

BOOK REVIEW

Denis Porter, *Coal, the Australian Story: From convict mining to the birth of a world leader*, pp. 353. Connor Court Publishing, Redland Bay, 2019. ISBN: 978-192-582660-9.

The history of the Australian coal trade is comprehensively documented. With this offering, Denis Porter has produced a volume of reference rather than analysis of the sector and the forces - domestic and international - that have influenced the fortunes and misfortunes of an industry central to the post World War Two economic and social well-being of Australians.

This does not in any sense diminish the worth of Denis Porter's work. It is a valuable tool in identifying the milestones in the long march of Australian coal mining from the brutality of its genesis as a trade built on convict labour in the late 18th and early 19th centuries to its emergence, from the 1960s, as a pillar of a global trade.

Denis Porter comes to his work with strong industry credentials. He is a former Chief Executive Officer of the New South Wales Minerals Council, a former influential voice with the New South Wales Coal Association and a Trustee Director of the industry's superannuation fund. As such, he has been very much an insider.

Of course, where we stand often influences what we see - physically and ideologically. This is as true for the author just as it is true, for example, of the late Jim Comerford, in *Coal and Colonials*, who wrote from the perspective of organised labour.

Comerford, who began work as a pit boy and rose, over the years to the highest ranks of the then Miners' Federation, brought that same perspective to his best work, *Lockout*, which chronicled Australia's most violent industrial confrontation at Rothbury Colliery in the Hunter Valley in 1929.

Similarly, the work of the late Pete Thomas, a long-time editor of the Federation's now out-of-print *Common Cause* newspaper, was understandably partisan in his various volumes on the history of coal miners and their Queensland Colliery Employees' Union.

Denis Porter's offering is comprehensively referenced, drawing on a broad range of sources that attest to the diligence the author brought to his endeavours. Even as a stand-alone resource for historians, and higher degree aspirants, the bibliography is impressive. So, too, is the index, and the glossary of coal mining terms, and abbreviations.

Quite correctly, Denis Porter, in his introduction concedes:

This book does not pretend in any way to be a complete history of the industry in New South Wales and Queensland; rather it is (sic) attempt to bring together some of the major events in the industry and some of the major events on the way it has evolved and grown.

This is a sensible and necessary concession. After all, there is, as the author observes, no single story of Australian coal. Rather, the many stories of coal are drawn from the lives and memories of miners, their families and their communities, company reports and records, dry scientific, technical and engineering documents, the findings of various Government enquiries, letters and unpublished diaries and a treasure trove of newspaper and magazine articles.

The author's coverage of the evolution and growth of the Australian coal sector begins with accounts of the late 18th century discovery and subsequent exploration and often difficult and deadly extraction, by convict workers, of coal in the decades following British colonisation of a continent wrongly regarded as *Terra Nullius*.

By the mid-19th century, convict labour had given way to the arrival of skilled miners from south Wales, central Scotland, northern England and Cornwall. They were generally optimistic, believing the New South Wales coalfields would deliver something of a fresh start in a new world where their abilities would be financially well-rewarded and their working and living conditions would offer an escape from the master and servant strictures of Victorian Britain.

That optimism aside, the skilled workers also brought with them a collective sense of solidarity, a product of their dangerous and physically taxing workplace. This solidarity was evident in their frequently fractious interactions with pit proprietors. It was the spear point of a strident coal mining unionism that, over more than a century, delivered a shorter working week, vastly improved working conditions, particularly in relation to safety, health screening, sick pay, holiday payments, pensions and employer provision of pit-top bath houses and change rooms. Many of the workplace gains made by the miners flowed on to the wider Australian workforce.

Concurrent with this strident coal mining unionism, employers were organising themselves to defend their financial and proprietorial interests. The miners soon learned that coming to a new country did not necessarily ensure their escape from the master and servant realities of their old country. The emerging coal barons in Australia were no less obdurate than their British cousins in commerce. This was hardly surprising at a time when Britannia ruled an empire on which the sun never set. What was the norm in proprietorial attitudes and the behaviour of capital in 'the mother country' became the norm in Colonial Australia.

Overall, Denis Porter's work is methodical, chronological, uncluttered. It moves steadily through the decades, laying out significant events. These include Federation, World War One, economic depression and its attendant widespread suffering and the growth of the Queensland coal sector which was initially centred on the West Moreton coalfields.

Along the way, the author touches on bitter and often bruising industrial conflicts and the impact of post-2nd World War pit mechanisation before moving on to the 1960s opening up of the Bowen Basin coal measures that stretched from Moura up to the Utah Development Company's opencut mines – Blackwater, Norwich Park, Saraji, Peak Downs and Goonyella and the Harrow Creek Trial Colliery.

In his coverage of torrid industrial disputes, Denis Porter attends to what he describes as the 1929 New South Wales miners' 'strike'. However, 'strike' is a misnomer. It was, in fact, a lengthy lockout of miners who refused to accept lower wages.

A flashpoint of this lockout was the Rothbury Colliery in the Hunter Valley where police opened fire on unarmed workers marching towards their pit. One bystander died and an estimated 40 miners were wounded by batons and bullets. Police claimed their actions were taken to disperse what they described as a 'riot'. It was no such thing.

'Baron' John Brown, owner of the Richmond Main and Pelaw Main Collieries was the steel in the backbone of proprietors insistent that workers would not be allowed on-site unless they accepted lower wages. Unyielding in his virulent anti-unionism, Brown was fabulously wealthy. Substantial coal and shipping interests aside, he bred and owned thoroughbred racehorses and prize-winning poultry. His death, aged 78 in 1930, was not mourned by organised labour. Not unexpectedly, he was lionised by capital. As ever, what we see depends on where we stand.

In his concluding commentary, Denis Porter advises that a second volume is anticipated. That volume will attend to the period from the early 1970s to the present. It will chronicle the decades when, in Australia, coal went from being a jewel in the crown of the national economy to becoming, for many, the Ugly Sister of an economy in transition. There is every reason to believe Denis Porter's second volume will be as useful as his first.

Alan Murray