

## SITES OF STRUGGLE: DISABILITY IN WORKING-CLASS COALFIELDS LITERATURE

In Lewis Jones's dramatic retelling of the Tonypandy 'Riots' of 1910–11 in *Cwmardy* (1937), a young communist challenges the authorities to 'come and work the coal themselves if they want it. Let them sweat and pant till their bodies twist in knots as ours have.' He knows, however, that '[t]hey will do none of these things', and tells the striking men to take heart, for:

While it is true our bodies belong to the pit, so also is it true that this makes us masters of the pit. It can't live without us. When we are not there to feed it with our flesh, to work life into it with our sweat and blood, it lies quiet like a paralysed thing that can do nothing but moan.<sup>1</sup>

The tributes of flesh and blood demanded by the monstrous mine allude to the routine injuries and accidents which maim, kill or at the very least promise disability as a none-too-distant part of the life course. But the central image of the mine as a 'paralysed thing' turns the normal relationship between mining and disability on its head by projecting a condition so often associated with industrial accidents onto the pit itself. Disability in the form of paralysis and 'moan[ing]' is imagined, rather conventionally, in terms of loss of agency and pain. Yet in this metaphor power lies with an organised collective of embodied workers, including – or especially – those whose bodies are 'twist[ed]' and impaired: by withholding labour they have agency and can 'paralyse' the monstrous machinery of capitalism. In this short, illustrative excerpt from Lewis Jones's novel, we see how the imagery of disability is embedded in metaphors of power, work and resistance; furthermore, by portraying the miner's body as 'twist[ed] in knots', the emblematic worker is a disabled worker.

As we have seen throughout this book, the fiction, poetry, ballads, autobiography and drama written in and about the coalfields offer valuable insights into the way disability was regarded and experienced in these communities.

The preceding chapters have turned to this literature as a historical source to help expand our understanding of disability in work, leisure, politics, welfare and the various medical encounters that went with impairment. Imaginative literature is, however, more than the sum of the scenes and episodes contained within it. To assess the cultural and political meaning(s) of disability in literature (and, by extension, to understand something about the communities from which this writing originates) we need to be aware that literature has its own traditions, formal constraints and innovations. Representations of disability within working-class coalfields writing not only interact with prevailing community understandings of disability, they must also negotiate literary form and convention, imagery and language. As literary theorist Ato Quayson points out, ‘not only do the characters [in any given text] organize their perceptions of one another on the basis of given symbolic assumptions, but as fictional characters they are themselves also woven out of a network of symbols and interact through a symbolic relay of signs.’<sup>2</sup> To study the ‘network of symbols’ and ‘relay of signs’ in literature is to recognise that understanding the meaning of disability in a text requires looking beyond what happens or what is said (events, dialogue or even plot are of only partial significance). Rather, we must work at the more intricate and sophisticated level of language (signs) and systems of representation (the network of symbols, metaphors, images, textual conventions and cultural assumptions) which carry both pre-existing and new meanings in any literary text. This final chapter, then, delves more deeply into the formal structures and recurring tropes – the images, set pieces and metaphors – in coalfields literature. In a deliberate departure from preceding chapters, it foregrounds the tools and methods of the literary and cultural critic, especially those literary theories developed by disability scholars. We show that while it has been overlooked in literary studies of working-class industrial literature, disability is in fact central to some of the most iconic works of this period.

### Working-class writing 1900–48: a brief literary history

This book as a whole covers the period from 1880 to 1948. Late Victorian coalfields literature is fascinating in its own right and we explore some of the representations of disability found in nineteenth-century writing in preceding chapters. In this final chapter, however, we concentrate on the working-class voices which emerged in the twentieth century. In his seminal lecture on ‘The Welsh Industrial Novel’, Raymond Williams describes the development of industrial writing from early outsider perspectives that portrayed the industrial landscape as a ‘panorama of Hell’ and towards an insider narrative. That is, the ‘movement towards describing what it is like to live in hell, and slowly, as the disorder becomes an habitual order, what it is like to get used to it, to grow up

in it, to see it as home.<sup>3</sup> While Williams's account overlooks important examples of industrial literature, particularly by women, it is undoubtedly the case that a new proletarian literature, much of it from the south Wales coalfield and almost all of it written by men, came to dominate and define industrial literature in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Fiction, drama and verse poured from the pens of men who had worked as miners or who had been raised in mining communities: writers such as Joe Corrie, James C. Welsh, Tom Hanlin, Harold Heslop, Jack Lawson, John Swan, Sid Chaplin, Lewis Jones, Rhys Davies, Idris Davies, Jack Jones, Glyn Jones, Gwyn Jones, Gwyn Thomas and Bert Coombes.<sup>5</sup> Coalfields drama by playwrights such as J. O. Francis, Ruth Dodds,<sup>6</sup> Jack Jones, Emlyn Williams and Joe Corrie also emerged as a major form in the twentieth century, particularly in Wales and Scotland, where it was often performed by amateur as well as professional groups.<sup>7</sup> In the work produced by these writers disability is generally shown to be the product of capitalist systems, poor industrial conditions and limited welfare provision. Unlike much of the Victorian literature, which attaches moral or religious overtones to impairment, disability is portrayed as both indiscriminate and ubiquitous.

The rise of working-class socialist writers during the 1920s and 1930s was supported by the development of politically left-leaning publishers,<sup>8</sup> though a buoyant market for industrial writing in the 1930s<sup>9</sup> that meant authors were also picked up by mainstream publishers.<sup>10</sup> Coalfields writing from Britain in this period thus had a large, often international, audience. Being published in the mainstream could have a politically moderating effect on the final version. The Hunwick-born miner-writer Harold Heslop reported that his novel, *The Gate of a Strange Field* (1929), was cut by about a quarter and the majority of the 'anti-capitalist references [were] deleted.'<sup>11</sup> Even left-wing publishers found some texts too unpalatable, and Gollancz rejected Gwyn Thomas's *Sorrow for Thy Sons*, which had been submitted in response to a competition in 1937: 'Gollancz said he liked the fervour of the book, but its facts were so raw, its wrath so pitiless, its commercial prospects were nil unless he could issue a free pair of asbestos underdrawers to very reader. So he had to say no to publication.'<sup>12</sup> Not all interwar writing was by working-class writers. A. J. Cronin's best-selling *The Citadel* (1937) was published by Gollancz, adapted into an Oscar-winning film in 1938 and credited by some as having a significant impact on promoting public support for the establishment of the NHS.<sup>13</sup> The novel – about a doctor's dissatisfactions with both colliery owners and the compensation system – abounds with images of illness and disability, including a striking portrayal of the industrial landscape of south Wales itself as a 'strange, disfigured country.'<sup>14</sup> One of the most commercially successful novels<sup>15</sup> was Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley* (1939), pithily described by Raymond Williams as 'the export version of the Welsh industrial experience.'<sup>16</sup> It contains a textbook version of 'overcoming'

disability through willpower and Christian faith, as discussed below. It has never been out of print and was widely translated and distributed, no doubt helped by the 1941 John Ford film, which won five Oscars. Despite the dominance of these stories of individual medical heroism (Cronin) and dubious nostalgia (Llewellyn),<sup>17</sup> several of the more realist and proletarian novels by working-class writers were very successful. For instance, Harold Heslop's debut novel, *Goaf*<sup>18</sup> (in which nystagmus is represented as the 'price' the miner is 'compelled to pay'<sup>19</sup>), first appeared in the Soviet Union as *Pod vlastu uglya* [Under the Sway of Coal] in 1926,<sup>20</sup> selling half a million copies in the cheap edition,<sup>21</sup> before its publication in Britain in 1934 to widespread acclaim in the press.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, publishers issue contracts with a particular audience in mind, and this audience was not necessarily located primarily in the coalfields. An awareness of, perhaps even a goal of reaching, an audience beyond the communities from which they came is evident in the form and narrative focus of the novels of this period. Heavily invested in realism for political reasons (though not necessarily documentary or social realism), working-class writers aimed to portray miners' lives with as much veracity as possible. Personal experience of the subject matter was considered an important marker of authenticity. Bert Coombes famously argued that 'the dust should still be in his throat as he was writing – it seemed to me – then it would be authentic.'<sup>23</sup> Autobiographical writing flourished, with miner-writers such as James Lawson, Harold Heslop and Jack Jones drawing heavily on their own lives in their fiction. Yet it was not all a matter of life underpinning fiction. Coombes's own memoir, *These Poor Hands: The Autobiography of a Miner Working in South Wales* (1939), which remains a major reference point to this day (including in this volume), itself began life as a novel and bears traces of this genesis.<sup>24</sup> As we shall see, realism and autobiography were not the only modes by which writers sought to capture coalfields experiences of injury, incapacitation and disability. Experiments with modernist and surrealist forms became increasingly important, often containing within them a seam of dark humour. We look at these later in the chapter, but first we must turn to the dominant, if diverse, conventions of realism in coalfields writing.

### Disability and realism

Realism means many things in literary criticism, but, according to Raymond Williams, in the industrial novel realism rests on the 'assumption' that:

the lives of individuals, however intensely or personally realized, are not just influenced but in certain crucial ways formed by social relations. Thus industrial

work, and its characteristic places and communities, are not just a new background: a new 'setting' for a story. In the true industrial novel they are seen as formative ... The working society – actual work, actual relations, an actual and visibly altered place – is in the industrial novel central ... because in these working communities it is a trivial fantasy to suppose that these general and pressing conditions are for long or even at all separable from the immediate and the personal.<sup>25</sup>

Social and industrial relations in the 'true industrial novel' (by which Williams means a realist text that reveals 'hidden or underlying forces or movements'<sup>26</sup>) are shown to shape the lives of fictional characters. In turn, these characters' lives and the events in which they are involved in various ways represent the forces of work, capital and history which affect them. Indeed, some writers, including the communist activist Lewis Jones, saw fiction, in his case a form of socialist realism, as the best way to reveal the complexity of coalfield life as influenced by historical movements and social relations. In his foreword to *Cwmardy*, Jones explains:

the full meaning of life in the Welsh mining areas could be expressed for the general reader more truthfully and vividly, if treated imaginatively, than by any amount of statistical and historical research. What I have set out to do, therefore, is to 'novelise' (if I may use the term) a phase of working-class history.<sup>27</sup>

Similar claims have been made for the importance of realist writing in representing a social model of disability, as theorists David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder point out: 'Realism promoted a more direct depiction of the political reality of disabled characters, from architecture to attitudes. Realistic depictions, argued social realism, will offer familiarity with an experience that has been understood as thoroughly alien.'<sup>28</sup> It is, of course, an oversimplification to portray literary realism as offering an unmediated and 'authentic' window on the world. Literary realism is carefully and selectively constructed, while, as Tobin Siebers argues, there is a 'temptation to view disability and pain as more real than their opposites. The perception already exists that broken bodies and things are more real than anything else.'<sup>29</sup> That is, the damaged or painful body seems more insistently corporeal: the disabled body is a visible body, while the non-disabled body, according to Maren Tova Linett, appropriates 'the neutral condition of invisibility.'<sup>30</sup> Coalfields realism tends to foreground broken bodies, sometimes in contrast to sculpted, strong or hypermasculine bodies.

The presence of disability in literature is, of course, much more than a 'realistic' (or otherwise) portrayal of impairment and its social consequences. Indeed, disability critics have pointed out that, while disability is a ubiquitous presence

in literature, it tends most often to function as a symbol of something else – a versatile metaphor or plot device rather than an exploration of disability itself. Mitchell and Snyder argue that disability is a ‘crutch’ upon which texts rely for their ‘representative power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight.’<sup>31</sup> Working-class literature of the coalfields depicts impairment as a product of industry and therefore a ubiquitous and ‘realistic’ lived experience, while simultaneously using disability as a versatile symbol by which to expose and contest the workings of industrial and capitalist society.

