A Dirty Business

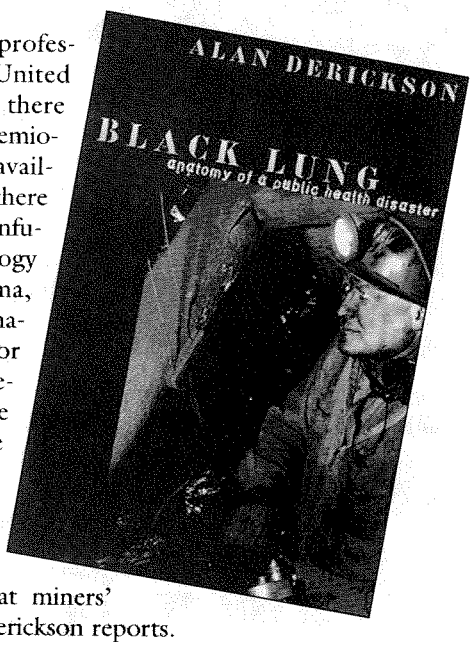
Black Lung: Anatomy of a Public Health Disaster
By Alan Derickson
Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998
237 pages; $29.95

Coal: A Memoir and Critique
By Duane Lockard
Charlottesville, Virginia:
University Press of Virginia, 1998
225 pages; $29.95

ALAN DERICKSON'S *BLACK LUNG: ANATOMY OF A PUBLIC HEALTH DISASTER* is a searing indictment of the coal mining industry. In a richly detailed account of the worker, public, corporate and medical understanding of the diseases once grouped under the name "miners' asthma" but now called black lung, Derickson shows that the devastating effects of coal dust on miners' health have long been known, but long denied by coal operators, medical doctors — many company influenced — and government regulators.

Derickson's book opens by recounting an 1881 presentation by H.A. Lemen, a professor of medicine at the University of Denver, to the Colorado State Medical Society. Discussing a coal-miner patient, Lemen reported not only on his "harassing cough" but that he spit up a pint of black liquid — of a "decidedly inky appearance" — a day. "The sentence I am reading was written with this fluid," he said.

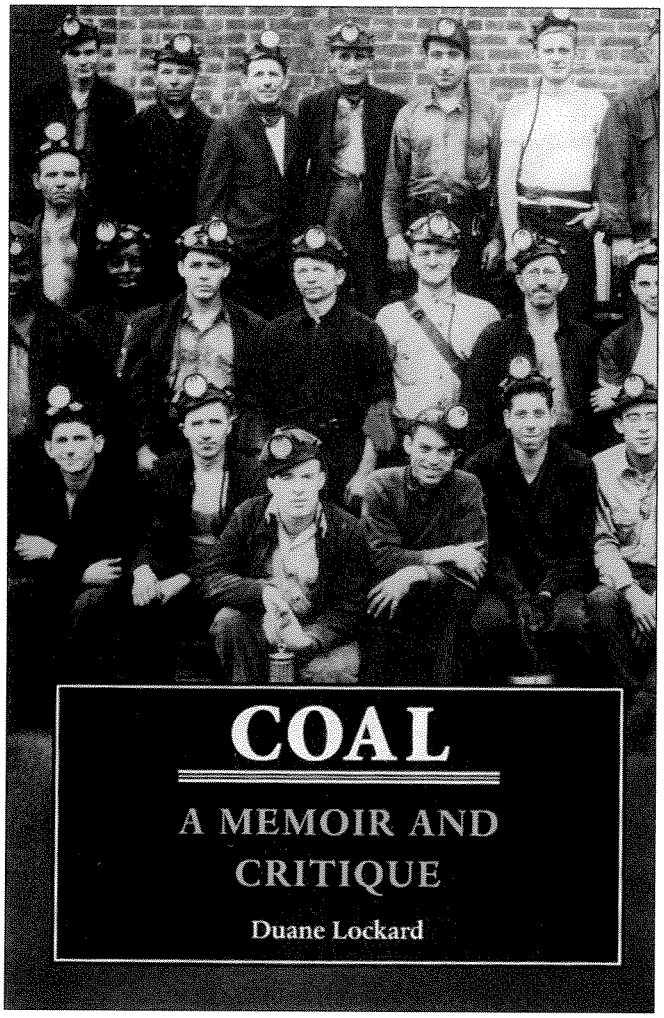
Lemen was not a maverick. British medical researchers had linked coal mining and respiratory ailments a full half century earlier. By the beginning of the twentieth century, there was widespread recognition of "miners' asthma" among medical professionals in the United States, although there was no good epidemiological evidence available. And while there was substantial confusion over the etiology of miners' asthma, some doctors emphasized the need for ventilation as a preventative measure to address a disease for which there was no cure. "Even the coal operators grudgingly conceded that miners' asthma existed," Derickson reports.



