

## **Fuelling Dissension: Coal and coal mining in 21st century New Zealand**

*Reviewed by Jeanette Fitzsimons, CANA*

You'd think nothing could be more boring than a book about...*Coal*. But you'd be wrong. This is mainly because of the breadth of view and the writing skills Jane brings to the story.

Somehow she manages to weave fascinating detail about coal chemistry and geology into a riveting narrative about the struggle between multinational mining companies and a creative but under-resourced environmental movement using all the tools it could muster – blockades, media, occupations, public information days, politics, science and the law. It charts the fall of Solid Energy and the rise of Bathurst to take its place, despite the determined efforts of the campaigners.

The Buller plateau, where much of the action took place, is visually stunning, and so is the book. With photographers like Rod Morris, Dave Russell, Neil Silverwood, Jane's husband Jim Young, and the extensive files of Greenpeace and Forest & Bird, how could it not be? Then there are the clear diagrams, all beautifully presented on high quality paper, making this one of those books that are delight to handle.

This is both a history, for those who want to know how and why it all started, and a reference book for those of us who were centrally involved and need to check on exact dates and places for events we remember well. It does not pretend to have no view on the ethics of mining the most carbon intensive fossil fuel in an age of climate breakdown, but it keeps sufficient distance to state the facts objectively.

Coal is set in its political, economic and philosophical context. The real prize was (is) of course the coking coal on the west coast where the most bitter battles were fought with conservationists against a backdrop of stunning scenery and ecology. This was also the most economically fragile coal, most of it exported for steel making in a market where a drop in the world price could send a mine into "care and maintenance" almost overnight. But Young has grasped that it was the rapid growth of the dairy industry and its domestic market for thermal coal for boilers to dry milk that kept Bathurst alive through a period of low export prices.

She also sets it in its context of neo-liberalism where governments have taken a hands-off approach to economic viability, ecological impacts, climate change and even industrial safety. Hence the Pike mine disaster.

Nevertheless, total coal mined in NZ has dropped from 5.34 MT in 2005 to 2.92MT in 2017 which supports the view that the wheel is, ever so slowly, turning and coal has peaked in NZ. There will be further ups and downs, further actions by conservationists, frustrated at Fonterra's glacial pace of decarbonisation, but it seems unlikely that the trend away from coal will be reversed.