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Power for the People

Siobhan McHugh

As part of the Speakers Corner lecture series, award-winning author Siobhan McHugh spoke at the National Archives on 16 August 2009 about her research into the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme. Through the personal stories of the workers and their families, and drawing on her book, *The Snowy: The People Behind the Power*, Siobhan shared her insights into the lives of the multinational workforce that built the 'Snowy' in post-war Australia.

Siobhan McHugh:

It's lovely to be here. Thank you all very much for coming. I feel a bit humbled because I know some of you have worked on the scheme. I spotted a few on the way in and you're probably thinking, 'What does she know about working on the Snowy? I was there.' But I suppose my job has been the privileged one of gathering the stories and trying to collate them into some unified tapestry that could make sense of what was such an epoch-making scheme for Australia. I was just lucky enough to be given a commission, way back in 1986 at the ABC, to go out and start the research for a radio series. I went on then to write the book and it seemed really to take over my life for a long time.

What I want to do today is try and bring some of those strands together to honour the 60th anniversary of the Snowy and the people who built it, and to give you a sense of the people who worked on the scheme – where they came from, what they did, who they were. To set the scene let's start at the very beginning with Sir William Hudson, the first Commissioner.

TAPE William Hudson:

The Snowy Mountain Hydro Electric Authority was born on August 1 of this year and I was appointed as its first employee. The small labour force we are now collecting will grow to 9000 at least, perhaps more. Ahead of us are many years of toil, numerous obstacles ... and I have no doubt many disappointments. These are what make the achievement of an objective worthwhile. The nation has accepted the scheme and if I judge Australians rightly, they will see that it goes through.

Siobhan McHugh:

So the Snowy kicked off 60 years ago, and Bill Hudson is rightly acknowledged as having been a great factor in the success of the scheme. The choice of Bill Hudson is very interesting. I was lucky to meet Nelson Lemmon, who was the Minister for Works in the Chifley government, and was responsible for appointing Bill Hudson to the position. I met him just before he died. He was very gruff when I rang him. I had located him up in Port Macquarie and I was a bit disappointed after all my hard work finding him. But I wasn't put off. I wrote a letter saying, 'Please, please can I talk to you?' I explained people can't pronounce my name. I said, 'It's an Irish name pronounced S-I-O-B-H-A-N.'

I rang again and I got this woman whom I took to be his wife and she said very abruptly, 'Are you from Ireland?' She said, 'Do you know Mullingar?', and I said, 'Yes.' Some instinct made me not say that it was known for bad country music. And she said, 'Well, my mother is from there and I've told Nelson he's got to talk to you.' So that's how I got the interview, which was actually an amazing fluke.

When I met Nelson he was wonderful. He remembered everything. He was a practical man, and he had been a farmer from Western Australia. He was passionate about pushing the Snowy through. He'd seen all the survey work and knew what it could deliver for Australia. He was interviewing people and everybody expected him to get somebody from America. He had seen people from Mount Isa, BHP, but they all thought that it would be like a consultancy. They weren't going to base themselves in Cooma. Nelson had no time for that; 'A gentleman's job is what they wanted,' he said, not good enough.

Bill Hudson's credentials were written on the back of an envelope handed to the Chairman of the Public Service Board by a colleague who was, in a typical Australian way, taking a 'sickie' to go to a cricket match. He knew Hudson characteristically was working away at his desk and not taking a sickie, and this fellow said, 'I'll be running into the Chairman of the Public Service Board, that job is still open.'

So Hudson scribbled down a few facts and figures about his past work, and Lemmon liked the look of them. He had built a dam for a fixed price in Scotland – this appealed. Lemmon checked him out with the unions, and found that he was considered to be fair. He rang Hudson, interviewed him and decided on the spot that he'd be the man. He still had to get it through Cabinet. You were supposed to put three names forward and somebody in Cabinet said, 'You have to have three names.' So Lemmon said sorry, took back the nomination and wrote down, 'Hudson, Hudson and Hudson'. And that's how he got through.

