

*The Face of Decline: The Pennsylvania Anthracite Region in the Twentieth Century.* By *Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. x + 275 pp. Illustrations, maps, figures, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$65.00; paper, \$24.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-801-43469-6; paper, 0-801-48473-1.

Reviewed by Perry K. Blatz

*The Face of Decline* is a fine work of social history, broadly based in its approach, painstaking in its research, innovative in its methodology, and thoughtful in its conclusions. Like Dublin's *When the Mines Closed* (1998), this work is essential for students both of deindustrialization and of the recent history of northeastern Pennsylvania. Just as significantly, *The Face of Decline* accomplishes the social historian's most difficult task: communicating with a wide audience while still challenging scholars.

A bit over one quarter of this work reviews the history of the anthracite coal industry, beginning with its earliest days when it reached its peaks of production (1917) and employment (1914), and concluding with the start of its decline in the 1920s. Here Dublin and Licht construct a comprehensively researched narrative that should be of value to the nonspecialist. An examination of the depression years begins their account of this great industry's collapse. Their chief task is neither to explain why anthracite lost its popularity as the premier home-heating fuel of the Northeast and Midwest nor to examine closely the business decisions of coal operators, but rather to show how the industry's decline affected the approximately one million residents of the region. The authors focus on the strategies workers adopted to moderate the effects of underemployment and unemployment, in particular the "equalization" of work in the Panther Valley and the "bootleg" coal industry that arose in the Schuylkill coal field. The Panther Valley, home to about 5 percent of the industry's production and workers in the 1920s and 1930s, is the source of much of Dublin's and Licht's most compelling material. There workers and the community united, with little help from the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), to pressure the Valley's dominant coal operator, the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company, to abandon its policy of working the most efficient operations most

intensively. From 1934 until production increased with the coming of World War II, the company maintained a roughly equal work schedule throughout its varied operations. Southwest of the Panther Valley in the Schuylkill field, thousands of miners engaged in a less organized but no less powerful response to the closure of more than two-thirds of local mines—mining the coal left there, in defiance of a capitalist society's definition of property rights. Such operations provided employment to at least thirteen thousand workers, or more than 10 percent of the number officially recorded in the anthracite workforce. Meanwhile, the coal companies' efforts to stop such production received little support from local police and judges.

World War II offered a brief increase in production, but the late forties and the fifties saw the sharpest drops in production and employment, coupled with population declines in each decade exceeding 10 percent. Dividing the population into persisters and emigrants, Dublin and Licht offer an especially clear, yet nuanced, portrayal of the choices that coal miners and their families faced. They skillfully weave oral-history recollections with census data and surveys of high-school graduates from the Panther Valley. They show how emigrants found employment in the growing industries of the 1950s, such as auto plants in northern New Jersey and steel plants near Philadelphia. In contrast, some persisters hung on to what work they could find in the collapsing coal industry while others commuted to industrial jobs within a forty- to-fifty-mile radius. Of special significance to the families who persisted was the work of wives and mothers, first in the garment industry and, as that also declined in the 1960s, in the nursing careers taken up by a better educated generation. Dublin and Licht emphasize how women's power in the family grew along with their earnings. To provide additional perspective, they extend their analysis to a second generation, one that had no expectation of work in anthracite coal. That generation adjusted reasonably well to economic decline through the familiar strategies of education and mobility.

The authors contrast the largely successful adaptation by the families of the anthracite region with the efforts by business, the UMWA, and government to stem the decline or cushion its impact. Their criticism of the coal companies is muted by their understanding of the workings of international capitalism and the limited options of an extractive industry, but they expected the UMWA to have done better and are thus more

disappointed by its response. Powerful union officials concentrated on shoring up their institution's—and their own—security, ignoring anthracite workers. The union struggled with the much larger bituminous industry's ongoing decline. Dublin and Licht provide a trenchant analysis of redevelopment efforts, from the initial pursuit of industrial diversification early in the twentieth century to the vigorous but poorly coordinated ventures thereafter. They contrast that record with the more robust attempts to counter the closure of nationalized coal industries in Great Britain, Germany, and France. One issue they neglect is the infiltration of the anthracite industry by organized criminal elements, who took advantage both of coal operators eager to escape the business and of corruptible union officials, in order to take control of many mines through long-term leases. This process, which began before the 1920s and spread with devastating moral and economic impact through the 1960s, has much to reveal about anthracite's fate.

But Dublin and Licht's purpose is less to explain deindustrialization than to assess its long-term impact on workers and their families. They pay tribute to these generations and their struggles to build new lives despite receiving little help from society's most powerful institutions. Most poignantly, they praise those who either stayed or came back to the anthracite region, and they conclude by skillfully evoking the intense sense of place felt by so many residents living at the periphery of economic growth. Yet these strong regional ties raise a question within the larger paradox of the creative destruction of capitalism: What makes these families, like so many descendants of the immigrants who came to work along what we now call the Rust Belt, so fiercely loyal to places relentlessly shaped by an industrial culture in which, quite literally, loyalty has no place?

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