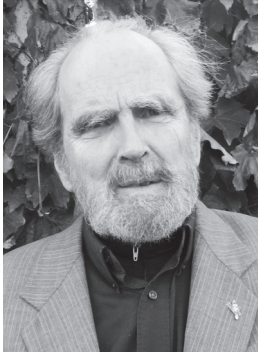


Images of the Deep Anthracite Miner

By Richard Aston



Richard Aston

Richard Aston graduated from Ohio State University with a Ph.D. in engineering in 1969, worked in aerospace engineering for several years, and taught engineering and engineering technology for 27 years. He is the author of three engineering textbooks from commercial publishers and of one available free on the internet. He has also published four previous papers in *The Torch*.

He has been publishing poetry and criticism for over 35 years. His poetry collection *Valley Voices* was published by Foothills Publishing in 2012.

He and his wife, Marcia, have three grown children and seven grand children.

His paper was presented to the Wyoming Valley Torch Club on September 8, 2014, in a dark room lit only by a miner's helmet light.

Anthracite coal mining was a major industry in the Wyoming and Lackawanna Valleys of North Eastern Pennsylvania from about 1850 to 1959. Here I present images, mostly in poetry, of the miners who worked up to 2000 feet underground.

The earliest ancestor with our surname that we know of was Jack Aston, born in about 1775. He was a coal miner in Shropshire, England, as was his son, Richard, my great-great grandfather, who was listed in one census as a grocer, but on his death record as a miner.

THE ANCESTOR¹

Like most of the miners,
Jack favored his sons
because they could add
to the family's income.
So when he would say,
Now give me my boys,
his voice would crack
with a ring of joy.

The laws were made
to keep girls from the mines,
bringing their value down for a time,
but boys could work at twelve or so
to learn from their fathers
how to mine coal, singing,
Colliery lads gets gold and silver
while factory lads gets brass and
pewter.

The miners had a pride of
craftsmanship
that was got with their brains,
their muscles and picks.

Where do you suppose
the trains came from,
including the rails and the steam
engine?
In the nineteenth century technology
was being advanced in the colliery.

In Shropshire, their method
was called "Longwall"
best done by wiry miners
who were not too tall
because it was used for narrow seams
where you couldn't use pillars,
and couldn't use beams.

When done the miners
let the seam subside
and walked away with a sense of
pride.

As a child, during World War II, I
grew up near South Wilkes-Barre,
Pennsylvania, on Parrish Street, where
there was a coal colliery, and would
watch the miners leaving the shaft after
their shift:

THE VALLEY COAL MINER

I met the man on Parrish Street
walking past a railroad track.
My child's eyes and his didn't meet.
His form was hulking, gray and
black.

He was a valley miner
he dug for valley coal.
He made our light shine brighter
by digging in a hole.

He was lowered down a pit
in a cage of wood and iron
to practice out his dangerous craft
in a deep, dark, dusty, dank, environ
chipping away at a blue-black wall
listening to it snap and crack
wondering if a rock might fall
like that that broke his father's back.

He learned he must be serious
about what he could hear and see
and thus became ingenious
at predicting what he thought might be.

He early learned of tragedy
resulting from disaster
as well as what his place might be,
before the Master.

He was a valley miner.
He dug for valley coal.
He drug youse out a culture.
It came from a dark, dusty, dank hole.

One of the
methods the
operators had
to try to keep
labor split in
Pennsylvania
and weaken
the unions was
to bring various
ethnic groups in
from all over
Europe.

Coal was mined as early as the middle ages, since the workers of iron knew that coal produced a hotter fire than wood, but for a long time it had only a small, specialized market. After the invention of the steam engine in the late eighteenth century by James Watt, and the subsequent development of the locomotive, the steam ship, and central heating in the mid-nineteenth century, a large market for coal developed, enabling deeper mines. As coal became big business, labor problems followed. One of the methods the operators had to try to keep labor split in Pennsylvania and weaken the unions was to bring various ethnic groups in from all over Europe. The mule tender in the following poem tells us about that, referring to the immigrant groups with their slang, usually derogatory, names:

THE MULE TENDER

I tended the mules
and thus the miners who
came in waves: Limeys, Cheesies,
Micks, Wops, Hunkies,
Pollacks, Kikes, Krauts, Huns,
Guidos, Dagos, Litvaks...
each new wave oppressed
by those recently established.

Born and bred in dark labyrinths
blind mules hauled blue-black
anthracite
and were valued by the coal operators
as capital to be exchanged.

