Recently a friend showed me Ray Jones’ piece in your magazine. My friend knew I had been close to Archie for many years – indeed had met him at my house.

Archie (real name Arthur - he told me) killed himself 22 years ago aged 60. I still have copies of most of his books and some letters, tapes and photos from him. I was prompted to contact Ray Jones who asked me to write this.

I was further prompted to re-read both ‘Cage of Shadows’ (the pre-libel action version) and ‘Corridor of Mirrors’. Here are some of my memories of Archie, a hugely talented but troubled enigma whom I loved dearly. He was, I recall, from the same mould as Best, Gauvain, Dylan Thomas and many others who are programmed eventually to self-destruct. The human memory is fallible and mine is no exception. Further there are those probably or possibly alive today who knew him better and differently than I. His first wife, Dink he called her, who would be about 82. His second wife Vi, mother of Barry in ‘Closed World of Love’. Their son Robin, who will be about 45 and whose photo was on the first edition covers of ‘Cage of Shadows’. Yes, another of Archie’s talents was that of photography. Archie spent his last few years in Hertfordshire with his live-in girlfriend, Wendy Huggett, finally Archie had several brothers and sisters, all of whom bar one were younger than he. Though I was born and raised in Wolverhampton we never lived in the same town so our friendship was always sporadic. We would not meet for months or years but still resumed as though we had met the day before.

We met in February 1956 when I was 18 and 6 months into National Service with the Royal Signals, Archie was 29. We were both patients in Stafford Mental Hospital, but neither of us had any business being there. Archie was several months into a 12 month order for treatment for Attempted Suicide, then a criminal offence, and for alcoholism. I had gone on a 48 hour weekend pass suffering from exhaustion. My mother, a Quaker and pacifist, thought this may lead to my early military discharge. The GP told her the ‘only way’ to affect this was by a voluntary admission to Stafford. Luckily both were wrong and a month later I went back to finish my service.

The day-room in Stafford was like a scene from ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’; dominated by a large excellent billiard table. Off this was a small ante room with a half-glass door. On my first morning after breakfast I heard a typewriter click-clacking away in the ante room, poked my head round the door and Archie was typing away. He greeted me warmly and we hit it off immediately, a most unlikely liaison. For Archie was from his life and background, very rough Black Country, genes which said ‘no chance’. And I was a cushioned naïve grammar school ‘monte-sod’, Oxbridge place won, middle class, total schoolteacher parents.

Archie was around 5’9” with a good figure. He had a particularly lived-in face with many scars, which had healed blue-black over coal-dust and foundry dirt. He had a twinkle in his eye, a ready genuine smile and a huge sense of humour which Palin and Cook (Michael and Peter, not Sarah and Robin) would have loved. To wit, he once offered to buy the hole in the ground some workmen were digging, negotiated a price with the foreman (5/-), later returning with a wheelbarrow in which to take away his hole.

I guess we hit it off because his iconoclasm and my youthful rebellious nature (I had recently read the War poets, Sassoon and Owen) fitted together well.

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Stafford Mental Hospital was a hive of torture and ill-judgement; fuelled by that Prince of motivation ‘good intention’. There were four main treatments for the labelled neurotic and psychotic. Electro-Convulsive Therapy (ECT), insulin injections to induce coma, Ant-Abuse for drinkers, and King of them all, Lobotomy; where parts of the front of the brain are removed. All are now laughable, sad and wrong; they are also classified by the International Community as ‘torture’.

Archie had been through the card, bar lobotomy. I was given very mild insulin, no coma, but I ate like a horse for two weeks and put on a stone in weight. 10 stone and 6”2” was military emaciation. Then I was discharged from Stafford and after 14 days leave went back to finish my time. The friendship had been cemented early; our conversation was mainly political and social. We laughed a lot and loudly; others wondered what the show in the ante-room was. Fifteen years later I was to return to the same ward in Stafford, but as the visiting Mental Health Officer. I had eventually settled on my profession of Social Work, full Circle, as Archie would have said.

