
Thomas’ socio-economic and political study of West Virginia from 1945-1972 is largely an exploration of the state’s troubled history with the coal industry and the difficulty faced in trying to modernize. Specifically, the monograph details West Virginia’s attempt to catch up and partake in the advances that most of America took for granted. This focus makes sense given the economic significance that the coal industry had (and still has) in an otherwise largely rural state. However, the author’s treatment of the issue reveals that mechanization and the subsequent job loss that accompanies such a rationalization project are fairly similar to what “Rust Belt” cities experienced as industry declined throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Thus, Thomas endeavors to show that West Virginia’s post-war condition was in some senses similar to much of America, but still distinctly Appalachian.

Thomas convincingly argues that West Virginia’s inability to modernize and effectively partake in the post-war boom was partially tied to its economic partnership with coal. Coal operations were forced to modernize by the rise of petroleum and subsequent reduction of the value of coal in the aftermath of World War II. Consequently, the mines mechanized as much as possible which effectively reduced the number of miners.

Thomas’ structure is essentially chronological, though he does develop the book along thematic lines. The opening two chapters provide the historical background for the rest of the book and detail West Virginia during the depression and the effects of New Deal programs. The chapter “American Paradox, Appalachian Stereotype” deals with providing the reader a general understanding of the state’s actual and perceived economic and social conditions during the period leading up to the 1960s. Thomas goes on to detail the changes in the coal industry and its connection to civil rights in West Virginia. Chapters four, five, and six follow the War on Poverty and some of the more radical offshoots that briefly threatened to challenge the prevailing order. The book ends with chapters focusing on the Buffalo Creek disaster and debates over strip mining.

*An Appalachian Reawakening* demonstrates the effect modern industry has had on social issues within West Virginia. Thomas deals in depth with desegregation and the ways in which mechanization impacted black workers disproportionately. The author also looks closely at the ways in which President Johnson’s War on Poverty initiative was implemented in West Virginia and the ways in which these programs failed. While Thomas notes that Head Start and VISTA were somewhat successful, he points out that public will, funding, and prevailing economic/social interests were too entrenched for significant and systematic change to occur. Moreover, the programs started and funded by the federal government were ill-designed for the rural environments, nature of poverty, and isolation that existed in the state.

The text also cites the convoluted political nature of the state legislative system and effective lobbying by the coal companies as a hindrance on economic regulation. West Virginia never succeeded in properly taxing or regulating the industry. Given the reduction of employees, and thus payroll taxes, the already cash-strapped state’s attempts to improve infrastructure and build roads was hampered by both the difficulty of the terrain and lack of funding, which resulted from both the state’s inability to raise taxes and the relative poverty of the state itself.
West Virginia’s difficult terrain coupled with its weak working-class tax base made its efforts to modernize infrastructure very difficult.

Thomas does a very good job of covering the social impacts of changes within the coal industry and within the state in general. *An Appalachian Reawakening* makes a convincing argument that West Virginia’s experience with mechanization foreshadowed what occurred throughout many industrial areas throughout the United States. However, by grafting feminism to community action and civil rights onto coal mechanization, Thomas limits the scope of his coverage and thus treats them within one particular context as opposed to a broader one. In truth, Thomas might have dealt better with issues of desegregation and feminism by simply dedicating a chapter to the subject as opposed to combining it with chapters focusing on larger issues.

*An Appalachian Reawakening* is at its most compelling when dealing with issues related to the coal industry as whole. That is not to say that Thomas’s other sections are not compelling, but that those sections largely set the stage for the conflicts between coal operations and attempts to regulate them. Anyone interested in understanding the current issues with Massey Energy would do well to look at the longer history of the relations between the state and the companies presented in the book. Ultimately, this monograph is very informative, and anyone interested in the history of West Virginia or in recent Appalachian history will find the book useful.

Daniel Michalak
Appalachian State University