One function of disability and disabled characters in coalfield literature is to act as a nexus via which a range of different forces – economic, social, political, medical – are brought into contact or revealed to underpin the wider social and economic ‘disqualification’ of the industrial working class.<sup>32</sup> Writing about nineteenth-century ‘critical realism,’<sup>33</sup> Georg Lukács identifies the importance of a ‘typical’ character, a ‘type’ that interacts with different forces within the text:

The ‘centre’ figure need not represent an ‘average man’ but is rather the product of a particular social and personal environment. The problem is to find a central figure in whose life all the important extremes in the world of the novel converge and around whom a complete world with all its vital contradictions can be organized.<sup>34</sup>

This typical figure, as Moyra Haslett explains, is often ‘portrayed as passive rather than active, played on by events rather than mastering them’, but they bring other characters and factions into contact.<sup>35</sup> Lukács’s ‘typical’ figure is not merely a stereotype, as Fredric Jameson points out; rather, ‘the “typical” was what ultimately registered the subterranean movements of History itself.’<sup>36</sup> While coalfields novels are in fundamental ways very different to the nineteenth-century models of which Lukács is thinking, in coalfields literature the impaired worker is often, by several measures, a ‘typical’ working-class figure around whom economic, medical, political, historical and social narratives converge. Indeed, congenital, work- or age-related disability itself is a locus of meaning through which different social and political forces are made apparent. In this chapter, then, we propose that the person with disabilities in coalfields literature can be seen as the paradigmatic citizen of the colliery districts.

An example of the disabled character as a ‘typical’ character can be found in the miner known as Big Jim in Lewis Jones’s *Cwmardy*. Big Jim’s experiences reveal the wider socio-historic and economic contexts in which the characters move. Originally from Welsh-speaking, agrarian Wales, this archetypal big hewer has proudly served as a soldier in the Boer War and, later, the Great War; thus industrial capitalism is shown to operate hand in hand with both imperialism and mechanised total war. Most significantly, from the perspective of our contention that disability is a condition emblematic of the industrial worker, Big Jim’s

life course over *Cwmardy* and its sequel, *We Live* (1939), exemplifies the *inevitability* of disability as a consequence of mining, due to overwork, lack of economic security and dangerous conditions. Facing premature physical decline and in financially precarious circumstances due to repeated strikes and lockouts, Big Jim struggles to breathe as a result of dust inhalation and is stooped and unsteady from joint-related injuries and strain. The working life of this foot-soldier of capitalist imperialism leads ultimately to physical impairment; disability is presented as the result of his loyal service.<sup>37</sup>

It is not surprising that Lewis Jones and other politically aware writers responded to the commonplace impairments of the coalfields by creating emblematic disabled characters. The figure of the impaired, maimed or 'stunted'<sup>38</sup> wage-labourer within capitalism was a material and symbolic presence from Marx onwards. Marx not only lists disabled people among the 'ragged' paupers who, after orphaned children and the aged, make up the lowest tier of surplus labour, those 'victims of industry, whose number increases with the growth of dangerous machinery, of mines, chemical works, etc.';<sup>39</sup> crucially, he uses disability as a metaphor for *all* industrial workers. The specialisation brought about by division of labour, which capitalism then exploits, 'converts the worker into a crippled monstrosity' where 'the individual himself is divided up' by repetitive and 'automatic motor' tasks.<sup>40</sup> Despite this interest in the fragmented and disabled body in Marx, B. J. Gleeson claims that 'the issue of disablement has been largely neglected in the socialist tradition.'<sup>41</sup> While this may be true in academic studies, it is certainly not true of socialist or communist coalfield writers.

Realist coalfields literature overwhelmingly represents impairment and disability as the product of the material conditions of industrial life, while using disability symbolically to represent the struggles of a working class facing catastrophic levels of unemployment and consequent material deprivation during the interwar period.<sup>42</sup> Disability is thus both an authentic and central element of coalfields experience and a metaphor through which the working classes are presented as 'disqualified'. But working-class coalfields literature, and socialist realism in particular, indicates that the experience of disability may be transformed by socialist organisation(s). To put it slightly differently, the condition of disability in realist coalfields literature operates along vectors of economic disqualification and physical (and mental) impairment; it is alleviated by social solutions, including mutualism and solidarity.

### Normalcy, disability and the life course

If disability was an expected, near-universal part of a worker's life course (be they male or female<sup>43</sup>) and if, as we argued earlier, the paradigmatic worker is

an impaired worker, coalfields literature implicitly invites us to reconsider what we consider to be 'normal'. The concept of 'normalcy' and its relationship to disability has been a rich ground for disability theory, showing as it does how the apparently invisible 'able' body is reliant on constructing the 'disabled' body as aberrant 'other'. Lennard Davis introduces the idea of normalcy thus:

Disability is not an object – a woman with a cane – but a social process that intimately involves everyone who has a body and lives in the world of the senses. Just as the conceptualisation of race, class, and gender shapes the lives of those who are not black, poor or female, so the concept of disability regulates the bodies of those who are 'normal'. In fact the very concept of normalcy by which most people (by definition) shape their existence is in fact tied inexorably to the concept of disability, or rather, the concept of disability is a function of normalcy. Normalcy and disability are part of the same system.<sup>44</sup>

The concept of normalcy is taken more explicitly into the realm of ideology in Rosemarie Garland Thomson's formulation of the 'normate', a term which names 'the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries. The term *normate* usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings.<sup>45</sup> The normate, broadly constructed, is white, male, able-bodied, educated, middle class and in employment. While the shadow of the normate is discernible in coalfields literature (sometimes in the text as doctor or minister, or as imagined reader), the norm in the context of the coalfields is, arguably, impairment and – in the depression years – widespread 'disqualification' through unemployment, poverty and disability.

Although still bearing ideologically on ideas of valuable masculinity, the characteristics to which 'normalcy' generally refer are challenged by the specific conditions of coalfields life. Realist novels address this by foregrounding the accelerated ageing which is an expected part of the life course of men and women, and thus showing disability to be a near-universal expectation. This typical life course is established by stock scenes and characters portrayed at pivotal moments: the boy's first day down the pit; the young woman contemplating marriage; the ground-down wife and mother struggling to feed a family on inadequate funds; the weak or worn-out miner; the man killed or maimed in the prime of life. As Edward Slavishak has said of nineteenth-century Pennsylvanian colliers, men operated in a 'culture of risk in which every minute might be their last and in which every worker's able-bodied prime preceded a future life of disability'.<sup>46</sup> The decline of Big Jim, over the course of *Cwmardy* and *We Live*, from gigantic hewer in the prime of life to an increasingly disabled – yet

still working – miner exemplifies the normal life course, from vigorous breadwinner to a bowed and breathless worker.

The process of decline and premature ageing<sup>47</sup> begins directly on entry to the pit in childhood: ‘round here they are only children till they are twelve. Then they are sent away over the hills to the mine, and in one week they are old men,’ remarks one character in Emyln Williams’s play *The Corn is Green* (1938).<sup>48</sup> In James C. Welsh’s novel *The Underworld* (1920), Robert is warned by his mother: ‘look how quick a miner turns auld, Rob. He’s done at forty years auld ... but meenisters an’ schoolmaisters, an’ folk o’ that kin’, leeve a gey lang while.’<sup>49</sup> In the same novel, the ageing effects of the industry are conveyed via the assembled bodies of miners at a union meeting: ‘eyes glad with expectancy, and eyes dulled with long years of privations and brutal labour; limbs young and supple and full of energy, and limbs stiff and sore, crooked and maimed.’<sup>50</sup> The structure of the sentence, with its list of juxtapositions, holds up a distorted mirror to the men: youth will rapidly become age; health and strength will be dulled, maimed and broken. In another James C. Welsh novel, *The Morlocks* (1924), the description of a man as ‘old’ is qualified in terms of diminished life expectancy under pit conditions:

An old man, named Wattie Wotherspoon, acted as bottomer on the shift, as such jobs, supposed to be easy and having light duties, were generally held by old men.

Not that Wotherspoon was so very old in years; for as he himself said, he ‘wasna a deidly auld man’; but owing to the effects of black damp, coal dust, and insufficient air, in the days before legislation was seriously, and in a way more humanely, applied to coal-mining, he had suffered, and paid the price of coal in giving years of his life.<sup>51</sup>

Women – working in houses that serviced the mines – were also subject to early physical decline. Indeed, as Ben Curtis and Steven Thompson point out, ‘physical impairment among women servicing the coal industry as wives and mothers was ... unusually high.’<sup>52</sup> Coalfields writers were alert to this, and a prematurely aged woman’s body is a recurring image in interwar coalfields writing.<sup>53</sup> These ‘breaking’ bodies are often introduced at the start of the fiction in order to set the wider social scene, drawing on well-established conventions of using female figures as allegories; here they symbolise the privations of coalfield communities as a whole.

The first glimpse of Siân in the first chapter of *Cwmardy* is typical: ‘she removed the shawl that hid her haggard face and big-boned body, with its slightly stooping shoulders. Care-dulled eyes made her look older than she really was.’<sup>54</sup> Premature age and the disabilities that go with it are the result of women’s service of industry – reproduction, and also the cooking, cleaning,

washing and care of the men who work the pit, not to mention the stress and hunger of managing a home in impoverished conditions during strikes or lockouts. In the first chapter of another Welsh novel, *Times Like These* (1936) by Gwyn Jones, Polly Biesty, though

not quite so old as her husband, [was] in the sad years called 'breaking.' It is the aptest word for the state – when her body, like a hard-worked machine, was at every point giving way to strain. Her hair was white, beautiful, a good setting for her pleasant, care-marked face. She moved heavily, almost lurchingly, when things were at their worst with her.<sup>55</sup>

Lennard Davis argues that 'the imperatives of industrialism and capitalism redefined the body ... the human body came to be seen as an extension of the factory machinery.'<sup>56</sup> Polly's domestic labour is explicitly portrayed as industrial work via the imagery of mechanisation; her lurching body is the rather more human consequence of servicing the industrial machine.

The overlap between industrial and domestic labour which results in inevitable disability, and often an early death, is perhaps most forcefully portrayed in 'Nightgown' (1942), a short story by Rhys Davies. The plot concerns a woman who becomes progressively impaired in the service of her husband and five 'big' sons with ravenous appetites. Feeding the men while starving herself in order to buy a satin nightgown that is far beyond her means, she is slowly, metaphorically, devoured by her service to them (and, by extension, the colliery). Dressed in men's cast-offs, her body starts to mimic that of a worn-out collier. She goes about her work 'in a slower fashion, her face closed and her body shorter, because her legs had gone bowed'.<sup>57</sup> As we have seen, bowed legs are a deformation of the body particularly associated with mining (see Chapter 2). The accompanying aches which she feels in her failing body are similarly portrayed in the language of a mining accident: 'She felt as if the wheels of several coal waggons had gone over her body, though there was no feeling in her legs.' Eventually, while cooking a meal for the men on the range, she collapses and her 'black-faced' body is discovered by the men on their return.<sup>58</sup> The blackness is from the soot on the frying pan, but recalls the distinctive face of the collier covered in coal dust.

