

## **Pitmen Poets: Songs and Verse from the Australian Coalfields**

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**Key words:** Coal, coalfield, song, poem, strike, mine disaster.

**T**he dominant theme of songs and verse from the Australian coalfields is one of conflict between miners and colliery owners, with the miners, supported by their families, fighting for better pay and conditions. As *The Labor Daily* observed in 1938: ‘Poetry has been the means of drawing the nation's attention to the social condition of the people’.<sup>1</sup>

Foremost among ‘pitmen poets’ was ‘Jock’ Graham, a coal miner and prominent unionist from Kurri Kurri in the Hunter Valley (New South Wales) who was known as ‘the miners’ bard’.<sup>2</sup> The opening verse of Graham’s *A Man of the Earth* epitomises the ethos of Australian coal miners:

By profession and birth, I’m a man of the earth,  
I burrow in it like a mole;  
I dig it and drill it, and blast it and fill it  
For that great commodity coal.<sup>3</sup>

Many miners came to the Hunter Valley and Gippsland (Victoria) from the coalfields of England, Wales and Scotland where there is a long tradition of mining songs and poems, a tradition they continued in their new country.<sup>4</sup> The culture and folklore of coal mining communities are reflected in songs and poems that come, in the main, from within the communities. These give us a personal view not only of the industrial environment and working conditions of the pits, but also of life in coal towns. Jim Champion, a Lithgow (NSW) miner, is quoted by folklorist Warren Fahey as saying: ‘Music was very important to our community and we loved to hear songs, poems and stories about miners. It made us feel as one’.<sup>5</sup>

This paper uses a selection of songs and verse from Australian coalfields to illustrate a range of themes. Texts are not reproduced in full but complete versions can be found in the appropriate references. A glossary of coal mining terms is provided.

Material examined in this study has been drawn from: published works by the pitmen poets Jock Graham,<sup>6</sup> Fred Biggers,<sup>7</sup> E.J. Bowling,<sup>8</sup> and Josiah Cocking;<sup>9</sup> themed volumes of poems, e.g. *Mordue*;<sup>10</sup> contributions in periodicals and local newspapers; recorded interviews in the National Library of Australia Oral History and Folklore Collection; songs recorded on LPs and CDs; and material published on the Internet.

### **The convict era**

Coal was first mined in Australia near Nobby’s, Newcastle (NSW), then called Coal River, shortly after its discovery in 1797.<sup>11</sup> Mining was essentially by convict labour, a practice that continued when the Australian Agricultural Company took over

Government coal mines at Newcastle in 1829 on the basis of a monopoly which lasted until 1847.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 1:** *Australian Agricultural Company Mine, Newcastle. Samuel Calvert, 1873.*



Source: State Library of Victoria, image IAN04/12/73/196d.

*For the Company Underground* was written in 1839 by Francis MacNamara, an eccentric convict known as ‘Frank the Poet’. MacNamara, at the age of 21, was sentenced in Kilkenny, Ireland, to seven years transportation for breaking a shop window and stealing a plaid; he arrived in Sydney in 1832.<sup>13</sup> In 1838 he was assigned to the Australian Agricultural Company to work on their New South Wales properties, and in 1839 was sent to their coal mine at Newcastle (Fig. 1).<sup>14</sup> His poem declaring that he would only work in the mine if a range of impossible events should take

place was described by Gregory as ‘absurdist humour [which] makes this a memorable petition against forced labour’.<sup>15</sup> It reads in part:<sup>16</sup>

When the Australian Company's heaviest dray  
Is drawn 80 miles by a hound,  
MacNamara shall work that day  
For the Company underground.

When a frog, a caterpillar and a flea  
Shall travel the globe all round,  
MacNamara shall work that day  
For the Company underground.

The poem continues in this vein until the final verse:

When the quick and the dead shall stand in array  
Cited at the trumpet's sound,  
Even then, damn me if I'd work a day  
For the Company underground.  
Nor overground!

MacNamara did not work in the mine; he absconded from Newcastle, was recaptured and sent to an iron gang in Sydney.<sup>17</sup>

### **Coal Mining Towns and Communities**

From 1840, with no new convict labour available for New South Wales mines, companies began to import free labour.<sup>18</sup> Most mines were small and villages grew up within walking distance from them, and hearing distance of the mine whistles. Under the contract system on New South Wales coalfields in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries,

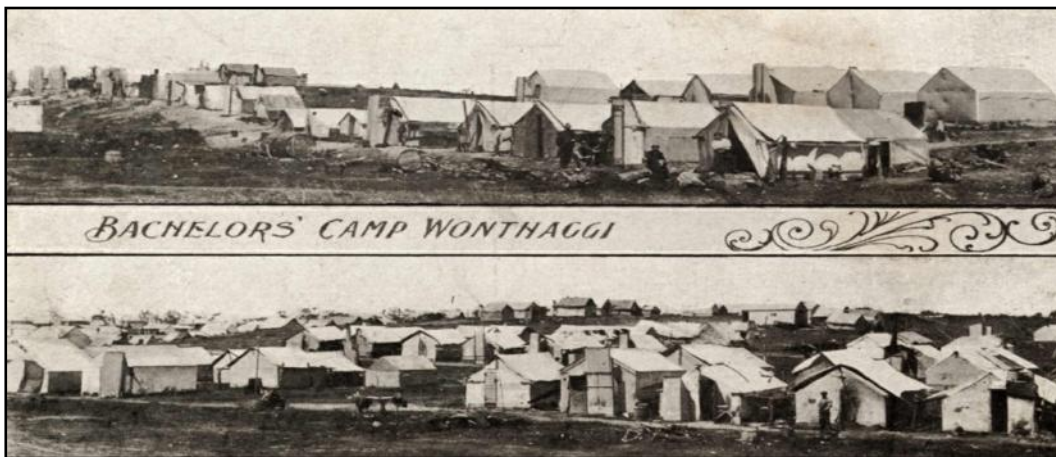
when a colliery whistle blew in the afternoon it signalled that production was needed on the next day; work was available and miners were expected to arrive. The whistle was also used to signal serious accidents.<sup>19</sup>

The poppet head whistle on the State Coal Mine at Wonthaggi in South Gippsland (Vic.) had ‘seventeen different whistles all signalling different Times of Day, No Work and Fire [that] regulated the lives of miners, shop keepers, school children, and housewives alike’.<sup>20</sup> Restoration of this significant part of Wonthaggi’s heritage was recorded in Amy Davis’ poem *The Whistle Restored*.<sup>21</sup>

On top of the town poppet head  
The whistle again will blow,  
A reminder to all who hear it  
And a monument to show  
That the men who toiled beneath the ground,  
Who began Wonthaggi town,  
Will ever be remembered  
As people of renown

For now each day at noon-time  
The mine whistle again will sound,  
A reminder of our heritage,  
Of the coal beneath the ground.  
Give thanks to those who had a dream,  
The whistle to restore,  
And the spirit of Wonthaggi  
Will live for evermore.

**Figure 2:** *Bachelors’ Camp Wonthaggi, ca. 1910.*



Source: State Library of Victoria, image H.86.98/303.

Rushes following mineral discoveries have typically been associated with gold rather than coal, an exception being discovery of black coal in the Powlett Basin in South Gippsland. This led to an ‘historic rush’ in 1909 to what became the site of Wonthaggi and the State Coal Mine. As noted in *The Argus*:

Miners from Tasmania and Western Australia and from almost every Victorian field, also new arrivals from England, Scotland, and Wales, were already in camp, and daily men were arriving in the heat and dust, with heavy packs on their backs, in search of work.<sup>22</sup>

Victoria was suffering a serious shortage of coal for its railways and industry as a consequence of strikes on New South Wales coalfields and the new find was seen as an opportunity to be less dependent on interstate coal. In *When the Old Man Moved from Outtrim*, 'Beau' Sleeman describes how Wonthaggi began as a town of tents and shanties (Fig. 2) that were soon replaced by bricks and mortar as the town progressed.<sup>23</sup>

Come the miners from the goldfields  
Come the migrants from every clime,  
Jobs are waiting in Wonthaggi,  
Coal is needed all the time.

Tents gave way to bricks and mortar  
In the year of 1910,  
With the rail link from Nyora  
We became a township then.

So we progress, go the shanties,  
Come the pubs – electric light!  
We've got Salvos on the corners  
And the flicks on Sunday night.

The final verses relate how mining at Wonthaggi came to an end in 1968.

Mining can't go on forever;  
There's a life span for a mine.  
Seams thin out and coal is faulted  
Causing output to decline.

Come the diesels, go the steam trains;  
Coal's not needed on our line.  
SEC<sup>24</sup> takes over power;  
There's no reason for a mine.

Wonthaggi residents have over the years produced a rich collection of songs and poems, many of which demonstrate pride in their town. The anonymous writer of this song clearly felt a strong attachment to his home town.<sup>25</sup>

There's a part of my heart in Wonthaggi,  
And it's calling me, calling me home,  
Hearts are true, skies are blue in Wonthaggi,  
And when I get back there no more I'll roam.  
When I walk down the street,  
All my pals I will meet,  
At the same old corner where we used to meet.  
There's a part of my heart in Wonthaggi,  
And it's calling me, calling me home.

