

King Coal

by Louis Fagon

Coal is not just a raw material: it is also a symbol and a commodity whose history Charles-François Mathis has retraced over a period spanning two centuries.

Reviewed: Charles-François Mathis, *La civilisation du charbon*, Vendémiaire 2021, 550 pp., €26.

Coal was the main source of energy in England and Wales from the 19th century until just after the Second World War (it covered 77% of the country's energy needs in 1877, 95% in 1900 and 90% at the end of the 1930s). In his book, Charles-François Mathis explores the history of coal in English society¹, not only as a raw material, but also as a symbol and a commodity. He offers an intimate cultural history over the long term (from the 19th century up to the 1930s), "as close as possible to the consumers, their habits and their ways of thinking" (p. 495).

This approach is part of a recent renewal in the history of energy, which no longer focuses solely on techniques and resources, but rather *energy systems*²: energy is now being analyzed as a combination of technical, political, economic, social and cultural factors in constant interaction. This book examines the rise of a true coal-based "civilization" and the forces behind it. It does so by looking at how English society was shaped not only by the materiality of coal (infrastructure, organization of the domestic

¹ The study focuses on England and Wales, and excludes Ireland and Scotland for practical reasons (the scope of the archives and the period) and various historiographical issues (Ireland had no coal).

² Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, Charles-François Mathis (dir.), *Sous le soleil. Systèmes et transitions énergétiques du Moyen-Âge à nos jours*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2019.

household, actual uses of coal), but also by its symbolism, becoming wholly "coal-minded" (p. 16).

The main aim of this book is to "make energy visible again" (Frank Trentmann³) in its everyday uses. For the author, this does not mean revisiting the already extensive work on labor (mines and miners) and on the coal industry and its role in the industrialization process, but rather focusing on consumers and their ordinary, domestic, unseen uses of coal. By concentrating on the mundane, Charles-François Mathis reclaims the legacy of earlier reflections on the "material civilization" conceived by Fernand Braudel. How was coal obtained? How was it used? Who was in charge of what (men, women, children, the role of the state or producers, consumer associations)?

These questions resonate beyond historical and academic circles: the book provides an insight into the role of energies in our societies, where they are much less visible than coal was in nineteenth-century England. Coal could be seen (as smoke), smelled (it irritated the nose) and tasted (it irritated the throat); it was found in songs, the press, literature, the arts, architecture, cinema, and even in children's stories, advertising and cookery books.

Drawing on these numerous sources – some of which have never been published before, like those of charitable organizations set up to supply coal to the most impoverished – we can study the consumers of coal, those who targeted them (advertisers, writers of home economics manuals, industrialists, reformers) and those who spoke on their behalf (the political world).

The materiality and social imaginary of coal

Coal was ubiquitous in England from the 19th century up to the outbreak of the Second World War. Extracted mainly in the mining regions around Birmingham (West Midlands), in Wales and in Yorkshire (the Durham region in the northeast), it was a commodity that shaped the English landscape (through distribution flows, from mines to private homes), passing via depots, deliverymen, and sales and purchasing

³ As part of the research project *Material Cultures of Energy*, based at Birkbeck College (University of London) between 2013 and 2017. F. Trentmann, "Getting to Grips with Energy: Fuel, Materiality and Daily Life", *Science Museum Group Journal*, spring 2018, n°9, online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/180901>

companies. It also changed the way the English household was organized. With each household consuming several tons a year, it had to be stored in dedicated rooms and storage units, and the appropriate tools had to be used – all artifacts of a civilization that permeated every aspect of daily life.

The author highlights an underlying paradox: coal is ubiquitous, yet it does not really exist. There are many different categories of coal, depending on its quality and use (anthracite, for example), but no scientific or legal consensus has been reached to define what it really encompasses.

For the author, coal is first and foremost a material that enables us to "interpret the British world" (p. 77) of the period in question, through a second paradox. Coal was both an object of fascination and concern. It left its mark on English vocabulary, art, the social imaginary, and people's relationship with comfort (a room without a fireplace was unthinkable for an English person of any social class): King Coal (an expression popularized from the 1850s onwards, underlining people's ambivalence towards coal as both benefactor and tyrant) fueled both the domestic fire and the nation's power. Coal was a blessing, but also a source of anxiety: from the nineteenth century onwards, the fear of scarcity gripped economists⁴ and politicians, as well as consumers. This book examines today's energy-saving issues from a long-term perspective.

Energy dependence and energy poverty: "This fuel is no laughing matter."