The script that Archie was typing when we met was the first draft of his first book ‘Cage of Shadows’. It hadn’t then got that title. He asked me to read it; only around three chapters as I recall, I found it riveting. My father, an English literature and language teacher and academic, visited Stafford. I showed him Archie’s work and some poems; later my Dad was to tell him “Archie, you write like Houseman’. Praise indeed from a hard task-master. But it was not till 17 years later that a heavyweight publisher, Hutchinson, discovered and published his work.

In ‘Cage of Shadows’ Archie describes his time in Stafford, nine months as opposed to my two weeks. I remember well some of the characters he recalls. Dr Barrabas was real enough. Archie had him well-hussled very quickly. The blind German nurse I remember well, though neither as German or homosexual. He took me aside once and told me I was keeping ‘bad company’ – Archie, advice I studiously ignored. I could write a book about the other inmates, whom I didn’t find as negative as Archie describes. A barbarous place of ‘Good Intentions’, which gave me finer training for my future profession than any academic Institution could ever have done. One visiting time another friend of his, Gordon, a school teacher visited Archie, ‘gave him a good drink of gin in the toilets’. Archie was well pleased.

After I left the hospital I returned as a visitor to see Archie. I also later visited him whilst he was on remand in Winson Green prison. One time in Stafford he asked me to get him a screwdriver, which I did. I am neither proud nor ashamed of that piece of history. He used it to escape, not the spoon he describes in ‘Cage of Shadows’. The law at that time held that any compulsorily detained patient who escaped and remained at large for seven days could remain free. After seven days on the run he telephoned the hospital ward. “Yo cor ‘ave me now” he chortled.

Years later after ‘Cage of Shadows’ had become an instant best-seller, in 1972; I asked Archie why I wasn’t in his book. I wasn’t in the least bit put out, just interested. “There was no place in that book for you” he said, protectively I guess.

Ray Jones has done the Black Country a favour by taking the time and trouble to revisit Archie’s most colourful life in detail. He is however critical of Archie’s accuracy of memory, I find this criticism naive. The comment in one book he claims to be one of 11 children and in another 10 is to overlook that Archie was a surviving twin. So his Welsh mum from Llangollen had 11 and raised 10. My father was one of 10 children born but the first died in infancy; very common in earlier days. Again Ray asserts we know nothing of his mother, we would if lawyers and greed hadn’t had her airbrushed out of the first ‘Cage of Shadows’.

I met her briefly once or twice in Amblecore and my impression was that Archie’s initial descriptions were accurate. When he came out of prison he went his mother’s house, she wouldn’t open the door, told him he wasn’t wanted there. So he went to my parents’ house where he was well treated.

Sure Archie embellished history, either to suit his purpose or to comply with an editor or publisher. Pope Tolley never existed but was a combination of two men who were Archie’s real teachers. In ‘Cage of Shadows’ he recounts how he ‘got shot’ whilst on patrol in Iraq. True, but he shot himself between his radius and ulna with his service revolver in an attempt to wangle sick leave in the UK so he could patch up a relationship. His nose was tumbled, no sick leave, but a vivid scar of entry and exit wounds in his left arm.

Ray Jones finds Archie’s narrative and photographic printing of Black Country accent unconvincing. I disagree. I was born and raised in Lea Road, Wolverhampton and grew up with some of the various Black Country accents. Sure, the differences between a Tipton accent and a Lower Gornal one are subtle. I don’t have a Black Country accent, being raised middle class, but can speak it naturally in company of those that do without patronising. And, would you believe, Archie didn’t have a Black Country accent either! This I can demonstrate as I have copies of some tapes he made for the BBC. But the phonetic words printed by Archie are as good a shot as you’ll find.

