

Extracting Appalachia: Images of the Consolidation Coal Company, 1910–1945. By Geoffrey L. Buckley. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004. xxiii + 215 pp. Photographs, maps, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$46.95; paper, \$22.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-821-41555-7; paper, 0-821-41556-5.

Reviewed by Paul Rakes

The popularity of historical coal-mining photographs has risen dramatically in recent years. The images hold particular appeal for Appalachian holiday shoppers, who now have a wide selection of photographic reprints of mining crews from which to choose the perfect nostalgic gift for relatives and friends whose families once worked in the mines. In preparing *Extracting Appalachia*, Geoffrey L. Buckley has drawn from a Smithsonian collection of photographs that were originally published in Consolidation Coal Company's *Mutual Monthly*. He set out to demonstrate the maxim that there is "more to photographs than meets the eye" (p. 163), employing a creative method of interpreting what the images reveal about the coal industry. While conceding that this was a subjective endeavor, Buckley's goal is to provide a historical context for the photos, analyzing what they tell us about the company, the industry, and the people of the time. He points out that the company's choice of subjects reflects its aims of conveying a positive image to investors, influencing worker behavior and productivity, and supplying visual evidence for insurance purposes. By publishing these photographs, he claims, the company hoped to "manufacture consent" for its policies.

The early history of the Consolidation Coal Company parallels other developments in America and reflects themes common to Appalachia's past. Industrial expansion after the Civil War brought capital to the coal fields, but the industry proved to be a highly competitive enterprise. Overproduction flooded the market with coal, and coal-mining concerns, operating on a thin margin, found it difficult to survive. In many areas of Appalachia, coal operators turned to wealthy investors for the necessary capital, and smaller companies combined to form conglomerates, hoping that this strategy would enable them to endure economic downturns and maintain some control over the market. Yet the resulting economic pattern turned out differently: New England capitalists

became the absentee landlords, and the wealth derived from coal ended up in the hands of a few businessmen.

Mining operations in sparsely populated and geographically rugged areas forced the operators to establish company towns that would provide the amenities of life for their workers. Consolidation's operations, displayed here in some excellent photographs, ranged from company stores to gardening contests to baseball teams. Buckley suggests that Consol (the name commonly applied to it early on) pursued a "good town" agenda by building model coal camps and improving the settlements they acquired from other companies. At the same time, the photographs reinforce Buckley's assertion that these standardized towns showed the influence of engineers, rather than architects; and their layout and design symbolized the comprehensive control the companies maintained over their workers' lives. Their efforts were also self-serving, as, in an era of welfare capitalism, a company that had a reputation as a "good town" was able to attract better workers. Additionally, threats of eviction and close supervision of workers' daily lives allowed management to dominate labor relations.

Buckley points out that the camera was used as a safety-education tool for miners, as a way to restore the company's image after mining disasters, and, in particular, as an aid in promoting an appearance of industriousness and harmony. Segregation permeated the surface facilities, but production competitions were integrated. The *Mutual Monthly* recognized productive coal loaders by ethnicity, but Buckley surmises that this was probably a strategy for conveying the idea that the company appreciated and rewarded hard work, regardless of ethnicity or race.

Buckley notes the absence of photographs depicting union activity, despite the intense union efforts in the area that occurred earlier in the century. Naturally, the company did not want to advertise unionism in any way, and the welfare capitalism associated with management's control of surface and underground activities was designed to undercut the attractiveness of labor organization. When it failed to halt union recruiting, Consol, like other operations, resorted to more extreme measures, such as hiring private police or "blacklisting" known organizers. Buckley suggests that these tactics exemplified the welfare-capitalist doctrine that professional managers knew what was best for the workers.

This study's strongest chapter, and possibly its most important contribution to Appalachian scholarship, is the one devoted to the environment. Before World War II, coal operations devastated the landscape, polluting the surrounding streams with acid-waste drainage from the mines. Although today the images of this destruction would seem appalling, Buckley uncovered scant contemporary criticism of the destruction. He documents Consol's use of its financial resources to overcome most court challenges. Another, perhaps more likely, reason for the lack of popular outcry was the utilitarianism that characterized the pre-World War II era and justified the spoilage of Appalachia's hills and valleys. Mining operations, railroad spurs, and company towns represented the conquest of nature and the advance of progress, and serious protest in defense of the land never materialized.

Most of the topics Buckley covers will be familiar to students of Appalachian history. The book suffers from the puzzling use of lengthy, repetitive quotes taken from secondary sources. Often the author fails to draw a direct connection between the text and the photographs. Nevertheless, his approach to these archival photographs is a useful one that will no doubt encourage readers to examine historical photographs with an equally analytical eye and perhaps inspire them to "read" more carefully the subtle messages contained in pictorial documents.

Paul Rakes worked in the coal industry for twenty years before earning a Ph.D. in Appalachian history. Currently, he is history professor at West Virginia University Institute of Technology.