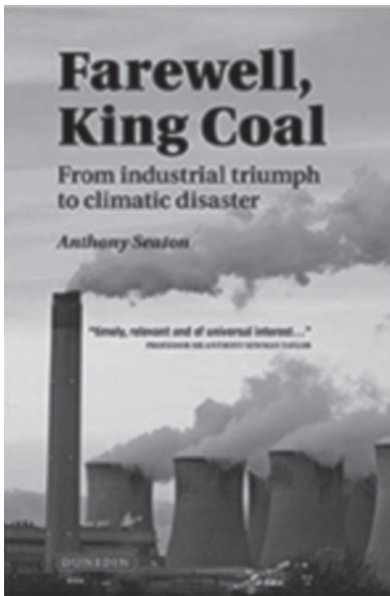


## An obituary of coal by professor Anthony Seaton



*This book is a fascinating autobiography written by Anthony Seaton with a fluent style and enjoyable clarity.*

*The final chapters deal with climate change, a topic that attracted Anthony's scientific interest during the last 20 years, well before Greta Thunberg's birth, thus anticipating what has*

*become such a popular issue of our present time. Thus, at a certain point the book turns from history to chronicle, maintaining a popular style supported by scientific evidence. Toxicologists and occupational health physicians, as well as industrial and environmental hygienists will enjoy this personal account covering the second half of the last century and the beginning of a new millennium.*

### FROM THE AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

My generation grew up in the age of coal. It heated our houses, powered our factories and was the source of the gas we cooked with and of the light in our houses and streets.

When I was in my teens we had to stop burning coal and obtained what was called smokeless fuel, compressed cobbles of powdered coke that produced rather less smoke and very little ash. A law had been passed to reduce the air pollution that we had until then thought of as one of the normal cir-

cumstances of city life, and the air did indeed become cleaner; later, more efficient oil burning stoves and gas central heating were introduced. Factories and power stations moved out of the cities and the winter smogs no longer occurred. In 1956 I had become a medical student and saw how many people came into hospital with coughs and breathlessness, learning of the disease that was called chronic bronchitis and was said to be due to cigarettes and air pollution, but I did not realise then what a part that disease and coal were to play in my future life as a doctor and medical researcher.

In 1978 I moved to Edinburgh and reversed these roles, researching occupational diseases and working part-time as a chest physician. In Britain by then, oil had replaced coal as a fuel in many applications, cheaper more accessible coal was available from elsewhere, and the British mines had started closing; the final phase of the coal industry had commenced. Oil and nuclear were considered the fuels of the future and motor vehicles rather than houses and factories became the dominant source of pollution in our cities. My final move took me to Aberdeen, the centre of the North Sea oil industry, where I was able to start researching the health effects of air pollution and, on retirement in 2003, I went back to Edinburgh to investigate the story of climate change.

Now, as an old man, I look back on the decline and death of the coal industry with mixed feelings and say, echoing the words of Shakespeare's Richard II, *Farewell King Coal*. But I watch with interest the decline of oil as a fuel, soon perhaps to be followed by gas, a switch away from fossil fuels driven by understanding of climate change. This is my personal obituary of coal in the context of an individual's medical career and a population's increasing understanding of mankind's place in the ecology of the Earth.