When the announcement was made, Eileen Hudson, Lady Hudson as she was to become, had the same sort of aplomb as Bill Hudson had displayed. He just came home and told her, 'I got that job.' When the press came, she wouldn't talk to them because she was bathing the children. There was a strike on and there were water restrictions. She didn't have time to stop bathing the children or the water would go off.

There were two main challenges that Bill Hudson faced. One was the scope and scale of the work, which was unprecedented and enormous, and the other was finding the workforce to implement that work once the design was in place. In Australia in 1949, there were only about eight million people in the country. It was severely underpopulated and everything was very run down after the war. Hudson knew that he couldn't be seen to be draining the country of much-needed resources, so he decided he would look overseas for the workforce.

Sir Robert Jackson at the time was an Australian working with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Fund, which was trying to deal with the three million or so displaced persons who were in refugee camps at the end of World War II. They either could not or did not want to go back to their countries of origin. Communism had arrived. The Iron Curtain had fallen across much of Eastern Europe and a lot of people were desperately seeking not to be sent back to these countries. Sir Robert Jackson went to see Prime Minister Ben Chifley. Here is an excerpt from his recall of that event.

TAPE Robert Jackson:

I went ... and saw Mr Chifley and he was certainly the most remarkable man. He could never get his pipe to light. All the matches were going fsccht over his shoulder all the time. And he said, 'Oh, how many do you want us to take?' and I said, 'Well, Sir can you take 100,000?' 'Why should we take 100,000?' I said the logic there is whoever gets the first 100,000 is going to get the absolute cream of the crop. He thought that was good logic. Then he said, 'Hold on, not too may Poles, we don't want a Buffalo City in Australia.' So I said, 'No we didn't take too many Poles, we've got plenty of Balts with us as well.' Anyway he said, 'We'll do it.' Then he [said] Cabinet, wouldn't like it, but I'll convince Arthur, I think it was Mr Calwell, it will be done.

Siobhan McHugh:

Sir Robert Jackson believed that it was Chifley's alacrity in taking those displaced persons that really had a big effect worldwide in taking some of those people and giving them a new home. About 170,000 displaced persons came to Australia between 1947 and 1952, and a condition of arrival was that they had to do two years work wherever the government allocated them. This was considered by most people to be perfectly acceptable. They were quite willing to do that even though in some cases you had people who were extraordinarily well qualified submitting to menial work. It must have been very hard and humbling for some of them.

Here's two voices of the people who came. One is Kon Martynow, who was one of the old hands on the Snowy, and a Russian. He was in the survey section and was a chainman. I interviewed him about 22 years ago. The other is Ksenia Nasielski who would be well known to anyone who worked at the Snowy Mountains Authority. She was an Estonian who went on to work as a personnel officer – a great role for her because she spoke about six languages. They're recalling why they came and how they came.

TAPE Kon Martynow:

I had a good friend, he came from Sydney. He had just come a year earlier to Sydney and he said, 'Go nowhere, come to Australia.' He said, 'That's the place in Australia for one who works hard and can ahead in life and bring up his family.' That's why I came.

TAPE Ksenia Nasielski:

We came to Australia in January 1949. We were told at that time the people Australia was interested in were migrants who would do manual work for two years. And I worked as a housemaid and my husband started work with the Department of Main Roads.

Siobhan McHugh:

Ksenia's husband was, I think, a lawyer and yet he worked as a labourer with the Department of Main Roads, as so many of those New Australians were prepared to do (that's what they were called then, New Australians – when they weren't being called less complimentary things like wogs, reffos or dagos). In many ways it seems such an innocent time, but when you go back to the early 1950s when the Snowy was beginning, Australia was such a different place. Multiculturalism was unthought of. Non-Indigenous Australia largely consisted of people who were from Britain and Ireland. There had been people from other places, but in such small numbers that they really hadn't made a huge impact. All of that was about to change. It must have been such a culture shock for everybody – for the people of the Snowy area, Adaminaby, Cooma, Jindabyne, Talbingo, Tumut.

