

AUSTRALIAN MINING HISTORY ASSOCIATION BOOK REVIEW

The Olympic Dam Story – How Western Mining defied the odds to discover and develop the world's largest mineral deposit

David Upton, 2010. Upton Financial PR, Armadale, Victoria, 180pp, including maps and photographs, \$35. Available from the author (david@theolympicdamstory.com) and from selected Dymock stores.

Failure is an orphan but success has many fathers'. The second half of that statement has long been applied to Western Mining's discovery of Olympic Dam, the large multi-metal deposit in northern South Australia, now owned by BHP Billiton.

In a well-written and highly readable book, author David Upton gives a detailed history of the discovery of the iron-rich, copper-uranium-gold-silver-rare earth deposit and the role of the key players, but more importantly describes the elements that contributed to the exploration success. In the process, David discusses the culture that Western Mining ('WMC') developed from its beginnings in 1933. It was a culture that encouraged and supported exploration, even through difficult times, that led to the company becoming such a successful explorer.

In his first chapter, David provides a succinct summary of the history of Olympic Dam. He deftly conveys the excitement in late 1976, as the company's directors inspected mineralised drill core from RD10, the hole that first demonstrated the economic potential of the orebody that had been discovered nearly 18 months earlier. The story covers the ensuing development of the project, the political battle to bring the orebody into production in 1988, plus the role of BP, through to the subsequent takeover of WMC by BHP Billiton in 2005.

In the subsequent chapters, David fleshes out the story. While there is some repetition, this does not distract the reader, and is necessary because of the intersecting story lines within the book.

For the technically minded, there is a complete chapter summarising the current geological thinking on how the orebody was formed, while the author also discusses in detail the geological theories that led to the discovery after 20 years of searching for copper throughout Australia. In describing the science, Upton also introduces us to the individuals who were developing the science and those who were providing the support framework for those scientists. This culminated in Western Mining drilling their first hole on Roxby Downs Station in 1975, in a region which has no surface expression of the riches hidden below.

David has the ability to convey an understanding of complex scientific and technical issues. Where more detailed explanations are required, for example on geology or ore reserves, he avoids the distraction of copious footnotes by the clever use of separate, concise information boxes, so as not to interrupt the flow of the story.

David doesn't shirk from discussions on some of the more controversial aspects of the discovery history. These included the role of tectonic lineament studies in the discovery, and later criticism that the orebody found was nothing like that predicted in the theoretical studies that led to the initial drilling. David provides credible

explanations and balanced arguments to justify the decisions taken at the time and to rationalise the thinking of the time with the benefit of hindsight.

The book discusses more recent developments by BHP Billiton at Olympic Dam. In addition, it also looks at the fruits of successful exploration by other companies in the region that have resulted in the discoveries of Prominent Hill and Carrapateena.

Upton has captured the culture of a successful explorer and the key people who created and supported that culture. In his conversational style, he provides an intimate picture of the key individuals, their motivations and reasons for their actions taken during the discovery process. The book illustrates the successes which come from the support of scientific excellence, attention to detail, persistence, perseverance and above all teamwork.

As background for the book, David interviewed many WMC executives including former Director of Exploration, Roy Woodall, and his senior executives Jim Lalor, Dan Evans, Douglas Haynes and Hugh Rutter, who were key players in the copper search project. He was unable to interview the late Tim O'Driscoll, but Tim's contribution is acknowledged. David also had access to WMC's previously unpublished records and has produced a well-researched account of the events preceding the discovery at Olympic Dam.

One of Australia's greatest industrialists and former WMC executive, Sir Arvi Parbo, has written a thoughtful Foreword to the book. He emphasises just how significant the find is and the importance to successful discovery of having a capable, well-trained, dedicated and persistent team of people. He also highlights the need for a very long term perspective in the minerals industry.

And finally, to quote from Sir Arvi Parbo; 'High level and persistent exploration effort is necessary if the Australian minerals industry is to maintain its world leadership position. I hope *The Olympic Dam Story* will assist in understanding that there is nothing easy or granted about it'.

The book is highly recommended to general readers and in particular to geoscientists, students, exploration managers and directors of mineral exploration companies. It should also be required reading for politicians and public servants!

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