Broken and disabled female bodies portrayed in coalfields writing literally and figuratively represent the relentless toil and poverty of all industrial workers. In their representations of prematurely aged women and men, coalfields writers both 'normalise' the incidence of disability in middle age (that is, they show that it is the usual and expected life course in these communities) and provide a 'diagnosis' – that disability is caused by poverty and overwork – which is, it is implied, common to all working-class people in the coalfields. Rather than

being the aberration, a debilitated and impaired body is the paradigmatic body of coalfields literature. This doesn't necessarily undermine the theory that disability and normalcy produce each other, because disability is pictured here both as 'normal' (in that sense of ubiquitous) *and* as a symptom of social injustice. It is a sign of the unjust capitalist system which needs to be challenged. Yet, in the universe of the fiction the relationship between disability and normalcy is not wholly oppositional; rather, there is an implicit acknowledgement that we are all only *temporarily* able-bodied. By making disability a normal part of the life course, coalfields literature reveals that the borders between 'able-bodied' and disabled are both blurred and easily crossed.

### Disability humour

Representations of disability are, as we glimpsed at the start of this chapter, closely bound up with power struggles. In coalfields literature the comedy of disability – or disability humour – is used to expose and disrupt power relations. Of our time, Dan Goodley and Geert van Hove claim: 'Disability is the last taboo for comedy, parody and pastiche.'<sup>59</sup> This was not the case in the early twentieth century, and much coalfields writing includes comic scenes which revolve around disability where the person with the disability is frequently the wit rather than the butt of the joke. An impairment is deployed to confound or outwit the able-bodied or 'normate', and in its later form a dry, often bitter, humour uses the 'incongruity' of disability to drive home the deprivations of coalfields society.

Novels of the north-east of England in particular draw on the trope of the 'canny collier', a clever, abrasive trickster character who outwits authority.<sup>60</sup> A colliery worker with a wooden leg, who knows he cannot join up, tricks a recruiting officer out of the King's shilling in Ramsay Guthrie's *Kitty Fagan: A Romance of Pit Life* (1900). In the same novel an 'infirm' and deaf miner who is being evicted for being a union member uses his inability to hear to delay the bailiffs who are legally required to read an eviction notice. Towards the end of the first lengthy reading, Neddy interrupts to ask a friend 'what's he jabberin' about.'<sup>61</sup> On the second reading he asks '[a]re ye speakin', mister ... [b]ecause if ye are, an' it's onythin particular-like, ye'll have to speak up a wee bittie.'<sup>62</sup> On the third reading he pretends to be delighted and thanks the bailiff for offering him a job at the pit. Thus the canny Durham miner inverts the ableist humour which laughs at miscommunication arising from a hearing impairment, to turn the tables on the bailiff.

Current understanding of disability humour often turns on questions of who is making the joke, on whether this is an 'insider' joke made by people

with impairments to others in the know, or perhaps intended to puncture ableist assumptions. Often such jokes waver on a knife edge even when the person telling the joke is themselves disabled. Robert ‘Bob’ McLeod (1876–1958), from Musselburgh in Scotland, was a poet and song-writer with impairments resulting from a mining accident. He used humour in his writing and performances in ways which both challenge and sometimes repeat prevailing prejudices about disability, convalescence and ideas of ‘malingering’. When Bob McLeod’s leg and hip were crushed and his foot partially amputated he took up writing poems and songs during the year he spent in hospital. One humorous poem, set in hospital at Christmas time, called ‘Takkin’ a Rest’, turns disability into a ‘rest’:

I’m expectin’ tae get oot then,  
But my feet they will be tender;  
So ye’ll hae tae gae up tae the smith,  
And order a little fender.<sup>63</sup>

The doctor says I’ll need it much,  
For my leg is a little shorter;  
I tellt him it was short before,  
He said Mac, you’re a corker.

So freends, aa dear ye’ll think I’m queer,  
But I hae done my best;  
I’ve just noo got my paarich,<sup>64</sup>  
So I’m gaun tae hae a rest.<sup>65</sup>

As well as a reference to his enforced idleness, the title of this poem, ‘Takkin’ a Rest’, is both a satirical reference to the lack of rest afforded to overworked miners and an allusion to the suspicion of malingering which could attend compensation payouts (see Chapter 3). In performances of his work, much of it written in the same distinctive voice of a male collier,<sup>66</sup> McLeod often appeared in drag, a decision which his daughter claimed was in part an attempt to hide a ‘crippled leg’.<sup>67</sup> This complex interplay of disability, comedy and cross-dressing suggests the flexibility and intersectionality of disability humour, which would repay a longer study than is attempted here.

In the politically charged interwar period, when the dangers of the mines were equalled by a debilitating economic depression, a bitter, sardonic humour reached its peak in the satirical wit of Gwyn Thomas. Humour dependent on dark irony became ‘one of the characteristic notes of working-class writing in the 1930s’, according to Simon Dentith, who identifies ‘a particular tone of voice, which can be described provisionally as one of sardonic worldly wisdom, characterized often by ironic understatement or by the choice of telling anecdote’.<sup>68</sup> This idiom was, according to Dentith, ‘a characteristic resource of the speech

communities from which the novelists emerged.<sup>69</sup> It is a claim corroborated by some of its major writers. Sid Chaplin described the Durham coalfields as ‘an oral society’<sup>70</sup> and Gwyn Thomas identified a similar working-class south Wales oral tradition to which he attributed his humour: ‘I think my humour shows the way in which the intellect of the working-class [*sic*] might have developed their world.’<sup>71</sup> Thomas’s humour repeatedly riffs upon vectors of class, disability and poverty,<sup>72</sup> and he sees it as arising from the conditions in which he grew up: ‘there was enough incongruity between the way my people lived in the Rhondda of my early manhood, and the way in which they would have wanted to live, to have nourished at least 10,000 humourists of the first rank.’<sup>73</sup> Thomas claimed that the vast majority of Welsh writers ‘are the survivors of great historic mutilations, and like most survivors our spirit and pens are erratic.’<sup>74</sup> This embodied metaphor of ‘mutilations’ (first industrialisation, followed by the crushing economic depression of the interwar years) is suggestive of the way Thomas sees disability as part of the condition of the depressed industrial areas. In his devastating one-liners the physical impairments of colliery work are aligned with the economic deprivations of low pay: ‘His father’s toil had been so excessive as to make him stoop like a victim of curvature. That had been just as well, because his father’s wages were so low it would have been impossible to count them standing up straight.’<sup>75</sup> Notice that it is poor pay that undermines this man’s dignity, not his stooped body, though the disabled body stands for the status of the exploited working man. Thomas’s humour is not one of resignation, however, but of resistance: his humour gave him an idiom in which to address the experience – embodied, economic, political – of interwar south Wales. Dai Smith argues that Thomas’s ‘key discovery was that it was through humour that he could transcend the limitation of that realism which, by its bogus claim that to name things is to describe them, had entombed so much proletarian reality within its gloomy documentation.’ As Smith points out, ‘the laughter was always a prelude to thought, never a release from responsibility.’<sup>76</sup>

### Modernism from the coalfields

Thomas’s humour, which edges into the grotesque, the gothic and the surreal, has much in common with other modernist strains of coalfield writing.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, to represent realism as the only or most apposite literary form of working-class coalfields communities is to tell only part of the story. In the late 1930s and 1940s writers experimented with modernism, including oral or folk forms. Modernism’s interest in fragmentation of the self and its challenge to totalising or linear narratives has been seen as pertinent to disability, while representation

of disability demanded a reconsideration of form, voice and authenticity. Moreover, modernist representations of disability take nothing for granted. Ato Quayson, in his typology of disability in literature, has described 'disability as enigma or hermeneutical impasse',<sup>78</sup> and this is foregrounded in modernist writing. In *Bodies of Modernism*, Marven Tova Linett characterises 'modernism's understanding of disability not as a given, but as a question.'<sup>79</sup> In modernist coalfields literature disability is linked to images of fragmentation and surreal, often comic, dislocation and absurdity; in its more sombre moments, the questions raised are often connected to religion or metaphysics.

'Hangman's Assistant' (1946) by David Alexander<sup>80</sup> is a fine example of coalfields modernism which fuses the comic and the surreal. The characters in this short story influenced by Franz Kafka are assailed by apparently intractable and inexplicable forces; disability, by turns uncanny and absurd, is an important element in all this. Arriving at work, the protagonist, Twm Pant, is told by the under-manager that he is to assist with a hanging. Once he realises that this is not 'a leg pull' he demurs, citing his conditions of employment: 'Light pick and shovel work, that's what my certificate says. I've got silicosis and hanging a man is outside my grade. I'll take it to the lodge committee.'<sup>81</sup> Conceding defeat, the under-manager sends another man, Dai, instead while Twm is made to empty a barrel of something unpleasant and dubious (what, we do not learn). The hangman – a sinister and shapeshifting figure – arrives, limping as he makes his way towards Twm down the railway track. He terrifies Twm by briefly turning into a 'huge yellow tiger'<sup>82</sup> before heading off to the stables to hang Ianto Lewis for an unspecified crime: 'I don't know – something he did about twenty years ago. They just found out about it.'<sup>83</sup> Dai, Ianto and the hangman disappear into the building and, one soft thud later, Twm assumes the deed is done. But soon Ianto emerges from the stables 'as if nothing had happened'<sup>84</sup> and walks away (an ironic nod to the trope of the resurrected miner, perhaps, of which more below). The hangman emerges, spots Dai this time, and shouts 'There he is – there he is!'<sup>85</sup> whereupon Dai runs for his life with the hangman and his noose in pursuit. The story ends as 'they bec[o]me merged into the grey-black mass of the slagheap beyond the trees.'<sup>86</sup>

Banal bureaucracy, unexplained persecution and a sense of guilt and entrapment pervade the story, suggesting the unseen hand of an inexorable force. This, coupled with Alexander's absurd and sinister use of comedy, recalls Milan Kundera's assessment of Kafka that 'A joke is only a joke if you're outside the bowl; by contrast, the Kafkan takes us inside, into the *guts* of a joke, into the horror of the comic.'<sup>87</sup> The comedy and the horror in 'Hangman's Assistant' derive in large part from the presence of disability in the story. The initial exchange between Twm, the labourer, and the 'under-manager' who is assigning tasks is mediated by their respective disabilities. Twm, as we have seen, has a 'certificate'

which specifies the type of work he can do, given his silicosis (light surface work was often assigned to miners with impairments); thus he is able to use the threat of the lodge (the miners' union) to demand his rights. The under-manager is a figure of fun, 'furious' at Twm's response, he is also 'full of silicosis', his frustration causing him to choke: 'His face became purple, then blue, and finally settled back to its normal grey.'<sup>88</sup> From comedy, disability turns to horror with the arrival of the hangman: 'Then coming down the track from the powder magazine he saw a man with a limp.' On closer inspection Twm realises that this asymmetrical gait is due to the man's walking one foot on the rail sleeper and the other in the gap. But the suggestion of disability is reinforced in the ensuing description: 'He walked as if he had one short leg, swaying from side to side like a rocking ship.'<sup>89</sup> In some Christian iconography and folk tale the devil is portrayed with a limp, while in Greek and Christian mythology lameness is connected both with punishment and with negative moral qualities.<sup>90</sup> The sinister purpose of the limping hangman certainly evokes a sense of foreboding and dread in Twm. The lopsided gait and the shapeshifting qualities of the hangman are also reproduced in the style of the writing. The swaying of the hangman in particular mimics the 'lack of symmetry and formal balance'<sup>91</sup> which Tyrus Miller ascribes to late modernist texts and which Linett sees reflected in the 'lack of symmetry and balance ... in the bodies of characters'<sup>92</sup> in modernist writing's concern with deformity (of body and art). A comic play on the officiousness of petty management and organised labour, the story is also a modernist retelling of the superstitious sense of the inescapable and inscrutable 'fate' which hangs over the individual miner and the community as a whole in coalfields culture.<sup>93</sup>

Not all coalfields modernism was as surreal or absurd as Alexander's European-influenced comedy. Writers searching for a way of getting closer to the language as well as the experiences of their communities experimented with finding a form suited to the oral traditions of coalfields culture. Modernist writers had long been fascinated by oral storytellers, including Irish, Welsh and Scottish authors James Joyce, Caradoc Evans and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, who incorporated the idiom and qualities of speech and folk tale into their distinctive narrative voices. An industrial branch of oral-modernist writing was pursued by the versatile Durham short story writer and poet Sid Chaplin.<sup>94</sup> His interest in orality was to find an 'authentic' (yet not necessarily realist) mode of writing to create a working-class narrative that did justice to the collective voice of a people and their way of life. Recalling his immersion in an oral mining culture, Chaplin wrote:

Later I discovered the reality behind it all; the dust and darkness, the laming and maiming, the bitter waters and blood and sweat that mingles with comradeship on the coalface. And a pitman with his lamp face down in the dust so that his face was in the shade said, 'Ah mind, Ah mind once ...' All this becomes part of the pattern of my living, and the pattern of my stories.