But following a 1902 strike, progress toward understanding the disease came to a halt, and the mining companies, company doctors and even independent physicians increasingly denied the existence or at least importance of miners' asthma. Indeed, for a long period of time it was argued that exposure to mine dust may provide a protective coating for the lungs, which would guard against tuberculosis.

The turnabout was due in part to developments in the medical profession, such as the increasing reliance on x-rays, which often fail to reveal black lung, but especially to a newfound recalcitrance among mining companies. The industry exerted its political power in state after state to ensure that workers' compensation did not cover miners' asthma, except silicosis, a severe form of black lung visible in x-rays.

Government and industry acknowledgement of black lung came only in the late 1960s. The shift was spurred not by any scientific breakthroughs, but by miners' organizing efforts to influence the legal, medical and popular conception of what had long been a disease defined by politics. Responding to a handful of progressive doctors who validated their disease and forcefully articulated the case of coal dust causation of lung impairments, thousands of miners joined the West Virginia Black Lung Association. In early 1969, 40,000 miners went on strike, demanding West Virginia recognize black lung as a compensable condition. The strike led directly to passage of West Virginian workers' compensation legislation covering all forms of black lung, and soon to passage of the Federal Coal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1969.



The Mine Safety and Health Act had numerous shortcomings, but it represented a giant leap forward for the miners. It established a federal compensation scheme; it required mines to transfer workers with early signs of black lung to less dusty jobs with no loss in pay; and it put in place a federal standard for coal dust exposure.

That federal standard stipulated that three years after enactment, miners could not be exposed to more than two milligrams of dust per cubic meter of air, the standard still in effect.

Finally, it seemed, the cruel black lung deaths of coal miners would fade into history, as exposures declined and new cases were prevented.

Black Lung ends with the passage of federal coal legislation in 1969. As dramatic and hard-fought as the miners' victory that year was, and although mining death and disease have dropped dramatically since, the coal laws have proved much less effective at curbing coal company abuses than many expected.

Coal companies routinely cheat on coal dust sampling tests designed to evidence mine compliance with federal standards, making it impossible to know how serious dust exposures are. Black lung remains commonplace in coal country, with nearly 1,500 black lung deaths registered in 1994.

THERE ARE, OF COURSE, OTHER HAZARDS of mining, as Duane Lockard recalls in *Coal*, an interesting meld of analysis and personal memoir from a Princeton University professor emeritus who comes from a coal family and spent some time in mines as a young man.

Lockard's book provides a useful but rather general overview of mine explosions and other disasters, low pay, the successful fight of the Miners for Democracy to clean up the miners' union and other chapters in the story of the coal industry in twentieth century America.

Where Lockard's book comes alive is with his personal recollections and quotations from the diary he kept as a young man. Through the eyes of a child in coal towns and of a young miner, Lockard conveys the life of a mining family — how they simultaneously depend on, and suffer at the hands of, the unaccountable corporations which dominate their community.

Life in coal country has certainly improved since Lockard's Depression-era childhood. Company towns are a thing of the past, pay is much higher, mine explosions are much rarer and workers have won significant pension rights. These gains are largely due to the efforts of the United Mine Workers of America, notwithstanding all of its faults during the 40-year autocratic reign of John Lewis and a decade of rule under a corrupt successor. The union is now a forceful advocate for health and safety, and union mines are much less likely to cheat on dust samples than non-union mines.

But even as the triumph of Miners for Democracy, a democratic insurgent movement, installed a more responsive union leadership, mechanization and a shift of the locus of the U.S. mining industry to the largely non-union West has drastically shrunk the size of the union and, consequently, diminished its bargaining strength and political influence. In the near term, at the very least, it does not appear that the miners' union will be able to function as a sufficient countervailing force to offset the mine owners' power, and the state and federal governments have not shown the will. More chapters in the tragic story of coal in the United States appear set to unfold. ■