Miners, though, took only a daily
wage and were thus expendable.
So when there was an accident
by which a miner would end his stint,
some of the mine bosses
were so damned cruel
they would say, "To hell with the man,
how's the mule."

That is a folk tale. According to a plaque at the entrance to the Anthracite Heritage Museum in Scranton, Pennsylvania, over fifty thousand miners died in the anthracite mines of Eastern Pennsylvania in the over one hundred years coal was king in the region.

One of my great-grand fathers, Shem Lloyd, worked in the mines in Pontypridd, Wales and immigrated to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania in 1857 to mine anthracite coal. Shem Lloyd was a Fire Boss, who, as part of his job, inspected the Stanton Mine in our town for odorless, tasteless, and explosive methane gas. His fate is described in this folk, and family, tale:

THE FIRE BOSS

Pulled from the mine
they lugged Shem home
and laid him on his bed
his face more black
because of white pillows
placed beneath his head.

Kassy, Liz, Marg, and Jen
all tried to comfort him,
Blythe, Hurst and Jack
then, finally, Aneurin.

He neither felt, nor heard, nor knew
but suffering through a night
that broke upon a faithful dawn.
He died by morning light.

The Avondale's brave Welshmen
shared with him their pine,
burnt dead as a Fire Boss
in 1879.

Likewise his grandson Samuel,
at fourteen in the mine,
fell by electrocution
long before his time.

The coal miner's wives were busy
with gardening, house keeping and
babies; my wife had three, Mother
five, Grandmother ten, and Great-
grandmother, coal miner's wife, had
seven survive to adulthood:

THE WIDOW²

Here at Wanamie
where gray birch now grow in culm
walked my miner husband
wishing to leave the mines —
to open a grocery store perhaps.

He tried, failed, and died a miner.
And I, lingering after the procession
to watch the diggers fill his grave
cried.

A coal miner lived next door to us in
a fifteen-foot-wide, single story house.
I would visit him in his kitchen, the
warm room:

THE OLD MINER

delighted in me a boy,
several fingers missing,
their stumps holding the cup
of boiling water he sipped
to soothe his coal-dust-scarred throat,
steam filtering into his bronchi
giving sorely needed relief.

He delighted in simple things.

Coal miner's son Ellis Roberts, a former president of our local Torch Club, and of the Wilkes-Barre Business College, which he owned, recalls a mine scene:

MINE YARD AT DAWN

Black, stepped-like tower,
Wheel-topped, square frame,
Low-roofed angled shanties,
Puffing, screeching cranes,
Silent, shuffling silhouettes
Crowned with flickering lights,
Clanking, grinding, heavy chains,
Strain in the dying night.
Coal-black, courageous, burdened men
Cross in the mine yard dawn,
Night-shift passing day-shift
Asthma-afflicted pawns
Slowly the full sun rises
Blazing yard, lift's cage
Empty now of either shift
A prop-like abandoned stage.

(Roberts 112)

The anthracite mines were as much as two thousand feet underground in our town, but near the outcrops of coal where the valley meets the mountains, the seams are near the surface, and the residents can hear the mine operations, the jackhammers and blasting, in their cellars. Some say they can hear the miners talking, and Harry Humes, a coal miner's son and English professor at Kutztown University, claims he could hear them singing while they worked:

UNDERGROUND SINGING

It rose out of air holes and off hot slate,
even from the bottom
of the muddy pond
where we swam,
and out of dry snake skins
snagged on laurel roots,
our fathers singing in their tunnels,
our fathers in their knee-high
black rubber boots, faces glue-scarred,
singing to keep the ghosts back
in abandoned tunnels
where nothing lived

where bones of never rescued miners lay
and ghosts drifted and shimmered,
and sometimes caused slate to clatter
off some miner's hard hat,
or a flare of gas
our fathers singing
in wet cramped places
where they worked on their bellies,
arms and legs moving
as they shoveled coal down a chute,
their singing sometimes a raspy breath
over the top of an empty bottle
or lace curtains rustling at dusk.

(Humes 13)

Deep mining
in the Northern
Pennsylvania
coal field collapsed
suddenly when a
local mine tunnel
was run so close to
the Susquehanna
River that it caved;
the river flooded
almost all of
the mines in
Wyoming Valley,
closing them
for good in
1959.

