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## The Caged Worlds of Archie Hill

To be sued for libel by one's own mother is a fate which can have befallen few writers. It happened to Archie Hill as the result of his

first book, *A Cage of Shadows*. Published in 1973, it is an at times chillingly bitter account of his Black Country working-class upbringing and a grimly eventful life which, via prison, mental institutions and skid row, brought him finally to a career as a writer. The book had to be withdrawn from sale, and was only reissued four years later with a number of highly unflattering references to his mother deleted. In *A Cage of Shadows* can be found the basic source material for Hill's work, both fiction and non-fiction, which was to occupy him till his death thirteen years later: three adult novels and four volumes of autobiography drew upon, revised or expanded some part of his earliest published book.

Archie Hill was born in the Great Depression, the eldest but one of eleven children of an impoverished Black Country family, with a coalminer father who, Hill claims in *Cage of Shadows*, was tyrannical and habitually drunk, spending more time in prison or on the dole than down the pits. Hill worked part-time in an iron foundry while still at school, managed a brief period at an arts school, cut short by hardship and war, and worked full time for a halcyon spell as a canalman, imbibing something of that peculiar working environment in the dying days of the traditional waterways culture of the Black Country.

The Black Country looms large in Hill's writing. It was the place, Hill was fond of recalling, Queen Victoria insisted on having the blinds drawn down on as her train passed through. This was also the

region W. H. Auden, for some years an intermittent near-native, could write of, also from the perspective of a railway carriage, in his *Letter to Lord Byron*:

But let me say before it has to go,  
It's the most lovely country that I know;  
Clearer than Scafell Pike, my heart has stamped on,  
The view from Birmingham to Wolverhampton.

Hill had stamped on his heart the pre-war Black Country world of 'tramlines and slagheaps, pieces of machinery'. But it was not somewhere he passed through as a tourist; it was a place of entrapment:

It was all a prison. Every bit of the system was a prison, every rotten God-forsaken minute. All you could do was fight and know in the fighting that you'd lose in the end.

The battlefield was life. Life in the Black Country among the reek and heat of iron foundries and the thunder of rolling mills where sheets of steel were pressed and hammered out, and the sulky glower of pit-heads stripped the countryside of all except smoke and dust. An area from which Hogarth and Dickens drew grim inspiration, and still could were they still on the scene. The Black Country, spewing its filth, lacerated with sluggish canals ('cuts', we called them) all sombre and dark and brooding. A place where men worked hard with the might of their muscles, drank hard, made love like rabbits and bred almost as much. Strong rough men whose everyday speech is still rich in pure Anglo-Saxon, who used words and expressions which were in vogue in the days of Chaucer . . .

It was a place where the working class had a dense culture of defence and endurance, of pubs, poaching, brawling, rat-pits, pigeon-and-whippet-racing, above all of methods of self-assertion and survival known as 'making-do' exemplified by Black Country characters featuring in *Cage of Shadows* who were to reappear in Hill's writing. There is Old Konk the poacher, fount of lore and wisdom, embodying the values of resistance to private property and impositions of capitalism and power, the most considerable of Hill's surrogate father figures from boyhood, who is never let to rest till the final pages of Hill's last book. There is Old Billy, the artist with his hands, who can make a bird of paradise with molten glass. And Pope Tolley, who stands up to the police and to the farmer who refuses to shelter hunger-marchers, fights in the Spanish civil war and dies on the beaches of Dunkirk. They, Old Konk in particular, provide a kind of sentimental Greek chorus in Hill's last books.

After working on the canals Hill spent some years in the RAF military police, including four years in the Middle East in the late 1940s when Arab-Jewish tension was reaching boiling point. He had been initiated into heavy drinking in his early teens but in the RAF he found himself consuming up to two pints of rum a day. Drinking soon cost him his first job after demob and his first divorce, as his life rapidly plummeted downwards. Craving the money for drink he broke into a gasometer. This led to his first dose of a mental institution, joining those he describes in *Cage of Shadows* as 'strange men forever staring into the cold ashes of themselves', a punishment earned because he laughed in court. He endured padded cells and ECT treatment before escaping back to his roots, living rough on the banks of 'the stinking yellow Stour'. When tracked down was given a three-year prison sentence for minor thefts committed while on the run. In prison Hill met Claus Fuchs, the atom spy, a cultivated and sympathetic influence, who encouraged him to read and write. But soon after release from prison Hill descended into the twilight world of London's 'skid row', living amid the squalor of bombsites and derelict houses, seeking what he called 'mental amputation'.

Despite further experience of mental hospital after accidentally overdosing on purple hearts, Hill managed to summon up enough survival instinct to reestablish himself in the relative security of bedsitterdom and a fast turnover of unskilled jobs. A turning point came when he met his second wife and shortly afterwards applied for, and by good fortune got, a job with *The People* newspaper, on its Readers' Advice Bureau. Pouring out his life story, he won the ear of the then editor and thereafter stayed with the paper for four years. For the last thirteen years or so of Hill's life he transformed himself into an author and broadcaster.

