

# AUSTRALIAN MINING HISTORY ASSOCIATION BOOK REVIEW

## *No Easy Field: Ipswich Coalmining, 1920-2000*

**Alan Murray, 2010** Queensland University Press, xiv, 418pp

Publication of this book coincided with the celebration by Ipswich of its 150 years as a municipality. Its period picks up from where the late Professor Ray William's Volume III of the coalmining history of Queensland left off. Publication was sponsored by the local William L. Haenke Historical Foundation which promotes awareness of coalmining in the Ipswich region of South-East Queensland. Support was also provided by the New Hope Corporation, the field's only remaining coalmining company, and by the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). The outcome is a large, handsome, luxuriously produced and lavishly illustrated tome rarely found among latter-day industrial and economic histories. Important among the author's lengthy list of remaining acknowledgements is that to his wife, Dr. J.B.Murray, for her work as editor of this weighty volume.

The author reminds us that as late as 1950 the Ipswich-West Moreland field still led state coal production with some 1900 employees producing 58 per cent of Queensland's coal output. Thereafter it was increasingly swamped by production from the easily accessible, large scale, open cut operations in central Queensland that catered for the exponentially growing export trade. By 1975, when Australia accounted for 22 per cent of world coal trade, the Queensland Coal Board Report saw West Moreland's role as largely peripheral. Although open cuts were opened there, by 1991 the field produced a mere 4 per cent of the Queensland total and ceased to be separately delineated in official statistics.

A noteworthy factor concerning the field's early expansion was, of course, its proximity to Brisbane, the state's capital and major domestic market. Murray emphasises that, although the key to its original predominance, this proximity became a negative in the post war years. This was because Ipswich increasingly became a dormitory for booming Brisbane's commuters who came to object strenuously to the deleterious environmental externalities of mining, particularly subsidence. West Moreland's major problems were, however, geological and historical. From the earliest days its readily accessible but narrow, tilted seams lent themselves to the crudest form of coal extraction. From the first nineteenth century scratching at the earth in shallow pits the field was epitomised by small, undercapitalised mines whose output lurched upwards in the early twentieth century. A few mines endeavoured to stay abreast of technical change but the small pits remained relatively unmechanised – underground haulage of coal by hand could still be found in 1946, while the last local case of mining by the ancient method of contract-share labour only disappeared in 1971. By and large, occupational health and safety was appalling and the accident rate was high. Naked lights were not totally banned until 1945. Eighty-one men were killed between 1928 and 1934, for example, and in 1971 managerial technical ignorance contributed to the death of 18 others in the Box Flat disaster which rocked the contemporary Ipswich community.

Two things spring out from Murray's immensely detailed account: a) the central importance of state regulation of the industry and b) the human and social aspects of mining this field. Successive major coal industry Inquiries and legislation, notably

in 1933, 1946, 1947 and 1949, helped, via increasingly stringent regulation, push the field towards greater production and marketing efficiency and safer operational practices – aided respectively, of course, by growing market competition and by trade union pressures. Meanwhile the local coalfield community lived, struggled, coped or celebrated through booms, depression, war and pit disasters. Here Murray is at his strongest. Any family, local or company historian will find great value in his book. Virtually every major event in Ipswich, including Royal visits, and in individual mines seems to get a mention and the author really shines in humanising his story around individuals. Most pre-war West Moreland coal owners appear to have been beneficent compared to their NSW equivalents and the sense of community closeness pervades the book. Some of Murray's pen-pictures and epitaphs are quite moving.

From the outsider's viewpoint, however, the book suffers from too much detail. It appears that the author studied his many sources literally year by year and he groups his findings in chronological chapters each covering two or three years and seeming to list every single change. The trees consequently obscure the wood. After being informed of each and every ownership change, technical plan or development in each and every mine and seam, a picture of fairly steady progress tends to form in the reader's mind. Subsequent disclosure of the damning criticism of the field's continuing backwardness in successive official inquiries and reports tends to come as something of a shock. Above all, tables and/or graphs depicting output, employment and exports are completely lacking. Their inclusion would have obviated the lengthy, tedious and repetitious literary enumeration of the data in this year-by-year account. In summary, this essential reference book provides a rewarding but overly dense read.

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