

BOOK REVIEWS

W.P. Ashley *The Mining Expert, Phillip Davies 1831 -1898*, self-published, limited edition 150 books, 2020, pp. iii-xiv, a-d, 1-380, incl. appendix, bibliography and index, Soft cover, A4, ISBN 978-0-9577730-3-5, \$85 plus p&p \$13, Robert Ashley ashley.rwp@bigpond.com R.W.P. Ashley, R.A. Research, P.O. Box 128, Wendouree, Victoria, 3355

As Welshmen ourselves, who had read with interest and enthusiasm the author's 2018 Journal article on Phillip Davies and hydraulic sluicing at the Kiandra Gold Mining Company, we were really looking forward to this substantial and definitive book on fellow-Welshman Davies' career. Both the article and the book arose from Ashley's work in response to family history research by Andrea (Davies) McGregor and others of Phillip Davies's relations, both in Wales and in Australia. This has been complemented by the author's extensive research into original sources on TROVE and the British Library and further enriched by his prolific photography and inexhaustible knowledge of mining locations across Victoria, New South Wales and well beyond. The book purports to be the history of Phillip Davies (or Phil Davis as the Australian press generally called him), a Welsh miner from the Rhondda Valleys who arrived in Australia in 1852. It charts his progress through mine management mainly in Victoria and New South Wales and inspection of mines across these states, the Northern Territories and Tasmania. It describes in considerable detail, and with extensive quotation, Davies' Melbourne Supreme Court trial late in 1869, on a charge of larceny at the Prince of Wales mine, Sebastopol, and his questionable subsequent imprisonment, an episode that ironically catapulted him into public prominence. Also chronicled is how he reached his final status as an acknowledged 'Mining Expert' in all kinds of metals and minerals, from coal, through tin and lead to gold. The book has many strengths and much valuable material but overall what results is a portmanteau of a volume, huge and rather chaotic.

The book has been compiled in an astonishingly short time, with most of the research being carried out since 2015. Ashley has accomplished a mammoth task in visiting and photographing virtually all the sites of former mines he deals with in the book and in successfully blending his own photographs with numerous older original ones and maps to illustrate the locations – in all there are 195 illustrations, diagrams and maps, the equivalent of one almost every two pages. The author also shows his ability to interpret and present the previous history of the claims and mines which Phillip Davies subsequently managed, and on several occasions to trace the destiny of the whole goldfield. For example, his clear familiarity with Parkes, an area where both Phillip Davies and his brother Richard were active, is very evident.

Davies's first managership was at the Imperial Company Hiscock's Reef, Buninyong, from June 1860 to January 1861. Other posts seem to have been as brief, but he was also involved early in inspection of other mines. For most mines with which Davies was involved, for however short a time, the author provides a detailed history from the initial claim to well beyond Davies's departure, and in some cases even up to the present day. In using Phillip Davies, and later his brother Richard, as 'pegs' on which

to hang his narrative, the author provides a wide-ranging and effective account of a diverse series of mines in a wide range of minerals. This is one of the most valuable features of the book, because of his breadth of technical knowledge of the processes of mining, as well as his detailed familiarity with the whole mining history of so many of these communities. For example, the section on the Cambrian Mine in Llanelly takes us all the way from 1860 up to 1983, when the last attempt was made to de-water and re-timber the mine.

Yet if the almost encyclopedic level of detail is one of the book's biggest strengths it also often proves to be one of its weaknesses. The sheer amount of material can become overwhelming, and we lose sight of the book's main subject. Passages switch back and forth in time, confusing the narrative timeline of Davies' career, while the many additional, albeit interesting, snippets of information serve to distract. Further, although the latter part of the book contains significantly more about Phillip Davies and his relations, in much of the first half of the book he is an ephemeral figure. Ashley's enthusiasm for his subject, allied to his lifetime of involvement in mining and mining history, mean that what he writes will be of interest to any member of the Association, or anyone with a specific interest in the locations of Davies's activities. But it must be said, we both found reading this book all the way through difficult, as was trying to keep a grasp on the thread of narrative and its relationship to Davies's personal history. It would be better perhaps for the reader to use the extensive index, and the chapter headings and paragraph/section headings (rather like those of the newspapers the author uses so frequently as sources) to dip into the book at various stages, and then to concentrate upon the chapters of particular interest.

