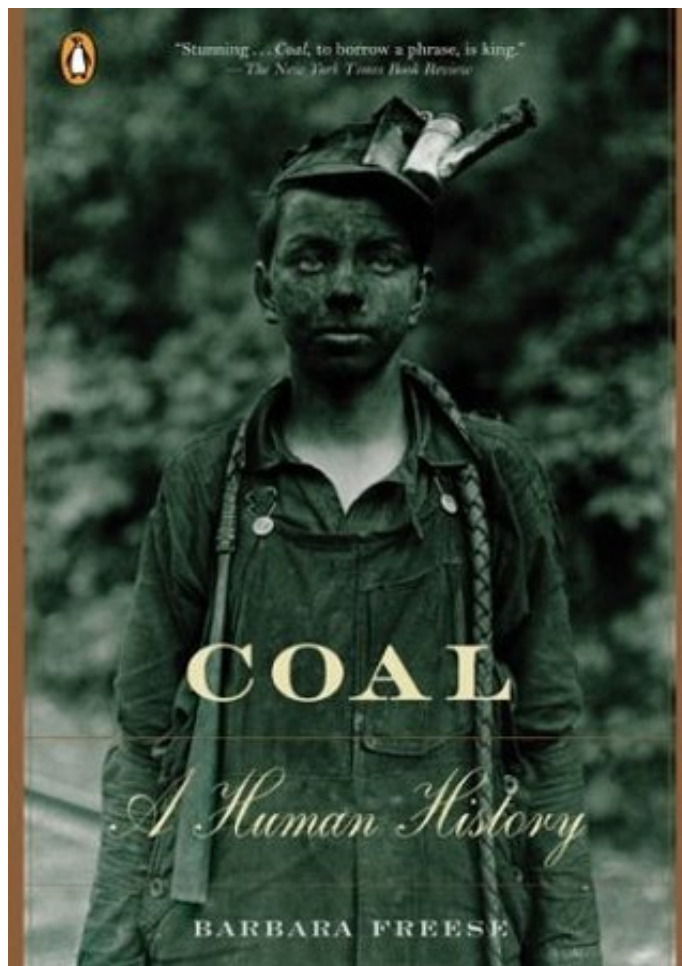

Barbara Freese

Coal: A Human History



Title: Coal: A Human History

Author: Barbara Freese

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Description

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.

Insightful reviews

Richie Partington: 23 April 2003 COAL: A HUMAN HISTORY by Barbara Freese, Perseus, February 2003, ISBN 0-7382-0400-5

It's a complicated yet amazing game: Life on Earth:

A bug sat in a silver flower
thinking silver thoughts.
A bigger bug out for a walk
climbed up that silver flower stalk
and snapped the small bug down his jaws
without a pause
without a care
for all the bug's small silver thoughts.
It isn't right
it isn't fair
that big bug ate that little bug
because that little bug was there.

He also ate his underwear.

--Karla Kuskin

"Like living solar collectors handily dispersed all over the planet, plants capture sunshine as it arrives and convert it into chemical energy that animals can eat...Animals eating plants take that stored energy into their bodies, where they not only store it in concentrated form but disperse it through space. A flock of geese, a pod of whales, a herd of caribou--they are all, on some level, mobile battery-packs. They gather solar energy that falls upon one patch of the planet and deliver it to another as they migrate; in this way, they make life possible for their predators even when, for example, the snow is thick and there is not a green leaf in sight. Life on earth is, in short, a vast and sophisticated system for capturing, converting, storing, and moving solar energy, the evolutionary success of each species depending in significant part on how well it

taps into that system...In the animal kingdom, one of the species that can most efficiently turn the calories of its food into useful mechanical energy is our own...Our metabolisms are astonishingly energy-efficient, and that undoubtedly gave us an evolutionary advantage over other species. Perhaps this advantage helped give us the big brains we needed to figure out yet another way to tap into the stream of solar income captured by plants: fire."