On the other hand, this parody on *When it's Springtime in the Rockies* warns us that skies are not always blue in Wonthaggi!<sup>26</sup>

When it's winter in Wonthaggi,  
You might as well be dead,  
When it's winter in Wonthaggi,  
My advice is stay in bed,  
When it rains it comes down heavy,  
When it blows, it blows a gale,

When it's neither raining or blowing,  
You can't see the town for hail!

Entertainment in the street on a typical Saturday night in Wonthaggi is described in 'Beau' Sleeman's *Characters*.<sup>27</sup>

On Saturday nights outside Pylies'  
A good stoush would end up as a fight,  
When Chook got stuck into Tiger  
And the others joined in as their right

So you paused on your way to the Plaza  
Where the show of the night was Tom Mix,  
But with action like this on the footpath  
Who needed to go to the flicks?

And the Salvos – they played on the corner.  
Battler Nelson in the midst of the ring,  
Calling on all of the sinners  
To join with the Lassies and sing.

Songs and poems about mining towns were by no means restricted to Gippsland coalfields. In *The Cakes*, Margaret Harvey recalls with nostalgia the Hunter Valley town of Cessnock some fifty years earlier.<sup>28</sup>

The roads around the school, unpaved,  
passed desultory cottages and the few  
mine managers' cottages, grand things  
regarded ambivalently by us all.  
The lazy town sprawled and straggled further down,  
and further still were the small villages  
that filled our class rolls. It was odd being in a place  
where each road led to a colliery, or a vineyard.  
Buses took our kids home each day  
to lives made grimy by the pits – to lives made possible  
by work undreamed of, under the ground and so tough  
a grown man wouldn't talk of it.

Out of this dust and coaldust came the cakes  
for Sports Day every class chose someone's mum  
to make a decorated cake, class-sized,  
loaded with marzipan and icing roses,  
in colours chosen by a room in an uproar.

Cessnock has B & Bs these days,  
and Sydney likes to go there for the wine,  
but I prefer to look back on the moment  
when the dusty townlet sprouted cakes, rainbow cakes,  
delicious cakes, so different from the black gold  
that was the reason for its being.

Poems in local newspapers in Newcastle and Wollongong give an insight into lives of families in coal towns in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, expressing a wide range of emotions. *The Miner's Wife* depicts a woman waiting anxiously for news of her husband, and fearing the worst after an explosion in the mine.<sup>29</sup>

The night grows dark and the sun has set,  
Yet his footstep sounds not nigh;  
I pace to and fro, my sad tears flow;  
And my lone heart heaves a sigh.  
Here my watch I keep, I wait and weep,  
Because there is no sign  
Of the noble form who, in death's sleep,  
Now lies in the wreck of the mine.

J. Hanley's *The Miner and his Child* describes the desperation of a miner who has recently lost his wife and now also his child and cannot afford the cost of a funeral.<sup>30</sup>

What will I do – the pit's worked bad;  
For death I almost crave;  
My poor wife died two months ago,  
No money could I save;  
What can I do my miner friends?  
His life could not be saved;  
I've come to ask my kindest friends  
To lay him in his grave.

A touching scene is depicted in *The Miner's Baby* where a baby joyfully greets its father on his arrival home from the pit.<sup>31</sup>

The miner came from the pit at night  
Black and grimy as any gnome,  
But, ah! the baby was pink and white,  
That crowed with glee as he entered home.  
  
The hands of the miner were hard, for he  
Had gripped the handle of the pick all day,  
But the hands were softer than silk can be  
That the baby raised in its laughing way.

Despite the warnings of her mother, the young woman in *The Lass that Loves a Collier* is determined to wed a miner.<sup>32</sup>

My father was a collier bred,  
And a' his kin before him;  
That's how I dearly like their trade;  
I'll tak' nae man before him.  
For collier lads are frank and free.  
They tak' their lassies on their knee;  
And sweet their cherry mou's they pree,  
I dearly lo'e a collier.

My mither wants me for to wed  
A tailor or shoemaker;  
Or ony ither kind o' trade,  
A flesher or a baker.  
But shoemakers are a drunken class,  
And the tailors, too, I understand;  
It tak's nine o' them to mak' a man,  
The're naething like a collier.

Her mother was likely trying to warn her that in marrying a collier she could expect the sort of drudgery described in John Warner's song *Miner's Washin'*.<sup>33</sup>

I came from Durham in '99,  
Married a laddie from the Coal Creek mine,  
The finest laddie that a girl could ever know,  
Till he brought me his washin' from the pit below.

Now I get me up before the peep o' light  
My copper for to fill and my fire for to light,  
I'll serve Tom his crib while the copper's on the boil,  
Then gird up my muscles for a hard day's toil.  
It's drag 'em from the copper to the rinsing tub,  
Pound 'em with the dolly and scrub, scrub, scrub,  
Pour away the mucky water, do it all again,  
Heave 'em through the wringer and pray it doesn't rain.

Folklore associated with mining has long involved superstitious beliefs.<sup>34</sup> According to a legend at Mount Kembla, the mine was haunted by the ghost of a young wheeler named 'Mickey' Brennan whose body was never recovered after an explosion that killed 96 men and boys. When the mine finally closed in 1970 Mickey's ghost is said to have moved into the cellar of nearby Mount Kembla Hotel.<sup>35</sup> Alan Tubman's poem *Mickey Brennan's Ghost* was written for the Mount Kembla Mine Disaster Centenary Commemoration in 2002.<sup>36</sup>

Mickey loved it down the mine and to while away the time  
He wandered through the tunnels, his favourite haunt  
He thought it was a lark that the pit was always dark  
And there was always lots of men down there to taunt.  
But around sixty nine production slowed down at the mine  
And Mickey's ghost could see the writing on the wall  
When they closed the bugger down he'd be stuck there underground  
All alone, with no one there to haunt at all.  
Well he was not the type to roam so he had to find another home  
A place where people gathered, a social hub  
And he thought of just the place, there'd be people there to chase  
So he left the pit and moved down to the pub.  
He now lives happily in the cellar, a very contented fella  
And comes out only sometimes, late at night  
When it's dark and bleak he might illuminate and speak  
Just to give the publican a fright.

### **Coal Mines**

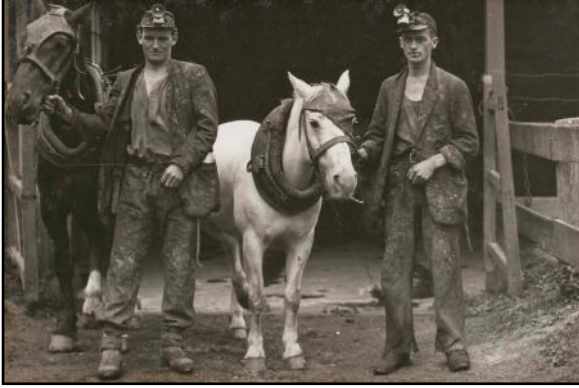
By the late 1860s 'pit ponies' were being introduced in at least some mines to replace hand-wheeling of skips.<sup>37</sup> The importance of 'ponies' in Australian coal mines was explained by Hargraves:

The horse is credited as intelligent, sensitive, habit forming, of long memory, and with well developed instincts as well as an ability to find his way, to be aware of danger ... and to discriminate between enemies and friends. Virtually until the mid-1900s, coal could not be got without the horse and a well-trained horse was one of the greatest assets in coal mining.<sup>38</sup>

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that mine horses should be the subject of poems and songs. The horse was under the control of a wheeler, 'usually a young, energetic, athletic youth' (Fig. 3).<sup>39</sup> Wheelers developed strong relationships with their horses, as

can be seen in E.J. Bowling's *The Wheeler's Farewell to his Steed*, in which a wheeler on being promoted to working at the coalface, has regrets at having to part from his horse.<sup>40</sup>

**Figure 3:** *Wheelers and pit 'ponies', State Coal Mine, Wonthaggi, 1929.*



Source: State Library of Victoria, image H2006.196/9.

So, Dobbin lad, we've gotta part,  
I'm goin' "on the coal"  
An' some'ow I've a 'eavy 'eart  
I 'ave – upon me soul.  
We've offen 'ad a word or two,  
An' once or twice a row;  
But, gee! I don't like leavin' you,  
You Roman-nosed old cow.

The instinct of mine horses to sense danger is the basis of the song *Blossom, The Mining Horse* by John Warner, in which the horse is said to have saved the lives of miners in the State Coal Mine, Wonthaggi.<sup>41</sup>

Now Bloss came out of the bord one day  
Pulled to a stand and blocked the way  
She had a full and heavy load  
Of skips which blocked the wheeling road  
So Mac, who fired the shots, did say  
"Let's eat, we could be here all day"  
But, as the lads got out their lunch  
The roof caved in with a deadly crunch  
Our Blossom saved the miners all  
She stood between them and the fall

The song may well be allegorical rather than describing a specific event but Joe and Lyn Chambers in *Come Here! Gee Off!* recount several stories of Wonthaggi miners having been saved from death or injury by the instincts of pit horses.<sup>42</sup>

In a reflective poem *Pit Ponies*, Margaret Harvey looks back on her time some 50 years previously as a schoolteacher in Musswellbrook in the Hunter Valley and her recollections and misconceptions of the lives of the 'ponies'.<sup>43</sup>

We looked down on a warm little town on one side  
and the colliery and the Common on the other.  
The Common belonged to us all, of course,  
to picnickers, fireworks nights, horses,  
and the mine let out their pit ponies there.

