Joan Miller. *Aberfan: A Disaster and its Aftermath*. London: Constable, 1974, 207 pp.

Fifteen minutes after the Pantglas Junior School began classes on October 21, 1966, a coal tip above the Welsh village of Aberfan slipped down Merthyr Mountain engulfing the school and twenty homes. By the time the clearance operation was complete, 144 fatalities were recorded, 116 of these children. *Aberfan* is an account of the growth of community awareness, concern and organization in the six years following this disaster.

In the century since the Merthyr Vale colliery was first established, the Aberfan area has seen more than its share of mining catastrophes. But the 1966 tip slide was dramatically different. Whereas the threat of death is part of the 'occupational subculture' of coal mining, the possibility of dependents perishing from mining related hazards is not. In Aberfan, almost a complete generation of children was killed in a single moment. Furthermore, the Aberfan tragedy could not easily be explained as an 'act of God'. Residents had been complaining for years about the danger Tip 7 constituted for the village, but the National Coal Board and other official sources always issued reassurance that there was no real danger. Aberfan parents thus faced the disturbing realization that, but for their lack of effective local political power, the slide might have been averted.

In this highly readable and decidedly humanistic account, Joan Miller, a former Methodist deaconess and medical social worker and a lecturer in social work at University College, Cardiff, traces the growing awareness in the village that through concerted action, helplessness could be transformed into a successful demand for participation in events and decisions which vitally affected Aberfan life. At first, a Parents' and Residents' Association was formed primarily to provide legal representation at the official Tribunal of Inquiry. As other pressing issues arose, however, this organization assumed the role of watchdog for the community's safety. When the Education Department decided that the children of Aberfan would temporarily be sent to a school in nearby Methyr Vale, the Association spearheaded opposition to the plan. The pressure to have Aberfan adequately represented on the Disaster Fund Committee came largely from this organization. On numerous occasions the Association acted in an ombudsman capacity, intervening on behalf of those individual residents who had difficulties with the Fund or the Coal Board. A second group, the Tip Removal Committee served a somewhat similar function and succeeded in convincing the Cabinet that the other tips had to be levelled no matter what the cost.

The author describes this process of increased community awareness and social action as 'conscientization', a term employed in the analysis of Third World development by Latin American researchers Luis Alfero and Paolo Freire. A vital aspect of conscientization is the realization that expertise is not the sole prerogative of the professional classes but can be utilized by all in the community. Accordingly, the decision of the Parents' and Residents' Association to employ engineering experts to make inspections of the tips and of possible flood conditions is seen by Miller as a kind of coming of age for Aberfan residents in terms of awareness of the role they could play in society.

What is not clearly delineated in the book,

however, is under what set of conditions this conscientization process is likely to occur in other communities in Wales or elsewhere. The author stresses the importance of 'dialogue' and 'bringing people together'; yet, surely these do not in themselves constitute a sufficient condition for such a major social change to occur. It would seem that the existence of an officially acknowledged scapegoat (i.e.) the National Coal Board, the fact that there was a generally felt sense of guilt over what had occurred in Aberfan (the disaster was frequently described as the human cost of a century of cheap coal), and the availability of considerable financial resources (the Disaster Fund totalled £ 1,750,000) were all significant, if not idiosyncratic, factors acting to facilitate the growth and effectiveness of community organization here. In this regard, it might have been instructive for Ms Miller to have compared Aberfan to other communities which have faced similar disaster situations. For example, the author herself cites the Welsh village of Senghenydd, where 439 men were killed in a 1913 pit disaster, as an example of a community which never recovered from disaster, but does not adequately explain why this should be so. More recently, the 1972 Buffalo Creek (West Virginia) dam break would appear to present a particularly good point of comparison.

In sum this is a thoughtful and often moving account of a community's return from an overwhelming tragedy. In particular, *Aberfan* should be of interest to community sociologists concerned with the important contemporary problems of local autonomy, identification and participation. Although the book's emphasis is not on disaster as such, it is an all too rare example of a *long range* treatment of social change after a community emergency. By 1974, a project had been initiated which was designed to bring the insights of the Aberfan experience to other communities in the South Wales Valleys. This hopefully will be the topic of another equally revealing volume.

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