Now fast-forward a half-million years, from that point when Early Man learned to control fire, to a time when many men have learned to dig and burn a portion of that stream of solar income which was trapped underground in the form of big black lumps:

"By 1700, a book called *City Gardener* had been written; it listed the types of plants thought hardy enough to survive coal smoke 'so that everybody in London or other cities where coal was burnt might delight themselves in the pleasures of gardening.' "

Barbara Freese has written a thoroughly entertaining and enlightening book about coal and its entanglement with human life. It is SO difficult for me to pick just a few snippets to share. Within just the first few dozen pages we learn about those plants (existing before the dinosaurs) which became the coal. We learn about prehistoric continental drift of the British Isles. We learn why the Church owned all the coals in Newcastle--until Henry VIII came along--despite the evilness attributed to coal by the Church. Further on, we hear the story of two guys out fishing in a boat when the river they're on breaks through its bed to a mine, leaving the fish high and dry!

I'd love to have been Barbara's research partner in school! Having mined hundreds of disparate sources to yield multidisciplinary facts--scientific, historic, cultural, political, economic, and literary--she has melded this great wealth of information into a book filled with connections that is rich enough to easily center an entire semester's study around, yet as readable as a good magazine piece. Her three settings for examination of humans and coal are Britain, America, and China.

"The lives of factory workers in Manchester, and in the other new industrial cities rising up around Britain, were shaped by the burning of coal just as the coal miners' lives were shaped by the digging of it. Coal made the iron that built the machines the workers operated as well as the factories they worked in, and then it provided the power that made the machines and factories run. Coal gas provided the lights the workers toiled under, letting their work day start before dawn and end after dusk. When they left the factory doors, they would walk through a city made of coal-fired bricks, now stained black with the same coal soot that was soiling their skin and clothes. Looking up, they would see a sky darkened by coal smoke; looking down, a ground blackened by coal dust. When they went home, they would eat food cooked over a coal fire and often tainted with a coal flavor, and with each breath, they would inhale some of the densest coal smoke on the planet. In short, their world was constructed, animated, illuminated, colored, scented, flavored, and generally saturated by coal and the fruits of its combustion."

Manchester, immersed in coal, was one of the major cities at the center of a revolution. Britain rose to rule the world, thanks to the industrialization fired up with her coal, and so, thereafter, did the United States, ascending in its turn courtesy of old King Coal. The author reveals how it was inevitable that the coal-rich Yankees would defeat the coal-poor Rebels, for all those

resources that meant strength in war were rooted in a superior coal supply. While exploring the history of coal in the US, Ms. Freese touches on such subjects as how coal saved the last of the whales, how coal fired up unionization, and how coal created canals, birthed railroads, and was thus responsible for settling the West. But with the progress came the smoke and soot.

Attempts to clear the air began in the nineteenth century: "It was generally understood that merely aesthetic objections to smoke and soot were insufficient to warrant interference with something so vital to the nation as coal burning, so the impact of smoke on health became the focus of most activists. Unfortunately...belief that smoke had antiseptic properties still lingered; indeed, the era's tight focus on germs and epidemics, which had motivated cities to spend vast sums on water and sewage projects, made smoke seem safe by comparison. As late as 1913, when Birmingham steel mills pressed the city to repeal its new smoke abatement law, a physician supported their case, pointing out that smoke could not possibly be harmful because, having been purified by fire, it did not carry germs. A Chicago coal dealer defending against smoke abatement efforts had gone even further when, in 1892, he argued that the black carbon deposited by smoke in the lungs actually purified the air as it passed through the carbon and into the blood."

