

AUSTRALIAN MINING HISTORY ASSOCIATION BOOK REVIEW

The Gympie Gold Field 1867-2008

John Ferguson and Elaine Brown, 2009. Gympie Regional Council, 102 pp., photographs, tables, diagrams. PB \$20. HB \$40 (plus \$6 postage in Australia) and can be obtained on line at: www.gympie.qld.gov.au/library.

Many books have been written over the years about the Gympie goldfield that focus on particular aspects of the discovery and the town. Booklets to promote the town's mining history, and especially the mining machinery and the head frame at its Monkland headquarters, have been produced by the local Historical Society. Bill Mulholland, Hector Holthouse and William Lees have also produced a variety of books and articles. In another venture, John Dale, a schoolteacher at Kin Kin and Caboolture, compiled extensive data on Gympie goldfield miners from 1867 to 1880, especially concentrating on mining companies, until his untimely death on 31 October 2001.

In producing this book, John Ferguson and Elaine Brown have significantly advanced the historiography of Gympie goldfield, their project being supported financially by the Queensland government's Q150 Community Funding Program for the Sesquicentenary of Queensland, and also by the Gympie Regional Council. Substantial research work for the project was done by Elaine Brown in the Gympie Regional Libraries Local History Collection where Elaine has done such dedicated work for 15 years.

The book is written from the perspective of the modern day citizen of Gympie. The style belies the hidden, extensive research and distilled evidence. It suggests an unfounded sense of superficiality – in the complexities of human behaviour, company formation and management, and the scientific assessment of the geological formations. The book is very comprehensive, covering the whole history of the field from before discovery to closure of the Gympie gold mine in 2008. The writing style indicates that the book is a distillation of extensive reading of the newspapers (*Gympie Times*, *Brisbane Courier*), geological survey reports, and Mines Department *Annual Reports* relating to Gympie, while the decades of distilled research provides the book with a sense of certainty of presentation and content.

The descriptions of the fledgling settlement and the subsequent establishment of crushing batteries along the Mary River in the first five years are exceptionally good. Similarly the publication of compiled plans and reproductions of geological survey plans are of enormous value to the reader and the scholarly researcher. The book is a mixture of technical explanations of the mining and its associated technology, and this facilitates an understanding of the geography and structural geology of this hilly goldfield above the Mary River. The story is told very methodically in a simple structured way under the heading of each scientific topic and dedicated mining history scholars desiring to understand the whole unfolding mining, technological, commercial and company history of the goldfield in one analytical chronological tapestry, will find this publication useful.

The Gympie goldfield provided enormous wealth and employment for its population. The boom of the late 1880s with its influx of British capital brought expanded opportunities for major company development and mine expansion. Capital was

available for deep exploration shafts – for chasing the reefs – at a time when there was very limited understanding of the field's structural geology.

Although the book contains little on the significant early miners other than James Nash, the biographical sketches of wealthy miners are excellent and provide a flavour of what a detailed history of the goldfield detailing the company formation and operation should look like. However, more detailed biographies of Matthew Laird, William Smyth and David Reid would have been very welcome.

The calculation of production figures is a difficult task but the figures published in this work should prove very worthwhile for further research. Production figures for the 20 largest reef mines illuminate the core of Gympie goldfield's mining and production, one finding being that the four largest producing mines accounted for just over half the total over the working life of these 20 mines. These were the Scottish Gympie Gold Mining Company (1896-1923), the No.2 South Great Eastern Gold Mining Company (1887-1920), the South Glanmire & Monkland Mining Company (1888-1915), and the 1 North Phoenix Gold Mining Company (1880-1918). The first three of these mines were clustered together at Monkland, and feature on the book's attractive cover, based on a postcard photo from 1909. Another statistic from the pages is that nine companies that began their life in 1870 (the first production year of a company in the top 20) produced 19,529 kgs of gold bullion, or 24 percent of the total of the top 20 mines. However, it is a pity for readers that that it is difficult to compare and analyze figures presented on pages 26 and 67 (except for the top four mines) with that of Devex's figures that are quoted, because of the different units used by that authority and the authors.

