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(editor), *The Coalminers of Queensland: A
Narrative History of the Queensland Colliery
Employees Union, Volume 2: The Pete
Thomas Essays*

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Abstract

In 1986 journalist Pete Thomas published the first volume of his proposed two-volume narrative history of the Queensland Colliery Employees Union, *The Coalminers of Queensland*. But he died before completing the task. With the support of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), Mining and Energy Division (Queensland District Branch), labour historian Greg Mallory has edited Volume 2 from Pete's unpublished manuscripts.

Pete Thomas, and Greg Mallory (editor), *The Coalminers of Queensland: A Narrative History of the Queensland Colliery Employees Union, Volume 2: The Pete Thomas Essays*, CFMEU Mining and Energy Division (Queensland District Branch), Brisbane, 2007. pp. xx + 476. \$39.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Rowan Cahill, University of Wollongong

In 1986 journalist Pete Thomas published the first volume of his proposed two-volume narrative history of the Queensland Colliery Employees Union, *The Coalminers of Queensland*. But he died before completing the task. With the support of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), Mining and Energy Division (Queensland District Branch), labour historian Greg Mallory has edited *Volume 2* from Pete's unpublished manuscripts.

The focus of *Volume 2* is one too often neglected by academic writers and by the spruikers who generate analyses of industrial relations for the capitalist media—the gritty realities of grassroots unionism. This collection of eight essays seeks to examine industrial relations from the viewpoint of a specific group of workers, Queensland coalminers. Thomas's focus is on the miners as trade unionists, and on their communities and families, as they variously interact and engage with the brute realities of emergent corporate neo-liberalism, flexing its muscles on the coalfields via the US based Utah Development Company and the Australian BHP. The time-frame is from the late-1960s to the mid-1980s.

So far as these corporations are concerned, the aim is to maximise profits and institute a new work regime on the coalfields. Trade union power has to be broken, the miners reduced to atomised and compliant individuals, willing to embrace corporate conceptions and formulations of adequacy regarding remuneration for work, and working conditions. The miners are equally resolute, maintaining their traditional belief in collective bargaining. They argue they are entitled to a fair share in the wealth their labours generate, and seek working conditions they regard as safe and dignified.

Conflict is at the heart of Thomas's account; the corporate and union agendas seldom coincide. The only thing that really links the two opposing forces is the coal that is mined. When the miners do win out against the corporations, it is because they have acted collectively, often crucially with the support of their local communities. The strength of Thomas is his ability to write sympathetically and perceptively about grass roots unionism,

due to his long involvement in labour movement journalism and his editorship of *Common Cause* (1973-1979), national journal of the Miners Federation.

I highly recommend this book to employment/industrial relations researchers. Skilful editing by Mallory, together with his addition of detailed endnotes to Pete's essays, enhance its academic worth. The book would also be useful in trade union training programmes, as it deals with the gritty realities of workface union organising, metaphorically a world away from the comparative supportive environs of branch and federal union offices.

Regarding Pete Thomas, he was born in 1914 and began his career as a journalist in 1933, working for *The West Australian*. The Depression, the struggle against fascism, and a trip to Europe in 1938, radicalised him and he became a Communist. Following war service, he briefly resumed work with the capitalist media. Then, from the late 1940s through to retirement in 1979, he worked full-time for Communist and labour movement publications. Along the way he also authored/co-authored some 17 books and booklets, many of them involving considerable historical research.

I met Pete during the late 1960s when I contributed to the Communist newspaper *Tribune* (Sydney). Modest, dedicated, professional, Pete worked for a meagre Communist Party wage, well below the salary he would have commanded had he stayed with the capitalist media. As a journalist, he saw himself as narrator, writing in a partisan way from first-hand observation where possible, and preferably close to the action. Partisanship, however, did not involve tinkering with facts or with realities. According to Pete, truth was not negotiable. This approach is amply evident in *The Coalminers of Queensland, Volume 2*, a powerful and valuable testament to a talented working class journalist.