The wheelers, their guardians, loved them,  
and here was I thinking them sad and alone  
as they nonchalantly ate of the Common,  
poor friendless blinded beasts. I didn't know  
they were miners as much as the next man,  
joined to all who hewed and heaved  
under the ground in fellowship.

Mechanisation of mines was seen as a means of eliminating much of the arduous work and improving safety and productivity. Coal cutting machines were introduced in the Hunter Valley in late 19<sup>th</sup> century and their use expanded in early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>44</sup>

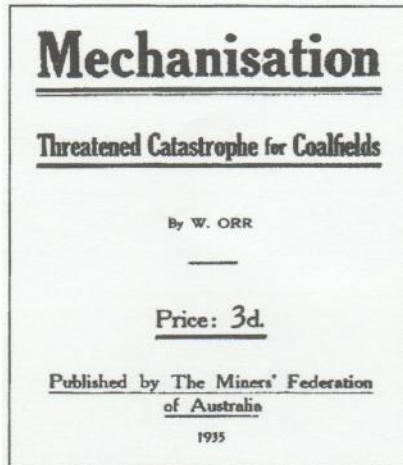


However, progress was slow; old customs die hard and mining unions objected to mechanisation on various grounds, including loss of employment and fear that increased productivity would mean greater profits to colliery owners but lower wages for workers (Fig. 4). An article in *The Labor Daily* in 1938 claimed that mechanisation was the cause of:

displacement of thousands of miners on the [Newcastle and Hunter Valley Coalfields]. This not only causes misery and distress to the miners, their wives and families, but throws new burdens of worry onto the business community.

This prompted the paper to republish American poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox's *The Protest* with the addition of a dedication 'to the coal magnates, who make a private monopoly [sic] of wonderful machines.'<sup>45</sup>

**Figure 4:** *Miners' Federation pamphlet protesting about mechanisation on the coalfields.*



Source: A.J. Hargraves (ed.), *History of Coal Mining in Australia*, Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, Melbourne, Monograph 21, 1993, p. 210.

Said the great machine of iron and wood:  
"Lo! I am a creature, meant for good."  
But the criminal clutch of godless greed  
Has made me a monster that scatters need  
And want and hunger wherever I go.  
But I would lift men's burdens and lighten their woe.  
I would give them leisure to live in the sun  
If owned by the many instead of the one.

I am forced by the few with their greed for gain,  
To forge for the many new fetters of pain.  
Yet this is my purpose and ever will be  
To set the slaves of the workshops free.  
God hasten the day when, overjoyed  
That desperate host of the unemployed  
Shall hear my message and understand,  
And hail me friend in an opulent land.

Whilst the majority of coal mining songs and poems are serious there are exceptions; one such example is *Hungry Jim the Miner*, a song from Illawarra (NSW) by Mick Lawson.<sup>46</sup>

I knew a hungry miner once whose name it was old Jim,  
No matter how much dough he earned 'twas not enough for him,  
Try as he would he never could take home sufficient pelf,  
'Till he cavilled with a young bloke just as hungry as himself.

Now skips were short in this here pit and they'd very often cry,  
When they couldn't get enough of them no matter how they'd try.  
There came a time one awful day when they had only one,  
"I'll get another" said old Jim "While you fill this one, son".  
The deputy he fainted and the horses pricked their ears,  
The shift men saw the strangest sight they'd seen for many years,  
The wheelers all did step aside and the miners all jumped back,  
When they saw old Jimmy comin' with a skip upon his back.

*Show Me the Way to Dig Coal*, a light-hearted ditty from Wonthaggi, is a parody on the old song *Show me the Way to Go Home*.<sup>47</sup>

Show me the way to dig coal,  
I'm always on the min,  
I fired a little shot about an hour ago and the whole damn mine fell in.  
This 'gutser's' blunt as hell, I'll never bore this hole,  
And you'll always hear me singing this song,  
Show me the way to dig coal.

### Working Conditions and Industrial Relations

By the 1850s unionism had appeared in the Australian coal industry and the first major stoppage took place on the Newcastle field in 1860. In 1861 Newcastle colliery owners

**Figure 5:** *Undercutting by hand in one of the Bulli district collieries, ca. 1949.*



Source: From the collections of the Wollongong City Libraries and the Illawarra Historical Society.

combined in an attempt to check the 'unjust and exorbitant demands of the miners' by lowering wages and employing non-union labour. The strike lasted about eight weeks before the owners backed down.<sup>48</sup> Industrial unrest was to plague the industry for the next 100 years.<sup>49</sup> Until the 1960s New South Wales dominated production of black coal in Australia,<sup>50</sup> hence most industrial activity took place in that State with the consequences carrying over to other states.

Harsh and dangerous working conditions (Figs. 5, 6) that led to frequent strikes by coal miners are the subject of many poems; *The Song of the Pick* by W.E.P. French is a typical example describing a miner's work.<sup>51</sup>

With straining sinew and loin,  
With shoulders stooping and round,  
A strong man, shorn of his beauty and grace,  
Delved mole-like, under the ground.  
Stroke, stroke, stroke,  
With the steel's monotonous click,  
Beating time to an air of dust and smoke.  
He sang the song of the pick.

Delve, delve, delve,  
At the endless veins of coal!  
Delve, delve, delve,  
Till it seems both body and soul  
Are black with the dust and dark  
Of this tomb far under the sod:  
Do you think that a prayer from a hole so deep  
Could ever reach up to God?

Both working conditions and the ever-present dangers faced by miners feature in *Working Underground* by Alfred Smith.<sup>52</sup>

Only the pitiful struggling beams  
Of a miner's safety lamp,  
Lit the shining face of the coal,  
The oozing streams of damp.  
The only sounds, the timbers creak,  
The rumble of coal laden skips,  
The chink of a pick, together with  
The taste, of rockdust on the lips.  
Very little comfort could anywhere be found,  
Only dirt and danger,  
Working underground.

The deadly, silent, seeping gas,  
The stale and clammy air;  
The threat of mortal danger  
Ever lurking there.  
The stealthy attack of lethal dust  
That denied a man his breath,  
The cave-in's thundering roar  
With its toll of lingering death.  
Lingering or sudden, was death too often found,  
By the men, who spent their lives  
Working underground

**Figure 6:** Loading a skip in one of the Bulli district collieries, ca. 1940.



Source: From the collections of the Wollongong City Libraries and the Illawarra Historical Society.

Danger was faced not only underground; brace boys' duties included the hazardous task of inserting a sprag into the wheel of the moving coal skip to stop it. *The Brace Boy's Prayer* is a parody on the well-known folk song *The Dying Stockman*.<sup>53</sup>

An injured young brace boy lay dying,  
A skip wheel supporting his head,  
An axle wrapped round his shoulder,

And a couple of clips on his legs.  
“Take the sprag from out of my shoulder,  
The podger from out of my chest,  
From the small of my back take the couplings,  
And do what you like with the rest”.

*Song of the Miners* by W.H. Utley is an example of a common grievance of miners - their perception of exploitation by colliery owners.<sup>54</sup>

We dig and delve in the darksome mine,  
With a flickering candle near;  
We delve and dig 'mid the dust and grime  
In the long black galleries drear.  
And above in the air, in his carriage and pair,  
The proud lord rolls along;  
He spends our gold, for our strength is sold  
To him through injustice and wrong.

The confrontational relationship between miners and management was attributed by Hargraves as having developed from the time when ‘miners selected from Great Britain to fill the need for non-convict labour brought with them memories of their struggle to improve conditions’.<sup>55</sup> According to Ross, they also brought ‘a traditional rebelliousness ... even union consciousness, and, in some instances, ideas of a different social system than capitalism’.<sup>56</sup> Discontent was exacerbated by the colliery owners’ lack of concern for miners’ working conditions, their master to servant attitude, and intermittent and insecure employment.<sup>57</sup> The relationship between employer and employee is satirised in *The Coal Owners’ Song*.<sup>58</sup>

The miners may strike, or may play if they like,  
Till we add a few pence to each “score”;  
It is well understood it is all for our good –  
We can then squeeze consumers the more.

Let the paupers endure – they were born to be poor,  
Shall we make a reduction to please them?  
Away with such stuff! If they can’t get enough,  
Why, then, let the cold weather freeze them.

The intensity of ill-feeling towards colliery owners is exemplified by *Two Miners’ Toasts*, a poem circulated during a dispute at Wonthaggi.<sup>59</sup>

May God above send down a dove  
With wings as sharp as razors  
To cut off the lousy bastards’ heads  
That lowered the brace boys’ wages.

