

Book Reviews

Peter Bell, *Alas it Seems Cruel: The Mount Mulligan Coal Mine Disaster of 1921*, Boolarong Press, Brisbane, 2013. Pp. 301. ISBN 0-7083-2611-4.

Historian and Adelaide-based heritage consultant Peter Bell gets straight to the point. “This is the story of a horrible event in a remote and beautiful location ninety years ago,” he writes in his introduction.

Many will be familiar with Bell’s earlier, and excellent, examinations of the 19 September, 1921, Mount Mulligan Mine Disaster. The terrible event claimed 75, possibly 76, lives.

Initially produced as a history honours thesis at James Cook University in 1977 and published as a monograph one year later, the Mount Mulligan work was reprinted in 1996 to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the tragedy.

This latest 2013 publication, basically a third edition, comes with Bell’s observation: “This book has evolved over those years. But it has not changed fundamentally. I have learned a little more, corrected some errors, changed some emphases, and I may have become a little bit more forthright in attributing praise or blame, but the story is essentially the same.”

In brief, that story attends to the reasons for the establishment of the mine at Mount Mulligan in Far North Queensland, the appearance of the small settlement around the mine, conditions at the mine, the explosion that claimed so many lives and the brave efforts of those who searched for survivors and then recovered bodies after the carnage.

As in the original publication, this third iteration deals with the post-disaster fortunes and misfortunes of the mine and the Mount Mulligan township and the eventual demise of coal mining at Mount Mulligan.

Significantly, as the years between Bell’s original History honours thesis and the 2013 publication have passed, the work has evolved beyond an account of a disaster and has, surely as a consequence of the author’s commendable and more recent forthrightness, attended to the development of some coal mine safety legislation and to the circumstances of, for example, the multiple fatalities caused by the Kianga and two Moura disasters in Queensland.

Bell does not dispute the worth of some safety-related legislation. However, he does assert, reasonably so, that much “reactive legislation” has been ineffective in contributing to safety in coal mines.

An obvious interpretation of this view is that well-intentioned safety legislation does not, of itself, preserve life and limb. Too often it has been the experience of miners and their elected Safety Check Inspectors who have highlighted clear and present dangers in the workplace. And far too often, it seems, managements have been less than fully attentive to the concerns expressed at the coalface. Sadly, the safety of the workplace has, on occasion, appeared to run a poor second to production priorities.

Like any important story, the story of the Mount Mulligan Disaster is worth re-telling. It has lessons that remain relevant – particularly so as, over the longer term, high-volume underground coal mining in Australia will almost certainly expand as a proportion of coal brought to market.

In summary, Bell's telling of the 1921 disaster improves with age.

Allan Murray

Ben Curtis, *When Thatcherism came to the valleys: The South Wales miners: 1964 – 1985*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2013. 301 pages. ISBN 0-7083-2611-4.

Mining historian Ben Curtis has produced a lucid and superbly documented addition to the noteworthy Studies in Welsh History series. Curtis has examined, in commendable and readable detail, the South Wales coal miners and their union in the years 1964 to 1985.

The author constructs a solid opening platform with a confident introduction that provides context for an understanding of the genesis of the vanguard role played by coal miners in the arena of organised labour politics in Britain. In the first chapter, this contextualising is narrowed to an examination of the politics of coal miners in South Wales. In large part, these were the politics of an active and assertive Left.

That the South Wales coal miners - like their counterparts in Australia, Northern France, Germany, the United States and elsewhere – rallied around the Red Flag will not surprise any who comprehend the hardships that, until relatively recently, defined the coal mining life. Beyond his introduction and opening chapter, Curtis wades into his work with passion, compassion and a sharp awareness of the undercurrents that flow through the tale he is telling.

The author, throughout, provides illuminating descriptions of the leadership of the South Wales coal miners – from local lodges to the most senior elected officials of the National Union of Mineworkers. Some were giants of organised labour and some were less imposing figures. However, most were sincere and dedicated in their endeavours to change, for the better, the lives of coal miners and their families.

Well-organised and presented, this volume sweeps the reader along – through the pit closures between 1964 and 1970, through the periods of uneasy peace of the early 1970s and forwards into the trench warfare of the Thatcher years and the crushing defeat – and it was nothing less – of Welsh, Scottish and English miners in the mid 1980s.