In total, 33,439,177 ounces of gold were produced on the Gympie goldfield between 1867 and 1930. The largest production year was 1903 (180,456 ounces). Between 1884 and 1906, more than 100,000 ounces of gold was produced in 12 of those years, and 150,000 ounces was produced in both 1903 and 1904. The largest number of mines operating was 215 in 1902.

The details on the Scottish Gympie that is provided should prove valuable as a template for studying other mines, as it has used most available technologies, although it would have been useful to learn something about Matthew Laird's training and skills for his position as General Manager. But perhaps omissions are understandable due to the destruction of records (page 72), an unfortunate but standard practice under Companies legislation in western legal jurisdictions. The success and failure in mining that David Laing experienced (he took over as manager of the Scottish Gympie Goldmining Company in 1897) is typical of the mining industry (page 73). The presentation to him by the miners on his resignation is indeed exceptional and laudatory.

Another notable personality discussed in the book is Andrew Fisher who worked at the South Great Eastern Extended mine as an engine driver, and who had a highly influential role in the Labor Party at the time. He had also worked underground in The 1 North Phoenix Gold Mining Company mine, before moving to the South Great Eastern Extended mine at Monkland sometime after 1890. The summary of Fisher's career on page 44 is very effective in describing his place in Gympie and Australian political history. His establishment of the *Gympie Truth* newspaper in 1896 was very significant for labor politics, and union formation and management, in Queensland.

The visit on 6 June 1888 to The 1 North Phoenix Gold Mining Company mine by Lady Lucinda Musgrave whose husband was the Governor of Queensland, was really ground breaking because she went underground (page 81). The captioned photograph of the visitors to the mine that day includes the names of all the mining company and town council personnel including their wives and daughters. Another photograph on page 72 of 200 invited guests (mining, financial, commercial) to the opening of new winding machinery in 1900 is highly depictive of the town's culture – a wonderful illustration for a centenary booklet. A list of names would have provided an excellent historic record but no doubt impossible, as they are unlikely to have been recorded at the time.

Deep exploration shafts came to be beyond the capability of companies after 1904 – as demonstrated by The West of Scotland shaft, which proved a duffer. However the shaft was later used as a critically important access to the area of the deep lodes of the Inglewood structure. The refusal in 1915 by Benjamin Dunstan, government geologist, to pay a subsidy for the No.2 South Great Eastern mine (the second largest producer on the field, page 76) on the basis that the company had been profligate in payment of dividends provides the cold evidence of a significant mining industry administrative decision. It indicates that the company did not meet the criteria for the grant program.

We also learn of a very constructive mine rehabilitation decision by the Scottish Mine where underground voids were filled with mullock, perhaps an unusual trend at that time in history. The winding and reported flood prone Mary Street demonstrates the living heritage of an administrative, legal, financial and commercial precinct that has operated for 144 years. While fires of 1881 and 1891 destroyed the old wooden buildings of Upper Mary Street, the new buildings built mostly of brick during the most prosperous periods of Gympie's economic history are still utilized in practical and highly functional ways and many were entered on the Queensland Heritage register in 2010 and 2011. The brief histories of the use and architectural style of each of the buildings should prove very helpful for visitors to the town.

Comparisons with other major goldfields – Charters Towers, Bendigo, Ballarat, Croydon and Kalgoorlie - would have given the book a wider perspective and defined Gympie more clearly in Australian mining history. Also some analysis of the rate of investment in deep mining and machinery in the depression of the 1890s by the major companies would have helped in understanding the impact of the contraction of capital and mine production on a goldfield as significant as Gympie.

It's a pity a book like this was not been written on Gympie for the centenary, as it would have guided the Council, the Historical Society and local historians. There are a number of small detractions from the book – such as the source for the plan on page 3; the reward letter by Nash on page 8 being really too small to read (ID2766, Queensland State Archives); the apparent mistake in the date of birth of J.O. Bligh (page 36); and the name of the ministry Andrew Fisher held in 1899 – viz., Secretary for Railways and Public Works from 1 December 1899 to 7 December 1899, rather than Minister for Transport (p.44).

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