A lengthy strike began at the Ironworks Tunnel Colliery in Lithgow in July 1911 when a miner was sacked for attending a union meeting without permission. His fellow workers demanded his reinstatement but the mine owner, Charles Hoskins, replied that he would only do so if they agreed to forgo a previously-negotiated increase of twopence per ton in the hewing rate. When the men refused, Hoskins brought in non-union labour. The strike is described in two songs, with the background explained in *Jingle on the Lithgow Ironworks Tunnel Struggle*.<sup>60</sup>

The present trouble had its birth quite early in July;  
When miner Cairns asked to get off, the boss made no reply.  
He went and did his duty, and when he sallied back  
The boss said: 'Here, you can't go in, for you have got the sack.'  
The chap was taken back a peg, but not dismayed was he,  
And turned round to his mates who said; 'Cheer up, old man, we'll see.'  
Now, these are men with humane hearts, who stand by one another  
They tried to patch the matter up without industrial bother.

With this in view, they sought the man who made the first big bloomer—  
He would not listen to their tale, go 'down below' he'd sooner.  
Then came the head boss money-bag, and broke a savage grin;  
He said: 'I'll take the twopence off and then you may go in.'

The reaction of the men to Hoskins' proposal and their contempt for 'scabs' are expressed in no uncertain terms in *When we get the tuppence back Charlie, dear*.<sup>61</sup>

It is strike time in the dear old Lithgow Valley,  
The men on strike intend to do their best,  
A few scabs 'round the tyrant seem to rally,  
But there's not a spark of manhood in their breast.

When the tyrant said he'd take them down for tuppence,  
Like a spirit each man seemed to disappear,  
As they said, 'Farewell, some day we'll be returning  
When you give that tuppence back, Charlie, dear'.

Then we wander down the roadway to the furnace,  
And it makes us sad to see scabs working there —  
They'd be better in the churchyard soundly sleeping  
Instead of being scabs for Charlie, dear.

Taunting of the strikers by scabs led to a riot<sup>62</sup> and gaoling of several unionists and fining of others.<sup>63</sup> The strike lasted some nine months before a settlement was reached, with reinstatement of all men previously employed by Hoskins and restoration of the twopence to the hewing rate.<sup>64</sup>

One of the most notorious industrial conflicts in Australia took place on the Hunter Valley Coalfields in 1929. A New South Wales Government plan to stabilise the industry by lowering the cost of production proposed that miners as their 'share of the sacrifice' should accept a reduction of 12½ per cent in contract rates.<sup>65</sup> When the Miners Federation rejected this demand the owners closed the mines and miners were locked out from March 1929 to June 1930. The Government announced that the Rothbury mine would reopen on 18 December and 350 non-unionists were brought to a camp on the mine lease under heavy guard. This led to what became known as the 'Rothbury riot' on 16 December when several thousand miners attempted to gain entry to the mine property. They were stopped by police, fighting broke out and in the ensuing melee police opened fire; a Greta miner, Norman Brown, was killed and an unknown number of miners injured (Fig. 7).<sup>66</sup> The lockout eventually ended when the men went back on the lower rates;<sup>67</sup> in the words of George Teerman, 'We were beaten, starved into submission'.<sup>68</sup>



Norman Brown occupies a place in the legends of the Australian trade union movement comparable with that of Joe Hill in the USA, a union organiser and poet who was executed in 1915 on a murder charge widely considered to have been a frame-up by the mining industry. The comparison is evident in the following extracts from Alfred Hayes' song *Joe Hill*<sup>69</sup> and Dorothy Hewett's poem *Ballad of Norman Brown*.<sup>70</sup>

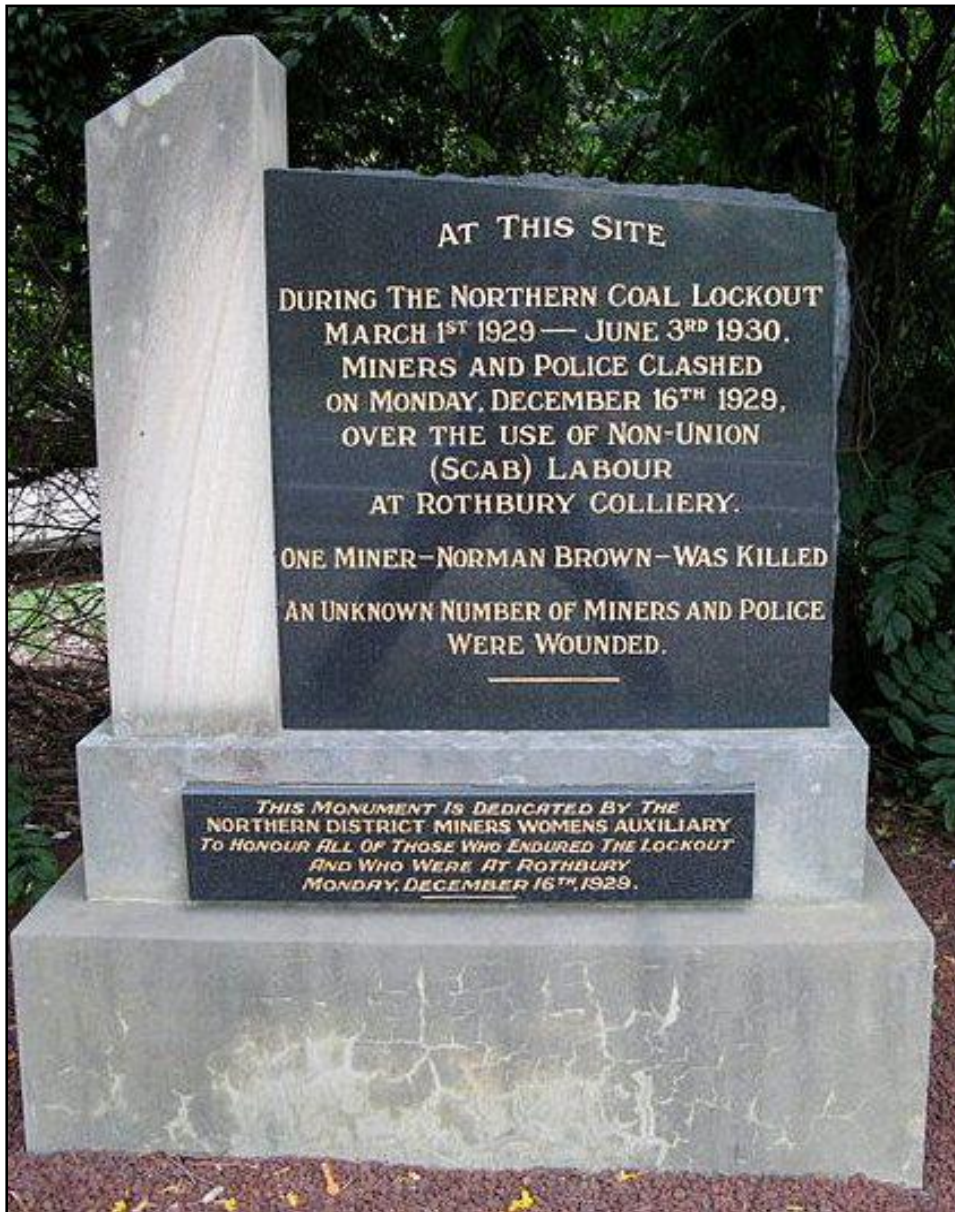
The copper bosses killed you, Joe,  
They shot you, Joe, says I.  
Takes more than guns to kill a man,  
Says Joe, I didn't die,

From San Diego up to Main  
In every mine and mill,  
Where workers strike and organize,  
Says he, You'll find Joe Hill.

There was a man called Norman Brown,  
The murderin' bosses shot him down,  
They shot him down in Rothbury town,  
A working man called Norman Brown.

At pit-top meetings and on strike  
In every little mining town  
When miners march for bread and rights  
There marches honest Norman Brown.

Figure 7: Rothbury riot memorial.



Source: wikipedia.org.

A general strike involving some 23,000 coal miners in New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria, and West Australia began on 27 June 1949. A log of claims presented by the Miners' Federation had been rejected as unrealistic by the Coal Industry Tribunal.<sup>71</sup> The Chifley Government, concerned by Communist domination of union leadership and potential impact on the economy of the nation, undertook a series of drastic measures: legislation was passed making it illegal to provide financial support to striking miners, union funds were seized and a number of union officials gaoled or fined. In August, the government brought in 2,500 troops to work some open cut mines, the first peace-time use of military forces to break a strike in Australia.

A song by retired miner Fred Brown describes the lengths union leaders at Wonthaggi went to in order to hide their strike funds from the authorities.<sup>72</sup>

They went and froze our strike funds  
Back in 1949.

They gaoled our union leaders,  
Worked our soldiers in the mine.  
But our leaders never faltered,  
And until this very day,  
Wouldn't tell the judge or bosses  
What they did with our strike pay.

For it was hidden in our cushions,  
Behind the photos on our wall,  
And even up our chimneys,  
Under floorboards in the hall.  
Some was wrapped in greaseproof paper  
In the downpipe from the sink.  
And we often used to query  
Why we couldn't have a drink.

We all received our strike pay  
And rations in pit bags.  
They couldn't starve us back to work  
Or have us walk in rags.  
For the thing they didn't count on  
Was the solidarity  
Shown by miners' families  
Struggling for equality.