Some of the miners were accomplished musicians and performed for each other. Gwilym Gwent, called the Mozart of the Mines, was a classical composer who would work out his lines on the coal cars with chalk. I had the privilege of singing his deeply felt choruses with our local Welsh ethnic Orpheus Society. Other such performers included the juggler of picks:

THE PICK

bowed, extending his muscled arm,
falling in only his helmet light off
anthracite
echoing through tunnels in the mine
He swung it with one hand
as it seemed to find its own way
in the dark to cracks
in the blasted face
yielding chunks for the breaker
its dust-blackened handle smooth
against his callused, hard hands
his wife felt as rough
against her smooth, soft skin
her hands stroking his chiseled biceps.

Sunday afternoons it was show time
as the miner
used to heavy dangerous labor
juggled three picks for her
and the neighborhood kids to watch.

Anthracite coal production peaked in 1914, after which the invention of the internal combustion engine meant increased competition with oil as a fuel for engines and home heating, causing a steady decline for coal. The Great Depression of 1929 took its toll, leaving miners idle and deprived of full pay. Business revived during World War II, but afterwards, it declined precipitously as motor vehicles, diesel engines on the railroads and in ocean liners, natural gas for home heating, and the fact that bituminous mining is less labor intensive than anthracite mining made the anthracite industry hardly profitable. Deep mining in the Northern Pennsylvania coal field collapsed suddenly when a local mine tunnel was run so close to the Susquehanna River that it caved; the river flooded almost all of the mines in Wyoming Valley, closing them for good in 1959.

Now there are no deep anthracite miners left there, except for a few retired men over eighty years old, nor traces of the industry that once dominated the region save a few colliery buildings, converted to other uses, and occasional culm banks covered with

grey birch trees. No visitor, judging from what remained visible, would know that for more than a century “Coal was King” in our region. The last of the coal breakers in the Northern Coal Field was demolished at the Huber Colliery in the Spring of 2014:

REMEMBERING THE HUBER³

Blue sky
dark crested windswept cloud waves
a sunny breeze
flutters our flag over a monument
for what a yellow-clawed dinosaur CAT
growling, tearing, pulling over
voraciously takes from our descendants
what our ancestors built
under whose shadow
our coal miner fathers and mothers lived
in fifteen-foot-wide houses
one spigot on each block
outhouse behind
houses left unpainted
to save the company owners taxes
What they used to mine coal
and energize our nation

The CAT demolishes
an eleven story sculpture of steel
The Huber Breaker
the grandest, youngest and last
characteristic of and unique
to our region
demolished for the money
the steel would bring in scrap

Gray birch trees now in culm
waiting to cover the site

We remember the Huber Colliery
with a monument of black granite
etched with a likeness of it
beside a coal car idle forty years
exposed to weather
rotting the wood
rusting the steel
weakening the coupler
awaiting its restoration
as artists symbolically
save the Huber

Remember the exhausted miners
after working a shift heading
for Knocker’s for Ma’s Root Beer

or, more earthy, to Cellar Dweller’s
or Chickaroo’s bar for a shot and a beer
their wives
waiting to take most of their pay
before they soothed
their coal dust scarred throats
re-energizing themselves
to sing Welsh hymns
“Guide Me Oh Thou Great Jehovah”
or Italian operatic arias

“O Sole Mio”
Or do Hungarian dances
Polish polkas
play accordions
Hey, hey, hey, hey, yahoo

No visitor,
judging from what
remained visible,
would know that
for more than a
century ‘Coal was
King’ in our region.
The last of the coal
breakers in the
Northern Coal Field
was demolished
at the Huber
Colliery in the
Spring of 2014.

If the deep miners are extinct in our
valley, they live in us their descendants,
this one biking over the hills of the
former coal towns:

BIKING HILLS⁴

The energy given to a hill
will return to you
in a view perhaps,
or in the wind on your chest
as you come back down,

or in a presence like that
on the top of Shay Town Hill,
at the Holy Child Church,
of the splay of the brick
matching the stone there,
or in the sound like that
on the top of the hairpin curve
at Warrior’s Run of
“Standing in the Promises
of God”
being sung,
or in a thought like that drawn up
by a bank of culm from
the rich coal seam
that courses beneath that
mysterious church
to which the miner’s descendants
come and sing.

Notes

- 1 This poem, along with “Valley Miner,” “Mule Tender,” and “Fire Boss,” appears in *Valley Voices*.
- 2 This poem appeared in *Endless Mountain Review*.
- 3 This poem first appeared in the *Wilkes-Barre Citizens’ Voice* of May 12, 2014.
- 4 This poem first appeared in *Mulberry Poets and Writers Association Day Book*.

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