

the acquiescent government officials, the racially discriminatory company managers, or the working members of the “Greatest Generation,” whose fight to protect whiteness and masculinity continued into the socially conservative post-war era.

Meet Joe Copper is a complex academic book, demanding a reader’s full attention. In dealing with these intertwined community stories, the author sometimes hurts the narrative flow by doing too much foreshadowing. Yet Basso manages to craft a story that is both careful in its attention to detail and sweeping in its implications. Attesting to its importance as a social history, the book recently won the Philip Taft Labor History Award, the first time since 1988 that a book about the mining industry has done so. Hopefully, it will inspire additional research connecting mining labor and war.

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Gwyn A. Williams. *The Merthyr Rising*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014 (reprint, 1978) [dist. by University of Chicago Press]; 237 pp., 1 b&w illus., 3 maps, tabs., notes, ind., paper, \$30. ISBN: 9781783160051.

The University of Wales Press has reissued Gwyn Williams’ *The Merthyr Rising*, first published in 1978 and reprinted in 1988 and again in 2003. The book concerns a riot or insurrection—Williams prefers the term “rising”—at the iron-making town of Merthyr Tydfil, Wales, twenty miles north-northwest of Cardiff, on 2 June 1831. The Merthyr region, rich in iron ore, coal, and limestone, became an early center of iron manufacturing. By the time of the rising, forty thousand inhabitants served forty-four iron furnaces in the Merthyr region. The work paid well—at least compared to the agricultural labor which these iron miners and mongers had fled—but employment was unstable. By 1831 Merthyr, with its economic instability, transience, working

conditions, and its class, religious, language, and political frictions, was a cauldron of discontents—Williams goes so far as to declare Merthyr Tydfil “a frontier town.”

What ignited the crisis was a combination of a sharp economic recession that began in 1829. This, combined with rising prices, had pushed the poor to desperation by the beginning of 1831. Working-class anger especially focused on the bailiffs of the local Court of Requests, who enforced the court-ordered repossession of workers’ property for debt in answer to local merchants’ petitions. Protest meetings and marches had already occurred in the spring of 1831, but when, after the announcement of another wage cut, bailiffs descended on the house of one of the leading protest speakers, violence erupted on 2 June 1831 and lasted for five days.

Williams sees a working class forming in the crucible of Merthyr Tydfil by the 1820s, but not yet a working-class movement; the rising, he believes, was the beginning of that. He sees the Merthyr action of June 1831 as a distinct expression of working-class grievances and ambitions, separate from the middle-class Reform Bill agitation and other protest movements of that tumultuous period. “That [British] national crisis assumed divergent forms in localities of differing historical experience,” Williams writes. “In Merthyr Tydfil, the impact of a complex national crisis on local tensions produced a revolutionary insurrection of the working class and brought a pre-history [that of the working class] to an end.”

That proto-working-class movement suffered from an absence of prominent leaders, however—“it was precisely the absence of personalized ‘leadership’ which gave it [the rising] its character”—and thus had no means to articulate its demands. Williams believes the movement was a premeditated revolt but uncoordinated. Once anger had been vented at the obvious targets, the protesters were unable to produce a coherent set of objectives beyond such obvious steps as demanding abolishment the Court of Requests and debt im-

prisonment, and supporting such generalities as higher wages and lower prices. A revolutionary spirit, Williams finds it, harnessed to the service of limited, local reforms.

The rising dissolved after the arrival of the soldiers called in from various barracks in the region to reestablish order in Merthyr. With control reimposed, twenty-eight “sacrificial scapegoats,” in Williams’ words, were arrested and charged with crimes associated with the rising. Trials that July produced twelve convictions, with six sentenced to prison, four to transportation, and two to death for the capital offense of stabbing a soldier, although one of the death sentences was commuted to transportation.

Williams’ book then becomes something of a detective story, attempting to establish the innocence of the condemned Richard Lewis, immortalized in Welsh folk history as Dic Penderyn after his execution in August 1831. In this pursuit, as throughout the book, Williams demonstrates a judicious use of facts and inferences, speculating freely but carefully avoiding overreaching when considering evidence.

This may be less true, however, of his conclusions. Williams sees “the Merthyr Rising” of 1831 as “a crisis of working-class identity,” that, once endured, produced a working-class consciousness, participation, and power that led to subsequent reforms. Williams believes the rising’s ramification to be “one of those structural, almost geological shifts which accompany a profound change in opinion and attitude,” but makes almost no attempt to place the conflict in Merthyr into the context of discontent and protest widespread in Britain in that era. How, for example, does the clash in Merthyr Tydfil in 1831 compare to the riots that occurred four months later fifty miles away in Bristol, England? Williams sees the significance of the revolt almost exclusively in terms of class, but one wonders whether the power of the Merthyr rising and the execution of Dic Penderyn, then and since, is less as a marker of working-

class consciousness than of Welsh nationalism.

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Mark A. Vendl, Duane A. Smith, Karen A. Vendl. *My Home at Present: Life in the Mine Boarding Houses in the San Juan Mountains, Colorado*. Lake City, CO: Western Reflections Publishing Co., 2013; 166 pp., numerous b&w illus., map, 2 append., ref., ind., cloth, \$35. ISBN: 97819378511101

Before Mark and Karen Vendl married, Mark asked Karen to promise that she would agree to accompany him on several trips a year from Chicago to Colorado. The excuse was to learn more about Colorado’s mining history. As the story goes, the pre-nuptial agreement was not at all hard to keep. And now, with a couple of books under their belts, the retired geologists and current mining historians continue their research trips to Colorado.

The Vendl’s latest book, written with retired history professor Duane Smith, is *My Home at Present: Life in the Mine Boarding Houses in the San Juan Mountains, Colorado*. With Mark as the lead author, the book tells the stories of ordinary working people, from the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century, isolated in the rugged mountains of southwestern Colorado. Together, the Vendl’s and Smith have tapped a rich vein of previously unknown mining history.

My knowledge of San Juan boarding houses had been limited to Harriet Fish Backus’ book, *Tomboy Bride: A Woman’s Personal Account of Life in Mining Camps of the West*, through which I got a feel for the length of the winters and the depth of the snow. But *My Home at Present* does much more by taking the reader back in time using lively quotes and anecdotes, along with dozens of spectacular and previously unpublished photographs.

Meals were the highlight of a miner’s day.