest of it are all very well ... after victory'.⁶²

The tension between these competing forms of socialism reflect an underlying and fruitful tension in Pearson's depiction of Coal Flat. On the one hand, as we have already seen, the mining community is presented as being impervious to and afraid of ideas; on the other hand, the debates between the miners are rooted in a variety of ideological positions.

60 The wider Westland community was divided in its attitude to the nation's drinking laws; in 1949, 4,764 voted in favour of retaining 6 pm and 4,475 wanted 10 pm closing.

61 Rachel Barrowman, *A Popular Vision: The Arts and the Left in New Zealand, 1930–1950*, Wellington, Victoria University Press, 1991, pp. 68–72.

62 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 75.

Ideas were in fact a central part of life on the coalfields. The great majority of miners may not have picked up ideas in study groups or reading clubs, but rather in the jostle of ideas that peppered union meetings and were never far from the surface in everyday life. To a degree, Rogers comes to recognise this and redefines his conception of unionism and its role in Coal Flat. His faith in the ability of unions to give effect to a broad socialist agenda—never so much described as alluded to—is tested during the winter of 1947. He had invested a great deal of emotional capital in the ability of union officials to provide, if not intellectual leadership, then direction. In short, he believed that the way ideas were received and spread was very much in the hands of a small elite—the socialist vanguard—that had risen through union ranks. It was their task to raise the awareness of the majority. It was this high sense of purpose that was offended by the beer boycott that, as we have seen, he viewed as a comical if not cynical abuse of union power. He came to accept that the boycott was a legitimate exercise of the collective solidarity of the miners and acknowledges that the wider social reconstruction he seeks is simply not something the union can be expected to initiate.

This is most clearly revealed in Rogers's reaction to the birth of workingmen's clubs throughout the Grey Valley. On 1 October 1947 the Grey Valley Licensed Victuallers' Association announced that the price of beer would increase to 7d a glass (softening the blow by suggesting they would introduce a 12 oz glass also to sell for 7d) and that the price of a glass of spirits would be reduced. The Central Organising Committee appointed by the Westland Trades and Labour Council to coordinate the boycott called for the nationalisation of the liquor industry and the creation of workingmen's clubs. Meetings at Blackball, Runanga, Brunner, Reefton, Waiuta, Greymouth and Hokitika endorsed the argument that the new clubs would break the hold of the beer barons and provide a more congenial environment for community activities. Long a feature of life on British coalfields they were an extension of the self-help principle that had fostered the cooperative society. Designed 'to provide recreation, a place for talk and reading and some education, for working-men', by the mid-twentieth century these objectives were 'still formally alive, though little more than that'. They continued to serve as 'pub-cum-club' for more than 2 million members in 3,000 separate clubs and remained defiantly proud of being run for members and 'not ... for the benefit of the profiteers'.⁶³ From an idealist perspective, the embryonic clubs of the

63 Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 151.

Grey Valley could be, and were, promoted as an example of independent working-class activity and also as institutions through which educational and cultural objectives might be realised.

Pearson presents these issues in a discussion between Rogers and an orthodox Marxist, Dr Alexander. The pair assess the potential of a workingmen's club in the process of being established in a local billiards room in Coal Flat. Alexander expresses confidence in the leadership potential of the educated, socialist professional within working-class communities. It was possible to 'identify with the workers', he tells a disillusioned Rogers, without having to become one.⁶⁴ He suggests Rogers move into adult education and that in such a role it would be possible to develop the workingmen's club as the hub of community activity. Rogers is sceptical:

The climate's not favourable. No one wants to learn anything. Everyone's too comfortable having a sleep, even the miners. You wouldn't even get the horse to water, let alone make him drink. And people don't learn that way. They learn best from their own experience and what the miners learn will be from their collective experience, from disputes and action and settlements of disputes, not from classes in history and politics and literature ... What's the use in stimulating activity when no one feels the need for it? All they feel the need of in the new club is beer and billiards and forty-fives ... Drama groups, reading and discussion groups in Coal Flat! It would be as phoney as glee clubs or marching girls ... Union meetings in the day, crime films at night.⁶⁵

That the union had wittingly been the instrument of this 'escapism'—the Blackball Miners' Union Hall and Welfare Society organised film showings and redirected the profits from them into community projects and individual welfare—had long been a contentious issue among coalfield ideologues. The Miners' Page of the *Grey River Argus* had periodically denounced the silver screen as 'one of the strongest props of the present system of exploitation'.⁶⁶

In this outburst, Rogers confronts the dilemma of the idealist who has invested in mining unionism a potential for progressive reformism that was beyond its capacity to deliver. Dismissing the prospects of the

64 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 415.

