

AUSTRALIAN MINING HISTORY ASSOCIATION BOOK REVIEW

Mining Towns: Making a Living, Making a Life.

E. Eklund, 2012. University of NSW Press, 23.4×15.3mm, 400 pp. p/back, \$49.99.

The author of *Mining Towns* sets out to examine the rich cultural and historical legacy of five iconic Australian mining-related towns, all associated with non-ferrous metals, that had significant impact on the Australian economy from the late nineteenth century and up to recent times. The intention of the author is to get away from the city-centric focus of most histories although he acknowledges the many financial and other linkages with the major centres of population. While the economic impact of the towns and their regional and national links are emphasised, the focus is to bring alive the development of community spirit and identity this by examining the rise of civic and convivial institutions while aligning such developments with the recollections of workers and their families.

The chosen settlements are spread throughout the country with the exception of the Northern Territory and Victoria, and three of the five have seen continuous habitation since the 1880s. One, Port Pirie in South Australia, is renown for its smelting and has been included because of its industrial links and to illustrate the far-reaching impact of mining on the wider economy. Another distinguishing mark is that the mining towns, Broken Hill in New South Wales, Queenstown in Tasmania, Kambalda in Western Australia, and Mount Morgan and Mount Isa in Queensland are relatively isolated and located in harsh environments. These conditions have influenced the way the communities have developed.

Some of these influences were negative, such as those borne out of economic depression, or arising from industrial conflict often associated with profit-at-any-cost attitudes by employers, especially when communities were divorced from corporate bodies. Such social and often geographical distance brought on feelings of powerlessness among workers. Other negatives were associated with environmental problems linked to working conditions, or through pollution, such as that experienced in Mount Isa and Port Pirie where lead levels have had a deleterious effect on the health of the communities. An element of racism and exclusionism also featured in all five towns, although, not surprisingly, the latest town to develop, Kambalda from the 1970s, showed less evidence of this than in the other communities.

On the other hand, there are also stories of fulfilment, loyalty, reward, prosperity and attachment to the local industry and community. The one common thread in all towns was the desire and effort to bring about improvement in living conditions and to channel energy into supporting civic and voluntary causes through social interaction, though the concern of local employers was somewhat muted in some areas. Even in the 1880s, concern to plan and establish community was seen with the setting up of Progress Associations that attempted to tackle problems. The make-up of such civic authorities depended on whether they were 'Company' towns (such as Queenstown, or Mt Morgan) in which case they were dominated by the company hierarchy, or whether they were more worker oriented, such as at Broken Hill. Some of the palliatives that explain the awareness of community were associated with the formation of institutions able to address problems and provide

solutions that led to an awareness of community and belonging. The development of these institutions themselves often became a reason to stay in uncomfortable environments. Churches of various denominations, trade unions, sporting and ethnic clubs, friendly societies, drama and musical societies (of which brass bands featured highly), public houses, all come into this category. As stated by the author, 'They were vibrant and contradictory places' (p. 32), with harsh conditions and hard times being compensated for by comradeship, social activities and social ties.

In all cases the growth of mining saw inflows of immigrants from diverse backgrounds. Many arrived with the object of staying for a short period of time, while others, despite initial problems with harsh environmental conditions, high costs of living, shortages of housing and other infrastructure, developed an attachment to the locality. It is with this latter group of people and their motivation to stay and build a community that attracts the attention of the author.

To detail development of all five towns would be too space consuming for this review but in all cases the author provides a broad and informative description of the origins and development of mining activity and of the leading figures involved. Described as an 'Icon of working-class culture', Broken Hill that came into existence following Charles Rasp's discovery of silver-lead outcrops in 1883 had a population of just under 20,000 in 1893. By that time a municipal authority had been established, the township surveyed and a number of hotels and other institutions established but with 'progress' came problems with fume belching smelting chimneys and dust storms that were exacerbated following the cutting down of timber in the vicinity of the 'line of lode'. Such problems saw formation of the Broken Hill Progress Committee in 1885 that lobbied the NSW government to provide services and facilities. While BHP dominated mining activity, other mining companies, smelters and mills meant this was not a one-company town, and linkages to other industries saw a healthy diversification of opportunities for the population. Because of its isolation and high transport costs, Broken Hill also had a vibrant commercial and service sector, something that provided some opportunities for female workers in a male-oriented town.

Following establishment of a Catholic Church in the town, the Hiberian Catholic Benevolent Society emerged in 1887 to provide sickness and accident benefits (an organisation that appeared in all towns at a very early stage of development). By 1934, it was among a number of such societies that covered 4,800 members or approximately 40 per cent of the total employed workforce. While at first there was industrial harmony and an alliance between employers and workers, by 1892 the employers had formed their own organisation thus seeing an escalation of class conflict that culminated in the wages dispute of 1909 and the Big Strike of 1919-1920. The town's working class image was further exemplified by control of the municipal council by the Labor Party from 1900 onwards. Spokesmen also came from the ranks of sober religious bodies such as the Wesleyans, Primitive Methodists and other non-conformist groups.

While having an image of tolerance and fairplay, migrant workers in Broken Hill were always kept at the fringes of the labour market and allocated the hardest and most dangerous jobs, while Aboriginal people although supported by some sections of the religious and union community were also treated with contempt – something that sits uneasily with the subject of 'community'. Also noted was the formation of

co-operative housing societies that were active in constructing houses from 1937, while in 1947 the Zinc Corporation also constructed and financed houses. However, even at the later developed Mt Isa and Kambalda the author finds cause to suspect the motivation of the companies when providing such infrastructure.

One now familiar reflection by the author is that the old cohesiveness of community in some of these centres is today being eroded by fly-in-fly-out, drive-in-drive out regimes and by the introduction of 12-hour shifts. Transient communities and long shifts that disrupt old social patterns make for poor community cohesiveness.

This is a well-written account of some of the major mining developments that have taken place in Australia over the past century or so. The publication presents a comprehensive and informative account of historical development, although in places the detail sometimes tends to distract from the main stated object, which is to zoom in and identify developments that brought about communal affiliation with the particular mining town. In other words, the message at times tends to become lost in the detail – but this is not a serious problem. Another minor quibble is that while the introduction stresses the role of oral interviews in compiling the story, there are relatively few quotes in the dialogue from the lips of those surveyed – again not a criticism of concern but an aspect that perhaps should not have been emphasised in the introduction. In another respect this is a book that should appeal to those interested in Australian mining history in that it provides excellent detail on the history of five major mining-related developments that have helped define the Australian industrial landscape.

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