



# The Pitmen Painters

by Lee Hall  
inspired by a book by William Feaver

directed by BJ Jones

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## STUDY GUIDE

prepared by  
Maren Robinson, Dramaturg

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# — STUDY GUIDE —

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## The Playwright: Lee Hall

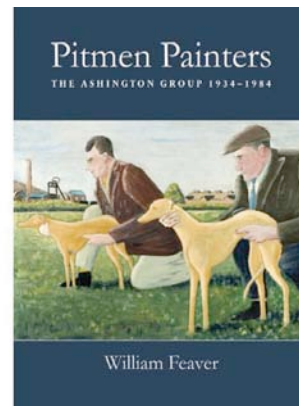


Born in Newcastle, England, in 1966, Lee Hall is a playwright and screenwriter. His plays include *Billy Elliot: The Musical*, *Bollocks*, *The Chain Play*, *Child of the Snow*, *Children of the Rain*, *Cooking with Elvis*, *Genie*, *I Luv you Jimmy Spud*, *Spoonface Steinberg*, *Two's Company*, *Wittgenstein on Tyne* and *The Pitmen Painters*. He has written the screenplays for *War Horse*, *Hippie Hippie Shake*, *Toast*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *Gabriel & Me*, *Billy Elliot*, *The Prince of Hearts* and

*Spoonface Steinberg*. He was a writer in residence at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1999-2000. He received an Oscar nomination for Best New Screenplay for *Billy Elliot*.

## The Author: William Feaver

William Feaver was the art critic for the British newspaper *The Observer* between 1975 and 1998. He is also a writer, painter, curator and founding trustee of the Ashington Group collection. He wrote the book *Pitmen Painters: The Ashington Group 1934-1984*, which inspired Lee Hall's play. He has written several books on art including, *When We Were Young: Two Centuries of Children's Book Illustration*, *Masters of Caricature: From Hogarth and Gillray to Scarfe and Levine*, *Frank Auerbach* and *Lucian Freud*.



He curated the 2002 retrospective of Lucian Freud at the Tate Britain gallery in London. In 2008, Feaver's landscape paintings were exhibited with the work of pitman painter Oliver Kilbourn at the Northumbria University Gallery in Newcastle upon Tyne.

## The Play: *The Pitmen Painters*

*The Pitmen Painters* premiered at the Live Theatre in Newcastle upon Tyne in 2007 before touring throughout Britain. It was produced at the National Theatre in London in 2009. In 2010, the play made its American premiere at the Manhattan Theatre Club, with the original British cast and director. The British production began a second British tour in March, culminating in a run at the Duchess Theatre in London's West End, starting on October 11, 2011.

## Director's Note

by *The Pitmen Painters* director BJ Jones

In 1969 I joined the United Mine Workers. I made varnish for Mobil Chemical one summer during college. Midway through the summer the UMW went out on strike for wages and conditions and we were on the picket line. During my time off my buddy and I headed to upstate New York to go to a rock concert which was getting rained out, but ... that's another story.

As I left Mobil to go back to school they offered me a full time job, but I told the shift manager that I was headed back to class and that I was going to be an actor. He looked at me with barely concealed pity and said I would always have a job at Mobil. I thanked him and headed out of the factory and into my life. Well, that factory has since closed, and here I am directing a play about my fellow mine workers who were also artists.

That shift manager was a great guy, but he couldn't conceive of making a living as an actor. I've thought of those guys over the years, and I wonder if they ever had dreams like I did. I wonder if they had gifts unopened, and fires unlit. I was the first of my generation in our family to graduate from college and in Cleveland in the late 1960s, making a living as an artist, let alone even being one, was outside the realm of possibility.

At the end of college the Artistic Director of the Cleveland Play House offered me an apprenticeship, and the fire of my passion for theatre was lit, unquenchable 40 years later. And here I am, working on Wellington Avenue, just down the street from where I made my Chicago debut at the old Ivanhoe Theatre.

I am so deeply moved by the thought that regardless of education, experience or class, the artistic impulse resonates from within everyone. Unrecognized, undernourished, it will not grow, but the flicker of recognition and validation can set the wheels of creation spinning.

At the end of the first act, the miners are talking about their work and their moment of self-discovery. As a group they tell us:

*"... If you can overcome whatever you need to overcome, no matter who you are, where you come from. That is what is important about art; you take one thing and make it into another, and transform ... who you are."*

Perhaps that is the Pitmen Painters greatest work of art ... themselves.

