

# Appalachian Journal



A REGIONAL STUDIES REVIEW

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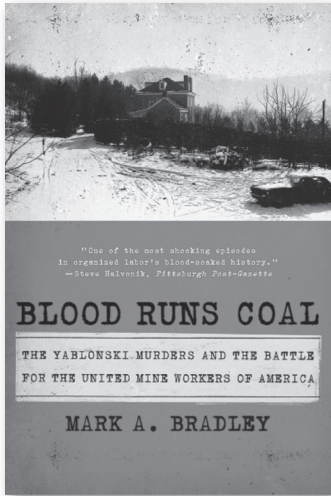
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## **Blood Runs Coal: The Yablonski Murders and the Battle for the United Mine Workers of America**

By Mark A. Bradley (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2020)  
\$27.95, cloth. ISBN 9780393652536, 334 pp.

In alignment with the American modern labor history, author and lawyer Mark Bradley reports a comprehensive and well-documented investigation of a triple homicide, the gruesome Yablonski murders from 1969, in Clarksville, Pennsylvania. The author's skillful, thorough research on this puzzling case creates a non-fiction account that proved to be, he said, "the most challenging writing project" he had "ever attempted" (255). From the start, Bradley's purpose was to expose, in the most authentic way possible, the events that took place within the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) during the

tumultuous decades of the 20th century, beginning with the interwar period and ending with the chaotic, uncertain 1960s. Responding to the feverish, bloody crimes committed against "civil rights leaders and politicians who called for change" and against "cultural and social awakening" (1), UMWA leaders and elites transformed the organization into a corrupt institution from top to bottom and linked its name with some of "the most infamous crimes in the history of American labor unions" (3).

The book retraces the true story of the larger-than-life labor leader Joseph "Jock" Yablonski, who, along with his wife and daughter, were fatally shot in their stone farmhouse in Clarksville, Pennsylvania, on the last day of 1969. Yablonski's aim had been to seek union reforms and better working conditions for miners, but he challenged the corrupt chairman of UMWA, Tony Boyle, for the presidency of the union and signed his death sentence. A total of nine people were charged in connection with the murders, led by Boyle himself, who did everything he could to maintain power, serve the Big Coal companies' interests, and embezzle union funds for a long time. Eventually, Yablonski's murder and the subsequent investigations transformed the union and restored democracy to the UMWA.

Bradley begins the book with a Prologue where he describes the 1960s, especially people's mindsets and how they were products of those times: "Americans seemed resigned to the fact of assassination as an unavoidable risk for those brave enough to speak out against injustice and inequality" (1). He also includes here a brief summary of what we are about to read. The book is organized into two main parts: Part 1 with 12 chapters, and Part 2 with 11 and an Epilogue. The author also includes illustrations, acknowledgements, notes on sources, and an index. The two-part structure focuses on the action, which is mostly presented chronologically.

The first part, "I Cannot Stand Silent," starts with an historical perspective meant to provide context to help readers understand the situation at the time in the Appalachian coalfields. Bradley makes a sketch of the essential

characters in the story and deals with the events that led to the murdering of the Yablonski family. The second part of the book, “The Walls of Justice,” is even more haunting than the first. Here, the author struggles with the messiness of identifying what actually happened, as the three murderers provide three different stories about how everything was planned and what happened inside the Yablonski farmhouse on the night of the murders. It also deals with the FBI’s daunting hunt for the assassins, the conspiracy to commit murder, and the trials and convictions of the people who were involved. At the end, Bradley offers more information about the substantial reforms that took place inside the UMWA and how it “became the most democratically run large union in the country” (242).

Additionally, the photographs included in the book provide framing and context for the story, and as a result, readers can make easier associations between names and faces. The acknowledgments and notes on sources explain in detail where the author gathered his resources and materials (trial transcripts, personal interviews, FBI case files, newspapers and magazines, previously published books on the subject, and many other official documents from various universities in Appalachia and Washington, D.C.). Bradley helpfully collects this diverse array of sources in a single book.

