

Mine wars: Rearranging mountains in Appalachia

by [Scott Williams](#) in the [May 31, 2005](#) issue

In the summers of 1920 and 1921 southern West Virginia was the scene of some of the most historically significant unrest in U.S. history. Yet today this history has been largely forgotten. Although I was raised in West Virginia, I first learned about these events as a nearly grown man when I saw the movie *Matewan*, John Sayles's cinematic vision of the seminal events of the mine wars.

In the Battle of Matewan, union coal miners fought Baldwin-Felts "private detectives" who had been hired to evict union miners from company housing. Several men died, including the mayor of the town of Matewan. Police chief Sid Hatfield (yes, of *those* Hatfields) became a folk hero. He was later indicted on murder charges in nearby McDowell County and shot, as they say, "in cold blood," by company detectives on the courthouse steps. This event, in combination with the imprisonment of some union organizers, led to the climactic Battle of Blair Mountain, in which union miners, having disregarded President Warren G. Harding's demand that they return to their "homes," confronted the U.S. military.

One would think that an armed insurrection would have been prominently displayed in the West Virginia history class one takes as an eighth-grader. It was not. Which is not to say I had no idea that strange and violent things had taken place in the 50 years or so when my coal-mining grandfather was moving from abject poverty to relative prosperity. There were occasions, I was told, when it was necessary for him and others to travel to work armed with rifles. There was the time he had beaten a mine foreman to within an inch of his life for admonishing my one-armed great-grandfather for his slow pace in loading coal. And there was another time, decades later, when that same foreman showed up on my grandfather's front porch seeking his forgiveness.

These stories, however, seem to have taken place on another planet. They are alien not only because of the nakedness and the nearness of their violence (it happened

here?), but also because most of us have little experience with the kind of poverty that could produce it. More than that, the stories seem alien because we'd rather not face the history of violence which underpins our use of electricity. When any of us flips a light switch, that electricity is underwritten in part by the violence I've described. In other words, electricity runs on coal, but coal production runs on bygone violence. The mine wars, the schemes to deprive local Appalachians of the mineral rights to their lands (an injustice which has never been put right), workplace injustice and the struggle to right it are the constitutive violences of the coal and electric power industry.

This violent history also remains hidden because it is clothed in relative prosperity; it's no longer *naked* in the way it was 80 or 90 years ago, and it's therefore more difficult to talk about. People in Appalachia and elsewhere really are fed, clothed and sheltered well through their work in the coal mines. That's why we don't talk about Blair Mountain in the eighth grade.

Despite the benefits of mining to individual families, West Virginians actually benefit very little from the coal industry. Given the richness of natural resources in West Virginia and the dramatic need for those resources elsewhere, one might expect that public universities in the state would rival the Ivy League. They do not. One might also expect that the last thing such places would require is state-funded taxing of the poor in the form of gambling and lotteries to subsidize the state budget. But strangely they do. For some reason this kind of injustice remains difficult for many to see.

Recently, however, the violence of electricity production has once more become starkly visible, as it renders our experience of the landscape interplanetary. This new visibility is the product of so-called mountaintop removal methods of coal extraction. This is a relatively new process for gaining access to coal seams using "drag line" equipment, in which mountaintops are simply sliced off in a kind of radical terra-forming. This process opens up previously inaccessible coal sources but at the same time produces an enormous amount of debris, which is then disposed of through the aptly named practice of valley filling. One simply "fills in" what had previously been a stream valley. It's hard to imagine a more intensive rearrangement of local landscapes.

Rearrangement of the land is never self-evidently evil. Scenic vistas are certainly to be valued, but one of the things that has to be resisted is a knee-jerk impulse to

keep things in the natural world exactly the way they are in order to continue looking at them. That reaction entails a kind of “eco-pornographic” view of the land, in which, rather than considering the natural world the site of an interaction which produces mutual benefits (in the way farming and hunting sometimes do), we regard it simply as an image or object with which one need not take the risk of real relationship. Those relationships, whether among people or between people and land, are mutually transforming.

Mountaintop removal might seem so destructive and radically transformative of the land that it cannot qualify as part of a mutually beneficial relationship between human beings and the so-called natural world. It certainly seems that way to me, but it’s a controversial point.

Far less controversial is the idea that when such landscapes are attacked in this way, the process does violence to things other than the landscapes themselves. Those things are, invariably, human communities. Consider the Environmental Protection Agency’s assessment of the disruption:

The impact of mountaintop removal on nearby communities is devastating. Dynamite blasts needed to splinter rock strata are so strong they crack the foundations and walls of houses. Mining dries up an average of 100 wells a year and contaminates water in others. In many coalfield communities, the purity and availability of drinking water are keen concerns. Blasting and shearing mountains have added to the damage done to underground aquifers by deep mines.

It’s hard to imagine a more fundamental devastation for a community than loss of the ability to supply itself with shelter and clean drinking water. To refer to such devastation as an “environmental” problem is to miss the point. It isn’t an attack on something *around* human beings—their “environs”—but an attack on the human beings themselves, one that involves them at the level of their livelihood, just like the early labor wars. In this sense, the strange violence of electricity production is once again alienating human beings from their landscapes by making those landscapes uninhabitable.