I am the spokesman, the story-teller. The stories themselves bear my signature, but by the nature of that pattern they belong to many people.<sup>95</sup>

Here, disability – ‘the laming and maiming’ – is closely tied up with the ‘pattern’ of Chaplin’s stories of the pit. The miner’s lamp lying ‘face down’ in the dust is suggestive of the embodied miner himself, while the tableau foregrounds the senses so often invoked in descriptions of the mine. The darkness in which the representative voice holds additional power mimics blindness – a recurring image to describe conditions underground – while the attention given to the miner’s voice suggests not only the importance of a collective memory but also the primacy and sensitivity of hearing in the mines that was a crucial early warning system for roof falls. Chaplin’s stories draw on a particularly male form of folk story imbued ‘with the essential inner core in the talk of men going to and from the coal’,<sup>96</sup> although he also uses the fragmented perspective of children and acknowledges women storytellers, such as the source for his story about a rebellious miner’s daughter ‘What Katie Did’ (1946).<sup>97</sup> Far from being the preserve of a metropolitan elite, then, coalfields modernism is attuned to a collective working-class narrative tradition. Modernist writers also drew heavily on that other oral tradition of the coalfields: Christian religion.

### Resurrections: Christianity and disability

The miner resurrected is a recurring image in a range of coalfields literature, including some of Chaplin’s short stories.<sup>98</sup> Resurrection, and the miner as a Christ-like martyr, use suffering and sacrifice to dignify and magnify the injuries and disabilities sustained by colliers. One such story, ‘The Kiss’ (1936) by Glyn Jones, in which a collier comes back from the dead to make contact with his maimed brother, offers a complex example of the miner-as-Christ. The protagonist seems to have been buried in a roof fall and emerges from this tomb after a few days bearing wounds akin to stigmata: the ‘centres of his palms worn into holes.’<sup>99</sup> The resurrected collier goes home to a brother whose hand has been crushed and swollen out of all recognition. The man unwinds the mass of bandages ‘with great care and tenderness’,<sup>100</sup> slowly uncovering a hand that is ‘a shapeless black mass of stinking flesh’,<sup>101</sup> to the horror of their anguished mother, who cannot bear to witness the injury uncovered. His ‘love-acts’ are described as a ‘Eucharistic task’<sup>102</sup> and the story concludes with the resurrected collier ‘[kissing] the putrid flesh of his brother’s hand.’<sup>103</sup> It is an act of love and union and a bearing of witness which transcends the revulsion and horror inspired in the men’s mother (and the reader) by the crushed hand.<sup>104</sup> He refuses his brother’s abjection in a symbolic act of inclusion and acceptance.

Christianity, as outlined by Nancy Eiesland in *The Disabled God*, has not always been an inclusive creed. Taking as a paradigmatic example her own exclusion from Eucharist by ministers who, though well-meaning, did not accommodate the physically disabled within the ritual of the sacrament, Eiesland outlines the stigmatisation and disempowering narratives of traditional Christian theology. Yet, in medieval Christianity the disabled or impaired body could be seen as 'an *alter Christus* (another Christ) – that is, an individual who truly embodied the suffering of Christ.'<sup>105</sup> Eiesland explores a symbolism in which Christ's incarnate corporeality and crucifixion are seen as proof of God's love and acceptance of *all* bodies, including the disabled body: 'The disabled God is not only the One from heaven but the revelation of true personhood, underscoring the reality that full personhood is fully compatible with the experience of disability.'<sup>106</sup> In the nonconformist traditions of the north-east England and south Wales coalfields in particular, Christianity was an important if waning force in the early twentieth century (as discussed in Chapter 4). The suffering and disabled miner as Christ is a recurring image in coalfields literature and art, and not limited to modernist forms. Miners' hands bear stigmata-like injuries, as we saw in 'The Kiss,' sometimes directly connected to working conditions, as in the wounds received through use of a bad shovel in Chaplin's *The Thin Seam* (1950). Christ himself is reimagined as a collier in some texts: the poet Idris Davies pictures 'Jesus crawling in the local mine'<sup>107</sup> and imagines how 'embarrassed' the ministers of 'Bethel' would be 'if Christ / Came with pick and shovel to the colliery yard / Seeking a stent ....'<sup>108</sup> Here, the 'true' Christ is aligned with the workers against an organised religion perceived to have betrayed the workers, a position not uncommon in the work of socialist writers.<sup>109</sup>

Disability was important in this rivalry between Christianity and socialism or communism that was played out in modernist, realist and romantic coalfields writing in the 1930s and 1940s. Gwyn Thomas saw nonconformity as a conservative rather than radical force, framing the chapel as a bystander to protest marches in *Sorrow for Thy Sons* or in league with the coalowners in his modernist-grotesque novella *The Dark Philosophers*. In both, the chapel is responsible for exacerbating poverty which in turn results in disability, illness or death, as discussed in Chapter 4. In stark and revealing contrast, the chapel enjoys a prominent place in the south Wales colliery district portrayed in the wildly popular 'historical' novel *How Green Was My Valley*. A brilliantly nostalgic and highly problematic epic set in an imagined south Wales mining valley where nonconformity is the glue that holds society together, its treatment of disability is tied to the clichéd trope of 'overcoming'. The young hero, Huw, is confined to bed for five years following an accident in a river. Over months and painful years,

he learns to walk again, healed by the nonconformist minister who sets a regime of increasingly challenging walks on one of the iconic hillsides so important to Welsh industrial novels.<sup>110</sup> In the Hollywood version directed by John Ford, the lengthy recovery is condensed into one short scene on a mountain strewn with daffodils (one of Wales's national emblems), which symbolically links the nation with the restoration of an able(ist) body. In the novel, the minister tells Huw 'never mind what all the doctors have got to say ... Nature ... is the handmaiden of the Lord' – what Huw truly needs, in his view, is 'faith'.<sup>111</sup> Huw duly regains his mobility, overcoming his disability through a mixture of faith and determination.

Rejecting such narratives of individual tragedy and the miraculous 'resolution' of disability, left-wing writers such as Lewis Jones and Gwyn Thomas saw solidarity and organised labour as the means by which disability could be 'overcome', or at least the limitations of impairment ameliorated. In the politicised world of working-class fiction, Christian faith was eschewed in favour of a model of interdependency and inclusivity based on mutualism and worker solidarity.

### Solidarity and interdependency: marching and the socialist rhetoric of disability

Community solidarity and mutualism pivot on images of disability in a number of major coalfields texts, driving the plot and providing a rich imagery by which writers can convey a substantial sense of what solidarity means in the coalfields communities. Representations of organised marches, processions and mass protests provide a good example of this. These are recurring features of the literature of the 1930s and were an iconic part of the workers' movements of the period. Before turning to literary representations, it is worth noting the historical genesis of the interwar organised protest march in which disability groups were central.

The first coordinated march – that is, one in which participants from multiple starting points converged on London – was led by the National League of the Blind of Great Britain and Ireland (NLB) in 1920.<sup>112</sup> The marchers were blind male workers who were staking a claim to rights within a wider labour movement. They carried a banner declaring 'Fellow workers, we want the right hand of comradeship', and reported to the press that they sought the same respect and treatment accorded the railwaymen or the miners.<sup>113</sup> One of the speakers and leader of the north-eastern contingent, D. B. Lawley, was introduced in terms of his credentials as a former miner before blindness had forced him to give up this work. In this way, the NLB march of 1920 aligned itself with the aims and rhetoric of other workers' movements, with a similar emphasis on the

importance of rights to state support, rather than private charity. These alliances were at times strained; the NLB organised a second march in 1936 where they refused the National Unemployed Workers' Movement's (NUWM) offer of cooperation. Matthias Reiss has argued that:

this form of political expression outside of Parliament had been discredited by the NUWM's extensive use of it. The NUWM's numerous marches had featured mass demonstrations, clashes with the police and workhouse authorities, as well as raids on government buildings and Parliament. This, together with the NUWM's reputation as a Communist front organisation, had tainted the Hunger Marches as a means of political protest.<sup>114</sup>

The 1936 march was less successful in regard to publicity and public support than that of 1921, which the NLB pamphlet *Golden Jubilee* attributed to the loss of their novelty value in the public imagination.<sup>115</sup>

It would be inaccurate, however, to imply that the NUWM's organised hunger marches and other forms of industrial protest in this period involved only the straightforwardly 'able-bodied'. Disability was evoked as a motivating factor in some marches, and could be a consequence of participation, yet organised care on some marches could apparently, if less frequently, result in improved health. Participants in such marches in the 1930s were sometimes selected for their likely ability to endure considerable physical demands, as Ellen Wilkinson recalled in the case of the 1936 Jarrow March, where 200 of the strongest, yet still malnourished, men were chosen.<sup>116</sup> The recognition that malnourishment combined with the demands of the march could lead to temporary or permanent disablement led the March Committee to arrange for medical attendance, which, according to Wilkinson, actually led to improved health for many of the men. Less organised groups did not fare so well, and a long march could exacerbate underlying illness or weakness.<sup>117</sup> The possibility that a protest march could lead to illness or disablement was supported in some of the fiction where marchers are portrayed departing the coalfields. A concern for the welfare of the protesters is reflected in a comic scene in Rhys Davies's novel *Jubilee Blues* (1938), in which a wife rushes out to demand that her husband wears his patched 'under-pants':

'Wait!' she reproached shrilly, 'you'll get your pleurisy back. Come in by here to the Jubilee lobby now and put 'em on.' Of welfare-centre origin, the pants were now patched like a crazy pavement. The other men were grinning, but the women were sympathetic to their sister, muttering and nodding their heads to each other. Who had to nurse and slave for men when they were ill?<sup>118</sup>

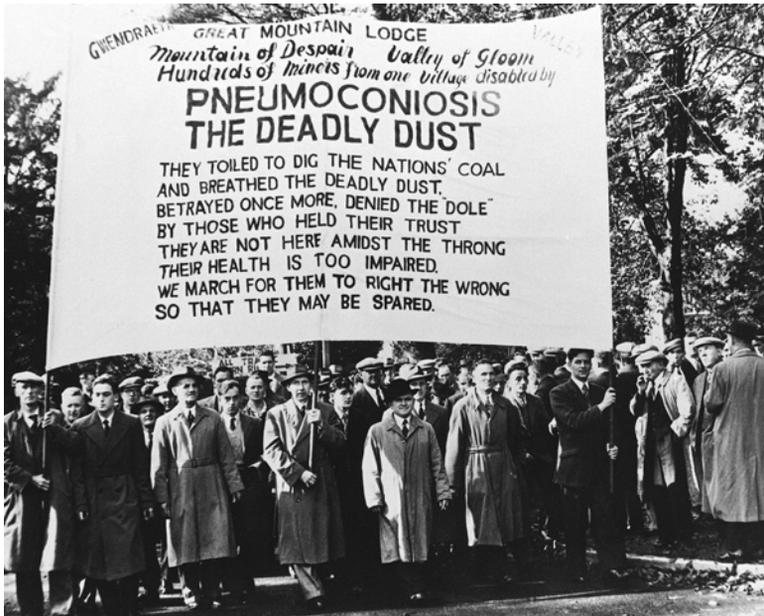
Conversely, physical disability could appear as the *only* reason a person might be prevented from joining his comrades, as we see in a remark in *Cwmardy* (mentioned in Chapter 5) which makes disability the barometer of total

community involvement. A mass meeting is called 'at which all the adults in the valley, with the exception of the bedridden, attended'.<sup>119</sup> Lewis is indicating that no one who is able to move stays away, while simultaneously acknowledging the existence of the many people who were sick or disabled in the town.