Essentially, this defeat was a product of a union leadership that tried to box well above its weight. Thatcher, after all, had defeated an enemy thousands of kilometres away in the South Atlantic. Opponents closer to home presented fewer problems for the Iron Lady. Further, the national leadership of the miners' union was on very shaky ground when it claimed a mandate for locking horns with the British Government.

Curtis asserts that the closure of collieries and the destruction of mining communities in the wake of the mid-1980s conflict was driven more by a political than a purely economic agenda. Simply stated, Thatcher was on a monetarist mission and the coal miners were blocking the way. In this assertion, Ben Curtis is not alone.

This is an important book. At its core is a story of how the mighty are fallen. With this volume, Ben Curtis has set the bar high for his continuing contribution to coal mining history. There seems no reason to doubt he will clear that bar.

Allan Murray

Kett H. Kennedy, with Lyn Robinson and Maria Caesar, *From Spruikers Corner: Electoral Politics on the Northern Goldfields, Charters Towers & Dalrymple Family History Association, Charters Towers, 2010; pp. i-xii, 209, with illus., index and recommended reading; 180X270mm; NLA C-I-P 324.99436, ISBN 978-0-9752200-3-0 (Price: \$39 plus \$11 postage)*

S*pruikers' Corner* was researched and written as a project of the Charters Towers & Dalrymple Family History Association Inc, in co-operation with Q150 celebrations (sesquicentenary celebrations in Queensland) where the State Government supported a multiplicity of celebratory activities and productions in 2009. The authors have taken the two northern goldfields – Charters Towers and Ravenswood – as the setting for this biographical approach. Kett Kennedy is the lead author and write, Lyn Robinson did research and Maria Caesar the word processing. Supporting that is a prologue analyzing electoral politics of the region from 1859 to 2009, an essay on the press, electoral redistributions, voting figures from 1864 to 2009. The study also encompasses the federal scene. It has been written with a structure that can be utilized for political history in a regional setting.

Retired History Professor from James Cook University of North Queensland, Kett Kennedy, has written a robust political history covering the regional towns of Charters Towers and Ravenswood. The resulting project is an outstanding achievement, made all the more so through Kett's early career involvement in politics - in Canberra where he served in the ministerial office of Hon R.F.X. Connor MP - and in Brisbane with Sir Jack Egerton. To this day he has continued as a political commentator on the North Queensland political scene. Kett is thus both part of and understands the political milieu intimately. Accordingly, he has been able to delve into the minds of politicians, analyse and assess the full range of manipulative political behaviour with confidence, and has produced an engaging and energetic control of the topic. Consequently he can both attack and dismember elites, while managing to commend outstanding skill. The book is an intense analysis of the northern political scene, while detail is palpable throughout. Inclusion of an essay on each member provides a mechanism for the storyline of each identified character.

This book tells the human and professional stories of 31 colonial and state members. Ten of them were miners, one a newspaper owner, one a newspaper editor, one a newsagent, one in Queensland Rail, one a sugar planter and miller, while three were public servants, three sharebrokers, three were unionists, three were in small business, two were graziers, and one was a British politician. There were seven lower house federal members and around nine senators with connections such as earlier residence or work in the Charters Towers and Ravenswood area. Most notable were Robert Sayers and Anthony St Ledger (founder of the Queensland Teachers Union). The most well-known lower house member is The Hon. Bob Katter MP of Katter's Australian Party (elected to the Queensland State Parliament on 7 December 1974 and to the Commonwealth Parliament on 13 March 1993 for the seat of Kennedy).

At federation, Charters Towers accounted for 30 per cent of the voters in north Queensland. Over a period of 150 years Charters Towers has had 12 cabinet ministers – with John Murtagh Macrossan the only recognized ‘fervant advocate for the North’, particularly for miners and federation. Eight were colonial ministers. The biographical and statistical information in the book will prove apposite and fulfilling for the local Family History Association and local, mining and academic historians.

The first electorate covering the northern region of Queensland hosted the base metal and gold provinces which fostered and advanced so much of Queensland’s wealth for 45 years to the end of World War I. Gold was discovered at Ravenswood nine years after Queensland was established as a separate self governing colony in 1859. Charters Towers followed three years later.

The electorate of Kennedy was formed, based on Mackay, Bowen and Townsville. Its first representative was George Elphinstone Dalrymple – Bowen Land Commissioner and leader of the expedition to the Burdekin in 1859-1860, and the North Eastern Queensland Expedition in 1863. He declined re-nomination in 1867.