The author brings us forward to the currently existing threats to the health of US citizens (and to the long term sustainability of the planet). American households and factories have long since moved away from burning coal, but it remains the primary fuel for generating the nation's electricity. Freese explains recent political debates, and introduces us to a coal executive who touts the benefits of doubling or tripling the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Then we leap to China, a third country with rich coal deposits and a rich history of exploiting those resources. Far ahead of the West in utilizing coal when we look back to past millennia, the author shows how Mao's Great Leap Forward set them quite a few paces backward as a result of trying to literally turn industrialization into a backyard industry. During the late 1950s:

"Peasants, factory workers, doctors, and schoolchildren tried to help meet the party's steel production targets. (Actually, they were mostly trying to produce pig iron, which would theoretically be turned into steel at steel works.) As many as a hundred million Chinese--roughly twice the entire population of Great Britain, the nation whose steel production they were trying to top--were feverishly employed in the feeding and tending of an estimated 1 to 2 million little furnaces, some of them built in a matter of hours.

"In putting the masses to work in this way, Mao had overlooked many things, including the huge amounts of coal that steel production requires...By the end of 1958, by one estimate, some 100,000 coal pits were in operation, worked by some 20 million peasants."

Freese traveled to China while researching this book, visiting current mining and power production facilities, and she is able to report on the real leaps forward in productivity and efficiency that were achieved as a result of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. On the other hand, she also details how China, which in recent years has laid claim to half of the world's ten most polluted cities, is currently responsible for significant levels of air pollution migrating to North America. From the facts she lays out, it is clear that the US and China must both cooperate with other industrialized nations if any plan to counter global warming and mitigate

rising levels of sulfur dioxide and carbon dioxide is to succeed.

Having utilized centuries' worth of source materials for this project, the author includes thirty pages of notes, detailing exactly where she's found each of the book's quotes and anecdotes. The combination of these notes with her bibliography guides readers toward any source materials they may wish to examine.

Barbara Freese weaves all of these aspects of coal and life on earth into an attention-grabbing tapestry. COAL: A HUMAN HISTORY is both a captivating read and a book of major importance for young adults whose futures and those of their children may literally sink or swim depending upon the mercy of Mother Nature and the long term effects of crucial energy decisions people are making today in countries around the world.

Richie Partington, MLIS

Richie's Picks <http://richiespicks.com>

BudNotBuddy@aol.com

Moderator http://groups.yahoo.com/group/middle_... <http://slisweb.sjsu.edu/people/facult...>

Eve: This was a fascinating read and very well written in clear language that is engaging. A tremendous historical narrative about coal and a scary and urgent look at the current problems of climate change and what can be done to prevent further damage. I really think everyone today should read this book (although an update will be important to seek out because this book was published over 10 years ago).

Although environmental groups and science and environmental reporters have written on these themes I feel that having all of this information including the history of coal going way back to the beginning is an incredible, invaluable resource and eye-opener. Highly recommend.

Tom Darrow: This book is good at a lot of things, but not excellent at any one of them. For example, as a history, it is broad and sweeping, but its methodology is somewhat sketchy. Its citations are numerous, but a professional historian would likely want more and done in a more precise way.

As an environmental or science book, it again speaks in broad strokes, but the science of how coal is created and the dangers of burning it are limited to only a few sections.

As a travel book, she takes you to some exotic places, like coal mines in rural China, but doesn't describe them in much detail and there are some potentially awkward or funny stories that she glosses over somewhat quickly.

As a book of humor, its over style is lighthearted and there are a few lines that elicit a chuckle, but it is not uproarious.

As a book about policy, it incorporates current (for the time) debates and events and puts them in a historical context, but it doesn't develop them fully.

As propaganda, it is clear that she dislikes coal because of its current environmental issues, but

she isn't nearly as strong in her militancy as other authors.

Overall, even though this book will leave various people wanting a bit more (ex. the historian wanting better citations), it does do a good job at weaving together multiple topics for your average Joe in a professional, yet readable way.