65 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 416.

66 *Grey River Argus*, 1926.

workingmen's club ever becoming more than a 'co-operative society for the purchase and sale of beer' is too harsh. In historical terms, the clubs had come to New Zealand coalfields, as we have seen, late in the piece, as coaltowns were beginning to fragment and their populations were ageing. Better transport was already making it possible for miners to live at greater remove from their workplace. The Labour Government's housing program was providing affordable housing in the larger towns of Greymouth and Westport. Consequently, the old community that worked and lived together was slowly being dismantled. In a trend that first became evident during the 1920s and 1930s and quickened sharply after the war, young men (and especially those who had entered the mines to take advantage of the protected industry status of the wartime coalmining industry) were moving away from the coaltowns. The tradition of son following father was similarly being broken down as opportunities widened. In terms of community coherence and creativity, the birth of the workingmen's clubs came at a time when their potential for providing an impetus for change and self-improvement was limited.

As an example of community action, the creation of the Grey Valley workingmen's clubs was nonetheless impressive in both its speed and ingenuity. After little more than two months, plans had been finalised for clubs in Blackball, Brunner, Greymouth, Runanga and Hokitika. Brunner's was first to open. 'Rough and ready' premises were opened on 21 December 1947, on land leased from the Brunner Borough Council at the rear of the Dobson mine, and as men finished their shift and began their walk home they could now go straight to the club. Two further clubs had opened before Christmas. Runanga miners raised the money to purchase from the state a property that had previously housed the district mine manager. In Greymouth, the combined resources of miners, watersiders and railwaymen were sufficient to purchase a two-storey house on Alexander Terrace. Elsewhere the process was slower, but within two years Blackball, Reefton, Hokitika and Westport each had a workingmen's club. The legal position was initially shaky. In theory, the clubs were unable to offer beer for sale across the bar until they achieved the status of a chartered club. With this achieved, the Workingmen's Clubs and Mutual Schools of Arts, to give them their full title, became a feature of coalfields life. Some were bemused by the grandiose title; the only 'art' was 'in the drinking'.⁶⁷

67 *Greymouth Evening Star*, 12 March 1994.

The communitarian possibilities of the workingmen's clubs, as envisaged by the more idealistic in the late 1940s, were never fully realised. Yet there can be little doubt that, for many, life was enriched by their presence. Perhaps the greatest beneficiary of the clubs was sport, an activity barely visible in Pearson's *Coal Flat* and introduced as a symbol of conservative values, past glories and physicality. Football (and for Pearson this means rugby union) is suggested by a Catholic priest as a more appropriate activity for Rogers than political activism.⁶⁸ 'Mr. Tribe', the ubiquitous 'Mr. Fat', whose pep-talk to wavering members of the Westland Branch of the Licensed Victuallers' Association is a caricature of Cold War capitalism's unlovely face, is a 1923 All Black and one of the new army of business functionaries rallying behind a resurgent National Party. To the generation who looked backwards to a past stocked with images of resilient gold seekers and the pyrotechnics of pugnacious socialists, periodic sporting success and military heroism—'All Blacks did well on an overseas tour, or a war came and perhaps a local lad got a V.C.'⁶⁹—remained markers of vitality, if not regeneration.

Yet if, as Peter Simpson has written, we are to see Pearson's novel as a fictionalising of mainstream New Zealand, a place where 'coal mines, saw-mills, pubs and football clubs' pass for normality, then sport, as one ingredient of that normality, is largely missing from the community in which Paul Rogers moves.⁷⁰ Whether this was a conscious decision or merely a by-product of literary artifice is unclear. One of Pearson's obituarists tells us that throughout his life Pearson remained 'sports numb' and that he had taken a perverse pleasure in noting that 'his Herne Bay home had been built a century ago by the famous All Black captain Dave Gallaher, while his nephew, Fred Goodall, had become one of our best known cricket umpires'.⁷¹ Whatever the reason for the marginal role played by sport in *Coal Flat*, it would have been impossible, in the Blackball of 1947, to ignore the sport of rugby league.

68 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 133.

69 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 323. Samuel Frickleton worked in the Blackball mine, 1913–15, before enlisting. He was awarded a Victoria Cross for bravery shown at Messines on 7 June 1917.

70 Peter Simpson, 'Bill Pearson's New Zealand Then and Now: Testimony of an Internal Rapporteur', *Landfall* 194, no. 3, Spring 1997, pp. 214–15.