When asked what Jindabyne consisted of in 1949, some wag answered, 'Wallaces, Westons and wabbits!' And they weren't far off the mark. There were traditional family names that had been on the snow leases from the 1840s – Mould, Prendergast, Kennedy, Golby. They had been there for five or six generations. This is a very long time in white Australian history. They were very attached to the land.

The only bitumen between Canberra and Tumut at the time was a strip through Adaminaby. There were potholes big enough to bury a Mini Minor, I remember somebody telling me. It was a completely different world. Some of the people in Jindabyne had never been to Adaminaby, let alone overseas.

Some of the Italians who arrived from northern Italy were horrified. They'd come from this area with Renaissance art and buildings, and they arrived in Adaminaby which looked like some shanty town from the wild west. Where were the beautiful buildings? They couldn't believe it. And the food was a source of constant horror. If I had a penny for every time I saw eyes rolled at the mention of mutton chops. Lambs fry and dripping were other horrors. The Australians classified these people as 'garlic munchers'. It was considered horrific and an affront to civilisation that you would eat garlic. So there were these kinds of cultural gaps to bridge.

I remember one German fellow who arrived in the 1960s. He got off the train at Cooma and he saw a sign that said 'beware of snakes, spiders and venereal disease', which gave him rather a shock! By that stage the Snowy was in full swing. There were lots of men in the construction townships and convoys of prostitutes were a fortnightly event.

One German told me that some fellow said to him in the pub, 'Have a drink you old bastard.' He went, 'Bastard? Bastard?' and started a fight, because he took it literally. 'Bastard' was a big insult to a German or an Italian. The men made a big impact on the local women, who were very impressed with their manners, their habit of clicking heels and bowing from the waist, and their courtesy at dances while the Aussie guys were out in the car park drinking beer. There were many a mixed marriage between a New Australian and an Old. I remember one lovely story, a woman married a Czechoslovakian and her uncle's only reaction was, 'How could you possibly marry a man who wears suede shoes?'

I also remember Karl Pahl, a carpenter from Germany, talking about how he couldn't get used to the Australian hardwood. If it was two years cut the nails would just bounce out. This was a matter of some pride because the carpenters had been brought out as specialist tradesmen to satisfy the lack of supply, and the Aussies were having great fun watching them as the nails bounced out. Then Karl noticed how the Australians actually greased the nails. Some of them just ran them through their Brylcreemed hair and then they would just go in. He started picking up these small cultural traditions.

So the work begins, and it all starts with the investigation division. I'll let one of the workers talk about this. He is a hydrographer.

TAPE Tony Sponar:

We had three sections in the division of investigation. The drillers and they were mostly Australian. The other one was surveyors and they were mostly German, and ours were only Czechs. I think it was accidental and

maybe a little bit adventurous spirit. Sometimes there were several metres of snow on the creeks and we had to lift it out and measure the flow, then go home again ... At that stage I was a Czechoslovakian champion, I was an Olympic skier.

Siobhan McHugh:

That was Tony Sponar, after whom Sponar's Lake at Thredbo is named. It was in the course of his work as a hydrographer that he identified the best downhill run in the Snowy Mountains, which became Thredbo in about 1957–58. Tony had come out here as a ski instructor, but one of the two resorts in Australia at the time had burnt down virtually the night after he got here.

Some of the Czechoslovakians were fantastic skiers. There weren't many great Australian skiers at the time. Johnny Abbottsmith was one. He worked on the Snowy and we'll hear from him in a minute. The Norwegians would follow and they would introduce *lang lauf*, cross-country skiing.

