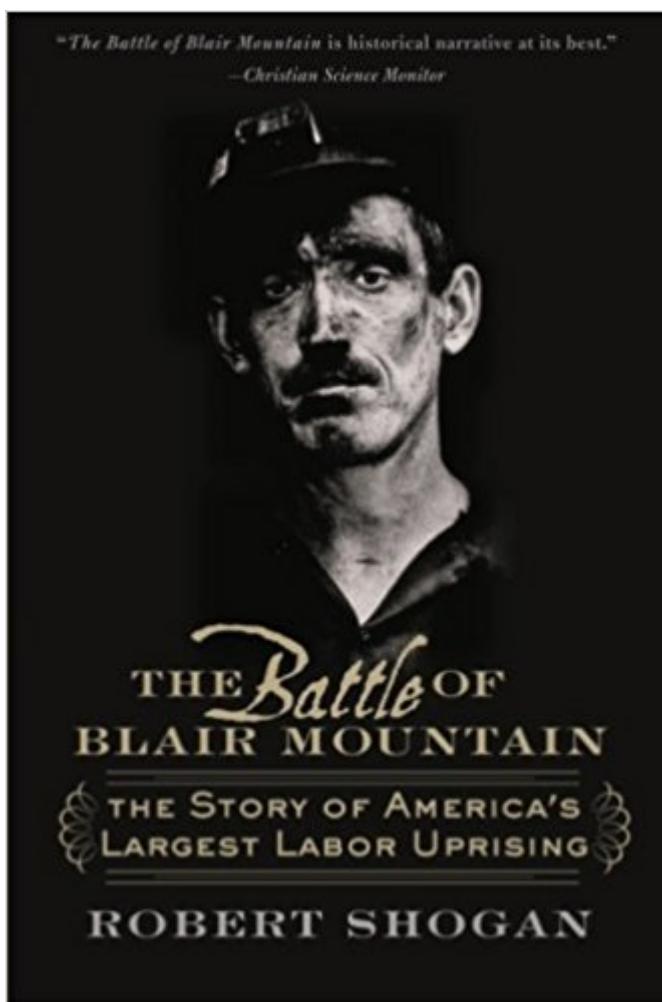


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# The Battle Of Blair Mountain: The Story Of America's Largest Labor Uprising



## **Synopsis**

In 1921, some 10,000 West Virginia coal miners-- outraged over years of brutality and exploitation-- picked up their Winchesters and marched against their tormentors, the powerful mine owners who ruled their corrupt state. For ten days the miners fought a pitched battle against an opposing legion of deputies, state police, and makeshift militia. Only the intervention of a Federal expeditionary force ended this undeclared war. In *The Battle of Blair Mountain*, Robert Shogan shows this long-neglected slice of American history to be a saga of the conflicting political, economic, and cultural forces that shaped the power structure of twentieth-century America.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

In this concise, dramatic and authoritative account of the bloody 1921 encounter between the mine workers and mine owners of the West Virginia coalfields-- the most tumultuous labor battle in American history-- Shogan gives us a strikingly vivid post-WWI America both utterly foreign and oddly familiar. A former political reporter for *Newsweek* and the *Los Angeles Times*, Shogan is as much good feature writer as historian. Out of a confusing and often still-disputed series of events, he sets scenes and fills in necessary background with an unfussy narrative drive. Such well-known figures as the mercurial Mother Jones and the stalwart Samuel Gompers have their roles, as do a pair of presidents (Wilson and Harding), whose dithering made a difficult situation worse. Less familiar figures such as the organizer Sid Hatfield and the detective C.E. Lively are drawn with lifelike strokes. Police raids and deportations, bombs sent through the mail and a general air of

panic and "red" hysteria build as miners and owners move inexorably toward their ultimate confrontation. The tragic outcome of the battle between a group of mountain people and the full power of the emerging superstate—with WWI hero (and later state senator) Billy Mitchell's biplanes ready, 15 years before Guernica, to bomb civilians—is inevitable, but it is Shogan's triumph here to make the reader feel it anew. A minor quibble is the otherwise fine bibliography's failure to mention John Sayles's *Matewan*, surely an important (and reasonably accurate) version of the events in question. 10 b&w photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"A mesmerizing, rarely mentioned piece of labor history, crackingly told." Kirkus (starred review)"

