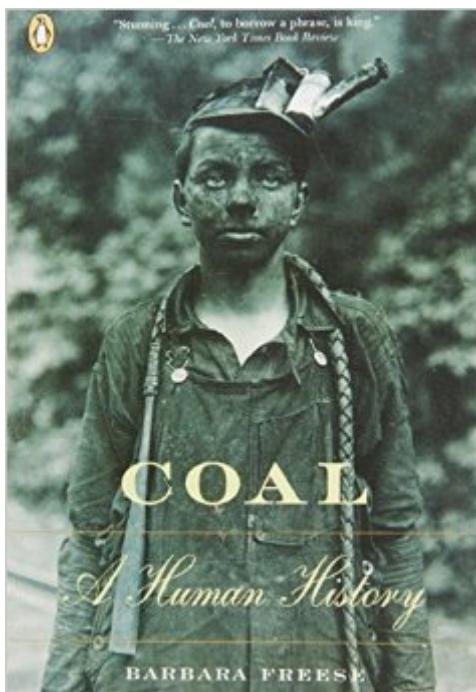


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Coal: A Human History



Synopsis

In this remarkable book, Barbara Freese takes us on a rich historical journey that begins hundreds of millions of years ago and spans the globe. Prized as the best stone in Britain by Roman invaders who carved jewelry out of it, coal has transformed societies, expanded frontiers, and sparked social movements, and still powers our electric grid. Yet coal's world-changing power has come at a tremendous price, including centuries of blackening our skies and lungs and now the dangerous warming of our global climate. Ranging from the great stinking fogs of London to the rat-infested coal mines of Pennsylvania, from the impoverished slums of Manchester to the toxic streets of Beijing, Coal is a captivating narrative about an ordinary substance with an extraordinary impact on human civilization.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books (January 27, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0142000981

ISBN-13: 978-0142000984

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.7 x 7.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 8.5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars See all reviews (68 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

I moved back to the United States after living for about 8 years in Manchester, England. Even today, you can still identify the effects of coal in Manchester--from the many chimneys around the Northern landscape, to the coal-blackened Victorian warehouses. When I bought a house there, I pulled-up carpets that covered wood floors since 1911, and I myself was covered with coal dust that accumulated over the decades. Finally, in the North of England, you still have a few coal mining villages and towns that have very strong cultures. So I was aware of coal when I lived there, and had become curious. Freese's book is an excellent and engaging history of the history of coal and its relationship to the history of three nations: The United Kingdom, the United States, and China. She

writes exceptionally fluidly, with, at once, broad sweeps and minute details that keep you both interested and informed. She also has a lovely dry sense of humor. Her chapter on Manchester, by the way, is excellent. The book isn't academic (to her credit), but nor is it a vapid popular account. Instead, Freese has written a book that does the nearly impossible in that it is well-researched, historically accurate, engaging almost, but not, to the point of being chatty. I couldn't put it down. What it lacks, by way of an academic angle, is a discussion of what else had been written in the past about the history of coal, as well as a theoretical approach. This is hardly a criticism because that really isn't the intention of this book. In fact, believe the book would have suffered had she taken this approach. I agree with another reviewer who suggested that Freese didn't know how to end the book--although I did find her discussion of alternatives to coal to be compelling. There are two typos in the book that evaded the copy editor, but otherwise this book is a small masterpiece. You will enjoy it.

I found this book to be well-written in a literary sense. While correctly critical of coal where justified, Freese does not descend into partisan polemic and cliche when discussing difficult issues. The book covers nearly all the major issues that coal has faced over the centuries - including the little-recognised fact that Europe went through an energy crisis as forests were depleted before coal came into widespread use hundreds of years ago. However, I was surprised that Freese did not cover the major role that coal played in the development of organic chemical industries based on coal liquids in the 19th century. We owe synthetic dyes and major advances in the understanding of organic chemistry to coal liquid by-products of coke and gas making in the 19th century. Solvents such as benzene were also first made from coal tars. The misuse of these chemicals also led to major advances in the understanding of occupational health and epidemiology - some of the most significant medical advances of the 20th century.

This book discusses the history of coal as a two-edged sword, as both a creator and a destroyer. Freese is extraordinary in her history of coal and its impact on England, and then on how coal has impacted American history as well. The social effects of coal consumption for the last five centuries has been immense and far-reaching -- allowing human comfort in otherwise unlivable areas, later allowing its energy to be harnessed for transportation and then electric power. That this comes at an astonishing price in terms of human lungs comes as no surprise but Freese's narrative is vivid, subtle, and convincing. The last chapters on China and the future of coal read more anecdotally, more like a travelogue, so they seem a bit disjointed from the first part of the book. That's the cost of

a shift from historical writing into contemporary issues and speculation on the future impact of coal, which I do think Freese has accomplished with measure and balance.

This book is a good introduction to the history of coal and issues surrounding its use. It's not an extensive history of all of its uses as other reviewers have observed and the author's credentials as an environmental lawyer let you know which side of the fence she stands on. However, she makes a good try at presenting a balanced viewpoint, and usually succeeds. The book is very readable, and for anyone with an interest in energy issues, it should be entertaining.

Barbara Freese's book has it all. It's about an important topic and it's very easy to read. The first few chapters deal with the discovery of coal as fuel, the pollution that resulted, the use of coal to run the British empire, and how coal was dug out of the ground. She describes the industrial revolution, noting that Thomas Newcomen invented the steam engine, not James Watt. (Although Watt did make important improvements.) Then she switches over to the US. She describes the coal-mining regions of the Appalachians and the two types of coal. (One burns easier but is dirtier than the other.) Pollution is a key part of the story throughout these chapters. That sets up the final third of the book: coal mining gets automated, alternative fuels are introduced, and the environmental impact of pollution is described. If this is your first book on coal, pollution, or fossil fuel, it won't be your last. Barbara Freese makes the topic very interesting. She whets your appetite for more.

With today's concerns regarding energy, and the switch from oil to alternative fuels, this book provides how it felt when the use of coal had reached its peak in the 19th century and oil began to replace coal as a cleaner, more efficient alternative fuel source. The book was well written, and gave a timeline of coal's inception as an energy source, and the ill-effects experienced by society as a result of its use. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in non-fiction.

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