

BOOK REVIEWS

Martin Summons, *Mandarins & mavericks: remembering Western Mining 1933-2005*. Richmond, Victoria: Hardie Grant Books, 2017. xi, 396 pages, 46 pages of plates, illustrations, maps, portraits.

This extensive history of Western Mining Corporation covers the company's history from its formation in 1933 through to its major Board and company restructure in 2005. Without even a short introductory section, or a nod to prior works on the company, the book starts at a gallop diving straight into the formation of the company out of the complex and challenging consequences of the Great Depression. The author Martin Summons is a freelance journalist and writer who has published other works of public history after a career as a journalist and then working in the industry as an investment advisor and public relations expert. The book was 'fully funded by more than eighty former employees, each initially contributing an equal amount to cover the costs of writing, production, and publication.' (p.360). This handsome hardback edition has a wonderful range of photographs throughout and an excellent index. A further innovative addition is an electronic file of supplementary material available for download through the National Library of Australia.

WMC started its life as a gold mining company, formed to take advantage of the increase in the price of gold after the Great Depression and to provide stronger local management over key Western Australian-based gold mining projects. Expansion did not occur until 1949 when WMC took over English owned gold mines in Western Australia, and expanded into Victoria.

Over its long history, the company embarked on a number of crucial new developments, pioneering a move into bauxite, iron ore, nickel and finally copper and uranium. By the 1970s WMC was a diversified miner and resource company of considerable importance in Australia and elsewhere. The chapter on nickel, which covers the discovery of nickel at Kambalda, south of Kalgoorlie in Western Australia in 1966 is one of the highlights of the book. What followed the nickel discovery was carefully targeted drilling, remarkably swift mine development, the construction of a company town as well as new mines and a nearby smelter. As Summons notes it was nickel 'that elevated WMC to international metals company status.' (p.162).

In the late 1980s the company came under the influence of key thinkers in what was then called the 'New Right' but is now often labeled 'neoliberalism'. Frustrated by what the company saw as the limiting straitjacket of union and arbitration commission interference, WMC was instrumental in shifting the industrial relations climate.

Mandarins and Mavericks provides a very well researched narrative history of WMC at the Board, corporate strategy, and exploration level with vibrant and engaging stories on key Board members and managers. But business history in Australia can and should do better. The full spectrum of the company's workforce should at least get a mention, not just the Board members and key managers. Business history should also be a place for a sober and critical assessment of workforce, union, community, and government relationships. For example, the treatment of the controversial figure of Hugh Morgan could be more nuanced. Recent work by Dominic Kelly (*Political*

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Troglodytes and Economic Lunatics: The Hard Right in Australia, 2019) for example, has argued that Hugh Morgan and another WMC employee, Ray Evans, used WMC as an organising platform for Morgan's political and industrial viewpoints. It seems even Morgan became too radical for the WMC Board as his controversial ousting in 1993 suggests. But Summons does not even mention Evans, who wrote most of Morgan's speeches, and his treatment of Morgan is very light touch.

In the USA a critical and scholarly business history has gathered around the Business History Conference and the journal *Enterprise and Society*. In Australia, business history has the capacity to mature into a valuable and nuanced discipline where the industry-community relationship is explored and assessed through an historical lens. This solid account of the complex and fascinating history of WMC is a good start, but the undeniable company bias and key points of omission mean we are still waiting for the maturation of a scholarly and well-founded business history in this country.

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