applied in the soft coal regions because of the usually horizontal lay of the coal beds. In the anthracite fields, where most of the coal seams pitched upward and downward, coal cutting machines had limited use. The craft nature of the industry there was more difficult to break. Still, as large corporations gained control of the industry after the Civil War, and management asserted its power, the struggles of anthracite workers came to parallel those of their brethren in the soft coal fields.

The author is at her best in the second part of the book, which describes the development of coal mining in the West. Like other recent historians of the region, she attacks the romantic myth of the West as a social safety valve and frontier of expanding opportunity. In the coal fields of Colorado, for example, the destruction of the Indians and their culture coincided with the rise of a brutal exploitative capitalism. The owners of the railroads and mines looked on the Indians, the land, and their workers as either obstacles to be removed or resources to be indiscriminately plundered and used. Coal provided the energy source for the West’s industrialization in the final decades of the 19th century, but the cost in human suffering and to the environment was immense. The ravages of eastern mining were repeated in the West with a vengeance.

Out of these coal pits of misery came workers who, with their women and children, engaged the operators in several of the most savage labor conflicts in American history. These mine workers, either veterans of the older eastern coal fields or newly arrived immigrants from Europe and also Asia or Mexico, eventually overcame their ethnic differences and organized under the banners of the International Workers of the World and the United Mine Workers of America. Though sometimes not well served by their unions’ leadership, they used their coal communities as bases from which to fight for better wages and working conditions. Their struggles culminated in the great Colorado Fuel and Iron strike of 1913-1914, which resulted in the Ludlow massacre of workers and their families in April 1914. The workers responded with an armed uprising; an alarmed President Wilson sent in federal troops to restore order. For the first time, as an observer noted, an industrial conflict had brought the nation to the verge of civil war and revolution.

The Colorado Fuel and Iron strike and the class conflict it engendered did not bring an end to the workers’ struggles. Miners and their families would go on fighting for their rights down to the present, as the recent Pittston strike in the southern fields demonstrates. But the events in Colorado that spring of 1914 cemented bonds of solidarity among the ethnic mine workers that gave them definition as Americans. The cauldron of conflict involving labor, big business and the federal government helped to gradually change public attitudes and set the stage for the long-coming recognition of labor rights and reforms of the New Deal.

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(Sharpless is co-author, with Donald L. Miller, of The Kingdom of Coal, a history of the anthracite industry and culture in the United States.)

Coal, Class and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932
By Joe William Trotter, Jr.

West Virginia has some of the richest lodes of bituminous coal in the United States. It turns out that it also has one of the richest seams of black social history. Joe Trotter, the son of a black West Virginia miner and now a history professor at Carnegie Mellon University, has laid bare a good part of that lode. His study is well-crafted, richly documented, and quite instructive.

The author’s central theme is “proletarianization,” defined as “the process by which southern rural and semirural blacks became new industrial workers and crystallized into a new class.” (Page 1) Trotter sees this proletariat as shaped not just by external forces — the coal industry and white racism — but also by the activities of black miners and middle class folks themselves.

The external forces were powerful and oppressive. In the 1880s and 1890s young black men who migrated from rural Virginia to the mines of West Virginia were forced to take the dangerous job of loading coal deep underground; the few who worked above ground were confined largely to the dangerous task of brake man. Miners’ families lived a restricted life. Their housing was company owned and controlled, their schools, theaters, baseball teams and social welfare institutions were rigidly segregated. Their children were long denied higher education; before World War I they had not one (!) school.

Despite segregation and appalling work conditions, between World War I and the 1930s, expanding coal production attracted new migrants from the deep South (especially Alabama), causing West Virginia’s black population to increase by about 50 percent, peaking at 60,000. Job discrimination also increased as blacks lost positions as supervisors, even of all-black labor gangs. On the plus side, they gained increased access to skilled positions such as brake man, working behind a white motor man. Most, however, remained confined to dangerous, wet and poorly ventilated underground work. All miners, of course, suffered, but there was a clear pecking order. Native whites prevailed in the most desirable jobs above ground: immigrants, who had formerly worked with blacks in the most undesirable jobs, increasingly refused such work and succeeded in out-bidding blacks for the better jobs.

