

BOOK REVIEWS

Nic Haygarth, *Baron Bischoff: Philosopher Smith and the Birth of Tasmanian Mining*, the author, Perth, Tas., 2004, 209 pages, ISBN 0 9585831 1 0

It is probably churlish of a reviewer to begin by quibbling over a book's title, but James Smith's discovery of tin at Mount Bischoff in December 1871 was by no means the 'birth' of Tasmanian mining. Van Diemen's Land had been producing coal since about 1804 - in large quantities from the Tasman Peninsula penal mines from 1833 to 1848 - and alluvial gold had been produced from 1852 onward. Indeed Haygarth describes Smith's involvement in a modest Tasmanian silver mine before 1871.

Mount Bischoff was the abrupt onset of adolescence in Tasmanian mining, leading rapidly to its coming of age, with implications that would ripple through the rest of the Australian mining industry for decades. Smith had made the first lode tin discovery in Australia, and it was not merely a few specimens from a creek bed, but the biggest tin deposit known in the world at the time. It was certainly the birth of base metal mining in Tasmania, and it inspired other prospectors; two years later, George Renison Bell found the tinfields of northeast Tasmania, which would be worked much longer than Mount Bischoff. Smith's discovery would lead others further west into the Mount Read Volcanics province to open up the Heemskirk tin field, find gold on the Pieman, Whyte and King rivers, and discover the base metal mining fields of Zeehan, Dundas, Mount Read, Rosebery, Renison Bell, Mount Farrell, Hellyer, Savage River and the legendary Mount Lyell. The deceptively simple-sounding aphorism that 'we find what we look for' is nowhere as true as in the mining industry. James Smith's most important legacy was to start prospectors looking for minerals in places where no-one had looked before.

James 'Philosopher' Smith can hardly be described as an unknown figure. Anyone who has written on the mining fields of western Tasmania, from Geoffrey Blainey to Kerry Pink, has identified his discovery of Mount Bischoff as a pivotal moment in Australian history. Yet Nic Haygarth gives us a fresh understanding of this historically important personality. Smith was an enigmatic man; simultaneously combining piety with worldliness, and business acumen with naivety. The figure of the unrewarded prospector recurs throughout Australian mining - Thomas Pickett, paid £10

for finding the Monster Mine at Burra, and John Campbell Miles who discovered Mount Isa and then vanished from its history, immediately come to mind - but Smith's case was far more complex than that. His find made him one of the largest shareholders in one of Australia's largest mining companies, and a Legislative Councillor, only to see him fall out with the board, resign his directorship after less than three years and his parliamentary seat after less than two, and spend the last years of his life back as a solitary prospector in the wilderness (However, his dispute with the company did not, contrary to legend, extend to selling his shares). Haygarth aptly compares him to James Mulligan of North Queensland, who over a prospecting career spanning 30 years made a succession of major mineral discoveries - several of them worth millions of pounds - but was seemingly unable to settle down to the tedium of running a mine.

The book covers many aspects of Smith's story, not only his factual biography, but the myths, legends and lies that surround it. The style is discursive, which can be frustrating to the reader seeking a narrative account. The discursion extends as far as the role of the smith in Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungen* - first performed in the year Smith resigned from the Mount Bischoff board - as 'the embodiment of the greed of the Industrial Revolution', but fortunately a good index helps the impatient reader keep to the essential story. The book is soundly researched and well-documented, as one expects from a work based on a PhD thesis at the University of Tasmania, and deserves a place on mining historians' bookshelves.

Peter Bell