

The Forest of Dean Miners' Riot of 1831. Chris Fisher. Bristol Radical History Pamphleteer No 50, 2020. 111 pp, 2 maps and 16 statistical tables. Paperback £7.00. [ISBN 978-1-911522-56-0]

In the summer of 1831, the Dean Forest miners rioted. Or did they? In simple terms, the miners' 'riot' was a corrective to the creeping enclosure of public land by wealthy private interests. In just four days, some 60 miles of fencing, hedging and embankments privatising 11,000 acres of Forest were levelled by a crowd of about 2000 men and women. The damage they left behind them was estimated at around £15,000. They were largely unopposed by the county authorities, who found it impossible to enrol special constables to disperse them and were in any case uncertain how best to deal with people who went about their destructive business in so peaceful a manner. This was a crowd 'very civil in their deportment' noted the *Hereford Journal*, 'but resolute in their purpose, simply desiring the Magistrates to stay out of their way'. They 'committed no other outrage either in language or deed, offered no violence to the persons or properties of the neighbourhood and did not injure the young timber'.

The destruction did not stop until a detachment of the 3rd Dragoon guards arrived, fresh from fighting ironworkers and miners at a more serious uprising in Merthyr. They were led by Major Digby Mackworth, a Napoleonic veteran who would distinguish himself a few months later by leading the same men into a massacre of civilians in the Reform riots at Bristol. In the following days a handful of Forest miners were taken up as scapegoats and one man in particular, Warren James, singled out as a ringleader. While most were treated lightly in court as the unwitting dupes of 'designing men', James alone was capitally convicted and transported for life.

Whether or not it is reasonable to reduce such well organised collective behaviour to the pejorative and simplistic language of riot, is clearly a question worth asking, and that's exactly what Chris Fisher's study sets out to do. For a start, he argues, the 'incident' of the riot needs to be located within a broader context, a longer view, and as 'something more complex than a local anti-enclosure movement'. To this end, a number of themes are explored. What was the basis of the miners' belief that enclosures in the Forest infringed ancient rights of access, and on what legal authority had the first embankments and fences been erected? Why did some local commentators believe a more sinister conspiracy, involving powerful pro-reform interests in London and tenant farmers closer at hand, lay behind the miners' actions? A simple man like Warren James, they argued, could hardly have engineered a popular revolt of such sophistry without assistance from men of greater substance. 'The backers of James must be discovered', proclaimed the *Morning Advertiser*, 'and it will not take the skill of Raphael to foretell that the small farmers, resident on the borders of the Forest, have not been inactive in this affair'.

James may indeed have sought legal advice in London, but we can dispense with the idea that either an 'O'Connell of the Forest', or the miners collectively, were having their strings pulled by anybody else. The answer will not be found in the political bargaining that accompanied that summer's introduction to parliament of the Great Reform Bill, nor in the politics of the general election, nor the invective of newly established radical newspapers like *The Forester*. Rather, we need to understand the deeper history of Forest rights, the lasting influence upon local communities of the Mine Law Court and the Book of Dennis (dated 1610 and compiled by 48 free miners, who there set out their legal claim in writing for the first time) and the changing agenda of the Crown towards the Forest as an industrial resource. Although 'foreigners' (non-Foresters, but industrial capitalists in particular) had been slowly requisitioning Forest land for decades, the rate of change had been escalating and further enabled in recent years through central government agencies like the

Commission of Woods. These changes galloped rough-shod through centuries of tradition, negating the Crown's traditional granting to free miners not only of the wealth beneath the ground but of pasturage and cottaging too. Fisher's careful charting of these changes is meticulous and compelling, but also very readable.

The book is not technically new; it is Fisher's MA thesis, researched and produced at Warwick University in 1975, at a time when the university's Centre for the Study of Social History was instrumental in the crafting of new 'histories from below'. These approaches, brought together in the same year in a benchmark collection of essays, *Albion's Fatal Tree*, were much concerned with the historical agency of the labouring poor as they negotiated the criminal law, customary right, and the idea of restorative legitimacy. Chris Fisher's book, published for the first time now by Bristol Radical History Group, should certainly be seen and read in this context and as a very welcome – if late - addition to the canon.

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