## The Interview: Director BJ Jones

During rehearsals for *The Pitmen Painters*, TimeLine Artistic Director PJ Powers (PJP) caught up with Northlight Theatre Artistic Director BJ Jones (BJJ), who makes his TimeLine directing debut with this show.

**PJP:** When I first approached you about directing *The Pitmen Painters*, I knew you understood the heart and comedy of this piece but didn't realize what a personal connection you had to the story. Can you talk a bit about that?

**BJJ:** I joined the United Mine Workers in 1969 as a summer job during college. The whole notion of being an actor was a source of amusement with my union brethren. I actually got offered a full-time job at the factory where I made varnish. They couldn't understand why I would turn down a full-time union job for the life of a want-to-be actor, in Cleveland. Now that factory is out of business, and I am directing a play about miners who are artists!

**PJP:** This play's politics, dialogue and, certainly, dialect, are distinctly British. What are the challenges of doing this play for an American audience?

**BJJ:** Oh, I suppose the accents will be challenging for the untutored ear, but I think the fact that the play starts in a recession, traverses a war, embraces socialism and finally faces the prospect of an England under [Prime Minister Margaret] Thatcher's Conservative government, has great resonance for our audience. I also feel the journey of discovery and the blooming of the artistic impulse in the souls of these men is as electrifying as any play I've read.

**PJP:** What do you think we have to learn today from *The Pitmen Painters*, regarding access to the arts?

**BJJ:** The first things cut from education budgets at all levels of school seem to be the arts departments. If there is any money left, it goes to the sciences, math and the athletic departments. At the end of *The Pitmen Painters*, we learn that all the dreams of these miners, to have a socialist approach to class accessibility to education and the arts, are dashed by the Conservative agenda in Great Britain.

Let's hope we will fight for a future in which the arts are part of the culture of a great country and valued by all, regardless of politics.

**PJP:** Talk about your design process and why you wanted to create an elongated 3/4-thrust stage, with the audience surrounding much of the action?

**BJJ:** I wanted to replicate the Workers' Educational Association meeting hall that the pitmen worked in and to give the audience a sense of being in the room for the progress of the play. I work at Northlight in a very deep thrust, so for me

it is very comfortable working in this environment. I grew up theatrically here in Chicago in storefront theater, working at Wisdom Bridge, Body Politic, Remains, Victory Gardens. Having an audience member at your side while revealing your innermost thoughts and feelings is what separates Chicago theater from other towns. With the audience this close ... you can't lie.

**PJP:** This is your first directing gig at TimeLine and, after seeing many of our shows, what's it like to work here, going from your much larger home turf to our intimate space?

**BJJ:** There is no difference in the impulse to do good work on worthy material, with artists who are passionate and keen to climb into the room with you. Oh, sure, we have a swell green room at Northlight, and a few more zeros on our budget line, but I've worked with you and some of these actors before and will again. The issue is never the theater, but the artists and the work—and that is paramount.

**PJP:** You and I first met in 1999 when I acted in your production of *The Cripple of Inishmaan* at Northlight. It was your first season as artistic director there and my first as artistic director at TimeLine. Since then you've not only been a dear friend but also a great mentor and colleague in the world of running a theater. I could certainly go on and on about how much TimeLine has changed since 1999 and, as a result, how much it has changed my life. Can you tell me what the last dozen years have been like for you, running Northlight and building it into a premiere regional theater?

**BJJ:** First of all, I am so proud of what you have accomplished at TimeLine, PJ, and honored to be working for you on this project. Since you and I started, we have lived through two recessions, three wars, a near economic collapse, and, as I type this, the market is down 300 points today alone! We have our first African-American president, and a bit of a political revolution with the rise of the Tea Party. It has been a roller coaster for all of us in the American theater, reflecting the turbulence in the country. I think all of us are trying to suss out the subscription model, the impact of the Internet on live theater and what the next generation of theatergoers will respond to as we move forward.

Like you, I have a family, and they are grown now, but during these years I have seen them go from junior high through grad school. Trying to balance being a parent and spouse and run a regional theater is challenging, to say the least. I'm sure you'd agree. But I am "living the dream," as my kids would say, and it is a huge gift.

**PJP:** During your tenure at Northlight you've shifted your focus from acting, which you'd done for years, more toward directing. What has that transition been like, and do you still have the itch to act?

