

CILIPS COVID-19 Book Reviews – [Book Title]

Reviewer name: David Kenvyn

Book title: Cwmardy

Author name: Lewis Jones

Genre: Working class novel

Overall Rating: Good

Brief summary:

There are a number of reasons why Cwmardy did not achieve the popularity of its near contemporary novel “How Green Was My Valley” by Richard Llewellyn. The first is the title, which for most English readers would be unpronounceable. It is always important to choose a title that your target audience can actually pronounce. The choice of Cwmardy suggests that the target audience was based in the South Welsh mining valleys, and probably not in the English and Scottish mining communities. Names like Senghenydd and Tonypandy would have been known throughout the mining communities of Great Britain, but I doubt that they could spell the names. I will return to the significance of these names later. The second reason is that John Ford did not make a movie from the book, as he did with How Green Was My Valley. Many people of my age, who have not read the book, will remember the film. They will remember Roddy McDowall as Huw Morgan, Maureen O’Hara as his sister Angharad and Donald Crisp and Rachel Thomas as his parents, Gwilym and Beth Morgan. They will remember the villagers singing Myfanwy outside the Morgan house. Younger readers will remember the TV series with Dominic Guard as Huw, Sue Jones-Davies as Angharad and Stanley Baker and Sian Phillips as Beth. No-one has made a film or TV series of Cwmardy, and there is good reason for that. Cwmardy is not undramatic, but it is fiercely political. This is not surprising considering the political affiliation of the author. Lewis Jones served on Glamorgan County Council as a Communist. His premature death in 1939 at the age of 42 was caused by his heart giving out when he addressed over 30 meetings in defence of the Spanish Republic in the course of one day. Cwmardy was published in 1937 two years prior to his death. There are three central events in Cwmardy: the pit explosion (Senghenydd), the strike (Tonypandy) and the Great War. Here I have to confess that this is my family’s history, and I have heard stories of this kind since I was a child. I am therefore not an objective witness. The story is told through the eyes of Len, a young miner, the son of Big Jim and Shane. It is the story of how he comes to understand the class struggle through his own life’s experiences. He learns when his sister Jane becomes pregnant, and is rejected by her lover, the son of a pit official who refuses to marry her, that there is a power hierarchy, and that his family are at the bottom of it. Jane and her baby die in childbirth, which is a bitter lesson for Len. This is followed by the pit explosion. This is clearly based on Senghenydd, the worst pit explosion of the C20th in Wales, and probably in the whole of the UK. My grandmother’s house was one of those nearest to the pit in Senghenydd. They laid the bodies out in the street in front of her house, and some of the bodies were brought into her house to be washed clean. Lewis Jones does not spare his readers any of the horror of what happened. He shows us the rescue team going down using equipment that the mine owners had not properly maintained. He shows us the women waiting to see if the bodies are their husbands, their sons, their fathers or their brothers. He shows us the whole tragedy, and how profit was more important than human lives. It is a lesson that we are re-learning today. After the pit explosion, Len begins his working life in the pit. It is not long before the mine owners decide effectively to reduce the wages of the miners by no longer

paying for the small pieces of coal that they extract. Of course, the mine owners took the coal and sold it, but they intended to cease paying for it. The miners refuse to accept this and go on strike. In the book, the strike coincides with the coronation of George V in 1911. This was quite clearly the Tonypandy strike. The mine owners called in the police to break the strike using the tactics that were used at Orgreave. At Tonypandy it did not work. The miners in the book, as at Tonypandy, drove the police out of their village. This was so serious that the Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, called them “hooligans” and sent in the army. There is some dispute now about whether or not the army actually arrived at Tonypandy. It does not matter because the miners at Tonypandy, as in the book, were shot at and many were killed. My grandfather, who was one of the strikers, never left me in any doubt about what he thought about Winston Churchill, and he died when I was six. In the book, the wrath of the Valleys descends on the coal owners and they are forced to capitulate. During the strike, Len meets Mary, the daughter of the miners’ leader, Ezra Jones, and very soon a love interest develops. This is, without doubt, the worst part of the book. Lewis Jones is not very good at describing this kind of intimate affection. What is important is that Mary is as much a firebrand as Len, who had honed his leadership skills during the strike. When war comes, Len and Mary become involved in the anti-war movement. This however is skipped through as if Lewis Jones has lost interest in the tale. The book, in my view, should have ended with the strike victory. That would have been a passionate, rousing climax to a tale of class solidarity.

What you liked: It is a visceral account of the meaning of the class struggle in the Welsh Valleys at the start of the C20th

Anything you didn’t like: I was uncertain of the spelling of the Welsh. In some cases like venw, it was clearly wrong as there is no v in the Welsh alphabet

Who should read this book?: Anyone who is interested in social history