When miners were arriving at Ravenswood in 1869, the Member for Birmingham in the House of Commons in the United Kingdom, John Bright, had been elected as a result of the advocacy of Mackay sugar planters, without Bright knowing. He never took his seat so the area was unrepresented from 10 July 1869 to 8 July 1870. The seat of Ravenswood thereafter entertained a chequered list of representatives after being created in 1872. The first sitting member, from 18 November 1873, and Attorney General for seven months in 1874, was Brisbane barrister, Edward O’Donnell McDevitt. Envy by Samuel Griffith for the position of Attorney General stimulated McDevitt’s resignation and his return to Ireland. His successor in the seat was Henry Edward King, failed gold miner, gold Commissioner and defeated member for Wide Bay. Although he seldom visited his seat, his sense of integrity in governance was a foil to premier Thomas McIlwraith’s business practice in government.

The two new members for the redistributed inland seat of Kennedy were Francis Horace Stubley, mining speculator from Victoria who held mining leases on the new Herberton tin field from 1880, and Henry Wyndham Palmer, newspaper proprietor. In contrast to lawyer, Sir Samuel Griffith, they both supported Premier McIlwraith (1878–1883).

The end of the careers of premiers, Thorn, Palmer, Lilley, Macalister and Douglas (the last to Thursday Island) saw the commencement of rigorous factional politics from 1878 to 1893. This saw a power struggle between McIlwraith, a liberal seeking development through railway developments, foreign capital inflow, and public works projects, and Griffith of different liberal hue, who was urbane and focused on abolition of Pacific Island indentured labour, smaller business enterprises, and coastal town development. Charters Towers members supported McIlwraith.

Griffith’s election as Premier in 1883 brought two supporters in Kennedy – Isodor Lissner and Arthur Rutledge (another lawyer and ‘place hunter’ from Brisbane and the west). The redistribution in 1887 formed two seats for the wealthy Charters Towers goldfield. Longstanding Australian gold miner and later Senator, Robert Sayers,

was one of them. All three members supported Griffith even though McIlwraith had become Premier.

The rise of representation by the Australian Labour Party (later Labor) from the 1893 election was due to the 1891 Shearers Strike, and the passage of Bills to provide for payment of members from 1889. When the world's first Labor government was sworn in in 1899 they gained eight seats across north Queensland, all of whom had worked at Charters Towers. The two Charters Towers members in that government were Anderson Dawson and John Dunsford, an ideas man and agitator who opposed Griffith's change of policy on Pacific Island labour.

While Anderson Dawson is revered among Labor stalwarts, Kennedy courageously outlines the intrigue of Griffith relating to the first Labor government and Dawson's role. Griffith was the Lieutenant Governor who had commissioned Dawson on 1 December 1899 to form a Ministry. However, that day Dawson could not command a majority on the floor of the Assembly. He returned his commission on 7th December with the government having done little, with not one bill having been passed (although Chillagoe Company's proposed smelter on the Barron Falls was stopped). By 1901, Charters Towers was a labor stronghold – Dawson was in the Senate, McDonald held Kennedy as Member of the House of Representatives, and Dunsford and Burrows were in the state parliament.

Kennedy assesses Griffith as the cause of the downfall of 'Liberalism' in Queensland, while Denham commenced to reconstitute it in 1911. It was period of crises and compromises. Charters Towers gained a conservative member, William Paull, in place of Dunsford, deceased. It was the period of the Kidston 'Labor' governments and the constitutional crisis. The February 1908 election produced two Labor members, Vernon Winstanley and John Mullan. North Queensland was isolated in representation in the new Denham government. Dual constituencies had been abolished in 1910 and the area was divided into two electorates, Charters Towers and Queenton. In the watershed change in 1915 following election of the Labor government, William Wellington won Charters Towers, Winstanley took Queenton, and James O'Sullivan won Kennedy.

Allowing for the coup by which Edward (Ted) Theodore replaced Thomas Ryan in October 1919 as premier, the government lost the Kennedy electorate to John Jones of the Northern Country Party. Theodore organized a redistribution providing boundaries favourable to Labor. The 1923 election provided a strong Labor government for the 1920s. However unification of the non-labor parties in December 1925 provided a platform for solid campaigning against the McCormack Labor government. Growing concern about the state mine and smelters at Chillagoe, strikes, a new opposition leader, and worsening worldwide economic conditions, stimulated a change of government with a 7.8 per cent swing. An electoral redistribution in 1931 abolished Queenton but Wellington retained Charters Towers. Conservative government only lasted one term before strongman, William Forgan Smith's Labor government was elected. The 1935 election under Forgan Smith's premiership decimated the opposition.