**BJJ:** I'm always itching, the scratch I hope will never heal—but when to find the time? And more people (ahem) keep asking me to direct. This year alone I will do two shows at Northlight, one for you, one for Second City, and one for Baltimore Center Stage (Martin McDonagh's *A Skull in Connemara*).

## The Place: Ashington

The village of Ashington is located in the far northeast of England, just north of Newcastle in Northumberland. It was built by the Ashington Coal Co. and, as such, the village's life revolved around the mines. Like many pit villages it had its own clubs and activities and was a very tight-knit community. Rows of pit cottages, where the miners and their families lived, formed rows down muddy street lanes. A typical cottage had two to four rooms and sometimes a small garden.

The 1937 Shell Guide to Northumberland & Durham counties described the village as follows:

*“Ashington: Po. 40,000. Mining town, mostly built in the early part of this century. Dreary rows a mile long. Ashpits and mines down the middle of still unmade streets.”*

The coal company was responsible for much of the welfare of the town; it also ran the stores. When miners were unemployed in 1928, the company built football and cricket pitches. However, the role the company played in the village's life did not mean it was a compassionate benefactor. Mining history in general was fraught with accidents, health risks and strikes to obtain better pay and working conditions. Life in mining villages was difficult, and the closeness and collaborative spirit of their communities reflected the values of the people rather than the business.

Mine families were responsible for creating their own entertainment. Football, cricket, pigeon and greyhound races were popular, as was gardening and breeding dogs and pigeons. Most colliery towns, including Ashington, had their own band. The miner's gala was an immensely popular annual event.

Harry Wilson, a dental technician, recalled that when he arrived in Ashington in 1926:

*“There was no public library, no one here could get the loan of a book. The hospital was a small affair run by the miners themselves. There was no higher education except a small college run by the mine for mine training. There was no grammar school or technical school.”*

*“One thing about Ashington: there’s very little snobbish class distinction. You can make an error or a mess of things and still be accepted as a reasonable person.” — Harry Wilson*

## **The Workers’ Educational Association**

The Workers’ Educational Association (WEA), founded in 1903, offered lectures and courses to workers and others. The courses offered included wide-ranging topics like music, drama, biology, geology and evolution.

It advertised as “a federation of over 2500 organisations, linking labour with learning.” Between 1926 and 1927, approximately 70,000 people took advantage of its educational programs. All were welcome — “an enquiring mind is sufficient qualification,” claimed their materials.

The WEA courses offered not only a chance to learn more and fill a vital educational gap in mining villages, but also provided an opportunity for members of the community to socialize and build friendships.

*“There’s a desire in all pitmen I think to learn a little bit more than we were taught in school.”*

—Oliver Kilbourn, one of the pitmen in the Ashington Group

## **The Ashington Group**

On Oct. 29, 1934, under the auspices of the WEA, a group of miners met in the YMCA hall in Ashington. They were there to begin a course in art appreciation taught by Robert Lyon, the master of painting at Armstrong College, part of Durham University.

Lyon began by showing black-and-white slides on a projector. He chose mostly Renaissance paintings with religious or mythological subjects, which did not appeal to the miners. Lyon swiftly changed his approach. He described it in 1935 in the WEA magazine, *The Highway*:

*“It was perfectly clear that these men had decided views on what they did not want the class to be. They did not want to be told what was the correct thing to look for in a work of Art but to see for themselves why this should be correct; in other words they wanted a way, if possible of seeing for themselves.”*





*The Ashington Group at work left to right: George Rowe, Oliver Kilbourn, Harry Wilson, Andy Rankin, Arthur Whinnom, Harry Youngs (foreground), George Brownrigg, Jimmy Floyd, George Brown, Andy Foreman, unidentified and Leslie Brownrigg, photo by Julian Trevelyan 1938.*

The WEA had a policy that nothing could be taught that could be used to make a living, so Lyon had to get permission to teach the men how to make art as a means to learning to appreciate art.

The men started with linoleum cuts and worked their way through a variety of other mediums. As the miners progressed, Lyon wrote articles about their “experiment in art appreciation.” He introduced them to heiress and art patron Helen Sutherland, who invited the miners over to see her art collection at her home, Rock Hall, and funded a trip to London for them to go to the National Gallery and Tate Gallery.