As we have indicated in earlier chapters, disability was itself a major concern of the labour movement, and worker disability was foregrounded on some protest marches. In a 1952 NUM march, a banner of the Gwendraeth Great Mountain Lodge laments the 'Hundreds of Miners from one village disabled' by 'Pneumoconiosis / The Deadly Dust' (Figure 6). It includes the following verse:

They toiled to dig the Nations' [sic] Coal  
 And breathed the deadly dust,  
 Betrayed once more, denied the 'dole'  
 By those who held their trust  
 They are not here amidst the throng  
 Their health is too impaired,  
 We march for them to right the wrong  
 So that they may be spared.<sup>120</sup>

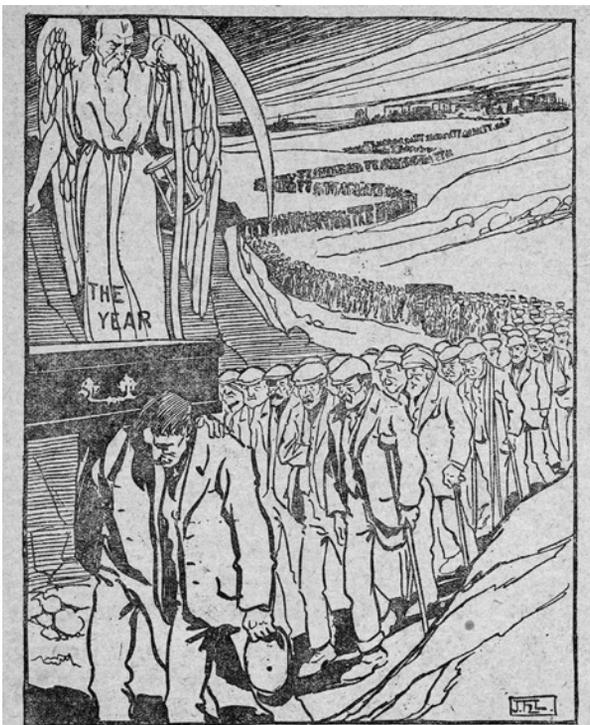
The statement of solidarity and activism on behalf of miners 'too impaired' to march themselves draws on the rhetoric of pity (the banner is headed 'Mountain



6 Pneumoconiosis banner in NUM march, 1952

of Despair' and 'Valley of Gloom') and isolation ('they are not here amidst the throng'). Yet the protest is also a clear gesture of mutualism and an effort to convince the state of its duty towards men who 'dig the nations' [*sic*] coal'.

Mass gatherings of protest, not to mention community celebration and commemoration, have long and diverse histories which predate the organised London marches of the interwar period. In the literature and iconography of the coalfields, community solidarity and protest are evoked via a range of mass gatherings, from military procession to riot, funeral marches to carnival, and disability is an important element in all these.<sup>121</sup> In a 1911 plate in the *Labour Leader*, entitled 'The Toll of Industry' (Figure 7) a drawing shows massed ranks



THE TOLL OF INDUSTRY.

(The above sketch is an accurate portrayal of the annual toll of industry.)

THE RECENT DISASTERS IN FACTORY, MILL, AND MINE SERVE TO REMIND US OF THE TRAGIC TOLL OF INDUSTRY. DURING THE YEAR 1910 3,474 PERSONS WERE KILLED AND 379,902 WERE DISABLED WHILE AT WORK. THIS MEANS THAT IF A PROCESSION WERE FORMED OF THE VICTIMS OF INDUSTRY, IT WOULD STRETCH 45½ MILES WITH A CORPSE EVERY TWENTY YARDS. BETWEEN EACH CORPSE 100 DISABLED WORKPEOPLE WOULD BE MARSHALLED, MARCHING FIVE AHEAD, AND IF THE WIDOWS AND ORPHANS FOLLOWED IN THE PROCESSION IT WOULD THEN BE 45½ MILES LONG. IN EACH HUNDRED DISABLED WORKPEOPLE THERE WOULD BE APPROXIMATELY 45 MINERS, 41 FACTORY WORKERS, AND 14 PERSONS FROM THE FOLLOWING OCCUPATIONS—RAILWAYMEN, SEAMEN, DOCKERS, QUARRYMEN, AND THOSE EMPLOYED ON WORKS OF CONSTRUCTION. THE MOST SERIOUS THING IS THAT THE NUMBER OF KILLED AND INJURED IS INCREASING.

7 'The Toll of Industry': a plate from *The Labour Leader*, 1911

of men, many with crutches, following coffins which are carried at intervals on the shoulders of fellow workers.<sup>122</sup> The columns of men stretch in a winding ribbon back into the distance, apparently issuing without end from a distant and almost indiscernible industrial township. The scene is somewhere between a funeral procession and a protest march, over which the angel of death solemnly looks. The accompanying caption states that the image is 'an accurate portrayal of the annual toll of industry' where for every death, 100 people are disabled. The full caption reads:

During the year 1910, 3,474 persons were killed and 379,902 were disabled whilst at work. This means that if a procession were formed of the victims of industry, it would stretch 43½ miles with a corpse every twenty yards. Between each corpse 100 disabled workpeople would be marshalled, marching five abreast, and if the widows and orphans followed in the procession it would then be 45½ miles long. In each hundred disabled workpeople there would be approximately 45 miners, 41 factory workers, and 14 persons from the following occupations – railwaymen, seamen, dockers, quarrymen and those employed on works of construction.<sup>123</sup>

In this symbolic procession, the disabled marchers represent the wider community of workers and their families.

This function of workers with disabilities as *general representatives* of colliers and their families recurs in literary works, where those maimed by poor safety in the mines are joined by ranks of those literally and figuratively disabled by the poverty of unemployment. A verse by Idris Davies in *Gwalia Deserta* (1938) imagines a march arriving in London:

And we come to the gates of Londinium,  
 Begging with broken hands,  
 Boys bach, boys bach all together,  
 Out of the derelict lands.<sup>124</sup>

In this poem, London is imagined as a fortified, gated city to which the miners with 'broken hands' come begging 'all together', and these three conditions – disablement, poverty and solidarity – are repeatedly used to characterise marchers in coalfields literature and iconography.

In fiction and poetry, bodily metaphors and the actual or symbolic presence of people with disabilities on marches were not only used to represent collective injury and travail, they epitomised community and worker solidarity. Yet portrayals of disability could also be used to complicate and challenge the propagandist rhetoric of working-class might. Take the following passage from Gwyn Thomas's *Sorrow for Thy Sons*. It comes near the end of the novel and describes a great protest march in Rhondda against the backdrop of mass unemployment and

the Means Test. It is written in Thomas's characteristically terse comic style and is worth quoting at length:

The people in front of Hugh and Alf began to move. The brothers fell into step. That was not an easy job. Three of the four men in the rank in front of them walked with a limp. It was hard to say which leg they were going to put forward next. Hugh stopped for a moment and looked back. Their own contingent was six or seven thousand strong. It stretched too far back around too many corners to be seen as a whole ...

A young boy, the son of one of the limping men, walked by Alf's side playing a harmonica as broad as his face. The boy had a loose, undisciplined mouth and dribbled a good deal, but the music he produced was sprightly. He worked on three tunes: a Welsh folk song reset to a rhythm basis, a tune of the American Civil War and an anthem of the international class war. At interval's [*sic*], the boy's father turned round with a handkerchief in his hand and wiped the boy's mouth.

Hugh looked once more at the vast body of demonstrators who were advancing down the mountain road half a mile away ...

'It's significant,' he said. 'Watching this is like listening to great music, only greater, much greater. Wonderful people! When they can come onto the streets at a few days' notice with ranks as firm and solid as these, there's nothing they can't achieve. I'll never forget this moment. Here is the final answer to all that goddamn poetic loneliness I've fed on like a swine ever since I grew to full height. Fifty thousand of the oppressed banding together against a common injury. Strong faces. Strong bodies marching. Strong voices singing. Strong wills. Strong arms to snatch us out of our dirty, brooding, fornicating little closets and plant us up on high, where the air is clear and worth drinking. From a point like this, life's immediate purposes seem so far away as to look like a straight, simple line without a twist or break in any part of it. I feel ... I feel like an eagle.'

'Speak quieter. If the police hear you talking like that I'll spend tonight bailing you out.'

Silence, except for the sound of feet and the boy's harmonica. Hugh noticed that a lot of feet made sloppy sounds as they reached the floor, as if the soles were leaving the uppers.<sup>125</sup>

In keeping with the rest of the novel – whose opening pages and subsequent chapters dwell on numerous impaired, disabled or disfigured characters – this passage is reliant on the language of embodiment. There is a stark contrast between the imagery of the crooked, asymmetrical and 'undisciplined' bodies of the people and the 'strong' unbroken ranks of the march in abstract as articulated by Hugh. The ironic clash between the two visions is used to make several different but related arguments about the workers, disability and solidarity.

Despite the fact that the organised march is presented as a potentially meaningful and effective way of protesting against conditions in the Rhondda valleys during the Depression, Hugh's representation of the massed people is treated with suspicion. His soaring rhetoric of 'strong marching bodies' is juxtaposed with the child with an unspecified disability and with the individual workers whose bodies are deformed by work and unemployment, poverty and squalid living conditions. The contrast between wholeness and fragmentation, extreme strength and vulnerable imperfection, set up in this passage recalls the juxtaposition deliberately presented between fascist and modernist art in Germany in 1937, at about the same time the novel was written (c.1936). In *Disability Aesthetics* Tobin Siebers analyses the Nazi aesthetics of the 'Great German Art' exhibition (*Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*) of 1937, as juxtaposed to so-called 'Degenerate Art' (*Entartete Kunst*), which was shown in a popular exhibition in Germany in the same year. The 'Great German Art' produced almost uniform figures of physical 'perfection', as against the abstract and 'deformed' figures of modernist art which Hitler and his Ministry for Culture interpreted in terms of disability and illness. Siebers explains that:

The Great German Art works to achieve qualification for the German people by designing a specific though imaginary human type based on the healthy and able body. This type was proposed as the norm, and deviation from it tended to justify disqualification and oppression.<sup>126</sup>

Hugh's eagle-perspective sees the people become a single 'vast body', made of 'firm' and 'solid' ranks. It is a 'body' constructed via military imagery of power, discipline and uniformity. Hugh's speech relies on repetition of the word 'strong', repeated so often that it becomes absurd: 'Strong faces. Strong bodies marching. Strong voices singing. Strong wills. Strong arms ...'. The imagery of muscular strength supporting determination ('strong wills') recalls fascist rhetoric, from the 'single will' which would direct German culture via the 'National Chamber of Culture' established in 1933,<sup>127</sup> through to iconic Nazi propaganda such as *Triumph of the Will* (1934). The Great German Art sees strength in discipline of mind and body: it 'refuses variation by embracing an idea of human form characterized by exaggerated perfection and striking regularity.'<sup>128</sup> The trajectory of Hugh's rhetoric is similarly towards the perfect, pure and regular, away from the 'dirty, brooding, fornicating' life in the 'little closets' of the town, and up to the 'high' 'clear' 'air'. From this perspective (which exaggerates the familiar spatial tropes of the Welsh industrial novel – a space of epiphanies and meditations – which we have already encountered as a healing space in the discussion of *How Green Was My Valley* above), Hugh sees 'life's immediate purposes' as a 'straight, simple line without a twist or break in any part of it' (emphasis added).