The inconsistencies Ray Jones finds are in truth, understandable. A tortured man with alcohol brain damage may not always have perfect recall. To assert that Archie stole DH Lawrence’s plot of ‘Lady Chatterley’s Lover’ for ‘Corridor of Mirrors’ is remarkable, and untrue in my recall. Sure, the rough hero seduced a ‘respectable’ but more than willing lady above his station, and sure the setting was most Lawrentian. But Lawrence’s ‘Sons and Lovers’ and Archie’s background were very similar. My grandparents were coal miners and my uncles all went down ‘t’ pit and my aunties married miners so I well recall as a child during WWII the deprivations and pride and the sense of community of these sons and daughters of the earth. Also I well remember the barges on the ‘cut’ and the ‘osses pulling them; I rode on many a one. Nottingham had mines as did many other parts of Britain. Archie Hill didn’t need to pinch ideas from anyone else. Further I never knew him run out of ideas, nearly always having a project on the go. His other work included radio talks and writing scripts for the BBC, (e.g. some Z Cars scripts). He also went on lecture tours; I remember his coming to Birmingham University at my invitation to give a talk on alcoholism. He held his audience of trainee social workers and probation officers rapt for almost two hours. Again Ray asserts we know almost nothing of his mother, there is a good deal more in the first edition of Cage of Shadows.

I have sometimes wondered why Archie’s work is not better celebrated, especially here in the Black Country. Although his books are out of print, some are still for sale ‘on the net’. They were translated into nine other languages so possibly he is a cult figure abroad somewhere, who knows? It has been suggested to me that an Archie Hill Appreciation Society might be formed. I guess it’s up to others to decide and act or not.

The language in some of the books does not appear in any way obscene to me – simply realistic. How real men and women speak in the real world. Archie and his siblings should have had no chance; their gene-pool was not high quality. Archie had a gift for making enemies, but yet this genius somehow emerged. I fully understand that Archie was impossible to live with, but he could charm the birds out from the trees.

Like Best, Thomas and Gascoine, his wives and girlfriends started out adoring him, but the drink soured all in the end, like some others he just couldn’t beat it. He stood in my
but not long before he died, wanting a drink at 9am, tears running down his cheeks, he cried with huge emotion: “It’s the compulsion, Rog, the bloody compulsion!” Another time at my house he visited at the same time as the author and academic David Lodge. Both were fairly well known, but neither had ever heard of the other, I found that interesting.

Ray Jones is fairly wrong in his assessment, but he has done the Black Country magazine a good service by taking the time to read all the books and ‘flag him up’ again here in the Black Country Archie loved. I will end with one of the first reviews of his work in 1973.

“Archie Hill is a Black-countryman in his late forties. After a childhood of appalling deprivation (described graphically and often lovingly in this book) he underwent alcoholism and forms of drug-taking in mental homes and hospitals, and also served a long prison sentence. He ended up on skid row as a meth-drinker – an existence of total degradation he broke with after two years”.

This is the subject-matter for what is, by any standards an outstanding autobiography. Tony Parker read this book in manuscript, and wrote:

“What began as a cursory glance through the first few pages, changed within five minutes to a completely attention-commanding compulsion to read on. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that here is an author who can write not only well but at many times brilliantly, and who can and does put over his feelings and thoughts with a salty incisiveness and lack of self-pity or sentimentality which, far from making his story hard and brutal, which it is – makes it both realistic and moving. I was particularly struck by his power of observation, his economy of expression, and, most of all, by the way he handles dialogue.

This last is one of the hardest tests of all for a writer – and Mr Hill not only succeeds but excels at it, and his characters when they are speaking ring entirely true.... I feel, rather than intellectually appreciate, the absolute authenticity of the dialogue; and it is this more than anything which makes the characters peopling his pages so real to me.

This as I’ve said is by no means his only ability, outstanding in particular though it may be. Additionally he strikes over and over again a poetic roughness of original phrases which I found staying in my mind long after I had read them....

This man has a very rare and a very real talent, and everything should be done to encourage it.

Archie Hill now lives in Herefordshire and earns his living as a freelance broadcaster, playwright and journalist.”