The class became a group who met regularly to critique each others art. In 1936, they held their first exhibition. Publicity grew for the group and the miners were profiled in articles and on the radio as both a novelty and inspiring story.

The miners didn't seem changed by this exposure, but there were conflicting interests surrounding them and their work. Artists and the organizers of Mass-Observation, a group that aimed to create an anthropological study of the lives of ordinary people in Britain, Tom Harrisson and Julian Trevelyan visited Ashington. They hoped to report on them for their project and drew broad assessments of their art, seeing it as stemming from a working-class

sensibility. Harrisson offended the miners by bringing a case of beer — most of the men didn't drink — and leaving without paying for his lodging.

In spite of the publicity and preconceptions, World War II and the decline of the mining industry and the Ashington colliery itself, the Ashington Group continued to meet and paint, respond to each other's work and exhibit their art. After World War II they created a rule book for the group and met weekly to discuss each other's work.

In the 1970s, a renewed interest in their work led to exhibitions in Durham, London, Germany and Belgium. In 1980, their work was exhibited in China. It was the first exhibit from a western nation since the cultural revolution.

In 1983, the hut in which the group worked was demolished. And after the miner's strike between 1984 and 1985 broke the back of the industry, the Ashington colliery closed in 1988, a victim of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's efforts to close unprofitable mines as part of denationalizing the mines.

The group sold paintings to pay for supplies but kept much of their best work. Many of the paintings of the Ashington Group have been housed at the Woodhorn Colliery Museum in Ashington since 1989.

*“From the very beginning one of the reasons the class remained so was that we hadn't any desire really to become artists. That was entirely foreign to our way of thinking.” — Oliver Kilbourn*

## **The Context: Mining History in the North of England**

Coal mines in England date to the Romans. The energy supplied by coal was key to the industrial revolution and World Wars I and II. Northeast England was particularly defined by coal mining. Many villages, like Ashington, were created by or for coal mines, and the life of those communities revolved around the mines.

Miners worked on shifts around the clock. Many women who had both a husband and children working in the pits would sleep for a few hours at a time in a chair so they could make meals as they came in after different shifts.

A miner heading underground would hang an identification card around his neck so his body could be identified in an accident.

Ponies were used in the mines to help pull the tubs of coal.

## **The History: Nationalization**

After World War II, in spite of a decimated economy and infrastructure, England undertook sweeping efforts to nationalize many industries and programs to help rebuild the country and ensure national welfare.

Labour Party leader Clement Atlee made nationalization a campaign promise in the 1945 election. He pledged to destroy the five giants: want, squalor, disease, ignorance and unemployment. It was a message that resonated with an exhausted post-war nation. However, nationalization was not without controversy. Conservatives opposed it, comparing it to Stalin's industrial policy in the Soviet Union.

Labour won, and Atlee was elected prime minister, and nationalization was passed. The Bank of England was created in 1946 followed by the nationalization of the cable and wireless, coal, iron, steel and railway industries.

In 1946, the Coal Industry Nationalisation Act passed, establishing the National Coal Board.

On Jan. 1, 1947, all coal mines were taken into public ownership under the government-run Board. Under the auspices of the government, mining conditions saw substantial improvement. Pay cuts started during the war were lifted, and modernized equipment and safety standards were introduced, including paid holidays, sick pay and rest homes for sick and injured miners.

However, strikes were not a thing of the past: Workers continued to seek better pay, hours and safety measures — and tried to keep their mines from being closed.

## **The 1984 Miners' Strike and Denationalization**

In part, Lee Hall's play is a response to the mine closings that began in the 1980s during the Thatcher administration. The 1972 miner's strike effectively shut off electricity in much of the country.

In 1974, Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath lost reelection. His successor, Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, insisted she was not going to subsidize mines that were losing money. She also wanted to weaken the mine union's power. By 1984, Thatcher's government had quietly prepared for a potential miners' strike by stockpiling coal and making accommodations for coal-powered electrical plants to burn oil, if necessary, so as not to disrupt electricity.

The 1984 Miner's Strike began when the Cortonwood colliery in Yorkshire went on strike to protest the proposed mine closure. Many other miners, including those in Ashington, struck in solidarity. The strike lasted a year and inflicted severe financial hardship on miners and their families.

As the strike wore on, the picket lines became violent as strikers and police clashed. Two miners were prosecuted and imprisoned for murder when the brick they dropped on a taxi carrying scab miners to work hit the driver and killed him. The violence turned many in Britain against the miners, and the Labour Party, by its close association with the unions, lost public support in the wake of the strike.