Hugh is attempting to represent a political or ideological purpose in terms of an abstraction, but the purity of an unbroken and untwisted line again draws our attention to the contrast between exaggerated bodily perfection and the imperfect and impaired bodies of the miners.

In fact, the marching ranks are of course made up of limping men who are perpetually out of step. As individuals, the people are dribbling, hobbling or so poorly shod as to make them walk with difficulty: their feet make 'sloppy sounds' on the floor 'as if their soles were leaving the uppers' (the nearly departed soles invoke the homonym 'souls', suggesting the men are being pushed to the brink of mortality). Individual impairment in this novel rarely demands the explicit explanation or narrative that Mitchell and Snyder argue is usually required of disability (though part of the plot is driven by the slow decline of Alf's girlfriend due to tuberculosis). Rather, disability here is collective: most of the figures we see are impaired in some way, and the causes – industry and poverty – are everywhere evident. Here, as elsewhere in Thomas's acerbic oeuvre, poverty and disability are mutually reinforcing. In this sense, Thomas 'pictures disability as the measure of the evils'<sup>129</sup> of poverty and unemployment as well as the poor safety record of mining. In so doing he arguably 'stigmatizes' disability as an allegorical symbol of the problems against which the men are marching.<sup>130</sup> Yet there is much more to this scene than the stigmatisation of disability purely as 'lack' that needs supplement,<sup>131</sup> or ill-health that needs a medical solution.

If we look at the young boy, we see a figure who is impaired but not apparently disabled. His participation in the march invites us to consider the idea of interdependence, as linked to community solidarity. Once more, the contrasts set up by Gwyn Thomas in this passage offer a way in. The quasi-military discipline of the 'vast body' of men is implicitly aligned with individual corporeal discipline, but this is undone by the 'loose, *undisciplined* mouth' of the boy who 'dribbles'. Disability is often constructed as a 'failure to control the body',<sup>132</sup> by which measure the uncontrolled, undisciplined mouth is a disability (though, as Susan Wendell argues, the disabled body actually exposes the 'myth[ical]' nature of control over the body). In Thomas's fiction the boy is not abject or 'other' due to his impairment, he is not even apparently 'disabled' by his 'undisciplined' mouth. Rather, he is routinely cared for by another marcher (his father), while at the same time he performs culturally and politically significant tunes which unify the marchers. The tunes themselves – Welsh, American and international socialist – tell us something about the wider allegiances of the community, thus this 'body' of men with the boy at the centre represent the cultural as well as political identities of the group. His repurposed Welsh folk song is a nod to the residual ethnic and linguistic roots of the area reworked for the modern industrial era; the tune from the American civil war signals a republican radicalism (and

perhaps an implicit alignment of the cause of the colliers with anti-slavery); the 'international socialist anthem' firmly locates the marchers in a transnational class war.

This passage, then, enacts a kind of disability aesthetics of its own, drawing into question the high-flown imagery of bodily perfection espoused by Hugh in his propagandist version of the power of unity and organised political action. If there is some stigmatisation of disability (it is the undesirable consequence of poverty and exploitation), disability is simultaneously a productively 'complicating feature' (Mitchell and Snyder's term) of this passage. In contrast to Hugh's 'strong bodies', Thomas's humorous picture of out-of-step marchers and the musician, a dribbling boy cared for by his limping father, is an unsentimental but much warmer and more attractive portrayal of cohesive community solidarity than the uniform ranks of Hugh's quasi-fascistic vision, one in which people with impairments are figuratively and practically a part. Crucially, it is also one that challenges or blurs the lines between conventional binaries of disabled/able-bodied (or 'normal'), carer and recipient of care, thus evoking the idea of *interdependence* – a contemporary disability studies term, but one anticipated by Thomas's vision of community solidarity.

### Interdependency and collective strength

The question of dependency is an important one in understanding disability as a socially constructed concept, as Michael Davidson explains:

For many able bodied persons, disability is *synonymous* with dependency, the former framed as a condition of tragic limit and loss requiring regimes of care and rehabilitation. For disability activists who have fought long and hard to achieve a degree of autonomy dependency conjures up the specter of paternalism that has historically marked living with a physical or cognitive impairment.<sup>133</sup>

Against the received image of a disabled individual isolated and rendered miserable by their lack of independence, disability theory has come to stress the *dependency* or *interdependency* of us all – impaired or not. Lennard Davis argues that 'if we redefine our notions of independence to include the vast networks of assistance and provision that make modern life possible – no one can live without being dependent on these – then the seeming state of exception of disability turns out to be the unexceptional state of existence.'<sup>134</sup> Thus, once we return disability to its social context (and stop treating it as an individual aberration or medical problem), as the social model of disability proposes, we recognise that much disablement is social in its origin. And once we focus on social interactions which are disabling or enabling, we also see that

all people are enabled or disabled by a complex network of social and material relations.

Coalfields literature foregrounds themes of (inter)dependency, emphasising the role and value of mutual support which challenges 'independence as the unspoken, untheorized norm.'<sup>135</sup> Community solidarity is a form of interdependence and is a source of pride: 'you will never see a miner refuse help to another who is sick or injured, for it may be his own turn next', claims Bert Coombes in *These Poor Hands*.<sup>136</sup> Mutualism, the support of sick and disabled workers through the contributions of all, is seen as an important achievement of the industrial communities in coalfields writing, even as the strains of caring or being cared for (with attendant financial, emotional, physical and psychological stresses on both sides) are acknowledged in realist fiction and biography. While personal care is generally, though not exclusively, the domain of women, interdependency is traced beyond the domestic sphere, emphasising that individualism is an illusion. Thus 'the notion of dependency leaves the relatively narrow domain of caring labour that is associated with the fulfilment of basic needs and enters a wider social domain in which our social dependencies become important in the constitution of our identities.'<sup>137</sup> One of the ways that families and the wider community provide support is in raising donations for the injured miner and his family, known as a 'lift'. This could be quite a substantial amount of money, and is the source of dramatic tension in many coalfields stories.

In Joe Corrie's *Black Earth* the paralysed miner, Jack, squanders all the family's 'lift' money on gambling, much to the distress of his wife.<sup>138</sup> In Rhys Davies's short story 'The Benefit Concert' (1946),<sup>139</sup> money is raised for a good-quality prosthetic leg for an ex-miner, but the local chapel hypocritically keep the vast majority of the money, using £1 on the leg and keeping £100 to redecorate their place of worship. In James C. Welsh's *The Underworld*, the desire to provide mutual support is ideologically pitted against the manager's suspicion of disabled people as malingerers: 'I ha'e been considerin' for a while ... about puttin' a stop to this collectin' business at the office on pay Saturdays, for it just encourages some men to lie off work when there's no' very muckle wrong wi' them; after they get the collection they soon start work again.'<sup>140</sup> In the end, a miner raises the lift despite a ban, with donations collected along political lines – there is a gulf between those whose 'will to give was often greater than the means'<sup>141</sup> and class traitors who put themselves first, 'the "belly-crawlers" ... who "kept in" with the management by carrying tales, and generally acting as traitors to the other men.'<sup>142</sup>

Thus, the idea of the strong 'body' of the collective is not after all in conflict with images of the impaired bodies which make up the procession in *Sorrow for Thy Sons* and other texts. Rather, it is the marching people's daily acts of

mutual care and a recognition of interdependence which *comprise* that solidarity. Thomas's marchers find power in communal action: 'banding together against a common injury'. This phrase evokes ubiquitous bodily suffering as well as the more figurative injury of unemployment, but also suggests power – and possibly healing – through an inclusive unity. Lewis Jones uses similar imagery, ultimately stretching the bounds of realism for symbolic ends in *We Live*. As Mary fights for 'Unity in Action' her health briefly improves and the bowed body of her father-in-law, Big Jim, who has also joined the struggle, momentarily becomes upright.

Mary is a leading figure in the local communist party. Despite her poor health – she has tuberculosis (TB) – she has been organising the women of each street to march in unison: 'as a contingent with its own banner, and not in the usual straggling individual manner'.<sup>143</sup> On seeing the women, children and unemployed men of Sunnybank 'lined up with a red banner at their head', Mary temporarily forgets her 'chest'.<sup>144</sup> At the same time her bright eyes, a symptom associated with TB, become a symbol of hope and are mirrored by the whole crowd.<sup>145</sup>

Mary forgot her chest ... as she looked behind her at the ranks of men and women who were ready to march. Each pair of eyes gleamed as brightly as her own and every mouth wore a smile, even the little babies', clutched tightly to their mothers' bodies in heavy woollen shawls.<sup>146</sup>

The same march sees Big Jim and Siân, his wife, take their places at the head of the procession, despite being somewhat frail and unable to keep in step. Proud of his reputation for quasi-mythical masculine strength (and his military past as a soldier), Big Jim tries to cover up signs of his impairments:

Big Jim, failing to walk erect, pretended he was doing so by stretching his head unnaturally far back and twirling his moustache arrogantly. But, not noticing where he was going, he stumbled against a stone in the roadway and would have fallen had not Siân gripped him tightly.<sup>147</sup>

The comic unreliability of the ageing body undercuts Big Jim's characteristic arrogance and bluster, but there is also an emphasis on mutual care and support which we saw among Gwyn Thomas's marchers. As Big Jim's life testifies, colliers are able to gain meaningful power only through collective action: 'power did not depend alone on bulk'.<sup>148</sup>

Yet the power of the collective as it is represented in this novel rests on more than the fruits of organisation and mutual care: an element of physical transformation occurs repeatedly in Jones's writing, a restorative or healing effect of collective action. Only a page after Jim's stumble as he tries to compensate for his stoop, 'Siân and Big Jim ... *walked silent and erect*, like soldiers'<sup>149</sup> (emphasis added). They are pictured 'right at the head of the demonstration, with the blood-red

banner streaming directly behind them’;<sup>150</sup> perhaps the tableau now demands an upright couple. Elsewhere, however, physical strength is directly drawn from the power of the mass, as in this scene where Len – Mary’s husband and Big Jim’s son – joins a demonstration:

Len momentarily felt himself like a weak straw drifting in and out with the surge of bodies. Then something powerful swept through his being as the mass soaked its strength into him, and he realised that the strength of them all was the measure of his own, that his existence and power as an individual was buried in that of the mass now pregnant with motion behind him. The momentous thought made him inhale deeply and his chest expanded, throwing his head erect and his shoulders square to the breeze that blew the banners into red rippling slogans of defiance and action.<sup>151</sup>

Blurring the lines between metaphor and actuality, Len – who has lung disease – finds his chest expanding and his shoulders ‘squared’, gaining health and an embodied masculinity via the solidarity of the mass (though it is typical of the complex gendering in the novel that this more masculine stance is afforded by the ‘pregnant’ motion of the crowd).

The reciprocal relationship between personal health and collective politics is explicitly articulated by Lewis in a scene in which the sick or disabled individual is shown to stand a better chance within the community than without. Mary and her activist husband, Len, reject medical advice that she should go to a sanatorium:

‘If you were penned up in a home, away from the workers, out of the struggle, you would die as quickly and surely as though you were poisoned. Your life does not exist only in your body, but in what your body and brains do for the struggle in which your father reared you.’ He broke down for some minutes and buried his wet face on her shoulder, eventually raising it to continue, without looking at her. ‘If I thought there was the least hope you would be cured or even get a little better by going to the sanatorium, I would gladly tell you to go. You believe that, don’t you, comrade?’ he asked pleadingly.