One of the earliest concrete examples of Davies's presence is that he was among those who testified to a Victorian Government Select Committee meeting in 1865 that he with others commenced a shaft at Cape Patterson in 1853, but 'We got no coal'. After this he seems to have moved for some years exclusively into gold mining. Indeed, far from being a 'mining expert', Phillip Davies's activities over almost all the first part of the book seem largely to have ended in failure or abandonment of the enterprises with which he was associated. All too often the publication of applications for leases and subsequent tenders for erection of mining equipment, or for building a reservoir to provide the vital supply of water, end, as in so many other cases that the author records, with the slowing down or abandonment of the mine.

Of course, this well reflects the ephemeral and precarious nature of so many of these early mining ventures, particularly in the Victorian gold fields. These were initially so promising, so widely 'boomed' by local newspapers, but inadequately financed, often through brokers boosting to speculators in London, and they seldom lived up to the extravagant claims of the prospectuses. Ashley conveys this febrile climate well; he narrates Davies' involvement in a great number of mining companies, either as a manager, shareholder, or in inspecting the property.

Following his early release from jail in January 1870, Davies moved to the Cambrian mine at Llanelly. He was clearly now much more in the public eye, and an extensive quotation chronicles his support for the establishment of a Miners' Association and his role chairing this meeting. Ashley shows how Davies became well regarded as an

effective manager with a good eye for a mine; his stay at the Dayspring, Currajong mine from October 1872 to 1876, for example, was clearly most successful. (We also learn in passing of Currajong's relationship with the moon landings of 1969-7). But it was the revival of the Kiandra mining ventures in 1881 that made Davies's name as an innovator, utilizing the hydraulic sluicing processes pioneered in California. His joint ownership from 1888 onwards of Mitchell's Creek, a name prominent in Australian gold mining since McGregor's first discoveries in the 1830s and 40s, sealed his prominence, as did his partnership with John Howell, formerly manager of Broken Hill, in developing the Prince of Wales mine, Reno. Ashley credits Davies with making Mitchell's Creek once more productive, particularly by more effective treatment of pyritic ores through cyaniding. There is no doubt that by the 1880s Davies did indeed qualify for the grandiose title of 'Mining Expert'. He was regarded as a credible promoter of mining companies and his reports had the stamp of authentic experience. Ashley stresses throughout Davies's commitment to workers' welfare and mine safety, though by tragic coincidence it was his son-in-law and manager Andrew Johnston who was killed at his Prince of Wales mine.

In the section on Davies's time at Llanelly we hear something of the Welsh community in that area, though it would have been instructive to have had more detail on the interaction of the Welsh within their community, using Davies as an example. In its eagerness to include every scrap of news information about his protagonist, and the mines in which he moved, the book tends to skate over the social contexts, and this leaves Phillip Davies a less rounded figure. Throughout the book, there are references to Welsh communities or mines with Welsh names in Australia, for example Llanberris in Ballarat, the Cambrian Gold Mining Company, and no fewer than four Prince of Wales mines. But this dimension to Davies's life is never really explored, and we learn little of the influence of the Welsh or the networks of Welsh miners and managers of which Davies obviously was a part.

Unfortunately, the book suffers as a result of a distinct lack of care in proof-reading. There are numerous typos, simple errors of fact (for example, the visit to the Prince of Wales mine by 'Alfred, Prince of Wales' where he confuses the first and second sons of Queen Victoria), and occasional confusion of dates - 1986 for 1886, for instance. An irksome tendency to scatter 'Davis *sic* - or Davis (Sic Davies) or (Sic(Davies))' or other variations - whenever Phillip Davies appears in various sources also catches the eye. It would have been far better for Ashley to have clarified early in the book the prevalent Australasian tendency to standardise and rename - as with Welsh mine-owner and premier of Western Australia Alfred Morgan becoming Alfred Morgans - and then to ignore it. In several sections, inconsistencies in font size make it difficult to differentiate between a direct quotation from the source and the author's commentary on it. The extensive and detailed bibliography and index are both extremely valuable, but they contain several errors and duplications.

To sum up, this is a book that contains a wealth of information not only on the mines across the colonies of Australia, but upon the processes of floating the companies, the characters that managed and directed them, and the extractive methods used in these mines. At times it is repetitive, at others, over-detailed. Sometimes it is frustratingly

generalized about matters relating to Phillip Davies and his family, tending too often to speculate, in the absence of direct evidence, on what they 'might have' done. Famous names and locations drift through it, and there are many gems among the histories encompassed. Indeed the book is very like the process of mining itself, speculative, frustrating, hard work for much of the time, but occasionally turning up nuggets of pure gold.

Alwyn Evans & Bill Jones