



Coal: A Human History

By Barbara Freese

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Coal: A Human History By Barbara Freese

In this remarkable book, Barbara Freese takes us on a rich historical journey that begins hundreds of millions of years ago and spans the globe. Prized as “the best stone in Britain” by Roman invaders who carved jewelry out of it, coal has transformed societies, launched empires, and expanded frontiers. It made China an eleventh-century superpower, inspired the *Communist Manifesto*, and helped the North win the American Civil War. Yet coal’s transformative power has come at tremendous cost, from the blackening of our lungs and skies, to the perils of mining, to global warming. Now updated with a new chapter describing the high-stakes conflict between coal’s defenders and those working to preserve a livable climate, *Coal* offers a captivating history of the mineral that helped build the modern world but now endangers our future.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Coal has been both lauded for its efficiency as a heating fuel and maligned for the lung-wrenching black smoke it gives off. In her first book, Freese, an assistant attorney general of Minnesota (where she helps enforce environmental laws), offers an exquisite chronicle of the rise and fall of this bituminous black mineral. Both the Romans and the Chinese used coal ornamenteally long before they discovered its flammable properties. Once its use as a heating source was discovered in early Roman Britain, coal replaced wood as Britain's primary energy source. The jet-black mineral spurred the Industrial Revolution and inspired the invention of the steam engine and the railway. Freese narrates the discovery of coal in the colonies, the development of the first U.S. coal town, Pittsburgh, and the history of coal in China. Despite its allure as a cheap and warm energy source, coal carries a high environmental cost. Burning it produces sulfur dioxide and carbon dioxide in such quantities that, during the Clinton administration, the EPA targeted coal-burning power plants as the single worst air polluters. Using EPA studies, Freese shows that coal emissions kill about 30,000 people a year, causing nearly as many deaths as traffic accidents and more than homicides and AIDS. The author contends that alternate energy sources must be found to ensure a healthier environment for future generations. Part history and part environmental argument, Freese's elegant book teaches an important lesson about the interdependence of humans and their natural environment both for good and ill throughout history.

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From [Booklist](#)

Deleterious to health and beneficial to wealth, coal contains a tension that makes its story a compelling one. Freese is a former attorney general of Minnesota, who became interested in the flammable rock's history during her tenure. After a routine description of coal's geological formation, Freese invigorates her narrative with its combustion in England. Even in the 1500s, its noxiousness provoked denunciation, but with Britannia's forests all but consumed, it became everybody's heat source. Freese is quite succinct in describing coal's critical role in sparking the Industrial Revolution, whose side effects included a troglodytic existence for miners and suffocating fogs for Manchester and London. The author then covers America's seduction by coal, and presently China's, culminating with her advocating reduction of coal's primary pollutants, sulfur dioxide and carbon dioxide, and its ultimate banishment as an energy source. Freese's combination of labor and technological history is fluid and evenhanded; she is a solid inductee into the popular club of "biographers" of materials such as salt (Mark Kurlansky) and water (Philip Ball). *Gilbert Taylor*

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Review

A *New York Times* Notable Book

“An absorbing book that never loses its grip. Barbara Freese is a splendid writer and takes the coal of the whole world into her compass.” —*New Scientist*

“A magnificent and plaintive ballad to the black stone that radically altered the path our lives have taken.” —*Providence Journal*

“Freese makes her points convincingly and eloquently.... Freese paints a fascinatingly wide swath.” —*Philadelphia Inquirer*

“A thoroughly absorbing history.” —*Boston Herald*

“An engrossing account of the comparatively cheap, usually dirty fuel that supported the Industrial Revolution, inspired the building of canals and railroads to move it, and once made London and Pittsburgh famous for their air.” —*New York Times*

“Freese's passion for coal is born out of her work.... Freese's book is as much about the growing scientific evidence of the damage coal causes to the environment as it is about the social history of the Industrial Revolution.” —*Financial Times*

“Freese has a deft style and a knack for explanatory metaphors. And she enlivens her meticulously researched history with anecdotes and surprising facts.... Above all, Freese is a strong storyteller who captivates with detail.” —*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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