Two years after the controversial first appearance of *A Cage of Shadows* came Hill's first novel *A Corridor of Mirrors*, set in the environment of Hill's birth, a small mining community in the Black Country of the Depression years, a world where the 'gaffer' is close at hand. The novel's plot has a nod and an wink towards *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Jack Furnstone has in common with the gamekeeper Mellors an affair with the young beautiful wife of a man of higher

social status, the pit-owner Wheatley, who has been rendered sexually impotent. But Furnstone is an angry pit-worker, a survivor of the trenches of France, scene of Clifford Chatterley's castration, more resolutely proletarian than Mellors, and inveterate enemy of game-keepers. And Wheatley's mutilations are the result of a pit accident – for he, unlike Chatterley, is self-made. Jack gets Wheatley's wife pregnant and is persuaded to agree to leave Wheatley with the child (and wife) in exchange for the pit, which Jack plans to give his younger brother. As his plans are cruelly dashed the fate of Jack mirrors that of the man who is his greatest rival. *A Corridor of Mirrors* depicts a hard world, but one where the wit and humour of Black Country working class life, its way of speaking, its wisdom and closeness to nature, are much in evidence. Typically, a strong vein of anti-capitalism is allied to opportunism and pragmatism. Despite his instinctive radicalism Jack's ambitions for his brother are as a pit-owner.

In the wake of critical praise for *A Cage of Shadows* Hill was asked to do a series of documentaries for BBC television under the collective title 'Archie Hill Comes Home'. Living now in Hertfordshire, and some years in exile from the Black Country, the project sent him back into the environment which had proved so formative, to the iron foundries, canals, glass and brickyards, and to encounter too the new office blocks and modern shopping centres which had become features of the area in his absence. This return also inspired a book, *Summer's End*, which contains some of Hill's most lyrical writing. It recalls the events of one boyhood summer holiday, of time spent on a canal boat acquiring a taste for the canalsman's life, of employment in the glass works, of learning to fire a gun, of poaching expeditions, pigeon racing and the companionship of Gyp, another of Hill's surrogate fathers.

*Summer's End* contains a familiar Hill view on the Black Country. Hill's great-great-grandfather had known the Black Country valley when it was rich in forests and fields, 'before the Industrial Revolution came and disembowelled it and hung it up to dry'; he was a representative of the last generation since Roman times to see it as a 'Green Country', and 'when he died it was a Black Country where only machines and a forest of too much misery thrived'. For Hill, 'probably

men of my generation are the last of the fully Black Country race, the last echo of it'. Changes in the last decade of Hill's life seemed to confirm this view, with so much of the industrial base which had given the Black Country its name and character disappearing.

*Closed World of Love* (1976), Hill's first book set entirely in the post-war period, grew out of one of the Community Concern projects Hill had become involved in. Like drinking and gambling, the cause of the disabled was something he had first-hand experience of. *Closed World of Love* tells something of Hill's relationship with the woman who became his second wife and who played an important part in giving him the strength to emerge from the wilderness. More importantly, it is the story of the relationship between this woman and her spastic child, Barry, product of a previous marriage, and Hill's growing awareness of that 'closed world' the two shared. This short book about the predicament of the disabled and those who look after them had its genesis in Hill learning that after twenty-six years imprisonment in a twisted, tortured body Barry was dying of cancer, a fact which gains some poignancy beside Hill's own early life, blighted and almost destroyed.

After that tribute to a woman's love, the rest of Hill's published work concerns what is resolutely a 'man's world'. The two novels which appeared at the end of the 1970s, *Sergeant Sahib* and *Prison Bars*, both exploit aspects of Hill's own experience, in the post-war Middle East and as a prison inmate, in a convincing and painful way.

*Sergeant Sahib*, set in a hardened, cynical and often routinely corrupt world, involves a sergeant of the RAF mounted police, named Toy, and his increasingly sadistic colleague, Morrison. British imperial responsibility in the region is petering out in panic flight from impending Arab-Jewish carnage. Against this background Morrison's prejudices and brutality enjoy a degree of tolerance and complicity from the sergeant, which assumes its consequences with Morrison's rape and murder of Toy's girlfriend. A three-month pursuit through the desert after the killer is motivated by revenge and guilt at Toy's own neglect (he was drunk when he should have accompanied his girlfriend home). The realities of a larger history are an intimate part of the narrative; for Morrison, unbeknownst, carries with him the

potentially explosive plans for British Middle East evacuation. The pursuit culminates in the ruins of the King David Hotel, Jerusalem, which had been full of British servicemen on leave, destroyed by the Stern Gang as a blow against British imperialism. The two policemen are small fry by comparison with the bloody eruption that that terrorist act portends. *Sergeant Sahib* is a brutal book which shows the author with a gift for the telling stomach-churning image.

An appeal the experience of the desert had for Hill was that out of its loneliness there was potential for escape into the reveries of memory; and an escape into private reverie from oppressive circumstances is an obvious resource for the central character of Hill's next novel, *Prison Bars*.

