

Hilton, Jack. *Caliban Shrieks*. Vintage Classics, 2023.

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In his review of the first edition of Jack Hilton's novel, *Caliban Shrieks* (1935), George Orwell pointed not only to the authentic working-class experience that lay at the heart of Hilton's writing, but also the class-conscious voice in which this was expressed: "The humorous courage, the fearful realism and the utter imperviousness to middle-class ideals, which characterize the best type of industrial worker, are all implicit in Mr Hilton's way of talking." Orwell does not, however, go into any specific detail as to the aspects of literary experimentation in Hilton's narrative, which could be characterized as a form of proletarian stream-of-consciousness in which Hilton moves from one existential reflection to another in a dialogue with himself and the reader. The serendipitous recent recovery of this forgotten novel from the shelves of the Salford Working Class Movement Library and its subsequent republication is without doubt a radical literary event to be celebrated, since it adds significantly to the range of 1930s political novels that broke away from the school of drab social realism, epitomized by Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* (1934). Hilton's *Caliban Shrieks* aligns itself instead with a very different group of progressively modernist novelists that included writers such as Lewis Grassic Gibbon, James Hanley, Margaret Storm Jameson, Hugh MacDiarmid and John Sommerfield. One has to salute moreover the efforts of the two editors, Jack Chadwick and Andrew McMillan, in bringing Hilton's working-class masterpiece back into circulation.

Orwell was himself more than just a passing reviewer of Hilton's book. It was Hilton who suggested that he should make a fact-finding trip to the industrial North of England, in order to meet with miners and factory workers (all men as is turned out, despite the fact that thousands of women also worked in these places), who could guide Orwell round the "Black Country," as it was then called. Hilton was however less than impressed by Orwell's subsequent account, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), dismissing the book as middle-class "piffle." It did however inspire him to undertake a similar investigation of his own, later published as *English Ways* (1939), in which he wrote back at Orwell's socially blinkered observations. One hopes that Hilton's alternative travelogue will also be reprinted, together with the other three books he wrote. Not least since *Caliban Shrieks* had, according to its editors, such a decisive impact on the debate about politics and literature in the 1930s.

Caliban Shrieks comes across as a cry from the heart in an unforgiving world of trench warfare, chronic unemployment, prison incarceration, poverty, child labour and homelessness. Each chapter is informed by Hilton's profound, first-hand knowledge of the oppression and exploitation around him. After being banned from making inflammatory political speeches at public meetings, Hilton turned to writing full-time. However, the need to feed himself and his family outweighed the limited earnings he made as a writer, forcing him eventually to return to his trade as a plasterer. In the end he became just another working-class literary talent arbitrarily dismissed by middle-class publishers, who told him "proletarian literature is dead."

Hilton's book is described as a novel with its omniscient if unreliable narrator. It certainly is this in parts, but it also belongs to the genre of *literature engagée*: a mixture of camera eye documentary, as well as personal and political commentary. The book deals directly with the condition-of-England question at the time, overshadowed not least by the threat of fascism and war. It ends with a frustrated assessment of the shortcomings of the Labour movement – the reformism of the Labour Party, the sectarianism of the Independent Labour Party, the stalinism of the Communist Party and the bureaucracy of the Trade Unions. It becomes clear from Hilton's personal remarks that he saw himself as a political outsider in this context, more of an anarcho-syndicalist than anything else. A supporter for instance of both the rank-and-file Workers' Committee Movement and the National Unemployed Movement, as a grassroots activist who helped found the Lancashire Plasterers' Union.

While we hopefully await the republication of Hilton's other books, I can recommend his almost fifty-page-long contribution to Jack Common's collection of workplace reportage, *Seven Shifts*, first published in 1938 and reprinted in 1978. Hilton's piece here is one of the most compelling critical deliberations on the Protestant work ethic since Paul Lafargue's socialist classic, *The Right to be Lazy* (1883). It ends moreover on a more positive note of international solidarity and struggle that echoes through to our own dark times:

I believe in mankind. I believe it to be inherently good. I believe that many people are thinking seriously of the dangers which confront us all. I think that the good will get together and make the world safe. It will be difficult to keep peace, to keep liberty of expression, to keep an international mentality. Still, these can be kept by democratic countries, if we are worthy, and work together with goodwill. (Hilton 49)

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ISSN 1097-3087

<https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/clogic/index>

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