

Chris Killip, *Seacoal*
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CLIVE DILNOT

THE GLEANERS

At a moment when representation of the working class seems largely to have vanished from the political agenda, it comes as something of a shock to discover a serious cultural project, extending over forty years, where this question is central. Born on the Isle of Man in 1946, Chris Killip has spent much of his career photographing the human and social consequences of de-industrialization in the Northeast of England. He made his name with the exhibition *Another Country* in 1985, followed in 1988 by his best-known book, *In Flagrante*; the latter, which offered one the hardest visual critiques of Thatcherism made during those years, won him the Cartier-Bresson prize, and indirectly helped secure him a professorship at Harvard, where he has been teaching since 1991.

A retrospective of Killip's work held in Essen's Museum Folkwang in spring 2012 displayed a substantial selection of the thousands of photographs he took between 1968 and 2004. It was while mining this image-archive to prepare for the exhibition that Killip devised the photographic essay published as *Seacoal* in 2011, which re-defines the idea of the 'collection', pushing it closer to a new genre in which the configuration of the pictures within the book constitutes an essay in its own right. Austere, unfashionably black-and-white, *Seacoal* looks at first sight like a straightforward instance of what used to be called documentary photography. But the images Killip offers are neither a record nor a document. They are both less and more; less, because they are not as evidential as might at first be thought; more, because instead of an ethnographic report, the book is a gathering of portraits. It would not be unreasonable, in fact, to call it a last collective portrait of the working class.

Killip had been drawn to the Northeast of England after making the decision, aged twenty-three, to become a full-time photographer. He never attended art school and had no formal education beyond the age of 16. After a spell as a photographer's assistant in London in the late 1960s, he spent a couple of years on the Isle of Man, taking pictures which would eventually appear in the small book *Isle of Man: A Book about the Manx* in 1980. The main influence here was clearly the work of Paul Strand, in books like the 1954 *Tir a'Mhurain* on the Outer Hebrides. Many of Killip's Manx images are extraordinary portraits, in which familiarity with the sitter is crucial to the effect: in Killip's words, the pictures owe their quality to the fact that 'I could be named and placed by the people I photographed because of my grandmother, or because of my father'. His skills in portraiture would subsequently be put to good effect on numerous covers for the *London Review of Books* in the 1980s, and in *Pirelli Work*, his 2006 series of portraits of shop-floor workers at the Pirelli tyre plant in Burton.

Killip returned to mainland Britain in 1973, at a moment when the post-war social-democratic project was crumbling—its demise signalled first by the oil shock of 1974 and then by the IMF and inflationary crises of 1976. Particularly in the North, de-industrialization was already in full swing. It was already a much harder world than Killip had found in the Isle of Man, and there is a sense in the photographs of the 1970s of shock at just how much the industrial fabric of the North was breaking down. Based in Newcastle from 1976, Killip was denied permission to photograph in the Swan Hunter shipyards on Tyneside, and instead developed a method based on gradual immersion in the environments that formed his subject matter. As he began to focus more on the consequences of the disappearance of work, his attention moved from surveying what was occurring to achieving the kinds of intimacy and depth impossible in the wider picture. He spent a considerable amount of time in working-class communities such as Skinningrove in North Yorkshire in the early 1980s, where the closure of the iron and steel plant ended all possibilities of local employment. Most extraordinary of all, however, was the small community of travellers, examiners and others at Lynemouth Beach in Northumberland who, for a few years, eked out the dole by harvesting coal as it washed in on the tides. Here is Killip's account of his initial encounter with the place:

When I first saw the beach in January 1976 I recognized the industry above it but nothing else I was seeing. The beach beneath me was full of activity with horses and carts backed into the sea. Men were standing in the sea next to the carts, using small wire nets attached to poles to fish out the coal from the water beneath them. The place confounded time; here the Middle Ages and the twentieth century intertwined.

Lynemouth beach, twenty miles north of Newcastle, lies at the northern end of what used to be the Northumberland and Durham coalfield, at the point where the seams run out under the North Sea. Coal had broken away from underwater seams and had been collected along local beaches for centuries. But in the 1970s Ellington colliery—one of the largest deep-coal mines in the area—began to tip the mixed waste which it was no longer economical to sort directly into the sea. Wave action gradually separated rock from coal, and since coal floats, some was carried back to the beach by tides and storms. For a few years, sufficient coal was being washed ashore for it to be just possible to scratch a living from harvesting it.

It was this scene that Killip had stumbled upon. He tried to photograph on the first day, but was driven off, not without violence. He kept returning, and after seven years his persistence, and a degree of luck, gained him grudging acceptance. For fourteen months, in 1983–84, he lived at the site on and off. Immersing himself—to the extent that he could, as an outsider and photographer—he took pictures incessantly and repetitively, producing an enormous archive. As the pictures in *Seacoal* testify, the site was extraordinary, on the margins in almost every sense. The Ellington colliery stood less than half a mile away to the south; also to the south, almost on the beach, loomed a power station that took the coal Ellington mined, and a smelter. Between the high water mark and the bluffs was a lunar landscape of coal. A few hundred yards in from the beach, but still bitterly exposed to the weather, were the dozen or so caravans in which the community lived. A scattering of sheds and makeshift stables for the ponies, a littering of trucks and the detritus of abandoned equipment completed the scene.