The strike, which lasted for 7 weeks, failed due to the combined effect of non-union labour and lack of support from some of the more right-wing unions.<sup>73</sup> There was also a lack of widespread community support, as can be seen in *Song of the Hurt*.<sup>74</sup>

Tired! Tired! Tired!  
Utterly sick of it all!  
And tired – tired – tired,  
'Tis a prospect to appall!  
It's oh to be back again,  
Where women and babes were put first;  
When paltry quarrels weren't sought by men  
By communists accursed.

Jock Graham argues the miners' case in *A Man of the Earth*.<sup>75</sup> As observed by Gregory,<sup>76</sup> the poem evokes the intense campaign of the Chifley Government aided by propaganda in the press to defeat the miners.<sup>77</sup>

To some I'm a brave man, to others a knave man  
Who's puttin' the land in a hole;  
A stab-in-the-back man, a black and a slack man,  
Who plunders the country of coal.

It's narkin' at times to be blamed for their crimes,  
And placed in the villainous role  
Invented by story, press-agent and tory,  
The grabbers of profit from coal.

Graham also points to the poor wages and conditions and the accident rates that led miners to strike.

No story of men who are suffering pain;  
Of heroes who starve on the dole;  
Nowt written or spoken of hearts that are broken –  
The widows and orphans of coal.

The court is the gauge which determines my wage,  
The parson looks after my soul;  
My hands are my boss's, his gains are my losses –  
My body is bartered for coal.

The gaps in our lines – “Red Roll” of the mines  
Show death has been takin' its toll,  
While snipers at maimed men and good men and famed men,  
Grow fat on the blood on the coal.

Finally, no doubt encouraged by post-World War II developments in Great Britain, Graham lends his voice to a campaign for nationalisation of the coal industry.<sup>78</sup>

Yet through muck and mire and lung-dust and fire,  
More clearly I'm seeing my goal:  
To work and unite and to preach and to fight  
For nationalised mining of coal.

The bias of the press against miners in their fight for better conditions is a theme that Graham returns to in several poems, e.g. in *Scribbler Come Below*.<sup>79</sup>

Leave your office and writing pad, scribe of the “Yellow Press”,  
Come with me down below, my lad – your tale is a biassed guess –  
Learn how the miners work and live, and bleed for the coal they hew,  
Then if a story you have to give, maybe you'll tell it true.

The importance of union solidarity is stressed by Graham in *Miners' Pensioners' Farewell* where he reflects on past struggles to win better employment conditions.<sup>80</sup>

When we qualified as miners – if we lived to see the time –  
Thoughts of happiness and beauty were submerged in muck and grime.  
Holing, stripping, boring, blasting – never mind the stone that fell;  
Keep the nation's fires burning, let the owner's profits swell,  
Heave and wrestle, dig and shovel, like inspired imps of hell.  
Trudge the weary miles each morning to this Frankenstein of pain,



From the hovels where we sheltered, through the winter wind and rain –  
We, the heroes of disaster, fighting death in flame and flood,  
Fed insatiable masters gold from streams of sweat and blood –  
But a better deal for miners? Why, a miner's name was mud,  
To the parasites who batted on his labor and his pay,  
And they slandered him in public as they slander him today.

Tho' this Frankenstein has grown, bolt on bolt and screw by screw,  
Greater still our Union's power and our Union's progress grew,  
For we've struggled on and upwards, we have scaled the heights of fame,  
We have shorter hours and holidays and pensions to our name,  
And better still, our unity is spreading like a flame.  
Though we leave you – not in sorrow – but with pride and hope at last,  
Still our thoughts will march beside you, be your progress slow or fast,  
And we'll help you win your battles, in the spirit of the past.  
Do your duty well, and conquer, you, the heirs of all to be,  
For the weapons that we hand over are the keys of Liberty.

Industrial disputes could not be won without family solidarity with the union. In *The Colliers' Strike Song* the 19<sup>th</sup> century poet and writer Melinda Kendall calls on miners' wives to stand by their men on strike over a wage dispute on the Illawarra field in 1885.<sup>81</sup>

Come all ye jolly colliers, and colliers' wives as well,  
And listen to my ditty, for the truth I mean to tell;  
It's of a colliers' wage dispute, is the burden of my song;  
I mean to cheer you up, if it won't detain you long.  
I would have you stick together, and have a good go in,  
Be true to one another, and I'm sure you're bound to win;  
Though money is so valuable – and so is labour, too  
The working man is worth whatever he may do.  
And I hope that every woman will tell her husband too;  
She will do her very best to help him to keep true;  
They will be sure to raise the wine, and make the masters say  
"The devil's in the women, for they never will give way."

In *The Song of the Striker* we see another side to union solidarity. When a strike by coal miners in 1917 led to a general strike in sympathy with miners, a worker (possibly a waterside worker) has no alternative but to join his fellow strikers, although he is unsure of the aims of the strike and has fears for his family's well-being; he also has feelings of guilt at striking during wartime.<sup>82</sup>

I struck for the sake of an unsigned name on the back of a blasted card;  
I struck for the sake of a load of coal that another union barred;  
I struck for the sake of all that's right and the sake of all that's rot;  
I struck for something I think I want – but I'm dashed if I quite know what.

I struck for the wife and kids at home, who will hunger and cry today,  
Since it's ruled that men can call the tune while the women and children pay.  
For what if a wife should give her life, and what if her new-born starves?  
Better no bread (and the youngest dead) than a "loaf" that were done by halves.

I struck – and I struck at the Motherland who is fighting to keep me free,  
I struck – and I struck at my kith and kin who have offered their lives for me.  
They may call in vain from the sodden plain, from the midst of the mire and mud –  
But what should I care if my price be paid in somebody else's blood?

### Mine Accidents and Disasters

Prior to introduction of safer working practices the Australian underground coal mining industry had an unacceptably high annual death rate resulting from gas or coal dust explosions or structural failure (such as roof falls).<sup>83</sup> In many cases, tributes in the form of verse were published in local newspapers in days following the disaster and, in some cases, many years later to mark an anniversary. Below are just a few examples of verse pertaining to such disasters.

Australia's first large-scale mining disaster occurred on 23 March 1887 at Bulli in the Illawarra District when a gas explosion in the mine killed 81 men and boys, leaving 50 women widows and 150 children without fathers (Fig. 8).<sup>84</sup> *The Bulli Disaster* by a Wollongong resident was published shortly afterwards.<sup>85</sup>

'Twas on the 23rd of March the wires flashed the fatal news around,  
That eighty gallant miners were lost beneath the ground,  
And that the Bulli Colliery was but a heap of ruin,  
And that widows and their orphans were without a way of doing.

For without a moment's notice they were called upon to die,  
And by a terrible explosion it makes our heart's blood creep,  
They lost their precious lives and this country for them weeps.

There were crying women with their children who were now their only joy;  
While others almost frantic for they had lost their darling boy.  
There were sisters sobbing and wailing for the brother they adored,  
All thinking of the dear ones they'd look upon no more.

**Figure 8:** *The scene at the Pit Top following Bulli Mine Disaster, Stuart Piggin, 1887.*



Source: University of Wollongong Archives, image D158/8/19.

In *At the Pit's Mouth* George Sims, expresses sympathy for the widows and suggests that colliery owners are to blame for the tragedy.<sup>86</sup>

For nine whole days the nation shows its grief;  
Sends a subscription – token of its sorrow.

The miner dead, we grant his wife relief.  
The miner living may be killed tomorrow.

"Death takes his toll on labours such as these;  
No human skill can ward off such disasters."  
Who says so lies – Death only takes his fees  
When the door's opened to him by the masters.

A Royal Commission found that the explosion was the outcome of 'lax discipline and reckless indifference on the part of the miners and colliery officials'.<sup>87</sup> Recommendations included improved systems of air flow and greater attention to the use of safety lamps in 'gassy' mines. Had that advice been heeded by the industry, an even greater disaster might have been prevented.

Just over fifteen years later, there was another mine disaster in the Illawarra; one that, to this day, remains the greatest loss of life in an industrial accident in Australia's history. On 31 July 1902, the Mount Kembla Colliery exploded, killing 96 men and boys and leaving 33 widows and 120 fatherless children (Fig. 9).<sup>88</sup> The Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the cause of the disaster found that:

fire-damp and air exploded; and, in turn, started a series of explosions of coal-dust, which wrecked a large portion of the mine, and killed a number of the miners. These explosions of fire-damp and coal-dust generated a large quantity of carbon-monoxide; and it was this deadly constituent of the afterdamp of the explosion which caused the death of by far the larger number of the victims of the disaster.<sup>89</sup>

The central proposition of the Commission was that the only measure that could have prevented the disaster was the introduction of safety lamps.

**Figure 9:** *Wreckage at the Mount Kembla Mine Disaster, Stuart Piggin, 1902.*



Source: University of Wollongong Archives, image D158/8/35.

One of several poems describing the tragedy is *Mount Kembla Colliery Disaster*, included in a selection of works by Fred Biggers.<sup>90</sup>

The churchyard's in a quiet vale  
Where the tombstones of the dead  
Tell the stranger an awful tale  
When the writings he has read.

