

High Altitude Energy: A History of Fossil Fuels in Colorado. *By Lee Scamehorn.* Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2002. xvi + 244 pp. Index, bibliography, figures, maps, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$27.50. ISBN 0-870-81661-6.

Reviewed by Joseph A. Pratt

Despite the vital role played by energy in modern industrial economies and by oil in international relations, the field of energy history is as depleted as America's oil fields. We need to know more about the production and use of energy in the United States and around the world. The history profession should have a strong voice in framing ongoing debates about long-term trends in energy, but it has largely ignored these issues.

One recent book that speaks to such issues is Lee Scamehorn's new history of fossil fuels in Colorado. Scamehorn provides an overview of the development of coal, oil, natural gas, and shale oil in an important energy-producing state. Using primarily secondary literature, he sweeps through almost a century and a half of Colorado's energy history. He organizes his account into chapters on specific fossil fuels before and after the 1930s. He concludes with a broad summary of events since the energy crisis of 1973. The book is a useful synthesis of the evolution of each type of fossil fuel.

Most useful to a history of Colorado are the chapters on coal and shale oil. The state's large mining industry gave coal a central role in smelting, and Scamehorn's descriptions of the rise, decline, and rebirth of the fuel remind the reader of its importance in the industrialization of Colorado and of the United States as a whole. In tracing the fate of coal, the author presents a case study of the impact of rising and falling demand on the fossil-fuel industry, a perspective that is regularly slighted in most energy histories.

Shale oil also has a special importance in Colorado, as the state has the nation's largest reserves of this elusive fuel. The short chapter on "synthetic fuels" provides an interesting overview of the cycle of booms and busts in shale oil, which has held a unique fascination for policymakers intent on finding domestic alternatives to foreign oil. Many have speculated that it would be the easiest alternative to develop, and its emergence as a major fuel has often seemed "just around the corner." The failure of shale to demonstrate

sustained growth illustrates the economic realities of price competition with oil and gas and reflects the unwillingness of American politicians to recognize the long-term societal costs of reliance on imported oil. As a result, the country has not pursued any systematic policies for reducing its dependence on foreign imports.

Like the chapter on shale oil, the book leaves the interested reader with a desire for more detail and analysis. Colorado is not described as belonging to a context of broader trends in energy production and use in surrounding states or in the nation. Much of this could have been accomplished with good charts. The information included on environmental controversies is suggestive but not well integrated into the narrative. Missing is a sense of how Colorado's history was shaped by the decline of America's fossil-fuel production relative to either the growing supply of foreign oil or the mounting demand for energy.

Despite such limitations, *High Altitude Energy* is a good addition to available sources on energy history. It joins several other recent works that take a statewide view of important trends in energy production. This approach adds a useful supplement to the existing bookcase full of histories of various energy-related corporations. Scamehorn has supplied a needed building block for courses in energy history. His book is also a reminder of how much work remains to be done on the history of energy supply and demand.

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