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The Face of Decline: The Pennsylvania Anthracite Region in the Twentieth Century

By Thomas Dublin, Walter Licht



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The anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania once prospered. Today, very little mining or industry remains, although residents have made valiant efforts to restore the fabric of their communities. In *The Face of Decline*, the noted historians Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht offer a sweeping history of this area over the course of the twentieth century. Combining business, labor, social, political, and environmental history, Dublin and Licht delve into coal communities to explore grassroots ethnic life and labor activism, economic revitalization, and the varied impact of economic decline across generations of mining families.

The Face of Decline also features the responses to economic crisis of organized capital and labor, local business elites, redevelopment agencies, and state and federal governments. Dublin and Licht draw on a remarkable range of sources: oral histories and survey questionnaires; documentary photographs; the records of coal companies, local governments, and industrial development corporations; federal censuses; and community newspapers. The authors examine the impact of enduring economic decline across a wide region but focus especially on a small group of mining communities in the region's Panther Valley, from Jim Thorpe through Lansford to Tamaqua. The authors also place the anthracite region within a broader conceptual framework, comparing anthracite's decline to parallel developments in European coal basins and Appalachia and to deindustrialization in the United States more generally.



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Editorial Review

Review

"A sweeping history of this area over the course of the 20th century. . . .The book is not only a history lesson. It's a human tragedy story, about people who worked hard, and long, in dangerous conditions, only to be let down, not only by their profession, but by their government also. Dublin and Licht paint an honest picture, of despair, of resourcefulness, and then more despair. It's a book that belongs in every coal region home and library, and in the hands of every school kid who has heard countless stories of the way it used to be in this area."?Bob Urban, *Lehigh Valley Times News*

"History Professor Thomas Dublin and colleague Walter Licht offer a sweeping history of Pennsylvania's anthracite coal region during the 20th century in their new book, *The Face of Decline*. . . . Since some of the material touches on recent history, Dublin interviewed former miners about their experiences. He said these conversations complemented the data and gave it a human context. 'I found it wonderful to be able to interview people who have lived through the history,' he said. . . . *The Face of Decline* also has much to offer politicians and business leaders in areas facing similar economic shifts."?Rachel Coker, *INSIDE Binghamton University*

"In an era when many historians are settling for symbols and representations to understand complex historical changes, Dublin and Licht have succeeded not only in explaining industrial decline and approximating its effects on the lives of their subjects but also in providing a model and a new standard for social historical research. Their narrative and analysis will certainly garner due attention and praise, but it would be good to think that their methods will also get the attention they deserve."?Journal of Social History

"*The Face of Decline* is a fine work of social history, broadly based in its approach, painstaking in its research, innovative in its methodology, and thoughtful in its conclusions. Like Dublin's *When the Mines Closed*, this work is essential for students both of deindustrialization and of the recent history of northeastern Pennsylvania. Just as significantly, *The Face of Decline* accomplishes the social historian's most difficult task: communicating with a wide audience while still challenging scholars."?Perry K. Blatz, *Business History Review*

"*The Face of Decline* is aptly named. By giving deindustrialization a human face, Dublin and Licht have produced an invaluable study of communities dealing with economic decline and rebirth."?Donna M. DeBlasio, *Oral History Review*

"Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht's *The Face of Decline* is essential reading for anyone concerned with the economic development or redevelopment of a community, region, or state. It is also a definitive history of the anthracite region of northeastern Pennsylvania that by 1890 was supplying 16 percent of the nation's energy. The book's handsome large-format pages conceal its great length, including detailed chapters that narrate the early decades when the industry was raking in profits. These provide ballast for what follows?an account of eighty years of decline, ending in regional economic collapse."?Priscilla Long, *Technology and Culture*

"This book is an excellent piece of scholarship, combining institutional and social history. The authors should be commended for their exhaustive research and expert merging of many different sources into a vigorous and readable narrative. It is no exaggeration to say that this book will very quickly become a classic in the fields of labor studies and economic history."?Richard P. Mulcahy, *Journal of American History*

"*The Face of Decline* gives us a subtle, multidimensional portrait of a region coping with the death of its defining industry. At the institutional level, it demonstrates how business, labor, and government all failed to effectively prepare for or respond to the loss of the anthracite mines. At the personal level, it shows the varied ways mining families coped with the resulting economic crisis?revealing in many cases an enduring attachment to place that runs much deeper than mere economics. This book is a story not only about economic decline but also about resilience and survival, with lessons that apply to the wider world."?Barbara Freese, author of *Coal: A Human History*

"*The Face of Decline* is a terrific book. Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht brilliantly portray in vivid detail not only the many human dimensions of the downfall of the hard coal industry but also the mining families' considerable resilience in meeting adversity."?Alan Derickson, Pennsylvania State University, author of *Black Lung: Anatomy of a Public Health Disaster*

"Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht have fashioned a poignant story of industrial decline in one American region, the failure of powerful organizations to help people in need, and the resourcefulness of displaced workers forced to find new ways to make ends meet."?John Bodnar, Chancellor's Professor and Chair of History and Co-Director of the Center for the Study of History and Memory, Indiana University

"Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht have written a history of Pennsylvania's anthracite region that includes many of the stories natives have heard as well as much that is new. Their book captures the tragedy of a region and people, exploited by outsiders for the sake of resources and then left to cope with the environmental and economic wreckage as best they can."?David DeKok, author of *Unseen Danger: A Tragedy of People, Government, and the Centralia Mine Fire*

About the Author

Thomas Dublin is State University of New York Distinguished Professor of History at Binghamton University. He is the author or editor of several books, including *When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggles in Hard Times*, also from Cornell.

Walter Licht is Walter H. Annenberg Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author most recently of *Working for the Railroad*.

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