

Archie Hill remembered: Black Country tale of childhood is republished

IN 1973, Archie Hill's first book was published and was acclaimed in *The Sunday Times* as 'a work that throbs with vitality, colour and meaning'. Presented as autobiography, it revealed the tortured and violent early life of a child of the Black Country, raised in poverty in the inter-war depression, partially redeemed by the friendships which counter-balanced his troubled home life.

The first half of the book deals with Hill's childhood, spent around the areas of Stourbridge and Pensnett in the 1930s. He portrays himself as a boy at war with his own family, unconnected to his mother and frequently suffering at the hands of his disolute, alcoholic but talented father. The family as a whole was a victim of the depression which deprived Hill's father of any prospect of regular work and undermined his self-esteem. The narrative progresses through a series of short episodes, each almost a complete story in themselves, dealing with aspects of Hill's life, the central themes of which emerge as violence, drunkenness, poverty and petty crime.

Brutality

Mitigating against the brutality however are the friendships with older men who act as substitute fathers. There is 'Old Billy' the glassworker (actually **William Swingewood** senior, 1871-1939), who teaches him about craftsmanship and beauty. Then there are **Konk** and **Pope Tolley**, men in some ways leading similar lives to his father but displaying warmth and generosity where his father could only show bitterness and cruelty. He sees these, and other Black Country men, as representing 'strength and sincerity and the pride of self in personal craftsmanship'. They are 'the last threads of Anglo-Saxon England'.

It was Konk and Tolley introduced Hill to poaching on the estates near Stourbridge and this provides Hill with a glimpse of the rural life that his forebears would once have enjoyed and, as he observes, was still reflected in places names like Tippetty Green, Delph Coppice and Bumble Hole; names which he writes "carry the pollen of catkins and blossoms, a swarming of honey bees". Other scenes vividly portrayed included a rat-baiting contest and a cock-fight with which Hill gets involved when he is working on the canals.

Black Country writer Archie Hill's first book, *A Cage of Shadows*, is to be republished. JOHN PRICE considers his life and work

Hill's life in the Black Country ends in 1944 when he reaches the age of 18 and leaves to join the RAF. His final contact with his father was to give him the hideous beating he had long believed he deserved.

Demons

Leaving home did not however mean vanquishing his demons. His time with the RAF saw him drift into alcoholism, although this did not prevent his achieving some success as a military policeman. When discharged, seven years later, Hill almost achieved respectability by joining the police force in Hertfordshire and getting married but his drinking undermined both his police career and his relationship.

A spell in a mental hospital

followed, as a result of a supposed suicide attempt, where the treatment he was given damaged him further. He eventually escaped only to be arrested after several months spent living rough and was then imprisoned for various petty crimes committed while at liberty.

Prison hardened him further but he did meet with the physicist and spy, **Dr Klaus Fuchs** who introduced him to classical music and the arts generally; this meeting played a large part in Hill's subsequent development. After Hill left prison, around 1956, he again lived rough as his dependence on alcohol grew before he eventually found the resolution to start the long process of rebuilding his life. The book proper ends with Hill entering a Salvation Army hostel near Westminster and saying 'good-bye to skid-row'.

There is however an epilogue, in which Hill charts the arduous path he took to recover and work he was then undertaking to try to help alcoholics. We learn that he took several labouring jobs before

being appointed to a post on the *Sunday People* writing the readers' advice column. He also married and, in 1963, became a father. There is also an account of a late meeting with his own father and his father's subsequent death.

When published, the book received excellent reviews but then ran into trouble as Hill's mother objected to the negative way she was portrayed. The result was that the book was withdrawn in 1975 and an edited version reissued with nearly all references to Hill's mother omitted and an apology from Hill included in which he acknowledged that his mother was, as much as himself, a 'product of the social evils brought about by the pre-war Depression'.

Restores

The beautifully produced republished edition from Tangerine Press restores the original text and classifies the book as 'an autobiographical novel' reflecting the breadth of the writings, covering not just the memoir but social and cultural history, addiction, homeless-



Archie Hill

ness, personal and societal depression, poverty, and survival.

For all its harshness, this is an absorbing book. Hill has a journalist's eye for the telling details, a poet's ear for the memorable phrase and a storyteller's gift of creating compelling narrative. Hill also displays the courage to look deeply at himself and his life and share what he sees with impressive honesty. His account of the Black Country in the depression is never com-

fortable but is saved from absolute bleakness by the warmth and humanity of some of the characters we meet. *A Cage of Shadows* deserves to find a new readership and its re-publication is greatly to be welcomed.

● Next week John Price looks at Hill's TV series about the Black Country, *Archie Hill Comes Home*, and his later life.

● *A Cage of Shadows* by Archie Hill is published by Tangerine Press on May 19.



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