She answered with a nod, knowing he was putting her own ideas into words without being aware of it himself.<sup>152</sup>

Mary’s physical existence is bound up with her political activism, in which her impairment is subsumed, and thus her disability is in some degree mitigated by the collective strength of the ‘body’ of the Party.

## Conclusion

Disability in coalfields literature, as elsewhere, is a site of struggle. The phrase, borrowed from Mitchell and Snyder, refers to multiple struggles; the fight for

disability rights on the one hand,<sup>153</sup> but also cultural and literary battles over representation and meaning. Though it has been neglected in the study of coalfields literature, coalfields writers, following Marx, used disability as an urgent metaphor through which the working class as a whole are presented as 'disqualified' and via which socialist solutions of solidarity and interdependency were presented. In the writing discussed here, disability is presented as a direct consequence of male and female bodies worn out in the service of the industrial machine, compounded by economic disadvantage. The disabled body as created by capitalism, and the body which most workers would sooner or later inherit, could, however, be shielded and included in the community by an ethical mutualism to be achieved by political solidarity, or so the rhetoric went. In its aesthetic and ethical engagement with disability, coalfields writing draws on humour, religion, political theory and the daily experience of gendered work. It adopted and adapted different literary forms, in particular realism in which representative workers' lives rendered the economic, political, social forces of industrial life apparent. Disability, and the representative disabled worker, is at the centre of coalfields writing in part because of the way in which work, medicine, welfare and politics – those daily concerns of coalfields life – were brought into sharp relief by the experience, while the imagery of disability was a powerful tool in the rhetoric of working-class struggle. In the hands of modernist writers it was possible to show how the marked, maimed or impaired body was not only a daily feature of coalfields life but also spoke to an aesthetic which, with its emphasis on fragmentation, framed 'disability' as fundamental to the human condition. Indeed, when we look *at* rather than *through* disability in coalfields literature it becomes plain that, rather than being a marginal experience or occasional rhetorical device, it is the fulcrum on which much of this writing pivots.<sup>154</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy and We Live* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2006) pp. 268–9.
- 2 Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 18.
- 3 Raymond Williams, 'The Welsh Industrial Novel', in *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture, Identity*, edited by Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 96.
- 4 Between 1920 and 1950 we have found examples of at least 26 coalfields novels published set in south Wales, as compared to 10 set in north-east England and 7 set in Scotland. There were also at least 19 active writers (novelists, short-story writers, poets or dramatists) who wrote about the south Wales coalfields, compared to 8 for north-east England and 6 for Scotland.

- 5 Rhys Davies, Glyn Jones and Gwyn Jones were raised in mining communities but did not work as miners themselves. Gwyn Jones's father was a miner, Rhys Davies and Glyn Jones both had mothers who were trained as teachers, while their fathers were a shopkeeper and postal worker, respectively.
- 6 Women writing on heavy industry were rare at this time, although middle-class female novelists had played an important part in nineteenth-century coalfields literature. Ruth Dodds (1890–1976) was a Gateshead playwright who joined the Gateshead ILP Players at its foundation in 1919 (they were the Progressive Players from 1924). She wrote *The Pitman's Pay* (1920), winning first prize in the Sheffield Playgoers Society, although they would not perform the play because of its political content in favour of trade unions. Dodds was Secretary of the Gateshead branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (from 1914), a Labour Councillor (elected 1929) and editor of the *Gateshead Labour News*, writing under the byline 'Redcap'. See Ros Merkin, 'No Space of Our Own? Margaret Macnamara, Alma Brosnan, Ruth Dodds and the ILP Arts Guild', in Maggie Gale and Viv Gardner (eds), *Women, Theatre and Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 180–97.
- 7 Dave Russell finds 'little evidence of a strong local or regional dialect drama [in north-east England] before the twentieth century, although it certainly existed and systematic research is once again absent here'. *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 150.
- 8 For example, The Labour Publishing Co., The Forward Press, Independent Labour Party Publications, Lawrence and Wishart (initially associated with the Communist Party), Victor Gollancz and Michael Joseph Ltd.
- 9 See Michael J. Dixon, 'The Epic Rhondda: Romanticism and Realism in the Rhondda Trilogy', in Meic Stephens (ed.), *Rhys Davies: Decoding the Hare* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001); Huw Osborne, *Rhys Davies* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009).
- 10 Including Routledge, William Heinemann, Putnam & Holden, Hamish Hamilton and Hodder & Stoughton.
- 11 Harold Heslop, '13-XI-1930 Morning Session: Heslop', *Literature of the World Revolution: Second International Conference of Revolutionary Writers* (Moscow: International Union of Revolutionary Writers, 1931), p. 226.
- 12 Gwyn Thomas, *A Few Selected Exits* (1968), quoted in Dai Smith, 'Introduction' to Gwyn Thomas, *Sorrow for Thy Sons* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), p. 7.
- 13 S. O'Mahony, 'A. J. Cronin and The Citadel: Did a Work of Fiction contribute to the Foundation of the NHS?', *The Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh*, 42 (2012), pp. 172–8. Christopher Meredith questions this claim, pointing out idealisation of the individual hero in the novel and its pessimism about collective structures put in place by mining communities. Christopher Meredith, 'Cronin and the Chronotope: Place, Time and Pessimistic

- Individualism in The Citadel', *North American Journal of Welsh Studies*, 8 (2013), pp. 50–65.
- 14 A. J. Cronin. *The Citadel* (London: Vista, 1996), p. 7.
  - 15 John Harris, "A Hallelujah of a Book": How Green Was My Valley as Bestseller', in Tony Brown (ed.), *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, 3 (1997) pp. 42–62.
  - 16 Williams, 'The Welsh Industrial Novel', p. 108.
  - 17 Richard Llewellyn's links with the mining communities he mythologised were very distant. A. J. Cronin was a doctor, originally from Scotland, who was appointed Medical Inspector of Mines surveying medical regulations in collieries, as well as writing reports on the correlation between dust inhalation and lung disease. He worked in the Tredegar coalfields, the same mining district from which Aneurin Bevan drew inspiration when proposing plans for the NHS. Nicklaus Thomas-Symonds, *Nye: The Political Life of Aneurin Bevan* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2015), p. 39.
  - 18 Goaf is a pitmatic word for the mined-out spaces in a pit, also called the waste.
  - 19 Harold Heslop, *Goaf* (London: The Fortune Press, 1934), p. 129.
  - 20 Also referred to as 'The Price of Coal' and 'The Wilderness of Toil'. In 1930, Harold Heslop was invited to be the British representative at the Karkov Conference of Revolutionary and Proletarian Writers, and spoke about emergent proletarian/working-class writing in Britain.
  - 21 Translated into Russian by Zinaida Vengerova-Minskaia. Gustav H. Klaus. *The Literature of Labour: Two Hundred Years of Working-Class Writing* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1985), p. 95.
  - 22 It was praised by the *Sunday Sun* and *Manchester Guardian*; the *Daily Herald* claimed that 'it should be illegal for miner-owners *not* to read *Goaf*'. See Heslop, *Out of the Old Earth* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p. 23.
  - 23 Bill Jones and Chris Williams, *B. L. Coombes* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), p. 60.
  - 24 Barbara Prys-Williams, *Twentieth-Century Autobiography* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004).
  - 25 Williams, 'The Welsh Industrial Novel', p. 103.
  - 26 Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, 2nd edn (London: Fontana Press, 1988), p. 261.
  - 27 Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1937), n.p.
  - 28 David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, 'The Uneasy Home of Disability in Literature and Film', in Gary Albrecht, Katherine D. Seelman and Michael Bury (eds), *Handbook of Disability Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), p. 199.
  - 29 Tobin Siebers, 'Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body', in Lennard J. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader, 2nd edition* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 180.
  - 30 Marven Tova Linett, *Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 11.
  - 31 David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 49

- 32 Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, p. 49.
- 33 That is, realist texts critical of bourgeois society.
- 34 Georg Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe', in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, edited and translated by Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), p. 142.
- 35 Moyra Haslett, *Marxist Literary and Cultural Theories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan), p. 91.
- 36 Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2015 [2013]), p. 144, fn.11.
- 37 Though not directly related to physical impairment, Big Jim is also a representative of Welsh-speaking Wales whose poor grasp of English is disabling when he finds himself in court as a witness to a fatal accident in the mine. Despite the workers' efforts, a fellow collier is blamed for what is really corporate negligence.
- 38 Karl Marx, *Capital: The Process of Capitalist Production*, translated from the third German edition by S. Moore and B. Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 257.
- 39 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 797.
- 40 Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I, p. 481.
- 41 B. J. Gleeson, 'Disability Studies: A Historical Materialist View', *Disability & Society*, 12:2 (1997), p. 194.
- 42 In 1936, 56.9 per cent of all miners were unemployed, and miners with disabilities were more likely to be unemployed; see Chapter 1.
- 43 Throughout this book we have included women's work in the home as part of a wider definition of industrial labour. This approach is supported by the use in coalfields fiction of industrial imagery to portray 'women's work' in colliery homes.
- 44 Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), p. 2. Tobin Siebers, among other critics, points out that disability is the 'trope by which assumed inferiority of these other minority identities achieved expression', *Disability Aesthetics*, p. 24.
- 45 Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017 [1997]), p. 8.
- 46 Edward Slavishak, *Bodies of Work: Civic Display and Labor in Industrial Pittsburgh* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 161.
- 47 See Ben Curtis and Steven Thompson, "'This Is the Country of Premature Old Men": Ageing and Aged Miners in the South Wales Coalfield, c.1880–1947', *Cultural and Social History*, 12:4 (2015), pp. 71–88.
- 48 Emlyn Williams, *The Corn is Green: A Comedy in Three Acts* (London: Heinemann, 1956), p. 15.
- 49 James C. Welsh. *The Underworld: The Story of Robert Sinclair, Miner* (London: H. Jenkins, 1920), p. 69.
- 50 Welsh, *The Underworld*, p. 56.
- 51 A 'bottomer' is someone who operates winding gear at the bottom of the shaft. James C. Welsh, *The Morlocks* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd, 1924), p. 120.

- 52 Curtis and Thompson, “‘This Is the Country of Premature Old Men’”, p. 27.
- 53 See Alexandra Jones, “‘Her Body [was] Like a Hard-Worked Machine’: Women’s Work and Disability in Coalfields Literature, 1880–1950”, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 37:4 (2017).
- 54 Jones, *Cwmardy and We Live*, p. 14.
- 55 Gwyn Jones, *Times Like These* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1979), pp. 21–2.
- 56 Lennard Davies, *Enforcing Normalcy*, pp. 86–7.
- 57 Rhys Davies ‘Nightgown’, in Rhys Davies, *Collected Stories: Volume I*, edited by (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1996), p. 243.
- 58 Davies ‘Nightgown’, p. 243.
- 59 Dan Goodley and Geert Van Hove, ‘Disability Studies, People with Learning Disabilities and Inclusion’, in Dan Goodley and Geert Van Hove (eds), *Another Disability Studies Reader? People with Learning Difficulties and a Disabling World* (Antwerp: Garant, 2005), p. 22.
- 60 This type of humour appears to be linked to the ballad tradition of telling amusing escapades of coalfields people, such as Tommy Armstrong’s ‘Wor Nannies a Maisor’. As Welsh author Ernest Rhys comments in the preface to his stories set in the Durham coalfield: ‘one must turn to the Border Ballads, to Johnnie Armstrong or Dick of the Cow, to recover any traces of a humour like theirs’; Ernest Rhys, *Black Horse Pit* (London: Robert Holden & Co. Ltd, 1925) p. 6.
- 61 Ramsay Guthrie, *Kitty Fagan: A Romance of Pit Life* (London: Christian Commonwealth Publishing, 1900), p. 66.
- 62 Guthrie, *Kitty Fagan*, p. 66.
- 63 McLeod is referring to the prosthetic boot or leg irons he needed following his injury that would have been made by the local blacksmith.
- 64 Parish relief, a form of financial aid.
- 65 Robert McLeod, *Robert McLeod: Cowdenbeath Miner Poet, An Anthology by Arthur Nevay*, edited by Margaret Bennett (Fife: Grace Not Publications, 2015), p. 62.
- 66 There were exceptions such as ‘My Man’s on the Buroo’, a poem in the voice of a miner’s wife.
- 67 McLeod, *Robert McLeod*, p. 14.
- 68 Simon Dentith, ‘Tone of Voice in Industrial Writing in the 1930s’, in Gustav Klaus and Stephen Knight (eds), *British Industrial Fictions* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 100.
- 69 Dentith, ‘Tone of Voice’, p. 99.
- 70 Sid Chaplin, *The Leaping Lad and Other Stories*, edited by Geoffrey Halson (Harlow: Longman Group Ltd, 1970 [1946]), p. 2.
- 71 Quoted in Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), p. 140.
- 72 Raymond Williams sees this Welsh wit as a protective mechanism in ‘Welsh Culture’, *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture, Identity*, edited by Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 9.
- 73 Quoted in Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales*, p. 140.

