

The Coal Coast: The History of Coal Mining in BC -- 1835-1900 by
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[See table of contents](#)

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This brief book is a readable popular history of coal mining in British Columbia during the nineteenth century. Newsome's narrative takes the reader from the Hudson's Bay Company's first stumbling efforts in the late 1840s to produce coal from the surface deposits at Fort Rupert through to the industrial world of late nineteenth century Nanaimo. The book will likely sell more copies at the

province's tourist outlets than in university bookstores but it provides a very useful introduction to a significant part of British Columbia's economic history.

Newsome writes well, with an eye for detail; the result is a book that is often evocative, and in places, compelling reading. The first chapters, dealing with the establishment of the industry on Vancouver Island, are particularly good. The author also has some new insights: for example, his discussion of the personality and career of Robert Dunsmuir, the coal industry's leading entrepreneur, is a much shrewder analysis of Dunsmuir's character than those of previous writers. Other notable sections include his account of the mine disasters of 1887 and 1888, which captures those traumatic events very well and leads naturally to the subsequent chapter on the role of the Chinese in the industry, and the attendant racism which this provoked.

There are some weaknesses, of course, although these are perhaps inevitable in any attempt to write the history of an industry in less than two hundred pages. There is, for example, no mention of the Crow's Nest Pass mines, and very little description of the Cumberland colliery. Overall, Newsome remains more interested in describing key incidents and the personalities of important male actors than with providing sustained accounts of the communities, the technology employed or the gradual evolution of the industry.

The book also suffers from one curious omission. Although Newsome has done considerable primary research, for some reason he has chose to ignore the significant body of academic work. There are at least a half-dozen MA theses, several BA Honours essays and two doctoral dissertations on the province's coal mining industry in the nineteenth century. While the quality is admittedly uneven, I can not believe that he did not manage to track down Keith Ralston's fine piece on miners' contracts at Fort Rupert (in *The Company on the Coast*), which would have provided him with some important additional information for his second chapter.

Despite such caveats, it is to be hoped that Newsome will write a sequel covering the twentieth century, an intent that comes out clearly in the book's last chapter. There are very few overviews of British Columbia's mining industry, and none that are as well written as this volume.

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