Gerald Ingermill is a failed writer and impractical idealist, whose views lead to involvement in a murderous bombing outrage. In prison Ingermill retreats into introspection, developing such an intense fantasy relation to his son that it eventually assumes for him the status of reality. The oppressive violent world of prison becomes the recurring bad dream, into which the intrusion of a prison officer can be mistaken for the visit of an unsympathetic publisher. Hill is on the firm ground of a caged world whose argot, rules, hierarchies of power, shames and cruelties, he is well acquainted with. Again the novel is full of brutality: an IRA bomber is 'slopped out' on instructions of the 'King Baron' by being tipped into a laundry boiler, or a prison officer is lynched by the inmates in the midst of a particularly bloody prison rising Ingermill unwittingly colludes in planning; for practical responsibility for the consequences of his actions escapes Ingermill till the last. In such a brutalising environment the notion of rehabilitation is seen as a fantasy, no less than Ingermill's delusions. The real ideal of the authorities is no more than a 'well run nick'. 'Rehabilitation', says Hill, 'is a myth on crutches'. Rare indeed is an exemplar such as Hill himself encountered in the shape of Claus Fuchs. This most explicitly 'caged' of Hill's worlds is a scene of destruction and waste; *Prison Bars* is a disturbing contribution to the 'prison novel', with little glimmer of comfort to relieve it.

Hill's last two slim autobiographical books, both reveal a sting in the tail, confessions of accelerating physical and mental disintegration.



*The Second Meadow* records Hill's three months camped alone in the depths of the Worcestershire countryside, living rough in a tent, existing off the surrounding forest and meadows. To survive he used knowledge drawn from his childhood hero, Old Konk, from his time in prison and as a fugitive, and his military training. The metaphor which gives the book its title is drawn from the perspective of the tree line of woods where he pitches his tent. The meadow nearest him is 'most nature busy'. But only the more adventurous life venture into the second meadow. In the third meadow, where pickings would be richest, it is rare to find anything. A sparrowhawk overhead holds the clue: the first meadow offers the safety of nearby woods. There are, meditates Hill, First Meadow people, himself included, who seek the 'safety of convention', familiar things, they take no risks. Some may glimpse the Second Meadow, but hesitate and fail to prove themselves individuals. Great thinkers, poets, painters and music-makers may pass to the Second Meadow, perhaps the rare genius to the Third Meadow, perhaps beyond that there are further meadows. Perhaps, Hill says, we are brainwashed down the centuries to be First Meadow people.

The sting in the tail comes when Hill finally examines the reason for his solitary sojourn. A year before he had left his wife and that 'helplessly lingering stepson' we learnt of in *Closed World of Love*, and took off into the woods to kill himself. 'I'd lived half a century too long. I was worn out with a sense of uselessness . . . I'd wanted out'. He took enough tablets to put three people down, followed by a quart of vodka.

By chance he had been found in time and restored to a new sense of wanting to live. He had come into the woods to 'find himself' and 'that enchantment which I'd glimpsed as a child', to be alone and hold dialogue with the old ghosts.

By the time of writing his last book, *An Empty Glass* (1984), Hill had been living alone in a caravan eight miles outside Hertford for three years, and was looking back over the wreckage of two broken marriages and the history of a drink problem which had proved near deadly. In the last book, as it was in the first, the old ghostly figures of the Depression years haunt: Konk, Billy, Pope Tolley. In the last book

as the first, we are in a caged world. Though twenty-eight years out of prison, says Hill, 'the fact is I'm still inside: in the prison of being and alcoholic. It's a life sentence I'm serving . . .'

The sting in the tail of *An Empty Glass* arrives when Hill reveals he has recently suffered a massive heart attack from a three-day 'bender'. Henceforth he must, so he tells us, quoting his beloved *Rubaiyat*, 'turn up an empty glass', because he has been told by doctors his next alcoholic drink will prove his last. But, in defiance of all medical advice, Archie Hill did continue to drink, and two years after the publication of *An Empty Glass* his desire to 'want out' was finally realised: in the summer of 1986 he committed suicide.

Many changes have overtaken the Black Country in recent years. One symbol of the area now is the Black Country Museum, situated between Dudley and Tipton, boasting a reconstituted 'traditional' Black Country village with actors dressed up to play out their 'traditional' roles within it. The canals are enjoying a revival, providing gainful employment for pleasure cruises. The Black Country future has partly arrived in the form of the 'heritage trail'. But it is a sanitised heritage on offer, at a time when another part of the Black Country future has arrived in the form of anonymous shopping precincts and sprawling housing estates. With the disappearance of traditional industries, large areas of the Black Country have been landscaped 'Green Country', though in a form Hill's great-great-great-grandfather wouldn't have recognised.

Archie Hill's books still bear some testimony to an unsanitised heritage from which this curious, wayward, tormented individual, so obsessive in his sense of rootedness yet so alienated from his own family that he had the unenviable distinction of being subjected to a lawsuit from his own mother, could in his lifetime never escape the painful consequences.