'Twas on the last day of July,  
In nineteen hundred and two;  
A hundred men were doomed to die,  
For that death was near none knew.

In health and strength they went away,  
And when nearing "knock off" time.  
At two o'clock that fatal day  
The explosion rent the mine.

Smoke came out of the tunnel mouth,  
The explosion shook the ground.  
The people came from north and south  
To see what caused the sound.

The reaction of wives and mothers on hearing the explosion is described in Darcy O'Kelly's *The Kembla Disaster*.<sup>91</sup>

'Twas thus that day in Wollongong, love tortured by suspense,  
Rushed to and fro distractedly to find the why and whence,  
And seeing over Kembla's brow dark clouds unwanted there.  
Wild women scale it's [sic] rugged face with sob and muttered prayer  
They speed to Kembla's mine mouth black and low before them there  
Disaster's debris, bones and blood destruction everywhere.  
Imprisoned gas has burst its goal, and rent the solid rock  
From mountain base to apex high, as if 'twere doomsday shock,  
The mourner's wailing stops a while, still by the pain intense,  
Imparted by the awful grip of terrible suspense.  
Then forth is borne a blood-stained form, one shriek a woman gives.  
And wildly cries with streaming eyes: "My husband! Oh, he lives!"  
Another form, a moment's pause, and then a shriek of pain,  
Tells those who cannot see death's face, a mother's hopes are slain.  
And thus the woeful work went on that place of wailing round;  
A cry of joy, a shriek of pain, then silence most profound,  
Till nigh one hundred dead men lay their mourning friends among,  
Till every heart on Kembla's brow with anguish keen was wrung,

A poem simply entitled *Mount Kembla* written by Thomas Spencer in the aftermath of the disaster was published by *The Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder* to mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event; it includes a description of the danger of afterdamp facing the rescue party.<sup>92</sup>

The rescue party formed, they enter then,  
To seek survivors from the dread disaster:  
A trusty band of picked and faithful men,  
Under the guidance of an expert master.  
Through the black tunnels plunge the plucky band;  
By the dull flicker of the safety lamp

They note destruction's work on every hand;  
They find, alas! the dreaded afterdamp.

"Back!" cries the leader. "Boys, go back"! he calls,  
"Back, for your lives, or it will be too late".  
He struggles manfully, then staggers – falls,  
But bids them go, and leave him to his fate.  
The afterdamp engulfs them; like a wave  
It rushes on them with its fatal breath;  
Like drowning men, they seek their lives to save,  
Each, for the moment, face to face with death.

As one band, baffled by the poisonous air,  
Is led or carried from that awful space,  
Another band of heroes gathers there,  
Eager and resolute, to take its place.

Eleven men died as the result of a serious roof fall in the Agricultural Company's Hamilton Pit at Glebe on the Newcastle Coalfield on 22 June 1889. Rescue attempts were hindered by further rockfalls. The first body was found on 2 July, as well as a pony known as 'Sharpo'. After further attempts were aborted due to dangerous conditions, rescue parties resumed work on 2 August; progress was slow and it was not until 8 September that the last body was recovered.<sup>93</sup> Poems in local newspapers reflect feelings in the community over the delay in recovery operations, with claims that the lives of the 'entombed miners' could have been saved by earlier action; *Hamilton Pit Disaster* by Joseph Manning is one example.<sup>94</sup>

They call the roll, and thus they ascertain  
Eleven entombed in the great fall remain.  
Then many a volunteer sought quick to go,  
And help their comrades from the depths below.  
But all repulsed, left idly to rely  
On weak advice, which let their brothers die.

Six weeks they wrought, and thus their record ran;  
A dying pony, and a mangled man.  
Had they but gone by otherwise intent –  
Skimmed the deep falls, and timbered as they went,  
How many, rescued by the good and brave,  
Had missed alike starvation and a grave!

By one sad error many men may die,  
We shuffle off the blame on Heaven's decree.  
Ten weary weeks of toil at last reveal  
A sight which makes the strong discoverers reel,  
For there before them lay, in grim array,  
Four wasted bodies crumbling to decay.

Community criticism was justified by the second of two inquests which found that management had not adopted 'the best means ... to rescue the entombed men', and was 'also blamable in not inviting and consulting other mining experts and that sufficient energy was not displayed in getting into Murphy's heading'.<sup>95</sup>

## Conclusion

Songs and verse reflect a political and social view of life on the Australian coalfields, with class warfare a common theme. Contributions by members of coalfields communities were a means of airing grievances and counteracting propaganda of the mainstream press. Jock Graham was the most prolific of the pitmen poets, with his forthright and uncompromising advocacy for better pay and conditions for miners.

With few exceptions, songs and poems from the Australian coalfields are from New South Wales and South Gippsland, the most likely reason being that many of the early miners on those fields came from Great Britain and brought with them the tradition of songs and poetry.

In a 1971 review of a book of songs from American coalfields, noted folklorist Ron Edwards commented on the apparent lack of songs about Australian coal mining and coal mine disasters.<sup>96</sup> Although more numerous than Edwards realised at the time, songs are nevertheless fewer in number than poems; of a total of 140 songs and poems in this study, 75 per cent are poems as against 25 per cent songs.<sup>97</sup> Folk songs in general used to be handed down mainly in the oral tradition and, consequently, in danger of being lost unless recorded in some form; it would appear that many songs about coal mining did not survive.<sup>98</sup> By contrast, poems were more likely to be preserved as many were published in local papers, the union journal *Common Cause*, or books.

The majority of songs and verse related to coal mining in Australia date from mid-19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with relatively few after the late 1950s, an exception being John Warner's songs from South Gippsland.<sup>99</sup> There may be many reasons for this but could include: improved safety and industrial relations;<sup>100</sup> changing social structures on the coalfields whereby intergenerational attachment to coal towns and coal mining became less frequent; and trends in entertainment with less incentive for self-entertainment in both the family and community. Hargraves drew a connection with mechanisation of the mines: 'With the passing of hand mining, another strong tradition was disappearing from the NSW coalfields – older miners, mostly officials of Welsh origin with strong voices tending to burst into song'.<sup>101</sup>

## Acknowledgements

Rob Willis kindly drew the author's attention to his interviews with retired coal miners and he and Duncan Felton of the National Library of Australia facilitated access to the appropriate files. Warren Fahey, as always, was generous in sharing his vast knowledge of Australian folklore and folk music. Barry Sykes gave helpful advice on a range of matters pertaining to South Gippsland mining. Constructive suggestions by Anne Both on a draft of the paper were greatly appreciated.

## Glossary

Afterdamp: toxic mixture of gases left in a mine following an explosion caused by firedamp, consisting of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide and nitrogen.

Bord: the coalface where the miner worked.

Brace: landing stage at pit top where skips are run out from the cage; the loading point for coal to be sorted and loaded into railway wagons.

Cavil: quarterly or half-yearly ballot for working places in the mine.

Clip: device for attaching skips to the endless rope haulage.

Couplings: large links used to connect a set of skips.

Firedamp: explosive gas in coal mine, mainly methane.

Gutser: a drill used to manually bore holes into the coal seam to insert the explosive charge, so-named because the miner had to push it with his body.

Hewing: hand method of digging coal from the seam.

Min: minimum wage earned by miner under contract system.

Podger: no reference has been found in relation to mining but may refer to a tool in the form of a short, tapered bar incorporating a wrench at one end.

Red Roll: the list of miners killed in mine accidents.

Skip: wheeled truck for hauling coal from the mine.

Sprag: a short wooden or metal bar inserted into the wheel of a skip to act as a brake.

Wheeler: a young man who controlled the pit horses hauling the skips to the shaft. Prior to the use of horses, the skips were pushed by a wheeler (hand wheeling).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> 'Poet sees Danger in Machine', *The Labor Daily* (Sydney), 22 October 1938, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Gregory, 'Australian working songs and poems - a rebel heritage', PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, 2014, p. 406.

<sup>3</sup> Jock Graham, 'A Man of the Earth', *Singabout*, vol.1, no. 2, 1957, p. 11. The poem was set to music by John Arcott and recorded by Phyl Lobl as the title song on the LP *Man of the Earth*, Larrikin Records LRF001, 1975.

<sup>4</sup> Warren Fahey, *Ratbags and Rabblers: a Century of Political Protest, Song and Satire*, Currency Press, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2000, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> Jock Graham (1893 - ?) wrote poems for the Miners' Federation journal *Common Cause* and collections of his poems were published in *Blood on the Coal*, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, 1946, 31 pp, and *Dark Roads*, Elizabethan Press, Sydney, 1973, 70 pp.

<sup>7</sup> Fred C. Biggers (1897 - ?) worked on the mines at Mount Kembla and Cessnock (NSW); his major work was an epic poem in the vernacular style of C.J. Dennis about the heroic exploits of a larrikin miner 'Bat-Eye'. Fred C. Biggers, *Bat-Eye: a tale of the northern coalfields*, Labor Daily, Sydney, 1927, 47 pp. See also S.A. Rosa in Fred C. Biggers, *Through the Valley*, Austral Publishing Company, Sydney, 1936, Foreword.

<sup>8</sup> E.J. Bowling (1876 – 1954) was a Greta (NSW) miner whose poems and stories appeared in *Common Cause* and *The Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder*.

