STB-e01-S2 [BCB] Wednesday, May 17, 2017 THE BUGLE - 15

# **Archie Hill remembered: Black Country tale of** childhood is republished

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 dissolute, 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 selfesteem. The narrative progresses though 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 craftsman-ship 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 Eng-

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 Tippity 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 policesuccess as a military police-man. 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

posed 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 resolu-tion to start the long process of rebuilding his life. The book proper ends with Hill entering a Salvation Army hostel near Westminster and saying 'goodbye 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

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

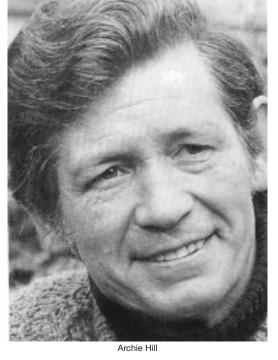
then ran into trouble as Hill's mother objected to the negative way she was portrayed. The result was that the book was withdrawn in 1975 and an edited version reissued with nearly all references to Hill's mother omitted and an apology from Hill included in which he acknowledged that his mother was,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

#### **Restores**

gerine Press restores the original text and classifies the book as 'an autobiographical novel' reflecting the breadth of the writings, covering not just memoir but social and cultural history, addiction, homeless-

father's subsequent death.

When published, the book received excellent reviews but



The beautifully produced republished edition from Tan-

ness, personal and societal depression, poverty, and sur-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 honestly. His account of the Black Country in the depression is never comfortable 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

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

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