

## AUSTRALIAN MINING HISTORY ASSOCIATION BOOK REVIEW

### ***A mirage in the desert? The discovery, evaluation and development of the Olympic Dam ore body at Roxby Downs, South Australia, 1975-88***

Johns R Keith, 2010. O'Neil Historical & Editorial Services, Adelaide, 64 pp.

*A mirage in the desert* provides the history behind the development by Western Mining Corporation (WMC) in outback South Australia of the giant Olympic Dam copper, uranium, gold and silver mine from its discovery in 1975 until formal opening of the mine in 1988. The author, Keith Johns, was the key State Government Officer involved throughout this entire period and this volume demonstrates his intimate knowledge of all aspects of the project.

The importance of this work is immediately demonstrated by the fact that Olympic Dam remains the world's largest single resource of uranium, the fourth largest copper deposit and fifth largest gold deposit. Yet as revealed by this work, the lengthy 13-year process of developing the controversial mine was overshadowed by one potential product, uranium.

The volume is framed sequentially around the bureaucratic approval process and mine progress. It is arranged primarily in short, succinctly written chapters with explanatory headings on exploration tenure, environmental considerations, the 1983 blockade, the 'Three Mine' uranium policy and water supplies. There is a major chapter on the Roxby Downs Indenture Act and another emphasis on the controversy surrounding aboriginal sacred sites. A detailed description is also included of mine development following a final commitment to mining was made in May 1986.

The development period of the Olympic Dam mine is revealed here as a tale of hypocrisy and political expediency. Readers are advised that, soon after discovery in 1977, both Liberal and Labor parties in the South Australian Parliament supported a moratorium on uranium mining. This was reiterated one year later. However, after the Liberals gained Government in September 1979, they quickly supported uranium mining and processing under their energetic Mines and Energy Minister, Roger Goldsworthy, whilst the Labor Party continued its opposition. The latter blocked indenture legislation in South Australia's Upper House in June 1982 until one Labor member dramatically 'crossed the floor'. At this time the Labor Party was accused by its Liberal opponents as perceiving the Olympic Dam development as a 'mirage in the desert' thus providing the title to this book. Yet the political balance quickly changed again when the Labor Party was returned to Government in November 1982 when it maintained Government support for mine development within the so called 'Three Mine policy' on uranium mining. Consequently it was a Labor Premier, John Bannon, once an outspoken critic, who opened the Olympic Dam mine in 1988.

Aboriginal and environmental concerns about mining at Olympic Dam were first raised in 1979. In June 1980, it was alleged that clay pans adjacent to a proposed shaft site were of mythological significance. Such matters led Premier David Tonkin to note in November 1981 that only as a consequence of the Olympic Dam discovery was aboriginal interest attracted to the remote area. However, it was the construction of the bore field road across Canegrass Swamp, 50km north of Olympic

Dam, in July 1982 that provoked the largest indigenous protest. It was only resolved in December after it was suggested that WMC might invoke the *force majeure* provision of their indenture and the Government approved \$450,000 expenditure to reroute the road.

Opposition also came from the Campaign Against Nuclear Energy (CANE) and in August 1983, 250 police were deployed to Olympic Dam to counter a CANE mine blockade. Three-hundred arrests resulted and the protest continued until the protestors were finally evicted by the police in November of that year.

Underlying all sections of the book is the astute and focussed commercial opportunism of WMC, commencing with its trail-blazing exploration programme that discovered a major ore body under 350 metres of barren rock. Coupled with this is the unambiguous appreciation of the economic opportunity by the State Department of Mines and Energy. Over the 13 years development period, WMC's exploration tenure was quickly and efficiently expanded over adjacent areas, joint ventures partners were secured, and an Indenture Act was requested and facilitated. Extensive environmental and anthropological reports were compiled and assessed as required. At the same time, mainstream political support was gained in face of initial opposition.

This volume is highly recommended for all those interested in modern mining history as well as those involved in establishing new mines in Australia today. Olympic Dam is and will remain significant to the economy of Australia for a long period. Consequently this history will be also an important, indeed an essential study, in ongoing reflection. The book is well illustrated with photos from the period under consideration and neatly edited. It also includes excellent explanatory maps and a very useful time-line of the events.

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