<sup>9</sup> Josiah Cocking (1867 – 1960) was a Hunter Valley miner who wrote poems under a variety of pseudonyms for local papers and *Common Cause*. See Arthur Cocking, *Biography of Josiah Cocking*, 1989, <<https://livinghistories.newcastle.edu.au/nodes/view/57566>>, accessed 26 April 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Mordue (ed.), *Beneath the Valley: mining stories, poems and memoirs*. Catchfire press, Dangar, NSW, 2005, 150 pp.

<sup>11</sup> A.J. Hargraves (ed.), *History of Coal Mining in Australia: the Con Martin Memorial Volume*, Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, Melbourne, Monograph 21, 1993, p. 5. The first discovery by Europeans of coal in Australia was made in March 1791 in a creek near what is now Newcastle by a party of escaped convicts led by William Bryant. See also M.H. Ellis, *A Saga of Coal: the Newcastle Wallsend Coal Company's Centenary Volume*, Angus and Robertson, 1969, pp. 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Hargraves, *History of Coal Mining in Australia*, pp. 5-6, 200-291; Clive Beauchamp, 'Disaster at the Australian Agricultural Company's Mine, Hamilton NSW, 1889', *Journal of Australasian Mining History*, vol. 12, 2014, p. 193.

<sup>13</sup> John Meredith and Rex Whalan, *Frank the Poet: the life and works of Francis MacNamara*, Red Rooster, Melbourne, 1969, pp. 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory, 'Australian working songs and poems', p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> Meredith and Whalan, *Frank the Poet*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12. During his years as a convict MacNamara suffered brutal punishment for his many transgressions and his refusal to submit to authority. He received his ticket-of-leave in January 1847, conditional pardon later that year and full pardon in July 1849, Meredith and Whalan, pp. 4-6; Gregory, 'Australian working songs and poems', pp. 82-85.

<sup>18</sup> Ellis, *A Saga of Coal*, p. 41.

<sup>19</sup> Hargraves, *History of Coal Mining in Australia*, p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> 'Mine Whistle; did it blow on that fateful day?', Wonthaggi Historical Society, Plod Essay, <<http://wonthaggihistoricalsociety.org.au/index.php/plod>>, accessed 26 April 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Amy Davis, 'The Whistle Restored', in Joe Chambers, Lyn Chambers and Fred Brown interviewed by Rob Willis, 28 May 1998, TRC 3388/152-153. National Library of Australia.



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- <sup>22</sup> ‘Rise of Wonthaggi’, *The Argus*, 20 February 1937, p. 31.
- <sup>23</sup> Beau Sleeman, ‘When the Old Man Moved from Outtrim’, in ‘*State Coal Mine Wonthaggi: Teacher Notes & Student Activities*, SCM-Teaching-Kit.pdf, Parks Victoria, ca. 1968, Appendix II.
- <sup>24</sup> SEC: State Electricity Commission which produces electricity using brown coal from mines in the Latrobe Valley.
- <sup>25</sup> Hazel Matthews and Doug Matthews interviewed by Rob Willis, 17 May 1998, TRC 3388/146. National Library of Australia.
- <sup>26</sup> Joe Chambers, Lyn Chambers and Fred Brown interviewed by Rob Willis, 28 May 1998, TRC 3388/152-153. National Library of Australia.
- <sup>27</sup> Beau Sleeman, ‘Characters’, in Joe Chambers, Lyn Chambers and Fred Brown interviewed by Rob Willis, 28 May 1998, TRC 3388/152-153. National Library of Australia. See also ‘Beau’s Poetry with a little help from Nell’, Wonthaggi Historical Society, Plod Essay, <<http://wonthaggihistoricalsociety.org.au/index.php/plod>>, accessed 26 April 2020.
- <sup>28</sup> Margaret Harvey, ‘The Cakes’, in Mordue, *Beneath the Valley*, pp. 52-53.
- <sup>29</sup> ‘The Miner’s Wife’, *Newcastle Chronicle and Hunter River District News*, 16 January 1864, p. 4.
- <sup>30</sup> J. Hanley, ‘The Miner and his Child’, *Miners’ Advocate and Northumberland Recorder*, 29 March 1876, p. 5.
- <sup>31</sup> ‘The Miner’s Baby’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 11 May 1883, p. 3.
- <sup>32</sup> ‘The Lass that Loves a Collier’, *Miners’ Advocate and Northumberland Recorder*, 6 June 1874, p. 4.
- <sup>33</sup> John Warner, *Pithead in the Fern*, CD, Feathers and Wedge, Glebe, NSW, 1994, booklet pp. 4-5.
- <sup>34</sup> For example, according to Cornish folklore the mines were inhabited by *Knockers* (or *Tommyknockers*), small, dwarf-like creatures believed by some to be the spirits of miners who had died in previous cave-ins. *Knockers* were generally regarded by the miners as benevolent – just before cave-ins, they would knock loudly on the walls of the mine as a warning – but they could also be mischievous, stealing miners’ picks, candles or clothes. See Kelsey Rolfe, *Knock, knock, who’s there?* <<https://magazine.cim.org/en/mining-lore/knock-knock-whos-there>>, accessed 26 April 2020.
- <sup>35</sup> Jamie Radford, *What happened that tragic day of Mt Kembla Mine disaster*, *Illawarra Mercury*, News, <<https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/2441786/what-happened-tragic-day-of-mt-kembla-mine-disaster/>>, accessed 26 April 2020; Ashley Hall, *The Mount Kembla Mine Disaster*, <<http://www.theparanormalguide.com/blog/the-mount-kembla-mine-disaster>>, accessed 26 April 2020.
- <sup>36</sup> Alan Tubman, ‘Mickey Brennan’s Ghost’, *Mount Kembla Heritage Inc.*, <<https://www.mtkembla.org.au/poems/>>, accessed 26 April 2020.
- <sup>37</sup> ‘Wallsend’, *The Newcastle Chronicle*, 1 February 1868, p. 3.
- <sup>38</sup> Hargraves, *History of Coal Mining in Australia*, pp. 109-110. Depending on the dimensions of the workplaces, the ‘pit pony’ could actually be a draught horse, a light horse or a low pony.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- <sup>40</sup> E.J. Bowling, ‘The Wheeler’s Farewell to his Steed’, *The Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder*, 18 June 1937, p. 8.
- <sup>41</sup> John Warner, *Pithead in the Fern*, p. 11.
- <sup>42</sup> Joe and Lyn Chambers, *Come Here! Gee Off! Wonthaggi’s State Coal Mine Ponies*, B.J. Clancy & Co., Wonthaggi, 1991, p. 19.
- <sup>43</sup> Margaret Harvey, ‘Pit Ponies’, in Mordue, *Beneath the Valley*, pp. 110-111.
- <sup>44</sup> Ellis, *A Saga of Coal*, p. 144.
- <sup>45</sup> Ella Wheeler Wilcox, ‘The Protest’, *The Labor Daily*, 22 October 1938, p. 9. The poem was originally published in Ella Wheeler Wilcox, *Poems of Power*, W.B. Conkey, Chicago, 1902. The transition from purely manual to fully mechanised winning of coal took more than 60 years. See Hargraves, *History of Coal Mining in Australia*, pp. 111-115.
- <sup>46</sup> ‘Hungry Jim the Miner’, in Lola Wright interviewed by Rob Willis, 19 March 2008, TRC 5747/79. National Library of Australia.
- <sup>47</sup> ‘Show Me the Way to Dig Coal’, in Joe Chambers, Lyn Chambers and Fred Brown interviewed by Rob Willis, 28 May 1998, TRC 3388/152-153. National Library of Australia.
- <sup>48</sup> Edgar Ross, *A History of the Miners’ Federation of Australia*, The Australian Coal and Shale Employees’ Federation, 1970, pp. 22-23.
- <sup>49</sup> Hargraves, *History of Coal Mining in Australia*, p. 213.
- <sup>50</sup> For example production of black coal (tons) in 1946 was: New South Wales 11,308,000; Queensland 1,587,000; Western Australia 642,000; Victoria 191,000; Tasmania 159,000. See Harold Elford and Maurice McKeown, *Coal Mining in Australia*, Tait Publishing Company, Melbourne and Sydney, 1947, p. 6.
- <sup>51</sup> W.E.P. French, ‘The Song of the Pick’, *Daily Post (Hobart)*, 2 July 1915, p. 2.