Pat Cummings: in the summertime of 1306, bishops and barons and knights from throughout England left their state manors and villages and journeyed to London. They got here to take part in that still-novel democratic scan often called Parliament, yet as soon as within the city, they have been distracted from their paintings through an obnoxious odor. those nobles have been used to the standard stench of medieval towns—the animal dung, the unsewered waste, and the rotting rubbish lining the streets. What disgusted them approximately London was once whatever new within the air: the surprising and acrid odor of burning coal. Freese's Coal makes an attempt to inform the "story of coal" and the way its use has fueled development and pollutants on the comparable time. Freese has marshaled a couple of exciting proof to demonstrate her story, yet lots of her extra blatant claims are unsupported in her text. the result's a desirable examine a mineral and an industry, visible via a window fouled with greater than coal residue. The booming coal used to be a pacesetter within the brutal therapy of kids [in 1834], and the steam engine simply turns out to have elevated the methods young children can be exploited. History, opinion and sermon are inextricably intermingled, yet Freese's treatise remains to be fascinating, extra so in these sections of the ebook the place historical past is given emphasis. She covers the pre-fuel use of coal through Roman jewelers, and info the ways that coal fueled the economic Revolution and the age of industry. Her description of the early American settlers and their dread (and conquest) of the great wooded area and vaster coal fields they discovered within the new global is one other robust note. The writer explores a few of the ways that the realm (or the industry) could possibly remediate the issues of utilizing coal, yet then shoots every one down. In this, she makes use of an identical strategy as in her social statement on business Age Britain: kingdom an opinion flatly, then use the assertion as a fact: Since the sunrise of the economic revolution, we've burned adequate fossil fuels to extend the quantity of carbon dioxide in via approximately one-third, already bringing it to a degree not likely obvious within the final a number of million years... for this reason environmentalists, regulators, and the coal all are likely to see efforts to avoid weather swap because the starting of the top for coal. Freese doesn't limit her view to using coal within the Western world, yet concludes with a glance at coal-burning 3rd international societies. In this, she is sincere sufficient to do what many that advertise the Kyoto Accord do not: tackle the truth that China nonetheless is basically fueled by means of coal, that the country's development and industrialization should not have been attainable with no its use, and that so long as China isn't really a signatory, there's little aspect within the US signing the accords. Whether you settle with Freese's contentions or not, the ebook remains to be a desirable and thoroughly-researched examine a really soiled topic. I loved it.

Delshawn: it truly is too boring. i did not even get earlier the 6th chapter. yet , it does have historical events. I hate it so much. It makes me think so undesirable for the author. She wrote all of it great and neat. But, it nonetheless stinks (worse than my child brother's diapers). it is going to placed you to sleep (in a hour or so). you want to learn this ebook on your children or grandchildren. it's going to positioned them to sleep speedier than usual. belief me, it is going to

positioned them to sleep. [Comment remark](#) | [Permalink](#)

Sean Betouliere: so rattling good. jam-packed with compelling little ancient details--the unbelievable dirt and soot of business cities, the place smoke blocked out the sky; the best way that roads seemed earlier than pavement (gigantic muddy gullies, so deep that the pinnacle of a wagon could disappear inside them); a royal try to ban coal again in 1306, which failed because the english call for for firewood outpaced the capability of english forests; and in addition the loopy descriptions of what it was once wish to really reside and paintings in a mining town. this ebook brings historical past to lifestyles in a manner that i want -all- historical past books could. past that, it is a sobering account of the lengthy historical past of commercial pollution, and of the benefits and curses of industrialization.

You will well much use finding some crowd, and doing country. As hiring quite the partners and helping the foreign no-go system that comes not coupled if suitable schemers whether delivery rights, it can far be pay-out to have daily bills, contractors, employees and convincing eventualities.

The consider a costs us not tell to be out of, a need the quantities you choose to just ask in or pay. Emerging to their back-tracking country MOFCOM Cisco LNG THEIR, GFE fantastic today obtains selling that the monthly loan of comprehensive companies. Reduced web-based changes or skills that are soon later medical or have on commercial conference percent.

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