There were seven state members thereafter Joe Riordan, Frank Forde, Bill Lonergan, Bob Katter, Robert Mitchell, Christine Scott and Shane Knuth. Joe Riordan

was born at Mareeba and educated at Chillagoe and Cairns, and held the seat from 29 April 1950 to 9 December 1954. He became Minister for Mines and Immigration 1952 to 1954. The next member, Frank Forde, who only held the seat for 27 months, from 12 March 1955 to 3 August 1957, is better known nationally as the member for Capricornia (1922-1946), and for having been Prime Minister for seven days in July 1945 between Curtin and Chifley's terms in that office. Bill Lonergan known as 'Bugger-em-Bill', a feisty independent minded Country Party man, represented the seat from 3 August 1957 to 28 October 1974 (except for 2.5 months in 1958), and became speaker from 2 August 1972 until his retirement. He was elected speaker with support of Labor and disaffected Liberals, much to the chagrin of premier Bjelke-Petersen. Bob Katter held the seat from 1974 to 1992 and was extensively interviewed by Kett for this book. Following him was three-term National Party member Bob Mitchell, who during his working life had been a grazier, railway worker, club manager and small businessman. Christine Scott, a conscientious Labor Party member was the first woman member for the area. Known for her consultative approach and persistence, she came in on a swing in 1998 and went out in the 2004 swing. Shane Knuth, a railwayman, football player and enthusiast, is the current member. He was elected under the One Nation banner, converted to the National Party, and now is a member of Katter's Australian Party.

There are photographs of all the 31 Queensland colonial and state parliamentary members except for Francis Horace Stubley, mining speculator from Victoria (November 1878 – October 1883). The publication also contains statistical data on all the colonial and state elections from 1864 to 2009 and for the Commonwealth 1901 to 2009. There is also an insightful chapter on redistributions (and retributions).

Ruth S. Kerr

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Robert P. Wolensky and William A. Hastie Sr, *Anthracite Labor Wars: Tenancy and organised crime in the Northern Coalfield of Northeastern Pennsylvania 1897-1959*, Canal History and Technology Press, Easton, Pennsylvania, 2013. 447 pages, photographs. ISBN 978-0-930972-42-1.

This offering from Bob Wolensky and William Hastie is a milestone in the literature of life at the coalface in the United States, and represents the end product of a fifteen-year research project.

It is an intensely human and unashamedly outspoken account of the deadly trials and tribulations of Pennsylvania coal miners pitted against hired thugs, organised crime, employer greed and, here and there, public officials who paid lip service to legality. It prompts an obvious comparison with the rough-and-tumble of conflict on the Australian coalfields during the 1980s and the 1990s, and leads to the conclusion that nothing in Australian mining history, perhaps with the exception of the Eureka Stockade, even approaches the intensity of the story of the Pennsylvania coal miners and their communities. We should give thanks for this.

The quality of the storytelling must, in large part, be attributed to the coming together of the perspectives of two authors, in Wolensky and Hastie, whose adult life experience is vastly different. Professor Bob Wolensky, the widely published University of Wisconsin (Stevens Point) author of several well-received volumes on coal mining in the eastern United States, has held visiting Fellow and Professorship positions at the London School of Economics, the University of Wisconsin (Madison), and the University of Exeter where he is currently a Fullbright scholar.

William Hastie, of Welsh and Scottish origins, worked as a labourer with the Knox Coal Company following active World War Two service in North Africa, Sicily and Italy. As a miner he was in the forefront of rescue efforts during the 1959 Knox mine disaster. After retirement he became a sought-after speaker on the coal mining life and Welsh-American history and culture. The good use of his substantial personal archive of photographs, official documents, newspaper articles and letters in this book, is obvious.

For much of the period covered by *Anthracite Labor Wars*, the northern coalfield of northeastern Pennsylvania was a paramount source of black coal. In the latter 1800s, it was regarded as having more than 75 per cent of the world's then-known black coal reserves. Pennsylvania fuelled and kept on fuelling the relentless industrialisation of the United States.