The coal famine of 1873 is considered a turning point in Britain's relationship with coal. The price per ton for domestic use rose from 18 shillings in 1871 to 44 shillings in 1873, sparking demonstrations, indignation meetings and petitions calling for state intervention via export taxation or regulation of production. As a sign of the depth and modernity of the debates, a form of carbon tax designed to moderate the use of coal was even proposed in 1871, but was quickly abandoned.

The author studies these events in several cities, exploring the link between local popular emotion and broader political opposition to liberalism and Victorianism

⁴ William S. JEVONS, *The Coal Question: An Inquiry Concerning the Progress of the Nation, and the Probable Exhaustion of Our Coal-Mines*, London, Macmillan & Co., 1865.

(p. 153). In his view, this was the first rift in England's coal civilization: society was heavily dependent on coal, and the poorest were the most vulnerable. Although coal only accounted for an average of 5% of a household's budget, price volatility (whether seasonal or due to unforeseen events) put a strain on people's living expenses, which, for the most deprived, were often the bare minimum.

To address the problem of fuel poverty, and in particular the fear of the cold in winter when prices were at their highest, "coal clubs" organized collective purchasing in small towns during the summer months. Drawing on their unpublished archives, Charles-François Mathis examines the middlemen who collected dues and distributed coal to members. In 1911, for example, one coal club in Winchester (population 23,000) had 330 members; in 1861, the Market Harborough coal club distributed 303 tons of coal to its 198 members. Consumer cooperatives made agreements with the mines to deliver coal directly to the towns, forming societies such as the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) in Manchester in 1863.

The author also looks at consumption practices that may have been residual on a national level, but which "on an individual level could make all the difference between surviving and freezing to death" (p. 206): for instance, collecting up coal that had fallen into the river during transport, and making pellets from coal dust.

Gender and the age of coal

A whole body of knowledge about coal and its domestic uses has emerged, which the author examines in particular through home economics manuals and school textbooks. This bottom-up approach reveals society's desire to save energy, and highlights the know-how acquired primarily by women to manage the coal fire at home. Coal not only reflected the gendered division of labor (women received coal at home, then used it when cooking), but also "the family's intimacy, [...] its organization and [the] power relations that could be expressed within it" (p. 265). Very early on, children learned a very real "morality" with regard to coal, its geological origins, the risks of fire, and the dreamworld of nursery rhymes in front of the fireplace.

The study focuses closely on how energy reflected gendered relations: "little girls were taught from an early age, by their mothers or schoolmistresses, how to light and tend fires" (p. 309). Women were at the forefront of demonstrations during the

coal famine; they were often in charge of collecting dues for coal clubs; and they were also the prime target of energy company campaigns, which emphasized the supposed empowerment of women in the home, thanks to their expertise with coal.

How should the state manage the cracks in the Carboniferous civilization?

The question of the state's role in the coal market has been a recurring issue since the 19th century. The lack of regulation was brought into question during the First World War, and export restrictions were introduced in 1915. The author analyzes the twists and turns in the creation of various committees, notably the Fuel Research Board in 1917, tasked with creating and collecting data on existing deposits. He shows that a comprehensive national energy policy gradually emerged, along with a better scientific understanding of coal.

During this period, competition from new energy sources was as much material as symbolic: oil and electricity now symbolized modernity and shaped the public's imagination. Faced with this loss of prestige, coal promoters in the 1930s defended coal as a healthier fuel than its rivals, cleaner if properly used, and even a patriotic material: coal was a commodity rather than a resource.

For historians, this book is an exemplary study of the "energy cultures" that accompany the mobilization of an energy source. By analyzing people's everyday uses of coal and the flood of contradictory emotions it aroused, the author helps to re-establish the importance of ordinary people, consumers and users who are often overlooked in historical studies on energy.

More broadly, Charles-François Mathis invites us to reflect on the implications of this historical study for today's societies, where energy abundance and precariousness coexist. Energy is not just a resource, but a social and economic construct that is hard to define: an increasingly invisible commodity that nevertheless shapes national and domestic spaces. Although coal is widely regarded as an energy of the past, it still accounted for 10.5% of total energy consumption worldwide in 2017, and 25% of the energy needs of England and Wales at the start of the 21st century. As technical debates rage over the various "energy mix" scenarios, it is worth remembering that energy is intrinsically linked to the uses and representations it

entails, and that "the transition depends, among other things, on a social imaginary" (p. 273).

To find out more:

- Presentation of the book by the author on the publisher's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgKesss55Bo>
- Podcast on the book featured on the radio program *Concordance des Temps*, by France Culture: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/concordance-des-temps/l-angleterre-et-son-charbon-seducteur-et-cruel>

First published in lavedesidees.fr, 21 February 2022, translated by Susannah Dale with the support of Cairn.info, published in booksandideas.net, 7 November

2023