- 74 Quoted in Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales*, p. 140.
- 75 Gwyn Thomas, *Sorrow for Thy Sons* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), p. 67.
- 76 Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales*, p. 145.
- 77 See Laura Wainwright, ‘“Hellish Funny”: The Grotesque Modernism of Gwyn Thomas and Rhys Davies’, in *New Territories in Modernism: Anglophone Welsh Writing 1930–1949* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018).
- 78 Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 217, fn.13. Quayson gives Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* as an example of this form.
- 79 Linett, *Bodies of Modernism*, p. 3.
- 80 David Alexander Williams, or ‘Dai Alex’ as he was known, was a colliery carpenter and a communist whose writing often focuses on occupational illness and disability.
- 81 Dai Alexander, ‘Hangman’s Assistant’, in Gwyn Jones and Islwyn Ffowc Elis (eds), *Classic Welsh Short Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 76.
- 82 Alexander, ‘Hangman’s Assistant’, p. 77.
- 83 Alexander, ‘Hangman’s Assistant’, p. 74.
- 84 Alexander, ‘Hangman’s Assistant’, p. 78.
- 85 Alexander, ‘Hangman’s Assistant’, p. 78.
- 86 Alexander, ‘Hangman’s Assistant’, p. 78.
- 87 Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1993 [1968]), p. 104. Original italics.
- 88 Alexander, ‘Hangman’s Assistant’, pp. 75–6.
- 89 Alexander, ‘Hangman’s Assistant’, p. 77.
- 90 Livio Pestilli, *Picturing the Lame in Italian Art from Antiquity to the Modern Era* (London: Routledge, 2016).
- 91 Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction and the Arts Between the World Wars* (1999), quoted in Linett, *Bodies of Modernism*, p. 145.
- 92 Linett, *Bodies of Modernism*, p. 145.
- 93 Jane Aaron has commented that ‘the lack of opportunity to find employment as anything other than a coalminer (or his wife) created a sense of a doomed or haunted community, sacrificed to the needs of Westminster and the British Empire’; Jane Aaron, *Welsh Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 6–7.
- 94 Ernest Rhys’s interlinked short stories, *Black Horse Pit*, are similarly influenced by the oral culture of the Durham coalfields, but though published in 1925 they have more in common with George Moore’s proto-modernist *The Untilled Field* (1905) than the more overtly modernist techniques being developed by Chaplin in the 1940s.
- 95 Sid Chaplin and Geoffrey Halson (eds), *The Leaping Lad and Other Stories* (Harlow: Longman Group Ltd, 1970 [1946]), p. 8.
- 96 Chaplin, *The Leaping Lad*, p. 4.
- 97 Sid Chaplin, ‘What Katie Did’, in Chaplin, *The Leaping Lad*, pp. 126–35.

- 98 See, for instance, 'Easter 1927' in *The Leaping Lad*.
- 99 Glyn Jones, 'The Kiss', in *The Collected Stories of Glyn Jones*, edited by Tony Brown (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), pp. 41–8.
- 100 Jones, 'The Kiss', p. 47.
- 101 Jones, 'The Kiss', p. 48.
- 102 Jones, 'The Kiss', p. 47.
- 103 Jones, 'The Kiss', p. 48.
- 104 The homoerotic dimensions of this story, which pays such detailed attention to the unwinding of the bandages and the unrecognisable flesh, are discussed in Tony Brown, 'Glyn Jones and the Uncanny', *Almanac: A Yearbook of Welsh Writing in English: Critical Essays*, 12 (2007/08), pp. 89–114. Disability, religion and homoeroticism are not uncommon bedfellows in portrayals of working-class bodies in coalfields literature, as in this image of a body being sacrificed to and sanctified by toil in Harold Heslop's *The Earth Beneath* (1946): 'It seemed nothing could prevent those muscles from being shaped into a vision that would have blessed Michael Angelo; nothing could prevent those muscles being made like iron in this unholy cathedral of pitiless toil. And as this toil ate those muscles of the flesh it made them lovely.' Harold Heslop, *The Earth Beneath* (London: T. V. Boardman and Company, 1946), p. 71.
- 105 Pestilli, *Picturing the Lame*, p. 3.
- 106 Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 100.
- 107 Idris Davies, *Gwalia Deserta* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1938), p. 13.
- 108 Idris Davies, 'Cwrdd Mawr', in *The Complete Poems*, edited by Dafydd Johnston (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994), p. 217. The title means, literally, 'Big Meeting' and refers to a large event in the chapel.
- 109 On Davies and his relationship with Christianity, see M. Wynn Thomas, *In the Shadow of the Pulpit: Literature and Nonconformist Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), pp. 172–9 and Daniel G. Williams, *Black Skin, Blue Books: African Americans and Wales, 1845–1945* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), esp. pp. 114–17. Peter Lord discusses Christ and Christian iconography in industrial art from Wales in *The Visual Culture of Wales: Industrial Society* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), particularly that of Archie Griffiths (see pp. 189–99).
- 110 Williams, 'The Welsh Industrial Novel', p. 104.
- 111 Richard Llewellyn, *How Green Was My Valley* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 80.
- 112 The NLB was founded in 1893 as a Trade Union focused on rights for blind workers.
- 113 Mathias Reiss, 'Forgotten Pioneers of the National Protest March: The National League of the Blind's Marches to London, 1920 and 1936', *Labour History Review*, 70:2 (2005), pp. 133–65.
- 114 Reiss, 'Forgotten Pioneers', p. 154.
- 115 Reiss, 'Forgotten Pioneers', p. 154.

- 116 Ellen Wilkinson, *The Town that Was Murdered* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1939), p. 200.
- 117 Wilkinson, *The Town that Was Murdered*, p. 203.
- 118 Rhys Davies, *Jubilee Blues* (London: Heinemann, 1938), p. 274. The scene is perhaps based on one Davies witnessed and described in his non-fiction account of men assembling to march to London in *My Wales* (London: Jarrolds, 1937). Davies writes: ‘a woman ... bawled to her son: “ -and ’bove all, keep the flannel on your chest; don’t you come back to me with another London cough”’ (p. 137). We are grateful to John Boaler for identifying both Davies quotations.
- 119 Jones, *Cwmardy and We Live*, p. 207.
- 120 ‘Pneumoconiosis banner in NUM March, 1952’, <https://museum.wales/picture-library/item/977/Pneumoconiosis-banner-in-NUM-March-1952-bw-photo/>, accessed 23 September 2018.
- 121 In one early novel, a riot that takes place in response to a disabled and despised manager’s mishandling of the workers is transformed into a near atrocity as soldiers prepare to fire on the unarmed rioters. It then becomes a protest march fuelled by Christian hymns, all in the space of a couple of chapters. See Irene Saunderson, *A Welsh Heroine* (London: Lynwood & Co., 1910).
- 122 *The Labour Leader* was a socialist newspaper that originated from a relaunch of *The Miner* in 1888, a monthly paper founded by Keir Hardie. It was purchased by the ILP in 1904 and was renamed a number of times in its near-hundred-years’ publication history; it was the *New Leader* from 1922, the *Socialist Leader* from 1946, and *Labour Leader* again from 1975. It ceased publishing in 1986. Safety in the heavy industries was a hot topic in contemporary politics; this plate is from the same year as the passing of the Coal Mines Act 1911, which improved safety regulations in mining.
- 123 *Labour Leader*, 8 December 1911.
- 124 Idris Davies, ‘Gwalia Deserta’, XXVII, in Dafydd Johnston (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Idris Davies* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994), p. 15. We are grateful to John Boaler, a research student at Swansea University, for drawing this stanza to our attention.
- 125 Thomas, *Sorrow for Thy Sons*, pp. 250–1.
- 126 Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, p. 31.
- 127 Toby Clark, *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century* (London: George Widenfeld and Nicholson Ltd), p. 61.
- 128 Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, p. 32.
- 129 Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, p. 37.
- 130 Siebers makes a parallel case in respect of using disability to represent the evils of warfare in *Disability Aesthetics*, p. 37.
- 131 Disability has been defined as ‘lack’ by Mitchell and Snyder: ‘the deficient body, by virtue of its insufficiency, serves as a baseline for the articulation of the normal body. Disability as lack is to be corrected by prosthesis – a supplement which normalises and completes’, *Narrative Prosthesis*, p. 7. In industrial fiction, disability

- is also linked to excess: excess of work in particular, though in the end this results in lack of health and strength.
- 132 Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 60.
  - 133 Michael Davidson, 'Introduction', *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 1:2 (2007), p. i. Emphasis in the original.
  - 134 Lennard J. Davis, 'Dependency and Justice', *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 1:2 (2007), p. 4.
  - 135 Davidson, 'Introduction', p. iii.
  - 136 Coombes, *These Poor Hands*, p. 165.
  - 137 Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder cited in Alice Hall, *Literature and Disability* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 69.
  - 138 'Lift' was a term for the donations of money raised for an injured miner by collecting from fellow miners. The physical connotations of the word – to lift a fellow worker over a hurdle – suggest embodied aid.
  - 139 Rhys Davies, 'The Benefit Concert', in Rhys Davies and Meic Stephens (ed. and intro.), *Collected Stories: Volume II* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1996), pp. 17–25.
  - 140 Welsh, *The Underworld*, p. 17.
  - 141 Welsh, *The Underworld*, p. 20.
  - 142 Welsh, *The Underworld*, p. 20.
  - 143 Jones, *Cwmardy and We Live*, p. 743.
  - 144 Jones, *Cwmardy and We Live*, p. 744.
  - 145 On TB and its cultural associations, see Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1978).
  - 146 Jones, *Cwmardy and We Live*, p. 744.
  - 147 Jones, *Cwmardy and We Live*, p. 744.
  - 148 Jones, *Cwmardy and We Live*, p. 549.
  - 149 Jones, *Cwmardy and We Live*, p. 745.
  - 150 Jones, *Cwmardy and We Live*, p. 745.
  - 151 Jones, *Cwmardy and We Live*, p. 751.
  - 152 Jones, *Cwmardy and We Live*, p. 739.
  - 153 Disability studies invites us to consider disability as a 'site of struggle' where disability is 'the result of the interaction between impairment and physical and attitudinal environments'; Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, p. 24.
  - 154 The words are paraphrased from Ato Quayson's discussion in *Aesthetic Nervousness*, pp. 34, 208.