

Archival Notes

‘Dead Men Talking’ – Oral History in the Making

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Background: The Australian Coal Miners’ Oral History Project began in 1986 when retired mineworkers Fred Moore and Ray Harrison and writer and editor Paddy Gorman reflected after a Labour Day march that while mining history was well documented, miners’ history was not. With \$50 from their union, the two initiated a project that has produced several books, an acclaimed television documentary and a teaching guide for use in schools.

Within Australia there is a strong tradition of the scholarly study of mining history. This is unsurprising in a nation whose economy was largely built on the extraction and exploitation of natural resources. That national economy remains underpinned by mining in the 21st century.

The sustained scholarly interest in mining history owes much to the endeavours and teaching of, among others, Professors Geoffrey Bolton, Geoffrey Blainey, Kett Kennedy and Ray Whitmore. Other works of lasting value have been brought into the public domain by Chris Fisher,¹ Brian Galligan,² Charles Mengel³ and Edgar Ross.⁴

However, the commendable efforts expended on mining history have yet to be approximated by the study of miners’ history – the first-hand stories of the lives and times of mineworkers, their families and their communities. There are several possible explanations for this. Mineworkers have often been reluctant to share their stories with ‘outsiders’ – sometimes suspecting that few outside the mining workplace and community had a capacity to understand the realities of the mining life and lifestyle and, as a consequence, lacked an ability to convey those realities to non-mining audiences. That argument is as flawed as it is understandable since without the trust and co-operation of mineworkers, the perceived ‘outsiders’ were never likely to either gain knowledge or show their ability to objectively transmit that knowledge. Paradoxically, many mineworkers in tight-knit and isolated communities saw historians as members of isolated, out-of-touch communities. There was also an abiding distrust of those who

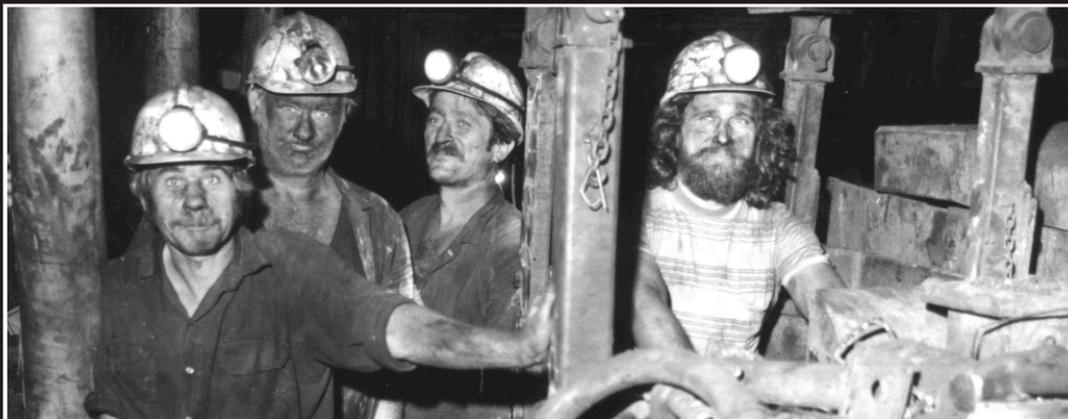
reported industrial relations for the generally conservative mainstream mass media within Australia.

This reluctance to trust others with their stories also produced its own problems. The stories of older Australian coal miners who had lived through the years of The Great Depression in the late 1920s and the mid-1930s, through World War Two, through the monumental and wounding industrial disputes of the late 1940s and 1950s and through the boom and bust and boom again times in the 1960s and 1970s, were being lost forever as coalface veterans died.

Those problems were crystallised for retired miners Fred Moore and Ray Harrison in 1986. The two were resting with Paddy Gorman, Editor of their union's *Common Cause* newspaper,⁵ after leading a Labour Day march in the industrial city of Wollongong on the Southern Coalfields of New South Wales. Glancing around at those who had marched, the two veteran labour activists saw that the ranks of older miners were thinning each year. First-hand accounts of the coal mining life were in danger of being lost forever; these were accounts of living through confrontation and poverty and disaster, of community life and of miners who were sporting heroes in the boxing ring or on the football field at weekends and were back at the coalface on Monday.