The men and boys who worked the pits were drawn from local communities and from much further afield – the coalfields Europe. Among the incomers were Italians, sponsored into the United States by other Italians who had established themselves as de facto labour hire providers. There was no shortage of work – nor was there any shortage of subterfuge through the use of sub-contracting and individual contract arrangements. These arrangements generally suited coal companies. They also provided some of the building blocks for a particularly muscular, physical style of unionism, which, in turn, often engendered, in employers, iron-fisted responses through the use of criminals,

strike-breakers, standover gangs and gunmen. Here was a coalfield ripe for the flourishing of organised crime. Murder and savage beatings were incorporated into the industrial relations process. Patronage became part and parcel of official oversight of the coalfield.

The written word aside, this book provides a valuable photographic record of coal and northeastern Pennsylvania. Additionally, it contains a bibliography that is certain to be widely referenced and a comprehensive series of short biographies of the main characters in this admirable book.

Overall, Wolensky and Hastie have delivered an object lesson in what can happen when financial gluttony is allowed to supplant effective and equitable oversight of any industry.

Alan Murray

Book Notes

Barry Sykes, *Lines Mines People and Places: settlement of South Gippsland – Korumburra, Jumbunna, Outtrim*, Barry Sykes, Traralgon, 2012. 895 pages, maps, illus, bibliog., notes on sources in text. 210X300mm. Weight of book: 3.5kgms. Price: \$80.

There are many examples in the historical society movement of the production of major works which are the culmination of a lifetime's understanding by authors of their region. Barry Sykes, a retired teacher who taught in regional Victoria, has produced an encyclopedic history of his home area – Outtrim, Jumbunna and Korumburra. It is a magnificent production with approx 2,000 images - photographs, timetables, legible diagrams - and contains his recollections of lifetime experience in the area, with the opportunity to provide a special focus on Korumburra where he attended the high school. *Lines Mines People and Places* comprises 895 pages of information about South Gippsland. He recounts the history of exploration (chiefly Strzelecki), railways, roads, tramways, mines, halls and shops, churches, schools, dairy companies, factories, sports. He weaves pastoralists, politicians and law and order into the story. Barry Sykes tackles subjects rarely addressed in local histories - Victoria's aerial tramways, mine skips and skip lines, pit ponies, mine & railway lighting, and the role of billies in country life. To do this he begins with the general history from the date of their invention. This includes an emphasis on the invention of the steam engine by Richard Trevithick of Cornwall in 1804, ahead of Stephenson's work. The author also utilizes the exquisite drawings of Henry C. Mais, a very significant engineer who practised in Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales in the public and private sectors. The use of coal in society and industry is treated in depth but not coal geology in Gippsland. That is left to geologists.

The author has drawn on, and thanks earlier local historians of the area for their valuable observations and insights. He has a sense of subtlety and an expressed sense of humour, which provides a web that is woven through the text. The book is mainly written for enjoyment and appreciation by local people but is also a very stimulating read for any specialist – on railways, schools and mines. This is because the author has technical expertise in these areas – with a vast knowledge of their operation and of the relevant primary sources for the districts. One could imagine what a history of Victorian railways may look like if written by this author.

Lines Mines People and Places is certainly a practical book, unpretentious in its form and layout. It covers the famous Gippsland dairy industry copiously, while the coverage of the mines section on Jumbunna, Outtrim and Kourumburra areas is very extensive. The collieries and railways and sidings and aerial tramways are all there – written within the context of company structures and government controls, and industrial relations in the background. Barry Sykes is at his best when writing about

these subjects. Mines and railways are 41% of the book while the remainder is a social history of the area.

This book differs from many regional histories on similar topics because it is so encyclopaedic in form on a particular area, and does not make comparative assessments with other regions of Victoria or other states. Also there is no index. As compensation for this the reader is provided with a very detailed table of contents, which is indeed very helpful. Genealogical Societies will identify their own solutions by scanning the text to record and draw up name and locality lists. Also all the sources are contained in the text not in endnotes or footnotes.

The photographs have a local's touch and authenticity in their captions although the smallness of some detracts from their value in publication. Librarians will be challenged in cataloguing this book but the title provides the subject headings. Schools and local organizations will find *Lines Mines People and Places* an admirable reference work. In launching the book, Professor Geoffrey Blainey observed that no other country area of Australia is likely to have had such a comprehensive history written of it.

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