71 Paul Millar, 'William Harrison Pearson: 1922–2002', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, no. 20, 2002, pp. 164–69.

As Geoffrey Moorhouse has written, Blackball had been in the 1930s and 1940s a 'nursery of footballers'.⁷² The game of rugby league had come to the West Coast during World War I as part of a missionary expedition from Christchurch where the code had established a solid base in the aftermath of the pioneering tour to Britain by the 'All Golds' team in 1907–08. Blackball miners played their first game on 16 June 1915 on the local domain against a visiting side from Canterbury. After the game a club was formed. The timing was significant; it coincided with the genesis of the anti-conscription campaign by the Miners' Federation and the conjunction of events had the effect of attaching the game to a radical and oppositional culture. Among conservatives it was seen as evidence that, in their sport as in much else, the miners were 'troublemakers'. In the 1930s Blackball miners had played their part in making the West Coast the nation's pre-eminent rugby league province.

During the early 1940s the club had become arguably the dominant South Island club, being six times (between 1940 and 1947) winner of the Thacker Shield—the symbol of Canterbury–West Coast club rugby league supremacy.⁷³ In 1947 seven members of the 25-strong Kiwi side to tour Great Britain came from the West Coast, four of them from Blackball: Bob Aynsley, Ray Nuttall, Ken Mountford and Charlie McBride.⁷⁴ At the heart of the rise of the local club were the brothers Mountford. Two, Ken and Bill, were to play for the Kiwis. In 1947 Ken, as a loose forward for the touring Kiwi side, found himself chasing brother Ces around Central Park, Wigan, where he had become something of a local hero while studying at Wigan's celebrated Mining and Technical College for a manager's certificate. Whereas in Pearson's *Coal Flat* it is the two schoolteachers who board at the Palmer's pub, in 1947 two of Blackball's most famous league players, Charlie McBride and Bill (Ginger) McLennan, had adjacent rooms at the hotel.⁷⁵ But the flow of rugby league players from the Blackball mines was already beginning to slow. There were two further Thacker Shield victories—1950 and 1953—but thereafter the ability of the township to retain the young men needed to keep the victories coming slowly withered.

72 Geoffrey Moorhouse, *At the George and Other Essays on Rugby League*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1989, p. 140.

73 The exact years were 1940, 1942, 1943, 1945, 1946 and 1947.

74 The other three West Coasters were Jack Newton and 'Nippy' Forrest, both miners from Runanga, and Artie Gillman, a policeman from Hokitika.

75 Peter Kerridge, 'Obituary: Bill McLennan', *Press* (Christchurch), 18 August 2007.

The absence of sport from *Coal Flat* goes to the heart of the dilemma that Pearson created for Paul Rogers. In part, such a dilemma is founded upon the separation of culture into popular, or mass, and high culture (the arts and literature). Rogers's efforts to bridge this gulf meet not so much resistance as indifference. Part of the problem, then, in constructing the dilemma is that it does not confront the bit in between—in short, those elements of the community experience that fall outside Pearson's *Coal Flat*. In the fictional world this does not matter much. But it does indicate the self-imposed limits of Pearson's interest in the 'wider community'. It is also in tune with the prevalent belief that New Zealand's attitude to sport was 'colonial' or 'primitive', and therefore to be, if not shunned, then at least shuffled off into another category of experience. Sport was, therefore, an inescapable part of the national landscape that helped make sense of the present, but one that more sophisticated folks hoped might find a lesser place in the future.

It is a perspective recognised and, in some degree, accepted in John Mulgan's celebrated *Report on Experience*:

Our main pursuits were only cultural in the broadest sense. They were horse-racing, playing rugby football, and beer drinking—especially playing football ... This phenomenon is greatly deprecated by a lot of thinkers who feel that an exaggerated attention to games gives the young a wrong sense of values. This may well be true and, if it is true, the majority of New Zealanders have a wrong sense of values for the whole of their lives. But to be frank, and since we live in a hard world, and one that has certainly not in my time got any softer, I found in wartime that there was a considerable virtue in men who played games like professionals to win, and not, like public-school boys and amateurs, for exercise. So that perhaps it would be more correct to say that the virtues and values of the New Zealanders were not so much wrong as primitive, and to this extent useful in the current collapse of civilisation.⁷⁶

That Mulgan had rugby union rather than rugby league in mind when he made his comments speaks of both his own social position and the lower place in national consciousness of what was then, and very largely remains, a working-class sport. By omitting league from his depiction