How are Christians to respond to this violence? If we claim to understand the world through the cross of Christ and to have lives shaped by the anticipation of Christ’s kingdom, how are we to confront the fact that an apparently fundamental component of our lives—our use of electricity—rests upon the kinds of violence that

Christ refused?

Any easy answer to this question would be untruthful. With that caveat in place, I want to suggest that Christians must reject at least two temptations. On the one hand, we may regard the violence that we do to one another in the name of electric power as inevitable. We may say, “Well, the world’s a fallen and imperfect place. It just seems to be the case that in order for there to be indispensable good x we’re going to have to face up to suffering y.”

We could give this fatalist reading of the situation a theological spin by claiming that only God can act without loss, which is just a pious admission that nobody’s perfect. Or we could give ourselves permission to engage in the violence of electricity production by saying (in the manner of Reinhold Niebuhr) that the kingdom that Christ’s life makes visible is an “impossible possibility” which stands at the edge of history as its judge rather than being the truth about history. Then we could take some solace in the fact that although we regret mountaintop removal, there’s nothing we can do about it; so as a practical matter we’re going to keep doing it. This has been the general mood of the conservative response to radically extractive industry, and complacency is its chief mark.

The other temptation is to believe that if we put the proper legislation in place, if we provide the proper ideological underpinnings to our ecological policies, then the end of the violence we do to one another in the name of electric power (not to mention oil, paper, coffee and cucumbers) will be at hand. Christ has left his work up to us and we’d better get busy—and the work had better be comprehensive. If the solutions aren’t wholesale and programmatic, then they cannot be real solutions. This has been the general mood of the “liberal” response to extractive industry, and immodesty is its chief mark.

Neither of these two options is satisfactory; neither of them is fully Christian in its understanding of the world’s violence or what it would mean to live in hope in the face of it. On the one hand, to regard violence as somehow “built in” to the structure of the world is to despair of Christ’s lordship over it. To say that the violence of coal extraction is inevitable is to despair of providing a description of the world as heading toward its redemption in Christ. It grants a kind of ultimate significance to something—electricity—that doesn’t merit it. We know this because our Lord has taught us that even food doesn’t have this kind of significance. So as a matter of greatest urgency it seems we should avoid the kind of violence to our brothers and

sisters that electricity production so often entails. It also seems like one of the sillier sorts of idolatry to regard that violence as somehow sanctified by the fallen condition of the world.

On the other hand, to believe that we can force history to unfold in a way that will make this violence go away is foolish and risks a different sort of idolatry. If the previous view failed to understand the world as heading toward redemption, this one sees moving it toward being fixed as a human project. The problems of energy consumption will not be solved with a sweeping or programmatic policy. Why would we trust such an enterprise to deliver?

After all, legislation that restricts mountaintop coal extraction already exists. It was passed under the Carter administration in 1977. Coal companies must now appear before federal judges to get special permits for this process. Recently two such permits were issued for Blair Mountain itself. That ghastly fact might well provide us with another opportunity to speak and act about this problem. The point is that there's no way of knowing or guaranteeing that our speaking and acting will be effective, and it's a mistake to believe that they will be salvific. What Christians are awaiting is Christ's return, not a technological or Caesar-led political triumph over such problems.

What's the alternative? If the dominant conservative and liberal Christian approaches to these matters are not fully Christian in their understanding of the world's violence, how should Christians respond to it? If we truly want to respond to violence in the way that Christ did (i.e., without resorting to still more violence), we will have to begin to think more in terms of witness and less in terms of solution. This means we won't necessarily know in advance the details or size of our responses; we will know only their shape—anticipation of the kingdom.

In the small 50-member Appalachian church where my wife is pastor, there was a mild controversy about cooling the sanctuary, a setting in which worshipers often swelter in the summer heat. The opposition to an expensive proposal to purchase and install air conditioning came largely from older members of the congregation. I assumed that these objections were fueled by the memories of lean times (the kind early coal miners experienced), which made them suspicious of any expenditures.

At a meeting one of these older members stepped forward. Max, a man in his late 70s whose family has been in this part of West Virginia for generations, mildly asked

permission to share with the congregation some of his memories of its history. He pointed out the place in the sanctuary where the wood-fired furnace (once the sanctuary's only source of heat) had stood. He explained how fans (the kind powered by hands and wrists) had once occupied every hymnal slot in the pews to stave off the heat in July. In his humble way he reminded us that the worship of God does not require electrically powered comfort. Only a deep confusion about what is necessary in our response to the Good News could make electricity seem so urgent. We don't need large amounts of electric power in order to be faithful to God on Sunday mornings. If we don't need it for that most important of activities, then how could it possibly be indispensable in any other context? Max reminds us of this question—and the reminder liberates us from having to take such power seriously.

I don't know if Max is conservative or liberal in his politics, although I suspect the former. I don't know if he thinks of himself as an environmentalist, although I suspect not. What I do know is that his hope for Christ's return and his commitment to loving God above all things relativizes the importance of electric power in his life and allows him to be a nonviolent witness against any idolatry of that power.

Max's testimony invites us to join him in responding to the violence of electricity production and other violence in the way that God has—with patience. It reminds us that the function of the church is precisely the function Max discharged in that local community—to remember and display an alternative to idolatry. The only way to reject the violence of energy production without resorting to still more violence is to present the world with an alternative which witnesses to the redemptive possibility that we don't need to live violently.