

AUSTRALIAN MINING HISTORY ASSOCIATION BOOK REVIEW

Dust and Dreams. Mining Communities in South-East New South Wales
Barry McGowan, 2010. UNSW Press, Sydney, pp. 381, 80 photos, maps and drawings. Price \$50 (plus \$5 postage and packing in Australia). To order, phone Barry at 0427118207 or email: barry@cyberone.com.au

Many members will be familiar with Barry's earlier mining histories on this local region, many of which were very popular with the mining and fossicking fraternity. *Dust and Dreams* is different. While it still includes accounts of the various mining ventures and a very informative chapter on mining and the environment, the focus is more on the towns, villages and camps and the day-to-day lives of the miners and their families. The region is broad, and includes a large number of contiguous and representative mining fields in terms of population, technology, mineralogy, ethnicity – not just gold mining but silver and copper mining are represented. The time period runs from 1850, just before the gold rushes, to 1929 on the eve of the Great Depression. A final chapter covers the period from 1930 to the closure of the Captains Flat mines in 1962.

Dust and Dreams reveals who the miners really were. It illustrates the extraordinary diversity, mobility and dogged perseverance of mining communities, from self-employed miners chasing dreams of independence to wage labourers bringing home regular salaries through to swagmen down on their luck, not to mention Chinese miners working in syndicates, Aborigines and whole families of fossickers. Underpinning all mining communities was the dream of becoming independent, for the mining workforce was very versatile, and a digger working an alluvial goldfield one day could be working reef gold or a base-metal mine the next. And if mining in all its aspects was depressed, then the miner might turn to work on the roads, railways and farms. Most miners saw themselves as part of a middling class of self-employed persons or better. What kept them at work was the prospect of earning more than they could as labourers, and in this most were for a time successful, whether working independently or for wages.

Barry questions a number of popular stereotypes, for instance the image of the mass of diggers as consumed by gambling, profanity and drunkenness, and the portrayal of mining society as masculine and rough around the edges. Even in the early gold rushes it is questionable whether the more turbulent image of the miner applies very often. Increasingly, the presence of women and children, family networks and middle-class values such as respectability and domesticity are being noted and discussed. On law and order he argues that fears about drunkenness and a breakdown of law and order turned out to be more about established middle-class sensitivities than an accurate reading of actual events. He also questions the popular image of sectarianism. Inter-denominational support, particularly where fundraising was involved, was common. Indeed it was an overriding characteristic in almost every community. On the question of race the overriding impression is that in this region the Chinese and European miners lived in relative harmony, often working in close proximity to each other, the European miners always mindful that they didn't always have the numbers and that the Chinese were their market, and were willing to pay handsomely for mining claims that the Europeans were no longer willing to work.