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Toward a Flatter Earth

By Ted Williams

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America may be a nation of laws, but "mountaintop removal," an increasingly common method of coal extraction blighting Appalachia, proves that laws, like mountains, can be pushed aside when they get in the way of the rich and powerful.

Last February, after a ten-year hiatus, I returned to West Virginia to inspect the mountains south of Charleston. This time they weren't there. The coal industry had removed them. What my companions and I saw from a small plane could more aptly be described as mountain range removal—a process that can blast away 600 to 700 feet of elevation.

On dozer-carved plateaus, white-rimmed drill holes were being stuffed with high explosive. At lower elevations, 20-story-high draglines, with maws 100 yards wide, bit into piles of broken mountain. Strewn around the landscape were sprawling ulcers black with slate waste or gray with toxic slurry. It all reminded me of the old ads in which Mr. Tooth Decay and his henchmen run around with drills and dynamite converting ivory peaks to brown rubble.

At the base of mountain stumps, spoil had been dumped onto streams. The steep slopes of these "valley fills," as the industry likes to call them, were terraced, lightly greened with grasses native to other continents, and slashed with rock-lined gutters—the new "streams." On the mountain stumps themselves, vast fields of debris, a more bilious green, had replaced the most diverse and productive temperate forest on earth.

Most of what I saw was the work of A. T. Massey and Arch Coal, both of which allege that all the greened-over stuff has been "reclaimed" and that these reclamations are a net improvement—"200 percent better," according to A. T. Massey.

The companies say it's unfair to judge "mountain mining," as they call it, from the air. So I checked it out from the ground. But the sites I visited looked no better. They were dry, heavily eroded, and stuck here and there with cultivated black locusts, none healthy and some as dead as month-old Christmas trees. In the words of Frank Gilliam, professor of biological sciences at Marshall University in Huntington, WV, purporting to reclaim a wild forest in this fashion is like fixing someone's clock by "taking it apart and stuffing some of the parts into a box ... The arrogance is astonishing."

What's even more astonishing is that the public tolerates mountain-range removal. As currently practiced, it is unlawful. The federal Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) requires that miners disturb only a small area at one time. But when mountains cover coal seams, that's not possible; so the U.S. Office of Surface Mining and state regulatory agencies look the other way. Under SMCRA there can be no surface mining activity within 100 feet of a stream, but in the mountains there's no place to dump spoil except on streams, so the agencies look the other way. SMCRA requires restoration to "approximate original contour"; but you can't put mountain ranges back together, so the agencies look the other way. If a site is not restored to approximate original contour, SMCRA requires that it be converted to a "higher and better" use with, say, a shopping mall; but such developments don't pay in Appalachia. So the agencies look the other way.

The fruits of such dereliction were seen in early July, when flooding from heavy rains devastated private and public property in West Virginia's coal fields. Exuding empathy and concern, Governor Bob Wise called for a study to determine if the damage had been exacerbated by mountain-range removal. But according to an existing study by the Office of Surface Mining (a report that Wise had tried to suppress), a large valley fill can increase runoff by as much as 42 percent. On July 11, 2001 the West Virginia

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Department of Environmental Protection finally assumed a stern countenance, citing 10 coal operations for contributing to the damage, two of them on Kayford Mountain.

Having seen what the coal industry does to the earth in Appalachia and elsewhere, I drove to Kayford Mountain, where I glimpsed what it does to people. A decade ago the mountains towered above the Stanley Heirs' Cemetery. Now, blasted apart, these "summits" lie 500 feet below. Near the cemetery's eroding northeastern edge I found the grave of Earl Williams and stooped to read the inscription: "Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal." If the erosion continues, it won't be long before his casket follows the sod clumps down the manmade talus.

A mine cave-in killed Earl in 1909, when he was 14. Like the mountains that shaded and cooled him during his brief childhood, like the mixed hardwood forest and the wildlife it sustained, like the valleys and the rich streams that carved them, he was a waste product of Big Coal. Now, apparently, his remains are, too.