Having read Denise Giardina's fictional account of events surrounding the battle (*Storming Heaven*), having seen John Sayles' film "Matewan," and having viewed the account as offered in the West Virginia documentary of a few years back, I was hoping for some fairly extensive background into the conflict. Some background is provided -- the book is not a waste for those who have some familiarity with the events. For those without fairly extensive knowledge, the book should prove an eye-opener. Yes, there was a time in this fair nation when corporations had rights and individuals -- human beings who suffered the ignominy of not being rich -- did not. The economic schism we are plunging into presently existed before, and men whose only crime was demanding to be paid fairly for their work were treated as criminals and rebels. Shogan provides some insight into the political world that allowed these injustices as well as a good account of the Battle and the events leading up to it. Again, not quite as much background as I had hoped for, but the book is more than good enough to make an impression. Valuable reading!

The Battle of Blair Mountain tells one story in the long history of American labor unions. It is a story that few Americans know, or were aware of even at the time that the events occurred. It shines a bright light on the struggle of the United Mine Workers to organize mine workers in West Virginia, in the face of opposition from an ownership concerned only with maximizing their profits. It tells how mine owners used their political clout, the desperation caused by the Great Depression, hired "detectives" and the fear raised by the rise of Communism in Europe, to disenfranchise and defeat union organizers and members. It illustrates clearly the difficulty in maintaining individual rights and protections for laborers when wealthy corporate interests collude with weak and often corrupt local

government officials. As well as being an important story, this is a well-written and extremely interesting book. There is enough background provided to provide the reader with an understanding of how such a story could be left out of most history textbooks, and yet the narrative isn't bogged down by asides or details. It is very readable and I recommend it highly.

A detailed account of the struggles deep miners had in getting a reasonable wage for the dirty and dangerous job theyes had. The more you learn the clearer the understanding that these people were slave, bound to a dirty, dangerous job, paid on company script that was worthless anywhere but in the company stores. The government cooperated by purposefully keeping education nonexistent in order to insure a steady supply of workers with no other option. This is what kept the northern industrial complex profitable and insuring a comfortable life for millions of people while the miners and their families lived in abject poverty! Slaves in all respects except by name.

Excellent story of a largely forgotten event in the history of labor/ capital relations. An army of "rednecks" in their red bandannas sought to stand up for themselves and demand justice for crimes committed by the mine owners' army of thugs was broken up when the US army intervened a forced them home. A fascinating read about power and (in) justice.

I was disappointed with this book after reading several of the academically oriented histories of the period that go into detail about the war particularly from the miners' point of view. I hope for more detail on the actual happenings of the battle, more focus on its aftermath. Shogan is a journalist who seems to have had a fascination with this incident for decades. However, it seems that his career as a Washington based reporter, has shifted too much of this story inside the beltway (of course before the beltway was conceived.) Shogun spends too much time talking about the reactions of politicians in Washington and for that matter politicians in West Virginia. He will not only tell you what they did, but give you their entire life background. He does this with the union officials on a national level like John Mitchell and John L. Lewis without giving us much of a picture of what their roles were in the union strategy inside West Virginia or with the federal government. Given the abundance of books that are much better researched about the general struggle for West Virginia coal in the first decades of the 20th Century, I had hoped that Shogan would not provide a rehash of what had already been written. Unfortunately, this is exactly what he did with anecdote and a general outline that appears to have been taken from other texts without much thought. Likewise, I hoped that he would zero in and provide many more details about the actual battle, which is, after all the subject of

his book, but there really isn't much in here that you can't find elsewhere, and elsewhere there is much more serious discussion of the struggle that led to the battle and the economics and politics and sociology of both miners and the coal bosses. One wishes, someone outside the beltway and close enough to a coal camp had written this story, or even some military writer who is used to giving details of battles.

Robert Shogan writes a good narrative explaining the Battle of Blair Mountain. He starts some time before the actual battle to help you understand exactly what caused the largest labor uprising in American history. At first though, his writing style can be a little hard to understand as he jumps around a bit but you quickly adapt to it. This is a must read for any one interested in American History, American Labor, or just in America in general. It is a well crafted story that really takes you to the heart of the union struggle in West Virginia.

Very interesting book, well written. A very good read about labor and the hardships endured.

Great movie

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