

# Thomas, C. (2024). *Scrip: How the Coal Companies Impoverished Harlan County*. County Line Books.

Review by Nathaniel Heggins Bryant

“*Scrip is the physical evidence of subsistence wages*” declares Charles Edward Thomas in the introduction to his wonderful new book (p. 3). And yet, outside of niche collector’s guides to exonomia—to coin-like objects or the paper equivalent that are not state-issued—scrip is rarely acknowledged as an important material, economic, and cultural dimension to the many resource extraction industries that historically used them. The term scrip or related synonyms are rarely, if ever, formally indexed in the academic histories and monographs on banana empires, Latin American coffee plantations, and Appalachian coal mines, which usually focus on the macroeconomic, the national, or even multinational economic dimensions. At best, scrip might get a single passing reference in a paragraph about forms of payment used at the company store or commissary, an anecdotal gloss of the way scrip functioned as a small but central and nasty metonym for complex forms of labor and economic exploitation. Enter Charles Edward Thomas, who refocuses long-standing conversations about exploitation, violent labor struggles and worker resistance, unionization attempts, and popular cultural memory through labor songs and memoir in Harlan County, Kentucky. He does so by purposefully *centering* scrip as an essential item worthy of inspection, examination, and analysis on its own terms. Perhaps the most important intervention of Thomas’s book is that it moves well past mere collecting and cataloguing, which is what most other prior books on scrip emphasize. These prior books, mostly out of print, emerge out of the niche exonomia collector community. While Thomas does in fact draw on that community’s expertise to frame his own book, he nevertheless moves past it; his is possibly the first critical book about scrip that centers the object in domestic and global labor studies and culture, as a crucial element worthy of inspection and analysis. Hopefully there will be future books like this one to come out as object and material culture studies continue to make inroads into labor history and working-class studies.

Why Harlan County? For one, the archives that exist about the struggles in the remote southeastern county of Kentucky are deep and robust, and Thomas draws on newspaper and political reports, personal narrative, snippets of song and poetry, and a fairly robust use of scholarly and historical monographs throughout his book to leaven this intriguing examination of coal company scrip. This is also a personal story for Thomas, who was born and grew up in Harlan County and began collecting scrip as a child; interspersed throughout his telling or retelling of moments like the Battle of Evarts in 1931 are moments where Thomas refers to his family’s deep roots in the area. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, scrip absolutely saturated the county, which Thomas carefully and lovingly documents in the second half of the book, a full-color collection of close-up photographs of scrip that he amassed with the help of fellow collectors, most of whom descended from other Harlan County miners. As he notes in an explanatory note before the scrip gallery, “at least 110 coal companies in Harlan used scrip. Together, they issued at least 976 different pieces of scrip,” of which “798 different metal pieces and 16 different paper pieces” are included in the book (p.

99). (There is an attendant website, [harlanscrip.com](http://harlanscrip.com), that is updated as the collection expands.) The sheer number and variety of scrip, in just one small county, forces us to imagine the enormous scale of scrip usage across the broader region—and, again, this doesn't begin to describe the other industries that also employed scrip in the United States and elsewhere. Harlan County might be Thomas's particular case study, but one valuable contribution of his book is the way it forces readers to contend with the global practice of using scrip writ large.

For decades, scrip served as a means of depressing wages and propping up an intricate debt cycle that helped amass fortunes for various coal companies, many of which operated as self-regulating mini-monopolies in Harlan hollers. Thomas sets out to explain just how all of this worked in great detail, far beyond the somewhat comic and superficial notion that miners "owed their souls to the company store," as Merle Travis and Tennessee Ernie Ford famously sang. This is a decidedly unfunny story that Thomas tells, and as a haunting reminder, many pages feature, in chronological order, small close-up photographs of a single year and the names of miners who died that year taken directly from The Harlan County Miners Memorial. Other pages feature images of coal company scrip that Thomas links directly to the most abusive coal operators in the region, tying together the often-unpunished anti-union violence of the region with the most ubiquitous symbol of worker repression and marginalization these miners were forced to use to stay alive.

Of the many examples in his book, two illuminating moments help illustrate the centrality of scrip to the broader debt cycle that miners experienced in Harlan. Following the deadly Zero Mine explosion on December 9, 1932, in which twenty-three miners were killed and another fourteen were injured, the Harlan Fuel Company blamed miner incompetence rather than lax and underfunded safety standards for the blast, but the owners nevertheless decided, at the behest of state inspectors, to replace new electric Edison headlamps with unsafe open-flame carbide lamps. New pieces of scrip were issued for the sole purpose of effectively renting to individual miners the use of the new headlamp for a single shift. Each time a piece of headlamp scrip was issued, the miner could expect a payroll deduction. The net result? "Once the lamps were paid off, the company actually made money on the deal. They had transformed a safety requirement into a profit center!" (p. 83-84). Thomas's photo gallery also includes similar metal and paper scrips issued for the use of a single blasting cap; dynamite; powder; and monobel (another type of explosive). The use of each essential item resulted in payroll deductions, as did the sharpening of tools; using company-owned bathhouses; renting company-owned housing; and even employing anti-union preachers! Another key moment in the book are photos of paper scrip instructions from the Lynch 1728 coal company, a subsidiary of U.S. Steel, which were published in six different languages (English, Italian, Hungarian, Polish, Czech, and Slovenian) to ensure the proper usage of them, a reminder of the complex linguistic density in the immigrant communities working Harlan mines (p. 208).

There is so much more that could be said about this fine and far-ranging history of scrip in Harlan County. Suffice it to say that it is a necessary and long overdue supplement to our understanding of the region and its history because it attends to the material reality miners and their families faced during the leanest of times. Thomas's book helps us to see scrip both for what it was, materially, and what it meant to owner and worker alike. As we peruse his gallery we would be hard-pressed to not imagine the indignities these workers felt using fake money, one of cheap metal or paper that weighed lightly in the hand, whose tinny sounds rang false in the ear, that never meaningfully

filled the pockets the way real money did. Hopefully, too, this helps readers historicize and contextualize scrip not only as meaningful artifacts of the past, but as one of the present and future, too. The recent trend to pay workers in digital point schemes and cryptocurrency or internal company currency like Amazon Swag Bucks should have us both considering these overlooked forms of payment and resisting the vicious return of scrip-like schemes in seemingly new and shiny forms that nevertheless reproduce the worst forms of historical exploitation.

**Reviewer Bio:**

**Dr. Nathaniel Heggins Bryant** is Associate Professor of English at California State University, Chico, where he also serves as the Chico State chapter president of California Faculty Association, the labor union representing faculty, counselors, librarians, and coaches in the CSU system. He is the author of several articles dealing with the intersection of labor studies, prison studies, and prison writing on individuals like the Soledad Brother George Jackson and Caryl Chessman. He has served as the Working-Class Studies Association secretary and is currently working on three book-length research projects: a critical reassessment of Robert F. Stroud, better known as the Birdman of Alcatraz, a second on prisoner unionization efforts in the 1960s and 1970s, and the newest one on the history of company scrip throughout time.