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Mineral Resources: Geology, Engineering, Economics, Politics, Law

By

PETER T. FLAWN

New York: Rand McNally & Company. 1966.

Pp. xxi, 406, \$9.00

The recipe for most books on mineral resources is simple: from the growing list of mineral commodities select an assortment of metallics, nonmetallics, and mineral fuels; compile notes on their occurrence, technology of production, and uses; add statistical tables and a map or two; bind. A number of such books have appeared since World War II, some of them quite useful. Few, however, have gone beyond description. Happily, Dr. Flawn's book does.

As indicated by the title, he casts his net broadly, and if the mesh is too coarse for the results to be entirely successful, it is not for lack of scope. The usual information on specific commodities is relegated to a single long chapter while other chapters lead the reader logically from consideration of the concept of a mineral resource through the geology of ore deposits and a history of mineral production into a review of the legal framework and political economy of resource use today. A final chapter is devoted to the question of future supplies. While much of this material is necessarily descriptive, Dr. Flawn, who is Director of the Bureau of Economic Geology at the University of Texas, never hesitates to note controversial aspects and to express his own views. Thus, the chapter on ownership of mineral resources contains a section on the need for modernization of American mineral law. Even the chapters on history exhibit a refreshing candor. For example, following his observation that the English settled down to farming whereas the Spanish plundered the New World, Dr. Flawn cautions that "virtuous smugness about one's ancestors should be tempered by consideration that they found nothing to plunder on the Atlantic seaboard of the North American continent, . . ."¹

Despite its laudable attempt to integrate disciplines, many readers will find the book dissatisfying for two related reasons. First, there is a regrettable lack of economic analysis at just those points where it would prove most useful. Second, there is a tendency to overstate

1. P. 122.

the "industry" position when it conflicts with alternate ways of dealing with economic and political issues. The importance of the first point alone is debatable. Dr. Flawn is not unmindful of the influence of cost and price, especially as they relate to reserves and resources. In this regard, an introduction of the economics of exhaustible resources and of common property resources would have helped explain both the ownership patterns that have developed in the minerals industry and the structure of the industry (an aspect that is ignored throughout the book).

Serious oversimplification results, however, when lack of economic analysis is combined with lack of balance in discussing current controversies. The oversimplification is especially regrettable because the book is addressed to a wide audience. Gaps are particularly apparent in the "Minerals and Government" chapter, which is the most ambitious but also the most disappointing in the book. To choose but one example, the question of gold as a monetary metal is discussed at some length,² and favorable comments are made about the international gold standard. Yet almost no mention is made of the domestic economic adjustments required by adherence to a strict gold standard. This omission weights the case against the managed money systems that "countries under the economic philosophies of Karl Marx or Lord Keynes [have] instituted."³ On the other hand, when Dr. Flawn focuses on the effects of mining on the environment, which he frequently does, he generally recognizes the mutually supporting roles of industry and government.

This, then, is a book that can be recommended, albeit with some misgivings, to the "generalist" desiring to go beyond a first course on minerals. The specialist, however, should not ignore the book. An economist can learn much about geology and the problems of a mining firm, and the minerals engineer something about the economic and political relationships that affect production and consumption. In addition, the chapter on ecology should be read by anyone taking a doctrinaire view of the pollution problem.

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2. Pp. 210-16.

3. P. 215.

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