

Book Review

Philip Payton, *Making Moonta: The Invention of 'Australia's Little Cornwall'*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter, 2007, i-xiii, 268 pp.

Philip Payton's book *Making Moonta* is a must for all historians, not only those with a mining interest. The author does not just talk about Moonta and mining, though that would be admirable enough, but the place of the Cornish people, not only in Moonta, but in Australia society as a whole. Perhaps the most telling point in the book is in the preface, in which he states that his book 'is about Australia more generally, and contributes to the way in which we now read and write about Australian history'. He comments that for many years a conventional wisdom was that Australia was up until the 1950s 'remarkably homogenous, its people largely the descendants of immigrants from Britain and Ireland, with any differences between them ironed out by the shared experience of emigration and settlement'. He acknowledges that much has been done by historians such as Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey to counter this view, Blainey referring to Australia as 'a multicultural society because the cultural differences between Irish Catholics and Scottish Presbyterians and Cornish Methodist and many other groupings was intensely felt'. Payton remarks that there is today a greater recognition of this diversity, and his book is a contribution to the further elaboration of 'difference'. On this score I agree totally.

From the outset the author acknowledges his debt to Oswald Pryor and his book *Australia's Little Cornwall*, first published in Adelaide in 1962 and still in print today. Pryor, the son of a Cornish miner and himself a surface manager at the Moonta mine from 1911 and 1923, did much to promulgate the Cornish mystique at Moonta and the myths and legends surrounding the Cousin Jacks and Cousin Jennys. Payton makes his intentions apparent from the outset, stating that his book 'picks up where Pryor left off, returning once again to 'Australia's Little Cornwall', but this time with the more explicit intention of seeking to understand just how and why Moonta constructed and sustained its particular mystique. His opening chapter is the first step in identifying the mechanisms that helped mould Moonta's myth. Just what the myth is requires some explaining. To me it conjures of images of towering stone built churches, the cult of the captains, such as the all powerful Captain Henry Richard Hancock, the fiery assertiveness and exclusiveness of the miners, with their creed of 'one and all', and their overriding religious convictions as Methodists, with that religion's emphasis on

sobriety, teas meetings and festivals. Payton takes the blow torch to these myths, explaining, elaborating and dissecting, for not everyone in the copper towns was Cornish; there were many Irish Catholics and Welsh as well.

For me the most intriguing discussion in the book concerned Cornwall's great emigration. I was unaware that it was so intense and that it lasted for so long, or that it had spread its tentacles so far around the globe. Successive waves of emigration took place between 1815, the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. The Cornish went everywhere and took with them their highly developed sense of superiority and identity, drawn from their culture of 'industrial prowess', which they then reinvented abroad. Their new homes were not just in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA, but South and Central America, in particular Cuba, Colombia, Mexico, Brazil and Chile; anywhere where there were mines, though not all the migrants were miners. The driving force for the migrants, as it was for the Irish, was economic and social - high rents, agricultural depression, religious resentment at Established Church, the onset of a potato blight, and the gradual depletion of payable and workable copper and tin deposits. I didn't realise that California's Grass Valley was the 'Cornwall of California'. I do now.

But there is much more to the book, in particular the cult of Captain Hancock, who was a legend in his own time. He was the archetypical Cornish mining captain, paternalistic, but shrewd and single minded, tough but fair and benevolent to his workers, and assertive to the directors. And if running one of the largest copper mines in the world was not enough, he was also a lay preacher. Hancock's influence was enormous and felt in 'seemingly every institution on the Peninsula'. Payton comments that for all his weaknesses Hancock had genuine concern for the well-being of his workforces and the local community, a result of his religious convictions, together with an affinity with the working class mining men of Cornwall and West Devon which he never quite lost sight of. But his relations with the local miners' trade union were prickly. Payton refers to the veneer of deference co-existing with a subversive resentment that was expressed quietly but continually and firmly by the miners. But of course the miners' feelings were not always expressed quietly, and the portrayal of the miners as passive and deferential is refuted by the author. There was uncertainty, tension and conflict, with major industrial disputes in 1864 and 1874 - and Hancock was not above sacking the more dissident of the union leaders.

Payton's discussion of mining society is intriguing. I had always imagined the mining townships to have been in their heyday clean and orderly, but they were not. At the township of Moonta Mines the houses were for the most part neat enough, but they were built in all directions with no attempt to form streets. Worse still were the unsanitary conditions. Filth, animal dung and human excrement seemed to be everywhere; much of the water was polluted and the air as well. Payton's attention to the depressing physical environment, which included the searing heat in summer and waves of epidemics of typhoid and other afflictions which carried off the strong and feeble alike is highly commendable. Historians often forget just how important environment was in the everyday lives of people. Just to what extent such miseries may have affected social attitudes and behaviour is not stated, though the author could perhaps have reflected on them.

The resourcefulness of the women and the role of the churches is also commented upon. Despite the overriding dominance of Methodism, there were Wesleyans and Bible Christians, and of course Anglicans and Roman Catholics, and differences and rivalries between the different chapels. The last two chapters of the book describe the years of decline following the Great War - all copper mining enterprises in Australia were affected adversely by falling prices - and the revival of the Cornish myth and the re-invention of 'Australia's Little Cornwall' through the Cornish festival held in May every year since 1973. All in all, *Making Moonta* is a highly informative and entertaining book that should sit proudly on the shelves of all mining historians.

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