A major strength of Trotter’s analysis is that he stresses that blacks
were not totally passive victims, but worked to shape their own destiny. They originally moved to West Virginia because the state’s mines, unlike the farms in Virginia and the deep South, offered cash wages. Some actually preferred underground work because it paid by the ton, so that a hard worker could increase his earnings. And because the wet, dark and poorly ventilated tunnels were isolated, they were perversely attractive because they offered more freedom from white supervision.

Nor were black miners totally discouraged by job discrimination. Denied significant mobility into skilled and safer work, they took pride in hard manual labor, improved their efficiency, set records for loading coal, and bragged how they could outwork any white man. They learned to do this while minimizing dangers to their health, sometimes by refusing to work in extremely dangerous sites. The high rate of black transiency, in fact, was a survival strategy that partly reflected a constant search for better working and living conditions.

Blacks also exerted themselves politically, possible because West Virginia, unlike most southern states, never disenfranchised black voters. They became the balance of power in state politics and aided the resurgence of the Republican Party — admittedly discriminatory and paternalistic — against the openly racist Democrats. As a result, blacks gained increasing (segregated) benefits, several high schools, and two new colleges, West Virginia State and Bluefield State.

Relations with the unions reflected blacks’ willingness to cooperate when feasible and to oppose when necessary. Sometimes they stood shoulder to shoulder with their white counterparts, as in the 1880s when they worked with the Knights of Labor, and in the early 1920s when 2,000 joined the “Armed March” during the “Mingo War” [see related book review in this section] and demanded the right of collective bargaining. Labor organizers like Frank Ingham and George Edmunds continued the tradition of black unionism pioneered by Richard Davis. On the other hand, anger and disappointment over their white colleagues’ indifference to, or active support of, racial discrimination and violence, increasing racial segregation, a rabidly racist press, substandard housing, and inadequate educational opportunities often caused black miners to ally with the black elite and with white coal operators. When, in 1913, the Republican governor spoke at a local black church and declared his “uncompromising purpose to see that every man gets a square deal,” blacks understandably responded. As Trotter notes, “unfortunately, Trotter stresses that blacks were not totally passive victims, but worked to shape their own destiny.

no corresponding white labor leader developed such a close bond with the black community.” McDowell County, situated in the state’s southern tip and the heart of black mining activity, was a bastion of anti-unionism.

Denied access to public facilities, blacks developed their own businesses, institutions, and professional associations. Achievers with national recognition include Booker T. Washington, a miner’s step-son who established Tuskegee Institute, Carter G. Woodson, who left to get a Ph.D. at Harvard and to establish the Journal of Negro History, and Mordecai Johnson, who became the first black president of Howard University. The state’s black middle class was small but vigorous. The town of Bluefield, for example, boasted two hotels, two hospitals, two real estate agencies, four doctors, one dentist, plus restaurants, grocery stores, barber shops, drugstores, laundries, dry cleaners, and a coal company that employed nearly 100 men. To survive, these businesses sought the support of white coal operators and white elites. They believed in the “virtues of racial solidarity, thrift, and economic development.” Indeed, the black middle class, as reflected in the McDowell Times newspaper (itself financed by coal operators), was a staunchly anti-union advocate of Booker T. Washington’s philosophy of self-help, entrepreneurial capitalism, and paternalistic alliance with the mine operators.

Trotter rounds out his study with a look at black churches, fraternal organizations, protest organizations (notably the UNIA and the NAACP), and black political activities. He shows how these helped to overcome class, color, and regional divisions and thereby cement intraracial solidarity.

Trotter’s work by no means exhausts this rich seam of black history. As he notes, West Virginia offers an alternative to the usual southern-rural versus northern-urban dichotomy by which we conceptualize black life in the United States. The Mountain State’s race relations shared aspects of both the North and South, and its economy featured industrialization in a rural setting. A future study framed in a comparative regional setting could provide the basis for a synthesis of twentieth century black history.

Other topics merit exploration. Because West Virginia did not undergo urbanization, one would like to know something about the persistence of rural black life and culture — hunting, fishing, farming, folklore, and music. West Virginia had a shortage of jobs for women and, at least in 1910, a great shortage of black women. Did the shortage of outside work undercut women’s independence? Did the shortage of women elevate, on the other hand, their status and desirability as marriage partners? Is “proletarianization” the right concept for understanding the historical development of black West Virginians, if, as Trotter notes, “Afro-Americans developed their most consistent alliances with coal operators and their corporate and political representatives, rather than organized labor.”
These are the sorts of fruitful questions raised by good studies.