Back At The Coalface

Volume 2 of the Australian Coal Miners Oral History



By Fred Moore, Paddy Gorman and Ray Harrison with Alan Murray and Anne Kruse



Moore and Harrison knew that something should be done to save these voices from obscurity. Gorman agreed. The three then spoke with Barry Swan, then General Secretary of the Miners' Federation (now the Mining and Energy Division of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union [CFMEU]). With \$50 from the union, the three bought a tape recorder and started what they'd call The Australian Coal Miners' Oral History Project. Moore and Harrison would undertake the interviews and Gorman would oversee interview arrangements and transcription and storage of material. By 2009, 23 years after the Wollongong Labour Day March, the Project has attracted widespread interest and acclaim for its contribution to telling the stories of working miners, their families and their communities. This recognition flows largely from the effectiveness of the approach taken by Moore and Harrison and project 'overseer' Gorman. From the outset, they knew that mining people would be more open in conversations with retired miners than they would in interviews with academics or broadcasters. Thus, they determined that they would conduct the interviews themselves. However, there was no grand plan although there was a notion that a book might be published.

The two, in discussions with Gorman and Swan, decided their interviews would not be restricted to retired coal miners, so those still at the coalface would also be recorded. There would also be recordings of the recollections of the women who had lived through the hardships of lockouts, lengthy strikes and disasters. Many of these women had supported the miners and their union through the Women's Auxiliary Movement. They had organised the collection and distribution of food and clothing to miners and their families and had fed men on the picket lines. It was also important to Moore and Harrison and Gorman and Swan that the collection of stories should not be limited to the Southern Coalfield of New South Wales but that the memories of mining people on the Northern Coalfield should also be recognised. This coalfield lies more than 200 kilometres north of Wollongong and inland from the coastal city of Newcastle. Similarly, they believed there should be recordings of the recollections of coal miners on the Western Coalfield that lies beyond the Blue Mountains that separate Sydney from the expanse of inland Australia. There was also a case for telling the stories of the miners in the Outback city of Broken Hill. In 1986, when the project began, these Broken Hill workers were the only metaliferous miners to be affiliated with the Miners' Federation.

The recording process that began in 1986 continued through to the mid-1990s in its first phase, and during those years, some of those interviewed died. Others became

too unwell for any follow-up interviews and for Moore and Harrison there was a sense of urgency. Both men were in their sixties and some of those on the interview list were in their seventies. The two persevered and, over the years to 2009, more than 100 coal mining people were recorded, the spoken words filling more than 150 hours of tapes. Transcription of the material was time-consuming and was spread over several months, while the union met the transcription costs.

With many of the interviews on paper by 1997, Moore and Harrison decided, with Gorman and their union, that a volume of 15 illustrated stories should be published. The volume would be called *At the Coalface* and would be published in 1998.⁶ However, even at the crucial pre-publication stage it was recognised by Moore, Harrison and Gorman that a publication comprised of bare transcriptions would be of questionable value. It was at this point that mining historians and editors were consulted – with the three making it clear that the incomers would be part of the production process rather than part of the compilation process and their task would be to set the recordings in their historical context and to transform some of the first-person accounts into third-person narrative.

In overseeing the publication of *At The Coalface*, Moore, Harrison, Gorman and their union were quick to perceive the possibilities of a multi-platform approach to the telling of miners' history to the widest possible audience. Web-based publishing was emerging. Subscription television was showing an increasing appetite for custom-made history, natural history and labour history documentaries. Community and regional radio stations offered low-cost access to audiences interested in local stories on local people and themes. Teaching materials for schools often included films and documentaries as well as the printed word and where electronic teaching materials were being used, education authorities were expressing a need for the production of printed study guides to accompany these electronic teaching materials. In recognising the potential of the multi-platform approach to telling their stories, the miners were well ahead of many historians and commentators. Perhaps this was because in their working lives, miners are more practically inclined than many who write about those working lives.

The sell-out success of *At The Coalface* prompted the subsequent publication of a second volume, *Back at the Coalface*.⁷ In the period between the first and second volumes, the material contained in the Moore and Harrison interviews provided the mother lode of material for other studies, one of which is *Lockout*,⁸ a first-hand account of the bloody 15-month lockout of 10,000 coal miners in Australia in 1929-1930. It was

written by the late Jim Comerford, who as a pit boy lived through the conflict which saw police open fire on unarmed miners, killing one and wounding dozens more. In later life Comerford became General Secretary of his union. His book became the basis for the award-winning documentary *Lockout* that was nominated in the Best Documentary category of the Asian Festival of First Films in Singapore. In December 2007. The documentary was also an official selection at the Labor Day Film festival in Santa Cruz and at Labor Fest in San Francisco, the largest labour arts festival in the United States. It was also selected for screening at the Seoul Film Festival in Korea and at the Durham Miners' Gala. In Australia, *Lockout* was selected for screening at the prestigious Dungog Film Festival, the Victorian Independent Film Festival, the Young at heart Film Festival and the Heart of Gold Film Festival. In addition to its official selection for film festival programmes, *Lockout* was purchased by the History Channel for screening in Australia and New Zealand and had been shown on educational subscription channels in the United States.

