

Wealth, Waste, and Alienation: Growth and Decline in the Connellsville Coke Industry. *By Kenneth Warren.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001. 270 pp. Maps, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN 0-822-94132-5.

Reviewed by David R. Meyer

The Connellsville coke region of western Pennsylvania, a narrow sixty-mile band extending north and south of the town of Connellsville, remains today as a quiet relic littered with beehive ovens, gullies, and derelict structures, equipment, and houses, often obscured by trees. This landscape contrasts with the bustling energy of the Connellsville region as it soared to national prominence in the 1870s based on supplying coke—the fuel iron-blast furnaces increasingly demanded for smelting. Entrepreneurs made and lost fortunes as they bought, traded, and sold coal land, and they constructed tens of thousands of beehive ovens to make coke; thousands of people poured into the Connellsville region to work for the coke firms. Violent labor strikes broke out episodically as workers challenged small and large firms, including the famous H. C. (Henry Clay) Frick Coke Company, to pay decent wages. Connellsville dominated coke production for four decades, and then its swift decline began in 1910 as byproduct coke ovens rapidly moved to ascendance.

Kenneth Warren's purpose is to provide detailed coverage of the Connellsville saga from the foundations of the coke industry, through its expansion into new districts within the region, and then the course of its decline, which was precipitated by the rise of byproduct coking. Along the way, Warren covers the organization of the industry, including labor relations, and describes the economic and social characteristics of the population and its relations with the coke companies. The environmental degradation inflicted by coke production on the region is highlighted as well. The fourteen maps, twenty-two photographs, and sixty-five tables supply rich documentation of all aspects of the Connellsville locale and the coke industry as a whole.

Within each chapter, Warren addresses a broad theme but remains largely concerned with details, both small and large. The first chapter on the foundations of the industry can be skimmed by readers more interested in the Connellsville saga. In the next chapter, "The Maturing Industry," Warren covers the expansion of production and the rise to prominence of key figures like Frick and, because coke production was intertwined with large-scale iron and steel expansion in Pittsburgh and other centers and with competition to control railway transportation, he also introduces to the story prominent personages like Andrew Mellon, Andrew Carnegie, and the Vanderbilts. The third chapter, "Organization in the Coke Trade," discusses labor relations and

management over the thirty-year period following 1885. The structural conditions of the coke industry—intense competition, easy entry to production, demand driven by one sector (iron and steel), rural location, and highly mobile immigrant labor—infused disputes, which seemingly were resolved with no clear winners or losers. The fourth chapter details the “New Districts,” both in the lower Connellsville and by extension into West Virginia around 1900; and the subsequent chapter, “New Technology,” covers the simultaneous rise of byproduct coking—the technology that would make Connellsville beehive ovens obsolete within several decades because it allowed many other coal fields to supply coking processes—and byproduct ovens located near iron and steel mills. “The Physical and Social Implications of Beehive Coke Manufacture,” the topic of the sixth chapter, underscores conditions that arose from extensive resource exploitation during this era of minimal labor and environmental regulations. The final chapter, “Peak and Decline,” discusses the fate of the Connellsville region after about 1915.

Warren’s skeletal structuring of the rise and decline of the Connellsville region features people, places, beehive ovens, and production statistics. Generalizations are sprinkled through the discussion, and the larger context of economic growth and development—rapid urban-industrial growth in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries—remains mostly as a reference point. Although Frick is covered extensively, and key players like Mellon and Carnegie appear, the Connellsville story is not told from their point of view. Yet the strategic maneuverings of those individuals and their firms as they attempted to dominate the coke, iron, and steel industries may well have overshadowed the details described in Warren’s account. Thus, the Connellsville story could well have been more meaningful had it been recounted from the perspective of metropolitan headquarters in Pittsburgh or New York, instead of through the rural lens of the coke region.

Business historians will find here a treasure trove of details about the growth and decline of the Connellsville region, and Warren’s ample footnotes offer guides for scholars who wish to pursue this topic from other angles. This book will certainly stand for some time as the definitive sourcebook on the Connellsville region.

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*is forthcoming from Johns Hopkins University Press. At present, he is writing a book on machinists' networks in the antebellum United States.*