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*Monongah: The Tragic Story of the 1907 Monongah Mine
Disaster* (review)

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relationship between the Welsh and the Irish in the anthracite fields of the 1870s. This example highlights the different experiences of two ethnic groups, but Lewis provides no examples of an immigrant group with a number of characteristics similar to the Welsh, such as German Jewish immigrants. German Jews, although they needed to overcome linguistic and religious barriers to acceptance by American public opinion and public officials, commanded a formidable arsenal comparable to the Welsh. Many of them, as Reform Jews, belonged to a faith which prided itself on its adaptability and willingness to fit into the parameters of their host societies. Although they operated in very different vocational niches than the Welsh, they also achieved success as merchants, manufacturers, and bankers. Their value system conformed to mainstream America as it emphasized hard work, education, and upward vocational mobility. Another asset was their patriotism, reflected in the celebration of national holidays, their veneration of national heroes, and a strong attachment to the American Revolution.

An understanding of the Welsh assimilation experience is enhanced by an awareness of the similarities and differences with other immigrant groups. Although the Welsh had an easier and faster assimilation process, even they did not obtain immediate and unconditional acceptance. Other immigrant groups of the era, such as the Chinese, Irish, and Mexicans, faced a much longer and difficult path to assimilation.

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Davitt McAteer. *Monongah: The Tragic Story of the 1907 Monongah Mine Disaster*. (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2007. Pp. xi, 221, notes, bibliography, appendixes, index. Cloth, \$30.00.)

McAteer's work is undeniably significant and his extensive research is evident. He presents a chronological history of Monongah, West Virginia and its development; from a briar town to its role in the country's largest coal producing company. Having been founded on incestuous agreements, consolidations and on exploitative economic principles, its explosion, and the fallout landed on the backs of its laboring families, according to McAteer, may have been imminent.

A substantial amount of McAteer's text emphasizes the political interweaving associated with the West Virginia mining industry—a byproduct of an agrarian society rapidly compelled towards industry at the hands of steel and electricity, the reliance on coal and the railroad, and a network of elite men capitalizing on nearly all accounts.

Chapter two opens, "The Monongah mines were developed by the most powerful, wealthy West Virginian entrepreneurs and politicians and financed by some of the wealthiest men in America" (7). Some key players included, John D. Rockefeller, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, and Standard Oil.

The founding principle of the endeavor according to McAteer was, "... to mine coal at a lower cost than their competitors" (91). McAteer shows that this cost was paid on the backs of a largely Italian and Polish immigrant workforce, who was employed at well below the prevailing wages on account of illiteracy, fear, and otherwise ignorance to their options. The coal company exploited their vulnerability, specifically targeting foreigners with the intent of preventing organization and ultimately labor unions.

Governors, senators, judges, and sheriffs, all had vested interest in the company. U.S. Senator Johnson N. Camden was the primary force behind the Monongah mines—from the land and mineral rights to the railroad. Early on, he purchased as much of the upper Monongahela Coal Basin as possible and invested in infrastructure; building a rail line connecting to the B&O. He eventually leased his coal properties to the Fairmont Coal Company, which was a product of the Watson family, including Senator Clarence Watson. Further, Camden supported his legal advisor's rise to Governor of West Virginia.

On a local level, Monongah's mayor was a Fairmont Coal Company manager, members of city council were employed by the company and the town police force was "hired and paid by the coal company..." Further, "The company's own private security force was far more substantial both in size and authority..." (48).

This offers insight into Consolidation Coal Company's political influence. A large-scale strike, and arguably the first successful attempt to unionize the workforce at Monongah, led by a host of labor notables including Mother Jones, was crushed through the creation of arbitrary laws, arrests and subsequent legal proceedings. McAteer quotes of Mother Jones, "... the coal company controlled the courts" (107). This sentiment was repeated during the trial following the explosion.

Of the operation itself McAteer describes a subjugated collection of immigrants working in two interconnected mines. Like most of the industry at the time, there were no federal regulations and safety measures were inadequate.

Before entering the mine, men checked in with tin tags on a board outside the entrance. The board was destroyed during the explosion—complicating the establishment of a death toll. Bodies were badly burned, and often destroyed beyond recognition. More are assumed to have been forever entombed. Further confusing the number of dead was the common practice of miners taking assistants into the mine, including children of whom there would be no record.

Of the disaster itself McAteer devotes only one chapter, but further details are revealed in the subsequent examination of legal proceedings. He vividly illustrates the havoc surrounding the tragedy, with crowds gathered en masse and women in distress pulling out their hair as shock turned to despair.

Rescue efforts initially provided brief glimmers of hope, but the focus quickly shifted towards recovery, as doctors and clergy were overwhelmed with bodies. The disaster represented total destruction of a community, in cases leaving not a single miner. “Out of thirty houses on one block . . . twenty-seven didn’t have a man left in them” (154). Once again, the political ties established in previous chapters play out their significance in the trial that follows. Ultimately the company was relieved of responsibility. No conclusive answer was established as to the cause of the disaster, but rather a list of possible scenarios, including a runaway train of coal cars stirring up coal dust, ignited by overcharged shot. Likewise, “. . . the number of dead would never fully be known” (150).

In the end over 500 men and boys perished in the Monongah Mine disaster, with many leaving wives and children with no means of support. McAteer mentions the small sums of money these widows received from the company and other relief sources. But what became of them? Did they remain in the community, did they return to their home countries, or did they move elsewhere? He also mentions that Monongah went back to work. What did that look like? Who was left to do the work? Where did new workers come from and what difficulties did the stigma of the disaster entail?

McAteer continues, examining mining on a federal level, including the development of legislation and regulations following the Monongah disaster. Finally mine safety reform was on the minds of the public, and ultimately the mining industry, though progress was slow. Despite the stirring of the

nation's conscience by the Monongah disaster and others similar, McAteer concludes that "Death still stalks the mines of America" (270).

At times the extent of McAteer's research bleeds through in his overwhelming presentation of facts, but this does not detract from the significance of his work, which stands testament to the 500+ souls lost in the West Virginia coal mines on the morning of December 6, 1907.

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Michael Aronson. *Nickelodeon City: Pittsburgh at the Movies, 1905–1929*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008. Pp. xvii, 300, maps, illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95.)

The dust jacket to Michael Aronson's *Nickelodeon City* is branded with the seal commemorating Pittsburgh's 250th anniversary. Aronson's careful and constant engagement with other scholars, when coupled with his peers' critical reviews, indicate that this book will leave its mark on the history of the silent era. But the commemorative seal speaks to the broader applications of this film historian's work as regional and social history. Aronson crafts this multi-layered text in a most engaging fashion, weaving together multiple fields of study as he argues for the critical contributions of Pittsburgh's film community—specifically film distributors and exhibitors—during the period 1905–29.

Aronson's study emphasizes the 1910s with any discussion prior to this period predominately historical context, and little attention paid to the 1920s. His primary source research draws from a diverse mix of national trade journals, local newspapers, state court cases, and existing locally-produced and focused films. However, the *Pittsburgh Moving Picture Bulletin* is the base upon which his exploration of the local industry is built. Aronson mines this regional publication, which ran from 1914–29 (and is a rare survivor for the industry in this period), for all that it is worth. His detailed analysis provides interesting insight into the world of film distributors and exhibitors.

The six chapters which comprise *Nickelodeon City* are thematically arranged. Aronson's introductory first chapter lays out his basic claim—Pittsburgh's significance in the industry. He also defines his work as an