⁷⁶ John Mulgan, *Report on Experience*, Wellington, Pen & Sword Books and Victoria University Press, 2010, p. 40.

of his fictional community, Pearson is simply sticking to more familiar terrain. The sporting preoccupations of the miners could be regarded as an affirmation of physicality and one further example of the presentism that prevailed within the community; above all, they were a distraction in the same way as the cinema, to which miners retreated after union meetings. In literary terms, ignoring such a significant slice of coalfields life is explicable and scarcely inconsistent. Historians, sociologists and anthropologists were only beginning to turn their attention to working-class leisure. But even studies such as Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques and Clifford Slaughter's *Coal Is Our Life* (1956), which recognise the importance of sport in working-class culture, did not pursue it very far.⁷⁷ Nor were there many literary precedents. David Storey's celebrated *This Sporting Life*⁷⁸ was not published until 1960, by which time *Coal Flat* had taken its final shape. Indeed, as we have seen, it is very much a book of the late 1940s. It is also an 'expatriate work' written, as Pearson has explained, at some distance from New Zealand and from the coaltown it depicts. If it was, as Pearson wrote in 1960, the 'difference in atmosphere between London and New Zealand that generated "Fretful Sleepers"', then the same framework shaped *Coal Flat* and had little place for sport.⁷⁹

A West Coast coalminer, writer, playwright and actor from a later generation, Mervyn Thompson, addressed the relationship of sport and art directly. He endorsed Pearson's view that New Zealanders were 'viciously addicted to the habit of glorifying sporting heroes while insulting or ignoring its artists'.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, in his autobiographical *All My Lives*, Thompson sought to balance the charge with a spirited denunciation of the 'anti-sport lobby':

Too many people in the theatre world—and the arts generally—are totally snobbish about sport. Alienated from the land they live in and in many cases looking rather wistfully towards old Europe, they never tire of telling anyone who will listen how much they despise 'Kiwi philistines' and their 'common' pursuits ... With their superior sensibilities you'd think they'd know better.⁸¹

77 Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*; Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques and Clifford Slaughter, *Coal Is Our Life: An Analysis of a Yorkshire Mining Community*, 2nd edn, London, Tavistock Publications (Social Science Paperback), 1969.

78 David Storey, *This Sporting Life*, London, Longmans Green & Co., 1960.

79 Peter Simpson, 'Bill Pearson's New Zealand Then and Now', *Landfall* 194, Spring 1997, p. 205.

80 Mervyn Thompson, *All My Lives*, Christchurch, Whitcoulls, 1980, pp. 50–51.

81 Thompson, *All My Lives*, pp. 50–51.

Nonetheless, when he reflects upon the Runanga of the 1940s and 1950s, he attributes the appeal of football squarely to a physical environment that was ‘a testament to man’s ability to survive at the lowest ebb of his existence’.⁸² So harsh and unyielding was the state coaltown that it led young miners, he believed, to prize above all else ‘physical dominance over others’. Thus, Thompson seems to suggest that while football as a sport possessed the potential to exhibit the finer elements of human achievement, in its Runanga or coalfield setting, it exhibited a crudity that approached barbarism.

Others saw the place of sport in mining towns more positively. Dr Francis Bennett, who as we have noted experienced Blackball in the grim years of the 1930s, thought the establishment of a domain, football ground and football club a testament to the township’s communitarian spirit and civic pride. The ‘scraping off the wages’⁸³ that made such amenities possible was an expression of a resilient citizenship that spoke of a future. In much the same way as the union had provided a generation of ideologues with a pathway into national politics, Blackball provided its most talented rugby league men with a platform from which to launch themselves onto a national and, for a select few, an international stage. And beyond football there was a range of organised sporting activities sustained by the town: wrestling, boxing, soccer (though never as successfully as the Buller coaltowns of Millerton and Stockton), cycling and quoits. May Day sports in Blackball rivalled in enthusiasm, if not in scale, the St Patrick’s Day celebrations in Greymouth. All, to a greater or lesser extent, added to the threads of a shared experience that set individual coaltowns apart from each other and from other communities.

Sporting clubs did not in Blackball, any more than they did anywhere else, dominate community life. A Caledonian Society flourished among the sizeable number of Scots who had come to Blackball in the 1920s and especially after Britain’s 1926 General Strike. They sustained a pipe band that was to be an ever-present symbol of a Scottish presence at the head of demonstrations in Blackball and represented the town in competitions and gatherings throughout the South Island. Their celebration of Burns Night was a feature of the social calendar. Despite Rogers’s assertion in *Coal Flat* that a drama society would be ‘as phoney as glee clubs or

82 Thompson, *All My Lives*, p. 13.

83 Bennett, *A Canterbury Tale*, p. 131.

marching girls',⁸⁴ Blackball at various times had sustained one. A debating club peopled by the 'earnest minority' addressed such topics as 'whether the rebel or the constitutionists have done more for the advancement of humanity'. Whatever else these activities tell us about Blackball, they point to a diverse range of community activity.