In producing the *Coalface* volumes, the Comerford book and the television documentary the Australian Coal Miners' Oral History Project regularly drew on the expertise of broadcasters, educators, film-makers – hiring specialists on short-term contracts for technical or other specialist services. The outcomes from this collaboration have been impressive. Documentaries and books aside, the Australian Coal Miners' Oral History project has produced radio programmes and a teaching guide compiled by professional educators to accompany *Lockout*, which has been approved for use in schools. When publications have been launched, they have been launched in communities whose members are featured in these publications. Similarly, in 2007 the documentary *Lockout* was given its world premiere in Cessnock, the town that was at the centre of the events of 1920-1930. The miners were making the point that they were the custodians of their history.

The funding for the continuing work of the Australian Coal Miners' Oral History Project was a product of the same innovative thinking that started the collection of information in 1986. Concurrent with the collection of recordings, the miners and their union had become holders of a coal mining lease near Warkworth in the Hunter Valley (United Colliery), and as a result, had become joint venture partners in the development of an underground mine. In entering this joint venture, the miners' union had resolved that a portion of profits would be used to establish a fund, the Mineworkers' Trust. One of its aims was to be the continuation of the Australian Coal Miners' Oral History Project and the hiring of external experts – the broadcasters who could transform raw

interview into programmes, the graphic designers who could package products, historians who could provide background material, professional editors and cinematographers. Essentially, Moore, Harrison and Gorman were seizing opportunities to value-add to their raw material.

Now in his late 80s, Moore continues to interview miners. From time to time he has appeared on national television in Australia – telling his story and the stories of the miners and their families who have spoken with him. In this way, through the books and interviews, the Australian Coal Miners' Oral History Project is contributing to the national narrative of Australia in a novel and noteworthy manner that provides another template for the telling of miners' history.

In time, it is possible that when all the recordings have been transcribed and the Coalface series has been concluded, probably after 2015, the material will be placed in the public domain - either in an on-line format or in a suitable archive. The value of this material to historians and researchers in the Social Sciences will be considerable, providing first-hand accounts of coal mining and coal community life from the late 1920s to the first years of the 21st century. More immediately, the Australian Coal Miners' Oral History Project offers a novel template for the collection and dissemination of oral history.

This paper is a version of presentations at the American Mining History Association meeting in Creede, Colorado, in June 2009, and at the 8th International Mining History Congress in Redruth, Cornwall, also in June 2009.

Endnotes

¹ C. Fisher, *Coal and the State*, Methuen, Sydney, 1987.

² B. Galligan, *Utah and Queensland Coal: A Study in the Macro-political Economy of Modern Capitalism and the State*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1989.

³ D.C. Mengel, et al, *A History of Coal Exploration and Mining in Queensland*, AusIMM Proceedings, Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, vol. 296, November 1991.

⁴ E. Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation*, the Australasian Coal and Shale Employee' Federation, Sydney, 1970.

⁵ *Common Cause* was first published in 1924. Several trial issues were produced under editors Norm Freehill and Sam Rosa. The publication was absorbed into *Labour Daily* chain of newspapers until it reappeared as an independent title in 1935 under editor Edgar Ross. The re-emergence of *Common Cause*, which remains in print in 2009, was a consequence of the opposing views held by the Communist leadership of the Miners' Federation and the Right-wing, conservative views of the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) which held the controlling interest in the *Labour Daily* newspapers.

⁶ F. Moore, P. Gorman, R. Harrison, *At the Coalface – The Human Face of Coal Miners and their communities: An Oral History of the Early Days*, CFMEU, Mining and Energy Division, Sydney, 1998.

⁷ F. Moore, P. Gorman, R. Harrison, A. Murray, A. Kruse, *Back at the Coalface*, CFMEU Mining and Energy Division, Sydney, 2007.

⁸ J. Comerford, *Lockout*, CFMEU Mining and Energy Division, Sydney, 2000.