There were very mixed ethnicities among the diamond drillers. The diamond drillers were an amazing bunch of men. Sometimes in the Munyang camp around Guthega, they had to walk five miles in carrying 18 litres of petrol and a diamond drill rod that weighed 20 kilograms. They washed in the snow. They washed in the creek in summer. The food was basic to say the least. You were lucky if it wasn't fly-blown. You left it in the creek to let water run over it. If you were really lucky and had meat, you cooked it on a shovel.

Joe Morgan, a Pole, worked there for about 30 years. Paul Grech, a Maltese, and his three brothers from Queanbeyan all worked on the Snowy for many, many years and went on to work in the Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation. When I interviewed Paul, I still remember the homemade wine we had with our lunch that he'd made from the grapes that grew over his pergola.

The survey section was interesting because the Snowy needed expertise in this and the tunnelling survey section, and they found it in Germany. Germany led the field at the time. Not surprisingly it was a very sensitive issue to bring in Germans to work on the Snowy so soon after the war. I interviewed Roy Robinson, an engineer at the Snowy who went to Europe in 1950 to select tradesmen, of whom he selected around 600 Germans – plant operators, carpenters and the like. Forty elite surveyors were also brought to Australia to work under a Scientific and Technical Employment of Aliens scheme, which operated until 1951.

Not surprisingly, this caused some kerfuffle in two areas. First of all the unions were upset and made sure that they had to go through trade skills tests. Some of the German carpenters complained they had to read the 'dumpy' level to show that they could do their job before they were admitted. There was also the political issue. In the early days all the Germans were billeted together in one block, which made them a focus of a lot of antagonism.

There were incidents in the early years. I interviewed some of the police around Cooma at the time. There were stones thrown, there were shotguns let off, there were even stabbings between Poles and Germans. Then eventually Bill Hudson woke up to the fact that you dispersed them, you didn't make them a sitting target. Gradually things started to lighten up as people got to know each other and shared the common bond of privations and danger involved in working on the Snowy Scheme. Ethnicity became less of an issue for most people. It was over-ridden by the solidarity engendered by the common cause of working together, rather like in a war.

However, there was an issue with the Germans. Following the publication of my book, under freedom of information laws several people were identified who had been in the Nazi Party. They had been admitted to Australia under the Scientific and Technical Employment of Aliens scheme. They named about 37 Germans who had once been identified with the Nazi Party. They mentioned seven names who'd been on the Snowy Scheme.

Roy Robinson, who had employed some of these people, said to me that he was very dismayed to find after he had got back to Australia that a few people – about 10 or 12 – had been given official clearances that they should not have been given in return, he believes, for having given information to the authorities back in Berlin and Hamburg. They had been given essentially false clearances to come to Australia in return for information given to the British and the American authorities. Two of those people he knew of were deported. So there were some people with the sort of past, as he put it, that you wouldn't have wanted to have taken knowingly on board.

But on the other hand, this was a very small number and there were an awful lot of Germans who became very integrated into the Snowy workforce. So much so that at one of the Anzac Days some years into the Snowy, the Germans marched alongside Australians at the Anzac Day march in Cooma. Such was the reconciliation that was to occur. However, at the beginning things were very sensitive.

Otto Blank was a plant operator who had grown up in an orphanage. He had joined the German army. I asked 'Why did you join the army?' He said, 'I thought the food might be better than in the orphanage.' This is his story about his first payday on the Snowy Scheme.

TAPE Otto Blank:

After the first payday there was a bit of a scare there because half of the Germans, or at least all I know, went to Cooma to buy a gun. The reason was up there where we lived, there were millions of rabbits around, see. And actually the first money we got, we went down to Cooma and there was only three general stores and, of course, you can imagine when those 50 or whatever Germans flooded the general store and bought all the guns, you can imagine! [laughs]

Siobhan McHugh:

Most of the ethnic rivalries on the Snowy dissipated over time with the exception of the Serbs and Croats, who did maintain hostilities. Many of you will know the fabled story of the flag that would be put up along the Avenue of Flags in Cooma. The Croatians objected to the flag of Yugoslavia under Tito and would take it down, and somebody else would put it up. And it went up, down, up, down – this was a source of great antagonism. But otherwise, so many nationalities put aside their differences and worked together so well. Part of this was due to the difficulty and the dangers of the work.