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Thunder in the Mountains: The West Virginia Mine War, 1920-21
By Lon Savage

One of the most pervasive popular images of West Virginia is that of a forbidding landscape wracked by endemic violence. The coal “wars” of the early 20th century between agents of those who owned the coal and those who mined it generated potent visual images which did much to establish this perception in the public mind. Lon Savage’s Thunder in the Mountains tells the story of the 1919-1921 mine war in southern West Virginia, one of the most dramatic events in American labor history.

On May 19, 1920, 12 agents (“gun thugs” to the miners) of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency had just evicted strikers from company houses at nearby Stone Mountain and were returning to Matewan, an independent town in strike-torn Mingo County, to catch a train. There, Mayor Cabell Testerman and Chief of Police Sid Hatfield, both of whom sympathized with the strikers, confronted the agents. During a heated exchange, Testerman was shot to death, and an unknown number of hidden miners opened fire on the guards. When the smoke cleared, seven agents, the mayor, two miners, and one bystander lay dead or dying.

A local grand jury acquitted Hatfield, but the “Matewan massacre” tarnished the Baldwin-Felts reputation for invincibility which agents wore as armor to intimidate the miners and keep out the union. Hatfield therefore was marked for Baldwin-Felts retribution, and one year later agents assassinated the popular policeman in full public view. The hasty exoneration of Hatfield’s assassins in August 1921 triggered a massive miners’ march to free Mingo County from its anti-union “gun thug rule.” To get there, however, the miners had to cross Blair Mountain and pass through the equally hostile anti-union freedom of Logan County, controlled politically by Sheriff Don Chafin. Vowing that no union army would tramp across his terrain, the “high sheriff” of Logan” deployed anti-union forces, including the newly formed state police, along the top of Blair to interdict the thousands of union marchers. Savage estimates that the ensuing week-long Battle for Blair Mountain resulted in 16 deaths, 12 of them miners. At the request of the governor, President Harding ordered the National Guard into the area to restore order. The miners cheered the arrival of the National Guard, and believing that they had succeeded in making their plight known to the nation, began returning to their homes.

During September and October 1921, Logan County grand juries returned 1,217 indictments for complicity in the insurrection, including 325 for murder and 24 for treason. Ironically, the trial took place in the same Charles Town courthouse where John Brown was convicted in 1859. Eventually, nearly all of the indictments were dismissed; only one man was convicted of treason, and two others were convicted of murder.

In October 1922, the United Mine Workers of America called off the strike in Mingo County. It had cost the union $2 million, the resignation of its district leadership, and the death of 20 people in addition to those 16 who lost their lives on the march, and still the union had failed to organize the field. Although the UMWA was soundly defeated, and union membership in West Virginia plummeted to a mere 600 by 1929, the conflict nevertheless had enduring consequences. When the right to unionize was finally achieved during the New Deal, coal miners in West Virginia flocked to the UMWA with the fervor of long-suffering believers. For the miners, the “Battle for Blair Mountain” became not only an important symbol of the oppression of capital, but also of the solidarity of labor.

One shortcoming of this otherwise thoroughly readable book is the lack of historical context for the events described. Fortunately West Virginia historian John A. Williams fills this void with an introductory essay sketching the historical backdrop of the 1919-1921 conflict. Not surprisingly, material conditions lay at the heart of this conflict, Williams points out. West Virginia coal producers suffered a comparative disadvantage relative to midwestern and eastern coal producers because the latter’s proximity to the major markets meant that their transportation costs were substantially lower. Therefore, when the coal markets were depressed, as they were after World War I, producers tried to cut miners’ wages, the only significant source of cost savings. Also, under pressure from the federal government, the companies had agreed to accede to union demands in order to ensure industrial peace during the war. Once the war had ended, however, the operators were as determined to return to the ante-bellum status quo as the miners were to maintain their improved status. The antagonism between these contesting forces was heightened to explosive proportions by the fact that 90 percent of the miners in southern West Virginia lived in company towns. The coal companies were not just the miners’ employers, but also their landlords, bankers, and merchants. Moreover, the towns had been constructed for an ethnically diverse labor force which the companies recruited from among foreign immigrants, southern blacks, and natives in order to divide and conquer.

Thus, with such combustible production and social relations pre