It could be said, of course, that *Coal Flat* is played out at the withering end of this communal creativity. In Blackball, as elsewhere on the coalfields, the celebrations that greeted the nationalisation of the pits had been muted. The demise of the well-compensated coal barons did not so much come at the height of a capitalist peak but as the Blackball mine neared the end of its productive life and the coal industry was in retreat. Since the troubles of the late 1920s, the bonds of community had struggled to thwart the long slide into the oblivion into which the old goldtowns had descended. The building of a new primary school in 1930 had been hailed as the forerunner of a high school.⁸⁵ The same confident flush encouraged the Miners' Union Hall and Welfare Society to explore with the Western Electric Talking Pictures Company the prospect of bringing 'talkies' to the town. By 1936, as calls for assistance grew and contributions withered, the society closed its books. A decade later the society purged its rolls of unfinancial members, borrowed £200 from a private individual and reduced the annual grant for the children's picnic from £25 to £5.⁸⁶

Nothing better captures the ambiguous and contradictory nature of Blackball's predicament in the late 1940s than the circumstances confronting the Miners' Hall. A product of the optimism of the early 1920s, it stood at the head of Main Street alongside the hotel and opposite the billiards rooms soon to become the workingmen's club. Like the bulk of the township, it had been built on land leased from a London-based trust. Paying the rental had been a recurring reminder of capitalism's ubiquitous presence. The 21-year lease expired in 1947 just as nationalisation of the pits became a reality. Was there another 21 years in the coal seam? Canny union leaders began with an abortive attempt to derive more income from hall rentals. The major tenant, the company that operated the picture theatre, was struggling to remain viable and had

84 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 416.

85 *Grey River Argus*, 25 October 1930.

86 Blackball Miners' Union Hall and Welfare Society Minute Book, 1946, ms, private collection, p. 21.

cancelled Saturday afternoon sessions.⁸⁷ The visible signs of communal endeavour under stress were apparent as the library and reading room of the Hall fell into disrepair.

Literary critics detected something similar in the final passages of *Coal Flat*. To some the final words of the novel seemed ‘bleak and laconic, if not fatalistic’, and indicative of a surrender to the contingencies of time and place:

and the school-bell rang for playtime. In the mine men paused to swig from the thermos-flasks, and the postboy’s whistle piped a small signature to the sudden quietness as the dredge stopped for smoko. In the distance a motor-bike started up, and a delivery van pulled up in front of the grocer’s; a heavy truck loaded with barrels stopped outside one of the pubs. It occurred to Jessie, feeling the freshness of the hills and the cicadas singing, that it would be about as good a summer as they’d ever had on the Coast.⁸⁸

Pearson rejected such a reading of the passage as based on an ignorance of just how good a West Coast summer could be and at odds with his intention.

In writing *Coal Flat*, he later explained, he had been attracted by the artistic symmetry involved in leaving his story very much as he had entered it—an idea he attributed to Koestler’s novel *Arrival and Departure*.⁸⁹ Thus, when readers first meet *Coal Flat* it is on ‘a sunny February morning throbbing with cicadas’;⁹⁰ they leave on a ‘sunny November morning’ where ‘already the air was singing with grass cicadas’.⁹¹ Life goes on much as it always had, seemingly untouched by the crises that had enveloped the lives of the individuals at the centre of the novel. Its central character, Paul Rogers, whose estrangement from the community provided the dynamic of the narrative, comes to accept much of what Pearson calls the ‘hopes and beliefs’⁹² of the majority. Communality might thus be seen as the handmaiden of conformity. It might also be seen as an arbiter of the levels of diversity that seemed appropriate to the circumstances of time and place.

87 Blackball Miners’ Union Hall and Welfare Society Minute Book, 1946, p. 146.

88 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 419.

89 Pearson, ‘Beginnings and Endings’, p. 21.

90 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 6.

91 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, p. 418.

92 Pearson, ‘Beginnings and Endings’, p. 21.

This text is taken from *People and Place: The West Coast of New Zealand's South Island in History and Literature*, by Len Richardson, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/PP.2020.05