Some of Killip's Lynemouth pictures were shown at the Side gallery in Newcastle in 1984, which he had co-founded and directed from 1977–79; and a dozen or more—including some of the most memorable—were published in *In Flagranti*. But the vast majority of the pictures in *Seacoal* have never been shown. Although there are contingent reasons for the delay in publishing the material from Lynemouth, it is clear that in selecting material for the Essen exhibition—and even more in the careful sequencing of pictures in *Seacoal*—Killip was attempting something more than simply to present a 'collection'. The individual pictures still stand, but they are contextualized, due to an impulse Killip clearly felt to provide, if not a complete, then at least an adequate, portrait of the Lynemouth community. At the same time, they offer an understanding not just of what was—the community, now vanished and dispersed—but of its meaning for the present. In that sense *Seacoal* is two books in one: a set of individual pictures made in the 1980s, and an essay composed in 2011. The force of the work lies in the interaction between these two modes.

The shift from collection to essay is scarcely insignificant—not least because of the ethics involved. In a passage in *Soul and Form*, though he was not referring specifically to photography, Lukács speaks very clearly to what is involved. Because the essay ‘does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive’, he writes, it is ‘bound to them and must always speak “the truth” about them, must find expression for their essential nature’. *Seacoal* is, in effect, Killip’s way of dealing with this special responsibility, and its politics arise directly from it. His solution is to take us systematically into the conditions of existence at Lynemouth, and then to present us with a collective portrait of the members of that community. *Seacoal* is therefore organized as a series of sequences that describe the principal elements in the life of Lynemouth and which gradually build to the collective portrait: at first anonymous, but by the end of the book we see named individuals. The sequences—which deal with harvesting the coal, horses and transport, the camp, the caravans and living conditions—are organized according to a clear logic. Through transitions that are often barely visible, yet apparent on examination, and by coordinating rather than subordinating the interwoven elements, the essay establishes both a conceptual density—harvesting, gleaning and so on—and a flow between the moments that begins to make evident the weave of cross-connections, contrasts and tensions involved.

To take a small instance, a sequence on maintenance in the middle of the essay—work which allows work to happen, focusing on trucks as much as on the horses—gives sudden perspective to the earlier, too easily romanticized pictures of the horse-carts used in the harvesting. The notion of a medieval archaism gives way to the realization that the camp’s ecology and economy are dependent on both horse carts and trucking, and on complex patterns of co-operation and competition. But across the book as a whole, the main transition that takes place is from the photography of circumstances to photography of people; as *Seacoal* progresses, the assumption that the reader has begun to internalize these conditions—grasping the basics of the geography and economy of the beach—allows Killip to focus increasingly on the individual inhabitants.

This move from distance to closeness, from outside to inside, from condition to portrait, is evident in the two sequences that open the book. These depict the work of harvesting the coal either from the sea, working with the horse carts—largely men’s work—or from the beach, where women and children glean by hand in the ebb tides. The two sequences show the nature of the work: cold, wet and exhausting for the first; tedious, backbreaking and time-consuming for the second. The problem with the photography of work is that, since by definition the experience is only given through duration and not as moment, photography is poor at conveying its felt experience. The

reality of what the work of harvesting and gleaning means for those caught up in it is therefore caught most powerfully in *Seacoal* by two pairs of compelling and arresting portraits. But these portraits in turn only take on their full meaning in the context of the larger sequence of pictures. It is these that allow us to begin to grasp the fuller realities of the situation.

Two-thirds of the way through the book, there is a more overt shift towards subjects when the sequence on maintenance gives way to a remarkable series of eight full-page pictures of children in the camp. This is then followed by a dozen or so pictures taken inside the caravans of men and children—the peculiar and unexplained absence here being photographs of women; there are very few in the entire book, and only two in this sequence. By the time we turn to the last picture of the essay proper—three men pictured with their backs to the camera, standing at the water's edge staring out over a calm North Sea—and realize that we recognize at least two of them, we also realize that we have, to some extent at least, internalized Lynemouth. When Killip then adds, as a postscript, a personalized note of thanks to some of those he was close to there, the move is complete: the dozen or pictures of named individuals lie at the opposite end of the objective panorama of the beach in 1976 with which the book begins.

Had Killip made this book twenty-five years ago it would have been read, not incorrectly, as both an illustration and indictment of the consequences of Thatcherism. One surprise generated by the book today is that, if anything, its politics seem sharper. To be sure, the seacoalers of Lynemouth are no more—and neither are the mine, the power station or the smelter, which closed in March 2012. In that sense these are photographs from a vanished world. The paradox however is that *Seacoal* now looks almost as much like a prefiguration of what is to come. It is an essay about work as a means of survival once it is pushed out of the formal workplace; about 'redundancy' and resistance to it; about 'unemployment' when there is no 'employment'. It is a book about how to cope with a situation that is becoming the norm for ever greater numbers, as they struggle to keep intact any sense of possibility in the face of a faltering but unforgiving economy.