

The Road to Blair Mountain: Saving a Mine Wars Battlefield from King Coal

Charles B. Keeney

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When history professor Charles B. Keeney committed to help preserve an important West Virginia landmark, the decision had implications for his job and his privacy; he knew the activism could take a toll in the long term. All of this is recounted in his memoir, *The Road to Blair Mountain*.

Blair Mountain was the site of a deadly 1921 showdown. Thousands of union coal miners marched south from the state capitol to help imprisoned, striking miners and their starving families. They were greeted by local police with machine guns. It was the largest labor uprising in American history—Keeney dubs it “labor’s Gettysburg”—but is now near forgotten because industrialists, politicians, and the mine guard system controlled the historical narrative.

Keeney, the great grandson of Blair Mountain battle leader Frank Keeney, names the parallels between the original labor fight and the contemporary fight to save the mountain from being mined. The book documents how Keeney’s rural, grassroots group used focused tools and strategies, as well as local and national alliances, to achieve wins against the powerful and entrenched fossil fuel industry and the political and social culture that supports it. Detailed and assured, this account serves as a guide for other small nonprofits to emulate when they’re pitted against well-financed corporate and political opponents.

Interesting sociological aspects of West Virginia culture, including its religiosity and sports, arise in the narrative alongside illuminating analyses of the subcultures of environmental activism and the planning and organization of grassroots events. In total, *The Road to Blair Mountain* articulates a thoughtful alternative vision for Appalachia’s future—one that supports its heritage of coal mining and labor history and also seeks a more sustainable, diverse, and decentralized economy.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (January / February 2021)

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