The Norwegians came to do the first major contract at Guthega. About 450 were brought in to do this. Although they were used to the cold conditions, when they got to Guthega they were unimpressed with the army-style conditions – uninsulated fibro barracks and sleeping on a 'donkey's breakfast' (a term I got from Frank Rodwell who's sitting here today). They went on strike until they got hot showers. They made various other demands. They wanted butter not margarine. They had this very civilised habit of laying out a smorgasbord on a white tablecloth at the entrance of the tunnel. This was a practice that was soon to be done away with when the Americans arrived. There was none of that time wasting, going out to the front of the tunnel to have your lunch.

When Guthega was opened, Hudson very quickly got on to the important thing of public relations and he would bring tour groups through the scheme. He made sure that there were magnificent films made of the work. He had school groups coming through. All of this was a deliberate attempt to make sure that it could not be closed down because there was a cloud over its constitutionality until about 1959. Hudson wanted to be sure that Menzies was on side because it had been a Labor government initiative, although Menzies would oversee most of its construction. There was an incident when the VIPs were attending the opening of one of the construction works. Johnny Abbottsmith remembers what happened.

TAPE Johnny Abbottsmith:

Sir William Hudson and all these politicians from Victoria and New South Wales and ACT were all having an inspection of the Hotel Kosci [Kosciusko] – that night they were putting on a big cocktail party. And one of the drink waiters, Johnny O'Donnell, came out and he said, 'Have we got any ice around the place because the fridge is broken down?' I said, 'No I don't know of any ice around.' So a little later on that night he came in laughing his head off. He said, 'I found some ice – up in the horse trough.' And they had the ice from out in the horse trough in their cocktail.

Siobhan McHugh:

I must say I've put that in my little children's book [*My Story: Snowy – The Diary of Eva Fischer*, Scholastic, 2003] where Eva Fischer, the girl I invent, goes around being the drinks waitress and goes and gets the ice out of the horse trough and gives it to Prime Minister Menzies, whom she doesn't like because her best friend Lizzie's house is about to be drowned in Adaminaby. And so it's their way of getting a payback, but it's based on fact.

So Guthega opened and started in 1955. Guthega was also the scene of the first fatality – a Norwegian miner killed by rock fall. Fifty-three of the 121 men who died were killed in underground fatalities because tunnelling and underground work was very dangerous. Here are some former workers talking about what could happen in a tunnel.

TAPE Duke Milford:

They thought that we would be breaking our necks ... at the risk of safety. That was not true because nobody had to rush around. It was only a matter of good organising. Plumbers had their piping there to extend the water ... Electricians were ready for the extension of the lights and it worked like a clock.

TAPE Charlie Salvestro:

Well, I was never one of the bosses but as far as I know it was go always, they hardly stopped for anything. Everybody was on board, the shift boss and everybody. I'd say a quarter of the pay was bonus.

TAPE Ulick O'Boyle:

After you fire the tunnel when you've got all of this rock, a lot of rocks up on top are sitting there waiting to fall and hit you on the head. So then they bar down, they're long steel bars. Now maybe they won't bar down as conscientiously as they should. Maybe the shift boss will hurry up and say, 'Well that's good enough.' Although after a few bad accidents they get pretty safety conscious for quite a while. But then gradually they lose that caution and start taking chances to get more rock out to make more money.

