

Florida Atlantic University

*The Face of Decline:*

*The Pennsylvania Anthracite Region in the Twentieth Century*

by Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht

A Book Review Submitted To

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by

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## Book Review

Dublin, Thomas and Walter Licht. *The Face of Decline: The Pennsylvania Anthracite Region in the Twentieth Century*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

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Until 1930, the coal miners in northeastern Pennsylvania's anthracite coal region made a very good living. After 1930, their happiness turned to misery as the United States switched to cheaper fuels, such as bituminous coal, oil, and natural gas, which resulted in a massive loss of jobs for the region. In *The Face of Decline: The Pennsylvania Anthracite Region in the Twentieth Century*, historians Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht chronicle the rise, the fall, and the subsequent problems that the deindustrialization of the region brought to the workers and to the community they lived in. This social history focuses on "the roles of capital, labor, and the state and the impact on and responses of communities, families, and individuals" (p. 3).

Dublin and Licht argue that this region contributed greatly to the economic growth of the United States and, in turn, the nation unremorsefully allowed the region to deteriorate. They believe that federal intervention by the President of the United States was necessary to resolve the habitual anthracite coal miners' strikes in the first quarter of the twentieth century. If this had taken place, the authors contend that the Pennsylvania anthracite region would have continued to flourish. With the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) demanding cost of living increases for their members and the coal companies frowning on that idea, both sides usually were deadlocked. As the 1920s approached, tensions between union members and coal companies reached a boiling point. In a rare episode of federal intervention into the labor disputes, President Wilson, in 1920, formed the U.S. Anthracite Coal Commission to investigate the problems. Both

the UMWA and the corporations welcomed the establishment of this commission despite their general reluctance to include the federal government in their negotiations. But this commission became controversial because it failed to hear union testimony, which claimed that the anthracite corporations had a monopoly since they also had stock in the anthracite railroads. With the cost of anthracite coal soaring because of the strikes and because the corporations passed on any pay raises to consumers, government officials in the northeastern United States, which relied heavily on anthracite, began encouraging the use of environmentally un-friendly bituminous coal, natural gas, and oil.

In their work, Dublin and Licht do a fine job of recounting how anthracite miners coped with the loss of their vocations. For instance, some workers moved or traveled from small towns, such as Hazleton to bigger cities, like Philadelphia. With a close proximity between the two locations, former anthracite workers were frequently able to travel back to their “home” region to visit with family and friends. However, not all former miners were this lucky to find work nearby; this caused its fair share of problems. They explain, “Mary Vietk had worked at a local department store in the last years that the mines were operating, but she did not work during the period that her husband commuted to New Jersey. She had her hands full raising five children, from an infant of a few months to a fourteen-year-old, when [her husband] Mike first began to commute” (p. 143). Between 1930 and 1960, problems such as this resulted in massive migration out of the region, and to this day, poverty remains abundant in the area.

While this study nicely documents the victimization of the miners and their region, the work has several faults. Most notably, the reader is lost as to who’s really to blame for the disintegration of the region. First, historians Dublin and Licht claim that

the UMWA is to blame for being more interested in its establishment than on its members; secondly they claim that the coal mining corporations are to blame for being too greedy, and finally they blame the federal government for not taking a more active stance in the labor negotiations that could have saved Pennsylvania's anthracite region. They believe that all of these actors should have come together to save the region, yet they also explain, "A long-term historical perspective is necessary to judge whether an economy is experiencing deep collapse, momentary fluctuation, or structural change" (p. 3). Consequently, any blame that they attribute to the actors is absolved by the notion that the actors did not have the hindsight to know how their inability to reach a consensus would affect the region in the long run. Additionally, the authors' deep remorse for the loss of anthracite coal mining does not allow them the objectivity to realize that as time moves on, technology changes. Another problem in this study is the use of terms, such as "union dues checkoff" and "breakers," without giving the reader a clear definition.

While this work has several flaws, it does a good job of highlighting the process and the effects of deindustrialization. Dublin and Licht make good use of the large amount of manuscript sources available from the anthracite region, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, in addition to the inclusion of numerous oral history accounts that move the story along. Historians of U.S. deindustrialization will greatly benefit from this work as a good starting point for further research in what is still a young historical sub-field.