Ronald E. Hester and Roy M. Harrison (Eds): Coal in the 21st Century; Energy Needs, Chemical and Environmental Controls

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Bibliography

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When the chapters are linked together, this volume (No. 45 in the series “Issues in Environmental Science and Technology”) throws a grenade or two into current controversies. The opening lines: “The long term future for coal looks very bleak”; and “The recent UN climate change conference (COP 21) signalled an end to the fossil fuel era”, appear to be wholly true. And yet, Poland uses coal for 94% of its electricity production, South Africa 92%, China 77%, Australia 76%, India 70%, and Germany over 40% (and increasing). The UK (meritoriously?) is down to 9%—but at what cost to its economy? By 2020, 40% of UK domestic bills will consist of very high cost ‘green’ electricity, whilst UK industry is today paying a carbon tax of £23/tonne of CO₂ compared to its European counterparts which pay £5/tonne. Any examination of the contrast between these two disparate facts shows how cynical propaganda and manipulated numbers have hidden the economic consequences of the current harebrained UK energy policies, blindly adopted by politicians in response to brilliantly executed propaganda emanating from the very well organised environmental lobby.

We should, perhaps, more properly examine the hypocrisy of this year’s COP 22 climate change conference. This cost more than £100M was attended by 25,000 delegates from 200 countries, with the environmental damage contemptuously “offset” by provision of bicycles and water fountains to replace plastic water bottles and cups. The environmental footprint created by the conference was not an agenda item; the delegates “jollies” continued without a mention.

With seven chapters, contributed by 11 authors, the quality and depth of research is excellent throughout. The individual chapters are well chosen and balanced. The collection is effectively a global in-depth history of coal throughout the ages, followed by descriptions of new enabling technologies that potentially reduce its environmental footprint. Whatever the downsides, coal will still remain a critical raw material for 70% of the world’s steel production and 90% of its cement. The editors also emphasise that despite all the adverse publicity, the world’s *fastest* growing energy source is still coal; not gas, oil, nuclear, hydro, or renewables. The driving force is the unarguable fact that coal is abundant and the cheapest available energy source available in most circumstances, reinforced when poorer countries observe that Germany, closing its nuclear generators for cynical political reasons, have replaced their output by the dirtiest possible energy source, lignite.

In conclusion, the editors expressed hope that this balanced evaluation of both positive and negative aspects of coal may possibly exert some influence on future governmental policy making. About the only person in power that might be influenced is the current resident of the White House. At least the President does not appear to have a closed mind; but the COP conference delegates? They were far too busy cycling and drinking from their water fountains.

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