The ideal audience for this book includes readers and researchers interested in analyzing labor/industrial relations or relations between unions, labor studies specialists, social historians, lawyers, political scientists, and Appalachian Studies scholars. This well-researched book gives readers a way to gain more insight into the Yablonski murders and the aftermath of the trials.

Bradley’s political narrative belongs to the true-crime genre as it reports the Yablonski triple homicide from the beginning of its investigation through its legal proceedings. The author’s biography includes work as a U.S. Department of Justice lawyer, a criminal defense lawyer, and a CIA intelligence officer, experiences that mark his narrative: a descriptive style intertwined with expository and legal reporting. If we compare *Blood Runs Coal* with other writings on the same subject, two of them stand out, and coincidentally or not, were published at the same time (January 1, 1975): Trevor Armbrister’s book *Act of Vengeance: The Yablonski Murders and Their Solution* and Arthur H. Lewis’s *Murder by Contract: The People v. “Tough Tony” Boyle*. The first one is a veridical account of facts presented through the lens of a journalist, who does justice to this bizarre tale, and is considered one of the best books ever written about a criminal conspiracy. In the second one, a tabloid-style account of the facts, Arthur Lewis deviates a little from the true story and sensationalizes the villain, Tony Boyle, emphasizing his “Tough Tony” image in the title of the book. As a consequence, Bradley addresses the need for more inclusive and verifiable documentation, especially since he processes the events from an investigative lawyer’s point of view.

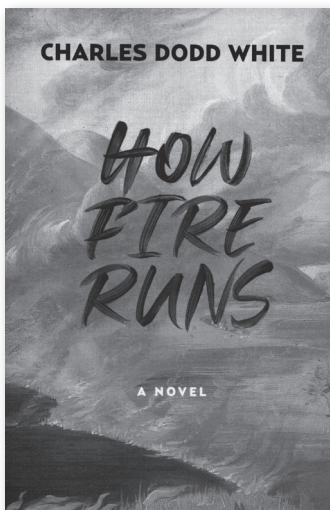
Another point of difference between the previous writings and the current one is the perspective offered by the passing of time and the way in which the

author perceives the events that took place over half a century ago. The first two books were written as soon as the events took place, and the subject was fresh in the collective memory. Bradley's account, however, considers what happened with the perspective of investigations and information that have come to light during the last 50 years.

Reading this chilling book might lead to some existential thoughts. You might juggle shady feelings of hopelessness and meaninglessness, and you might struggle to identify your place in the world, or even start to seriously question everything you have been taught, everything you know, or what you thought you knew. Without a doubt, Mark Bradley sheds light on a major story that shows how imperative Jock Yablonski's and the miners' fight for democracy really was: "In death, Yablonski had become the force for reform that he longed to be in the last half year of his life" (173). Bradley's meticulous research on each of the facts, some of them backed by photographs, contributes greatly to the overall value of the work. As Bradley mentions in the first pages of *Blood Runs Coal*, this is a story "of extraordinary courage, raw ambition, shameful betrayal, unspeakable savagery, and blood-soaked redemption. More than anything, it is a story about a pivotal time in American history—one with reverberations still felt today" (4).

#### **Iulia Salca**

Iulia Salca is a doctoral student in philology at Transilvania University from Braşov, Romania, in a co-tutorship agreement with Radford University in Virginia. Her dissertation deals with a comparative approach to mining narratives from the Jiu Valley, Romania, and Central Appalachia.



#### **How Fire Runs**

By Charles Dodd White (Athens: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 2020) \$22.95, paper. ISBN 9780804012287, 273 pp.

Set one year after the 2017 white supremacist Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, Charles Dodd White's *How Fire Runs* depicts a summer when a Nazi group establishes an enclave, "Little Europe," on the compound of an abandoned psychiatric hospital near the northeast Tennessee city of Elizabethton. Already a heavily conservative area—only two members of the all-white county commission are Democrats—many of the citizens across party lines recognize the threat posed by the group but struggle through lawful means to defeat it. The novel focuses on the perspective of Kyle Pettus, an elected member of the Carter County Commission, and Gavin Noon, who

directs Little Europe in his ambition to obtain greater influence as a white supremacist leader. As the tension escalates, Charles White avoids political