TAPE Pino Frezza:

The danger was there but believe you me they were looking for the big fat wages. When you're young you don't know. You're fresh from Italy and in Italy I'd never been working for a boss. To me it was quite an easy life there. But coming here and being under pressure and believe you me the Americans made sure that you work. Really, really tough people – come on, come on, come on Joe, come on hurry up. The words 'hurry up' were every second.

Siobhan McHugh:

Those four workers were: Duke Milford who was a Serbian electrical engineer who worked in the Snowy. He was the first guy who worked for Kaisers, the big American contractor who started on the Eucumbene–Tumut Tunnel. There was Charlie Salvestro, who was a miner in the tunnels. He was the one talking about the bonus. Ulick O'Boyle, who was a first aid worker and was in and out of the tunnels on accident duty. And Pino Frezza an Italian who worked for the Americans.

The Americans were generally considered hugely efficient – work was streamlined and proceeded at just astronomically higher rates than had been achieved previously. When the Snowy started they were getting around 70 feet per week – that was the normal excavation they would get in a hard rock tunnel. That increased to 474 feet, six or seven times more. They achieved this huge rate by working around the clock 24 hours a day, six days a week and by having better equipment – the jumbo rig that you can see in the exhibition, which was on several levels.

They were also considered to be ruthless in many ways. They fed you well, they paid you well, and they built in a system where you got more money the more rock you got out, so there was something in it for all the miners to work fast. But you didn't get any second chances.

Adaminaby Dam was completed almost two years ahead of contract, which was wonderful and a huge bonus for the Authority, but eight men died during its construction. Under Public Works in the previous six years, nobody had died.

So there was a constant balance between getting work done at the rate that was required and safety. From 1959 there was a major safety drive, with safety committees and major safety initiatives put in place. This included things like seatbelts becoming compulsory in 1960. Roads and heavy equipment earthmoving equipment were big killers.

There were definitely fatalities that resulted from the men rushing. One of them happened in the Eucumbene–Tumut Tunnel. A worker pushed the switch to fire the face before all the men had got safely back to a place where they took shelter. It's all written in the inquest. The fellow who pressed the switch had seen two of the Italians jump off halfway as the loco car rattled back. But he hadn't actually checked that everybody was back before he set off the device.

These two young men – one of them only on his second day in the tunnel, one of them had been there a month, one was Italian and one was Greek – had jumped off halfway back thinking that they'd get to the crib table early to play a game of cards, not realising the danger. The crib table should never have been placed where it was. It had been moved forward of the safety area so the workers could return to work more quickly. They were not complying with regulations. When the thing was let off a leading hand tried to stop them but he couldn't get to them in time. He was experienced and knew to flatten himself alongside the wall and he got away only with injuries. One of the men was decapitated instantly and the other died some days later of his injuries.

Nobody was prosecuted over that incident. Problems arose due to the fact that the workforce was comprised of some young men who thought they were immortal, language barriers, and although the AWU was there on the site, a complete lack of understanding by the union of the needs of migrant workers.

Charlie Oliver [head of the AWU] was really more interested in the numbers that he had, the fact that he had a position of power. He had 6500 of the 7000 workforce signed up, and he was happy that they didn't start unless they had a union ticket. When I asked him about conditions, the multicultural workforce and the language, he said, 'Oh we checked, we had about 39 languages among our group.' 'Different dialects, half of them couldn't understand each other anyhow,' he said, as if there was some lingua franca called 'wog' that they should all speak.

It's tragic to think of those young men who died, partly through their own recklessness. They just thought that they could get away with it. And 121 of them didn't. Some accidents were unavoidable, such as lightning coming down 400 foot through a wet bit of tunnel and detonating a face that had been loaded with explosives on the Guthega Tunnel. There were lots of those kinds of incidents that could not have been avoided. But 121 men died and they're remembered in a memorial at Cooma.

One of the worst accidents was in 1958 when a lift shaft – the longest single-stage lift shaft in the world at Tumut One Power Station – dropped right down to the valley below. Four Italians were on the platform fixing some pipes into place and a gear wheel broke in the hoist and the whole thing slammed down to the bottom. They were killed. The safety drive was implemented the following year.