- <sup>52</sup> Alfred Smith, 'Working Underground', *The Gippsland Sagas*, South Gippsland Sentinel Times, Korumburra, 1982, pp. 2-3.
- <sup>53</sup> 'The Brace Boy's Prayer', in Fred Brown interviewed by Rob Willis, 28 April 1999, TRC 3388/180. National Library of Australia.
- <sup>54</sup> W.H. Utley, 'Song of the Miners', *The International Socialist*, 27 January 1917, p. 1. This song comes from the collection 'Chants of Labor' first published in 1888, see Mark Gregory <http://folkstream.com/593.html>, accessed 26 April 2020.
- <sup>55</sup> Hargraves, *History of Coal Mining in Australia*, p. 201.
- <sup>56</sup> Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, p. 13.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 19, An outstanding grievance of miners at the time was the *Masters and Servants Act* which 'empowered Justices of the Peace to fine or imprison "servants" who, without good reason, broke their "contracts of employment"'.
- <sup>58</sup> 'The Coal Owners Song', *Miners' Advocate and Northumberland Recorder*, 20 January 1874, p. 4.
- <sup>59</sup> Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, p. 234. Ross notes that there was a higher percentage of juveniles at Wonthaggi than in other mining districts, 'many of whom received as little as 3/6 a day'. See also 'Two Miners' Toasts', < <http://www.warrenfahey.com.au/jack-mays-and-jim-champion/>>, accessed 26 April 2020.
- <sup>60</sup> 'Jingle on the Lithgow Ironworks Tunnel Trouble', *The International Socialist*, 26 August 1911, p. 6. Recorded by Warren Fahey on the CD *Larrikins, Louts and Layabouts*, Bodge Productions Pty Ltd, 2004. According to Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, pp. 214-216, 'Hoskins stood down J. Cairns, president of the miners, and dismissed William Hayes, the union delegate, an engine-driver, for absenting himself from work at the coal mine while attending a meeting of the Delegate Board ...' and that the *Jingle* was 'written by Richard Northley, secretary of the Eight Hour Committee, and sold for a penny a copy for the strike funds'.
- <sup>61</sup> Fahey, *Ratbags and Rabblers*, pp. 42-43. Recorded by Warren Fahey on the LP *Man of the Earth*, Larrikin Records LRF001, 1975.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42; 'Anarchy. Eight Hours of Chaos', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 August 1911, p. 9; 'Where Labor Rules', *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express*, 1 September 1911, p. 28.
- <sup>63</sup> 'Lithgow Rioters', *The Daily News (Perth)*, 14 October 1911, p. 12; 'The Right to Strike', *The Tenterfield Intercolonial Courier and Fairfield and Wallangarra Advocate*, 6 October 1911, p. 2.
- <sup>64</sup> Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, p. 215. Ross notes that 'the strike-breakers were not dismissed and disputes over their employment continued for a long time'.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336; Hargraves, *History of Coal Mining in Australia*, p. 336.
- <sup>66</sup> Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, p. 336; Hargraves, *History of Coal Mining in Australia*, pp. 340-343.
- <sup>67</sup> Ellis, *A Saga of Coal*, p. 204.
- <sup>68</sup> Wendy Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour: an oral record of the 1930s depression in Australia*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1978, p. 81.
- <sup>69</sup> Alfred Hayes, 'Joe Hill', music by Earl Robinson, 1938, Mark Gregory, *Joe Hill*, <<http://unionsong.com/u017.html>>, accessed 26 April 2020.
- <sup>70</sup> Dorothy Hewett, 'Ballad of Norman Brown', in William Grono, *Margins, a West Coast Selection of Poetry, 1929-1988*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988, pp. 45-46. Set to music by Mike Leyden, *Australian Tradition*, November 1965 (cited in Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour*, p. 88) and recorded by Tony Suttor and Andy Saunders on the LP *Man of the Earth*, Larrikin Records LRF001, 1975. The 'Rothbury riot' and death of Norman Brown are also the subject of two other songs: Roger Grant, 'A Sad Day on the Coalfields', 1930, <<http://unionsong.com/u553.html>>, accessed 26 April 2020, and Graham Seal, 'The Country Knows the Rest', 1975, CD *Barbwire Ballads*.
- <sup>71</sup> Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, pp. 420-421; Ellis, *A Saga of Coal*, p. 234; Hargraves, *History of Coal Mining in Australia*, p. 213. The log of claims included a 35 hour week, long service leave, a wage increase of 30 shillings per week and improved amenities in pit and town.
- <sup>72</sup> Joe Chambers, Lyn Chambers and Fred Brown interviewed by Rob Willis, 28 May 1998, TRC 3388/152-153. National Library of Australia.
- <sup>73</sup> Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, pp. 426-428; Hargraves, *History of Coal Mining in Australia*, p. 213; *Coal and Shale Miners: Forgotten Trades; selected records of early Australian trades*, <<http://archives.anu.edu.au/exhibitions/forgotten-trades-selected-records-early-australian-trades/coal-and-shale-miners>>, accessed 26 April 2020.
- <sup>74</sup> 'The Song of the Hurt', *Longreach Leader*, 8 July 1949, p. 3.
- <sup>75</sup> Jock Graham, 'A Man of the Earth', *Singabout*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1957, p. 11.
- <sup>76</sup> Gregory, 'Australian working songs and poems', pp. 410-412.

<sup>77</sup> For example ‘Get the Coal out Now’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 July 1949, p. 9; ‘Mounting Cost of Strike’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 July 1949, p. 1; ‘Coal Strike “Cracking Up”’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 July 1949, p. 4.

<sup>78</sup> The British coal industry was nationalised in 1947.

<sup>79</sup> John Graham, *Blood on the Coal*, p. 21.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Mass meeting of the Miners’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 1 September 1885, p. 2; Melinda Kendall, ‘The Colliers’ Strike Song’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 3 October 1885, p. 1s. Melinda Kendall was the mother of renowned poet Henry Kendall.

<sup>82</sup> ‘The Song of the Striker’, *Leader (Orange)*, 24 August 1917, p. 2; ‘Strike still spreading. Waterside workers, seamen and coal miners now out’, *Direct Action (Sydney)*, 18 August 1917, p. 1.

<sup>83</sup> Apurnah Kumar Ghosh and Sentai Wang, ‘Evolution of underground coal mine explosions law in Australia, 1887-2007’, *Journal of Australasian Mining History*, vol. 12, 2014, pp. 81-82.

<sup>84</sup> Mining Accident Database, Mine Safety Institute of Australia, *Bulli Mine 1887*, <<http://www.mineaccidents.com.au/mine-event/54/bulli-mine-1887>>, accessed 26 April 2020.

<sup>85</sup> M.J. Shannon, ‘The Bulli Disaster’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 9 April 1887, p. 4.

<sup>86</sup> George R. Sims, ‘At the Pit’s Mouth’, *The Cumberland Mercury*, 2 April 1887, p. 2.

<sup>87</sup> ‘The Bulli Disaster. The Report of the Commission’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 July 1887, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> Mining Accident Database, Mine Safety Institute of Australia, *Mt Kembla 1902*, <<http://www.mineaccidents.com.au/mine-event/184/mt-kembla-1902>>, accessed 26 April 2020.

<sup>89</sup> Royal Commission of Inquiry Respecting the Mount Kembla Colliery Disaster, William Applegate Gulliek, Government Printer, Sydney, 1903, p. xxxvi; Henry Lee, ‘A Reflection on the Mt Kembla Disaster’, *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2003, p. 38.

<sup>90</sup> Frederick C. Biggers, ‘Mount Kembla Colliery Disaster’, *Poems*, *Illawarra Mercury*, Wollongong, 1915, pp. 1-3.

<sup>91</sup> Darcy O’Kelly, *The Kembla Disaster*, Mount Kembla Mining Heritage Inc., <<https://www.mtkembla.org.au/poems>>, accessed 26 April 2020.

<sup>92</sup> Thos. E. Spencer, ‘Mount Kembla’, *The Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder*, 7 June 1932, p. 6.

<sup>93</sup> Clive Beauchamp, ‘Disaster at the Australian Agricultural Company’s Mine, Hamilton NSW, 1889’, *Journal of Australasian Mining History*, vol. 12, 2014, pp. 193-204. The pony had survived by drinking dripping water but died shortly after being taken to the underground stalls, Beauchamp, p. 195.

<sup>94</sup> Joseph Manning, ‘Hamilton Pit Disaster’, *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 1 November 1889, p. 9.

<sup>95</sup> ‘Glebe Colliery Disaster’, *Evening News*, 5 October 1889, p. 6.

<sup>96</sup> Ron Edwards, ‘Reviews’, *Australian Tradition*, December 1971, p. 28. Edwards commented: ‘The Mount Mulligan disaster [in which the entire underground workforce of 76 was killed] is still discussed at length all over North Queensland, yet I have never heard so much as a verse about it’. The book reviewed was George Korson, *Coal Dust on the Fiddle: songs and stories of the bituminous industry*, Folklore Associate, Halboro, Pennsylvania, 1965, 460 pp.

<sup>97</sup> Poems later set to music have been counted only as poems.

<sup>98</sup> In relatively recent years the advent of the portable tape recorder has simplified the collecting of folk music, and some of the songs discussed in this paper are from interviews of retired miners by folklorists Warren Fahey and Rob Willis.

<sup>99</sup> John Warner, *Pithead in the Fern*, CD. In recent years coal-related songs and poems concerned with environmental issues have appeared on the Internet but have not been included in this study as they are not from coal mining communities - an example is Anne Elvey, *Hope for whole: poets speak up to Adani*, Rosslyn Avenue Productions, 2018, 115 pp.

<sup>100</sup> Hargraves, *History of Coal Mining in Australia*, p. 213, ‘During the 1960s growth in the export market led to an era of peace in the industry’.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80, 213. A rapid expansion of mechanisation of the mines took place in the 1950s.