



Archie Hill

When Archie Hill came home: the later life of the writer and broadcaster

Last week JOHN PRICE dealt with the life of Black Country writer, Archie Hill, up to 1973 and his recently republished autobiographical novel *A Cage of Shadows*. Now he looks at Archie's later life and work

FOLLOWING the successful publication of Hill's first book, he was commissioned by the BBC to present a four-part TV series for BBC called *Archie Hill Comes Home*. This was a series of films in which Hill revisited the Black Country and sought our people and places that were representative of the world of his childhood. The films are an elegy for the vanishing world of the industrial Black Country, told without sentimentality but with respect and affection.

Hill's pieces to camera are very effective, allowing his natural charisma and gifts of expression to come through. Particularly memorable in the first film is the time-box of articles he chooses to reflect the Black Country; a blue brick 'for its strength and dependence', a nail 'where it all started', a bull terrier 'for its character and strength', a reed from a cut, a phial of sweat and beer and a piece of cut glass 'to show the beauty that existed in men's minds and the craft skills that existed in their fingers'. He closes the film by saying that 'To me, these things represent the clenched fist of certain, sure, achieved defiance'.

The next two films mostly consist of carefully conducted interviews with craftsmen from the old industries – an iron foundry, a blacksmith, a scrap metal yard, a brickmakers, and above all, a Stourbridge glasswork. Hill describes the work and output of the glass industry in loving detail. Cut lead crystal is 'as beautiful as diamonds, as permanent as memories'. His friend of childhood, the glassworker 'Old Billy' was the 'giant of glass' who once made Hill a sow and five piglets to fit on a silver sapphire; when

he put glass to the flame the world 'exploded into beauty and colour; exquisite, indescribable'. Hill was 'pleased, beyond everything that, in the glassworks, men are still in love with their own integrity, will not accept second best as good enough, only first best'.

The final film in the series concentrates on Black Country leisure activities. Harry Harrison is shown giving a reading of his poetry, there is an interview with historian Tom Langley about bare knuckle boxing followed by a visit to the Old Swan at Netherton including comments from the famous landlady, Doris Pardoe. The film ends with a young Tommy Muddon entertaining a packed pub with his extraordinary act. In his writings, Hill makes the point that his is the last generation that know the old Black Country and, to make these films, he had to dig deep to find such remnants of it that were still left. As such, it is a wonderful document of social history and cries out to be released from the BBC archives into wider circulation.

Books

Hill was now established as a writer and came forward with a steady flow of books over the next ten years. Four works of fiction were published along with further memoirs. *Summer's End* in 1976 grew out of the filming for *Archie Hill Comes Home* and, like *A Cage of Shadows*, the book provides autobiographical stories from Hill's youth, though now told with a mellower and more humorous tone as he realises that, notwithstanding the poverty of the depression, there were still 'some golden chapters of childhood; that not all my memories were dark and bleak'. *Closed World of Love* is about Hill's disabled step-son Barry who lived a severely restricted life being entirely wheelchair bound and unable to speak. Hill tenderly describes how he is able to learn from his stepson by imaginatively putting himself in his place. *The Second Meadow* in 1982 recounts the three months he spent living off the land on a remote country estate, making use of his poaching skills to kill animals for food. The title refers to his observation that only brave animals venture to

From the opening to *Archie Hill Comes Home*

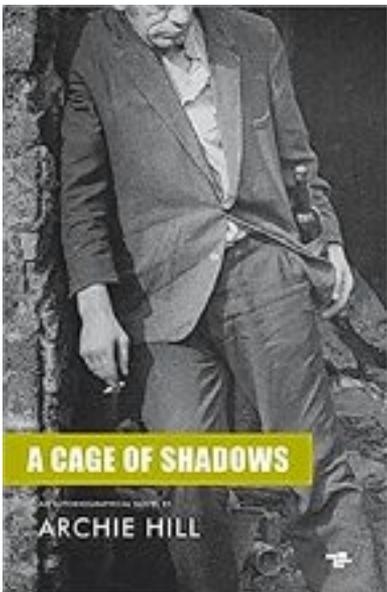
the meadows far from the safety of the woods

Hill's final book was *An Empty Glass* in 1984. After a 10 year period of abstinence, Hill was drinking again and his marriage had ended, and this book documents how drink has adversely affected his life. Much of the autobiographical material from his first book is repeated giving that impression that the seam of experience which has formed the basis of his writing had been worked out and he had very little left to mine. At the time of his final book he was living in a caravan in a wood in Hertfordshire, remote from local communities. It was there that he took his own life in 1986, through carbon monoxide poisoning.

It is hard to sum up a life such as Hill's. For a time, his great talent rose above the horrors of his early years and apart from his writings and his TV series he also made radio programmes and produced some fine photo-journalism. The consuming passion he developed for classical music indicates the breadth of his innate artistic sensibility and he could certainly have achieved more had he been able to free himself from his demons. All too often though, his gifts were undermined by a self-destructive streak that caused him to shatter everything he had worked for. Sadly, his creative ability was to flourish for a brief period only, but when it did, he produced the extraordinary writings and outstanding films that are his memorial.

● *A Cage of Shadows*, is published by Tangerine Press, www.eatmytangerine.com, paperback £12, ISBN 978-1910691113.

● *Archie Hill Comes Home* (BBC, 1974) is available for viewing via the British Film Institute, contact enquiries@bfi.org.uk, cost of individual private viewing £24.

The new paperback version of *A Cage of Shadows*Archie Hill talks on the glass industry in *Archie Hill Comes Home*

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