One of the things that people mention when they talk about safety on the Snowy is the mantra: a man a mile. People who worked in the tunnels used to say a man a mile would die in the Snowy Mountains Scheme, which was an expected mortality rate in tunnelling. Actually in the Snowy it wasn't a man a mile. By my estimations it was 0.6 of a man per mile. This is actually a lot better than Mont Blanc, which was 1.4 men a mile, or the St Bernard Pass, which was three men per mile. It was actually a very good record if you look at it that way.

One of the biggest fears that people had was of the concrete lining, having to go behind the forms and line the spaces between the rock face in the tunnel. Only the Italians would do this work. I interviewed an Australian who was asked to do it and he just walked out of the tunnel and said, 'I wasn't going to do that, it was too dangerous.'

And the difference was that he didn't have to. The New Australians had more at stake. Many of them were working to try and bring out family who were stuck in war-ravaged countries or they were bringing out fiancés. The only thing Karl Pahl, a German carpenter, spent his money on in a whole year was one set of underwear. He saved up every penny he got. His only recreation he told me was bushwalking.

There was another person who did not spend money in the canteen on food; he even went to the extent of eating fox, which even the crows wouldn't eat. So people had huge stakes on the Snowy. Here's Otto and Ken, who worked there, talking about what happened when you were lining a tunnel with concrete.

TAPE Otto Blank:

And the poor buggers, the poor concrete liners, they were all Italians, mostly Italians, because they just did the job. They were willing to do it you see. Can you imagine you are in a u-shaped tunnel, about 12-foot tunnel, and there were all these pourers and you put steel there, reinforcement steel and in between you might have two or three feet and other times you have only one foot or 18 inches just to get through, you know.

TAPE Ken White:

And they would bring a large diameter pipe, steel pipe, in the top of the formwork towards the opening of the tunnel and they would pump the concrete through this pipe. So it would burst in at the top behind the formwork and then spray down. That concrete you can imagine was made of rocks, some as big as your fist. Now, it was necessary for men to go behind the formwork through little hatch doors with these vibrators and vibrate the concrete so that it would settle and you would have a good solid concrete base.

TAPE Otto:

You can imagine the u-shape and one is on one side and the other is on the other side, and the other side wouldn't even know what happened because of the steel - they can't see in, you see. And as the concrete fills, these workers – they'd be right there where the concrete got shot in.

TAPE Ken:

Now there was a lot of worry with people going behind the formwork that if a big rock sprayed out through the pump, it might knock your hat off, the next one would knock you out. And you're hanging onto a vibrator and the next thing you're buried under concrete.

TAPE Otto:

Which apparently must have happened because a couple of blokes didn't come out one day, you see.

Siobhan McHugh:

That sort of story was told to me many times. I did try and get some documented evidence of people being killed in this way. However, I could never find any such evidence. But I've had two realisations from all the stories that I heard in so many places from so many people.

One is that we can't be sure that everything was documented, despite the wonderful archives that the Snowy Mountains Authority did keep. There were many 'rubbery' areas. There were people who worked under assumed names. There were people who falsified their own identification papers because of their history in the war or because they were 'wife-starvers' – people escaping maintenance payments. There were relatives – if all wogs were the same, nobody took much notice if you were Giovanni or if you were Salvestro. I have evidence of people swapping, doing shifts for one another. So you weren't necessarily the person you said you were on the timesheet. Unfortunately the contractors didn't keep records with the same meticulousness as the Snowy Mountains Authority. They weren't required to.

The other realisation is that this story actually grew out of a real hideous fatality that did happen in 1963. I've read the inquest. It was the last shift before Christmas and seven men were concrete lining a shaft into a dam [at Island Bend]. One of the men down in the scaffolding in the shaft realised there was no concrete coming through even though the signal to pour had been given and some time had elapsed.