After a very narrow National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) vote, the union workers who had suffered for a year were told they were returning to work — without gaining any concessions from the government.

Thatcher continued closing unprofitable mines. By 1997, all coal mines that had not been closed were privatized.

Nationalization was over.

## **Timeline: Mining History in England**

- 1909** The West Stanley Pit disaster. Explosions from two illegal lamps kill 160 men, 59 of them are under 20 years old.
- 1913** The Great Northern Coalfield employs nearly 250,000 people and produces 56 million tons of coal per year.
- 1920s** Most mine workers are still using pickaxes to mine coal. Only one fifth of the mines use machines.
- 1924** *The Daily Mail* publishes a letter claiming to be from the Soviet Communist leader Grigory Zinoviev. It urges British communists to start a revolution. The letter proves to be a hoax, but damage has been done to the trade unions because the middle class fears revolution.
- 1926** On May 26, a general strike is called by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) to support mining unions in their efforts to improve mining conditions and prevent a reduction in wages. *The Daily Mail* accuses the unions of trying to start a revolution. The strike collapses, and the TUC is ruined as an organization.
- 1927** The Trade Disputes and Trade Union Act makes sympathetic strikes and mass pickets illegal.

- 1946** The Coal Industry Nationalisation Act passes, establishing the National Coal Board.
- 1947** January 1, all coal mines are taken into public ownership under the government-run National Coal Board.
- 1951** 81 men are killed in an explosion at the Easington Colliery.
- 1950s** Thirteen mines close in the north of England.
- 1960s** More than 70 mines close in the north of England.
- 1972** The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) strikes against the government for seven weeks, seeking a pay raise. 289 mines close across the country. The electricity is turned off in numerous regions because of power shortages resulting from the lack of coal.
- 1974** A coal strike results in the ousting of Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath.
- 1981** The NUM votes to strike if any pits are closed for any reason other than the exhaustion of the seam. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher backs down.
- 1984** The NUM strikes over threatened pit closures. Thatcher, who wants to end mine subsidies, has stockpiled coal and is prepared for a long standoff. Difficult economic conditions in mining towns lead to picket-line violence.  
  
180,000 miners were working in 170 pits.
- 1985** March 3, miners call off the year-long strike, and Thatcher's pit-closure and privatization program continues. The power of the strongest labor union in the country was severely undermined.
- 1987** The National Coal Board becomes the British Coal Corporation.
- 1988** The Ashington Colliery closes.
- 1994** The Coal Industry Act creates the Coal Authority, taking over certain functions of the British Coal Corp., including granting leases, environmental compliance and historical preservation.
- 1997** Nationalization of the coal industry ends completely.
- 2004** In Britain, there are only 12 working pits with 6,000 employees. By the end of the year three more pits close with the loss of 2,100 more jobs.
- 2011** The private UK Coal company operates 9 mines with 2,900 employees.

## The Politics: The Labour Party

In 1900, a group of labor unions and socialist organizations that felt the interests of the people were not being represented by the Liberal or Conservative (Tory) parties met and formed the Labour Representation Committee. The committee was devoted to drawing the attention of Parliament to their concerns. When the Liberal Party split in 1916, Labour was positioned to become a party in its own right. Nationalization and national health care are arguably the most substantial legacies of the Labour Party.

In 1999, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced in a speech to the Labour Party conference: “The class war is over. The 21st Century will not be about the battle between capitalism and socialism, but between the forces of progress and the forces of conservatism.”

Blair was endeavoring to distance the Labour Party from its roots and redefine it as a progressive party — or, as he described it, a “democratic socialist party,” sometimes referred to as “new labour.”

## Socialism in England

It is important to understand that socialism has long been an accepted political system in England, often associated with unions and the working class. Many socialist societies were involved in the creation of the Labour Party, in alliance with various trade unions. Although there were attempts to scare the public with fears of a Soviet-style revolution in England, socialism in England does not have the Cold War taint that socialism and communism have in the United States.

In general, socialism refers to a system of political thought advocating that the ownership and means of production and distribution of capital be controlled by the community as a whole. It is strongly based in the philosophical writings of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels.