What they decided at the inquest must have happened is that the dogman – the drop box operator who is down there controlling the flow – must have used some kind of a vibrator to try and poke at the pipe in case there was some kind of a blockage. What he didn't know was that by terrible bad luck a piece of rock virtually the same diameter as the pipe had lodged in the pipe blocking the concrete, of which nine tonnes had built up overhead.

So when he poked the rock and released it, an avalanche of concrete came through with such force that it pulled the pipe fitting from the wall. The pipes and the concrete fell on top of the men who had been working on the scaffolding. They were all knocked to the bottom of the shaft. Two men were killed instantly. One man

was buried up to his hips in liquid setting concrete. He was pinned by debris and they could not get him out. They had two hours before the concrete set. He was alive and he was screaming.

They tried pouring sugar in the concrete to stop it setting. They found out afterwards there would have been no hope because the man's legs had been virtually severed in the accident and the only reason he wasn't dead was that the blood wasn't able to escape because of the concrete around him. Two Yugoslavs and a Spaniard died (people were known as Yugoslavs then and not Serbs or Croatians).

Amazingly one man was knocked through to the tunnel below and survived, and three others survived with minor injuries. But that man was buried horribly in setting concrete. I think this became the currency for the story that was often repeated because it was about the fear of doing this very dangerous work. It also tells us about the hierarchy of workers. Ken White, whom you heard before, the Australian who walked out of the tunnel, didn't need to risk his life doing this work. New Australians did because the financial rewards were so great and they had so much at stake. They were willing to take the risk.

But that aside, the Snowy Scheme was completed on time and within budget. This is a remarkable achievement and Australians were so proud of it at that time. It was something that really put Australia on the world map. Despite the problems that have arisen since – environmental issues around salinity and the flow of the Snowy River – it was a wonderful engineering achievement and even more so a feat of social engineering that is surely unparalleled in Australian history if not the world.

I would like to just finish with three very short reflections on what it meant to the people who were there. The first one is from Bruce Bashford who was a union rep, then Tom Little, who was an Australian ganger on the first camp in Jindabyne in 1949, and then Kon Martynow, an old hand [which means he started in the first 12 months of the Snowy Scheme in 1949–50].

TAPE Bruce Bashford:

I will tell you an instance. I was in Queensland. We came back and I thought well we'll take some fruit, watermelons and pineapples and all that stuff back. Doug and I went to this roadside store and bought some and the guy said, 'Are you from down south are you?' The whole bill came to about four quid. He said, 'Oh down south, oh make it three quid.' Anyway he said, 'Whereabouts down south?' I said, 'We're down in Cooma.' He said, 'Oh you'll never see fruit like this, make it two quid.' He said, 'What do you do down there?' I said, 'Well, we work on the Snowy Mountain Scheme,' and he said, 'Take the lot!!' I had a little VW at the time and we were stacked to the gunwhales with watermelons and pineapples and all sorts. I think that in a sense typifies the way Australians looked at it.

TAPE Tom Little:

I had four years in the Army. That was all forgotten. I could have hated those German chaps as much as anybody else but I couldn't see any sense in that. We were there to do a job. He was a man, the war was over and they were there to kick off again and start life anew.

TAPE Kon Martynow:

People wanted to think, to form or carve out a life for themselves in this new country, to have a go. And from Bill Hudson the Commissioner, right down, it was a feeling that we were doing something worthwhile. It is in human nature that people take things for granted but I think that this is my life's work, what I did on the Snowy. I did this for 23 years. From the beginning of the Snowy to the end and it's a worthwhile thing that we did.

Siobhan McHugh:

I'll leave it there. Thank you very much.

{This is a copy of an original transcript of the lecture recorded by the National Archives of Australia. The original transcript is available here: <http://naa.gov.au/whats-on/audio/siobhan-mchugh-power.aspx>.}