## The People



**Oliver Kilbourn** was one of only two miners who worked in the pit at the time the Ashington Group was formed. Other miners worked for the mine, but at other jobs not as miners underground. Kilbourn was one of the most passionate members of the group and continued working on his art even as other members of the group left. He painted a series of works on his life in the mines. His work was featured in a 2008 exhibit in the Northumbria University Gallery in Newcastle upon Tyne.

*“I haven’t been one for the usual pursuits of pitmen. I didn’t go in for keeping whippets or pigeons or growing leeks; I wasn’t even a club man, not to any extent. I took a great desire to express myself not with any thought of gain or anything like that but I couldn’t express myself so well in words and I found that I could express my feelings and what I wanted to get over in drawing and painting.” — Oliver Kilbourn*



*The Deluge*, by Oliver Kilbourn, circa 1935



**Harry Wilson** was gassed during World War I and, because of the damage to his lungs, was judged unfit to become a miner. He trained as dental technician. His skills at molding false teeth later would help his art as he created sculptures blending his art and technical skills.



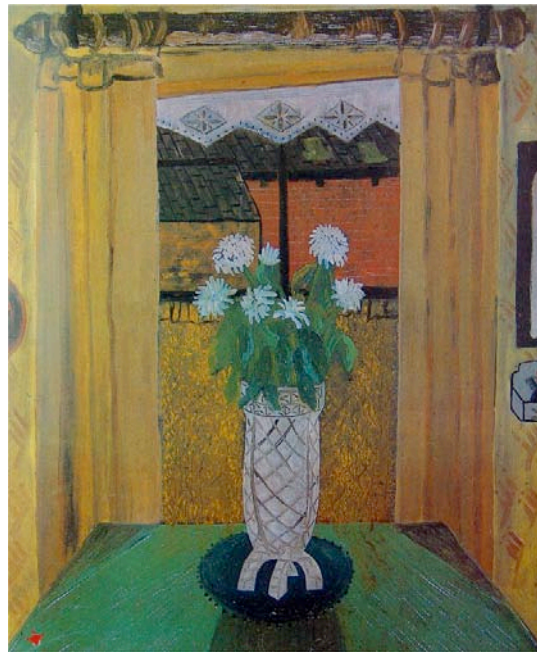
*The East Wind* by Harry Wilson, circa 1935

*“Except for the person I worked for I had no friends in Ashington but in the WEA I soon found myself among friends. In fact by the next year I was secretary of it. That gave me an opportunity to influence some of the things I was interested in and that was how we developed for about seven years. Biology, geology and the rest of it: it was a very interesting class and when that finished we felt we were at a dead end again so we started on Art.”*

—Harry Wilson



**Jimmy Floyd** was the other miner in the Ashington Group who was consistently working underground at the time the group was formed. Like Kilbourn, he would spend most of his working life underground. He was an onsetter, a role that involved moving filled tubs of coal into the cage to be winched up to the surface and receiving empty tubs.



*Flowers* by Jimmy Floyd, 1935

**George Brown** was the first named on the list of those who attended Robert Lyon’s Workers’ Education Association class in art appreciation. One of the oldest members of the Ashington Group, he was a prominent member of the WEA class on evolution. He had a reputation for being cantankerous and was among those who wanted to lay down rules for the group. He was known to chastise Jimmy Floyd for breaking the rules, and he once stormed out of the group’s work hut in a rage. He worked as a joiner, or carpenter, in London



before moving to Ashington to do the same work at the colliery. Artists and workers for Mass-Observation, Julian Trevelyan and Tom Harrisson, stayed with Brown and his wife while profiling the Ashington Group. Trevelyan paid board, but Harrisson left without paying for his. Harrisson, who had preconceived ideas about the miners, brought a case of beer as gift. Most of the miners didn't drink, and Brown was furious.

**Young Lad** is identified as George Brown's nephew. He is a composite of characters of various young artists in the Ashington Group. He reflects the tight-knit community in which fathers, sons, uncles and cousins all could work in the pit. He also reflects the changing values surrounding mining, as the young men left the mining villages during World War II.



Robert Lyon at work on a mural

**Robert Lyon** was the Master of Painting at Armstrong College (then affiliated Durham University) when he went to Ashington to teach the Workers' Education Association (WEA) art-appreciation class in October 1934. The miners didn't connect with the religious and mythological subject matter he initially chose for his lectures, so he quickly switched his approach to art appreciation through application.

Both because WEA guidelines said students could not learn anything that might be construed as a wage-earning skill and because he was a trained artist, Lyon frequently distanced the work the miners were producing from any kind of professional art. He was supportive of the group, introducing them to heiress and art patron Helen Sutherland, a variety of artists, showing

them art in London and continuing to teach the group. He wrote his master-of-art thesis on his experiment with the Ashington Group, “The Appreciation of Art through the Visual and Practical Approach.”

After eight years teaching the group, in July 1942 he accepted a post at the Edinburgh College of Art. He continued to communicate with various members of the group and came to their exhibitions. His “experiment in art appreciation” came at the right time to dovetail with public interest in art by the miners and social and educational movements about improving access to art and education.

*“The programme was not in any sense of the word an adaptation of the normal course followed in a School of Art, or of that of the training of an artist, but one which, it was hoped, would provide the class with a creative experience, and would so help them to appreciate better the creative experience in others.”*

—Robert Lyon, in his article “An Experiment in Art Appreciation” in *The Listener*

**Ben Nicholson** was born in Denham, the son of artists William Nicholson and Mabel Pryde. He studied at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. He married Winifred Roberts in 1920. His relationship with sculptor Barbara Hepworth resulted in the breakdown of his marriage in 1931. He married Hepworth in 1938; they divorced in 1951. He experimented with figurative and abstract works as well as Post-Impressionism, Cubism, and Constructivist principles applied to art. His first solo show was at age 21. He won the Carnegie Prize in 1952 and the Guggenheim International painting prize in 1956. Helen Sutherland was a friend and patron and she created a Ben Nicholson offertory box in her chapel at Rock Hall, her home in Northumberland.

*“We’d not experienced this sort of thing before and we certainly hadn’t met a practicing painter producing the abstract work that Nicholson was doing. So gradually our horizons were widening. You could really get down to it and talk about their pictures with the artist and really get to know what he was driving at, and you found that he was quite ordinary in a way, nothing to be afraid of: a person tackling a job.”* —Harry Wilson, describing meeting Nicholson and other painters

**Helen Sutherland** was the heiress of the P&O ocean liners through her father; she also inherited a fortune from her mother. She was a liberal; for a time, a Quaker; and a devoted patron of the arts. Robert Lyon brought her to meet the members of the Ashington Group in 1935 — he hired a live model for the event. Sutherland would become a supporter of the group, buying

paintings, inviting them to her home at Rock Hall, introducing them to artists such as Ben and Winifred Nicholson. She funded their trip to London to visit the National Gallery and the Tate Gallery. She would continue to see their exhibits. The last time the painters saw her was when she visited their exhibit in 1959.

*“Miss Sutherland expected you to be able to stand up and account for your activities. She would stand in front of a picture and ask precisely why this was done this way or why that person was included, and you couldn’t put her off. She was very perceptive and very rarely did you find out how her mind was working.”* — Harry Wilson

## **Outsider/Naïve/Folk Art**

It is difficult to classify the art being produced by the Ashington Group. Art produced by untrained artists often is called naïve, outsider or folk art. These terms can sound patronizing to the artists, though they are used throughout the art world.

The men in Ashington did not receive training in technique, yet, as they practiced, experimented with different mediums, read about and viewed art, the sophistication of their artwork grew. At the same time, members of the Ashington Group resisted identifying themselves primarily as artists.

In her 1987 article, “Toward a Theoretical Approach to Teaching Folk Art: A Definition,” in the *Studies in Art Education* journal, Dr. Kristin Congdon works toward a definition of folk art and some guidelines for teaching folk art. Congdon, points out that it is frequently “made by persons who do not call themselves artists as readily as creators from other art groups do” and is often the product of “a small close group.”

She argues that when folk art is taught, it should be emphasized that it is “not necessarily inferior, unsophisticated, or naïve” and that “folk artists are not categorically uneducated, nor are they culturally deprived.”

*The Pitmen Painters* prompts us to interrogate our responses to the art of working-class artists and examines cultural assumptions about class and access to art.

## The Geordie Dialect

by *The Pitmen Painters* Dialect Coach Tanera Marshall

“Geordie” is a regional nickname for a person from Tyneside, near Newcastle, in northeastern United Kingdom, and is also the name given to the regional dialect. The source of the moniker is thought to be “George,” a common name among the coalmining communities, and the name of the designer of the safety lamps typically used by pitmen, George Stephenson. Because the region supported coal mining for so long, the dialect came to be thought of as a miners’ dialect. The inhabitants of the region today still refer to themselves as Geordies, despite the closing of the mines in the ‘70s and ‘80s.

The Geordie dialect is distinguished by pronunciations and vocabulary that one may recognize as Scottish (“bairn” for child, “doon” for down) with an intonation and rhythm that sounds Irish. Complicating matters further still, some of the vowels are typical of the Yorkshire area surrounding Tyneside (“uh” in up, “a” in class). The result is a unique dialect that is quite unfamiliar to American ears.

Here are some common Geordie words:

divvent = don’t  
knaa = know  
canny = good or pretty  
wor = our  
iz = us

*I divvent knaa why he’s always paintin’. But those are some canny pictures, like!*

## Discussion Questions

### About the Play

1. There are moments in the play when certain characters address the audience directly. How do these scenes work in the play? Why is it important to hear the thoughts of a particular character at that moment?
2. Both Robert Lyon and Helen Sutherland have a complicated relationship with the pitmen painters and Oliver Kilbourn in particular. Are they primarily supportive? Do they ever undermine his work? Do class distinctions make a difference in this context?

3. At the end of the play do you feel there has been a change in the miners and how they view themselves? Has there been a similar shift in the other characters or the state of politics in England?
4. Two themes threading through the play are the role of art and class structure. What role does art play in the lives of the miners? How does that compare to the role it plays for the trained artists and the art patron in the play? How is class depicted in relation to access to art? How is it depicted in understanding, producing or appreciating art?

### **About the Production**

1. The play is staged in such a way that the audience surrounds much of the action. How does it impact your experience of the play to be so close to the actors? How does it feel to see other audience members responding to the play opposite you?
2. Projections are used throughout the play both to show the paintings and the mines. How do the projections enhance your experience of the play? The paintings are also reproduced on stage. Did you find your eye drawn to the slides or the paintings or the actors?
3. Most of the characters in the play speak in a Geordie, dialect which is specific to a small region in the North of England. How did the playwright use the dialect for humor and to distinguish certain characters? Why is the dialect important to the play?

### **About the History**

1. The play is set in the North of England where economic conditions have often been difficult and mining has always been a dangerous and difficult profession. How does their work influence the art the miners create? How is their art related to their work and lives? Is the criticism of their work that Helen Sutherland gives Oliver near the end of the play justified?
2. The play is also set in a political context of a moment when the mines as well as railways and health care were nationalized by the British government. How does this context influence the characters both in their politics and art? How does it impact the end of the play and the information the audience receives about denationalization? Is the play primarily hopeful or not?
3. World War I and II are not directly depicted in the play but they are referenced by the characters and by the art. How does the play show the impact those wars had on the British people and the characters specifically? How do they use art to respond to the war?

## References and Further Reading

### Books

- *Pitmen Painters: The Ashington Group 1934-1984*, William Feaver
- *A Stepladder to Painting*, Jan Gordon
- *The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell
- *The English At Home*, Bill Brandt
- *The Workers' Educational Association: The First Fifty Years*, Mary D. Stocks
- *Annual Report and Statement of Accounts of the Workers' Educational Association 1930-1940*
- *Art in England*, Richard Stanton Lambert ed.
- *A Continuous Line: Ben Nicholson in England*, Holt and Garlake Ed.
- *Lectures on Art: Delivered before the University of Oxford in Hilary Term, 1870*, John Ruskin
- *The Political Economy of Art*, John Ruskin
- *Cézanne, a Study of His Development*, Roger Fry

### Articles

- "Toward a Theoretical Approach to Teaching Folk Art: A Definition," *Studies in Art Education Journal*, Dr. Kristin Congdon

### Films

- *The Stars Look Down* (1939)
- *The Real Pitmen Painters*
- *Miners' Hymns*

### Museums and Archives

- **The Ashington Group at the Woodhorn Colliery Museum**  
<http://www.ashingtongroup.co.uk/home.html>
- **The National Archives Mining Records**  
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/coal-mining.htm>
- **Humphrey Spender Photographic Archive of Ashington in 1938**  
<http://www.pastperfect.org.uk/sites/woodhorn/archive/humphrey.html>
- **BBC Coal Mining in Britain collection**  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/mining/>
- **BBC Coal Mining Film Archive, featuring interviews with members of the Ashington Group:**  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/nationonfilm/topics/coal-mining/background.shtml>