And yet your beards forbid me to interpret That you are so.

MACBETH: Speak, if you can: what are you?

ILLAWARRA COLLIERS IN 1874:

November 24th, 1874.—Off by 10 a.m. train to Campbelltown, taking a carriage and horses with us; left Campbelltown at 11.45; at Appin baited, and visited the school. Such hedges of sweet-briar and roses, all in blossom. The road as far as Appin very good, about ten miles, through a very fair grazing country, with some crops of oats and hay. Then a road of eight or nine miles, across the ridges of sandstone, covered with scrub and trees, until we suddenly came to the edge of the great fall or cliff of sandstone, under which crops out the coal. I should think that it was 1200 or 1300 feet high; but perhaps more, and it is certainly very fine. The crest of the ridge is perhaps two miles from the sea as the crow flies, and it is lovely to see the blue sea and breaking waves. Here the ground falls precipitously to the mile and a half of undulating fields below, while on the western side it slopes rapidly away, the ridge itself being no more than twenty yards wide. The difference in vegetation on either side is remarkable. Towards the sea it is more than semi-tropical; towards the land the ordinary foliage near Sydney. As we went down the steep, too steep road—too steep for recent engineering work—the palms, three sorts, tree ferns, and Epipleytes, showed out in quantities. I always like the softness produced in the landscape by a dripping wet day, and I liked the view more to-day than the following day. We had left Appin at 2.15, and got to the top of the ridge at 4 p.m., and by 4.40 were at the foot, at Bulli. Here we did not stop, but drove at once to Wollongong, through a nice undulating country, on a badly-engineered road, among small farms and miners’ cottages. On arriving at Wollongong we walked to the port and criticised it. Coming back to the inn we met the lighthouse keeper, and talked to him. He said that the little harbour was dug out to the bare rock, and that thirteen feet at low-water mark was the depth. It had been cut out by hand, under a cofferdam—all government work; but no charge made for shipping coal from it, or even for the use of the coal shoots. A French barque of 500 tons is the largest ship which has shipped coal hence. “She went away ten days ago, and, my word! he and his mate, they went about together, and where one was the other was sure to follow; they were so much taken up with some of the young women, that they could hardly get away. It was a fine morning on Sunday, and I went down and cast off their warps at 6 o’clock; but the captain he comes up and shows his three fingers, and says, at 9 o’clock, ‘tree hour,’ says he. ‘No, no,’ says I, ‘you must be off;’ but away he goes, he and the mate; and I took the ship out into the offing, and at 12 o’clock they gets alongside at last, and comes on the poop, and the captain he takes his double glass and looks, and looks, and waves his handkerchief, and then wipes his eyes, and says, ‘Ahl in eight month I come back!’ and cries, and mops his eyes again; and the mate he takes his long glass and looks, and looks, and waves his handkerchief, and then wipes his eyes, and says, ‘Ah! in eight month I come back!’ and cries, and mops his eyes again; and the mate he takes his long glass and looks, and beats his breast with his right hand, and looks again, and there was two girls on the hill; but, bless you, they was a mile and a half off — they couldn’t see nothing. Well, I don’t know, I never see such a couple afore! I suppose they’ll be back here some day.” He is lighthouse keeper and captain of the port, and apparently, an East of England man.
To the hotel and to dinner; the innkeeper an old steward of Admiral Dundas.

November 25th.—Up at 5.30, got coffee, and then were told that the man at the hotel had no horses or carriage. At last we got him to put his own horses to our carriage, and Amphlett and I went off on foot up the line of rails, for three miles, showers of rain intervening. At the top we saw the steamer just coming in, and so the whistle blew for the men to begin to work. T. and Williams appeared at the same moment, having come in the carriage, and also Mr. Johnson, the viewer or mine captain, or manager; an intelligent young Englishman from Newcastle, whose father manages mines in Northumberland. He took us in hand, and led us into the mine, which is 1000 ft. long from the cliff side. The mouth of the mine is 660 ft. above the sea. The rail runs hence by two steep inclines and one long gentle one to the shoots at the quay side. There is the usual arrangement of wire rope and drum for hauling up empty waggons with full ones. A small level plot on the hillside gives room for the manager’s house, which is building, engine, screens, stables, &c., &c. We went in by an entrance 5 ft. or 7 ft. high, and 8 ft. wide. The shaft goes in N. 56° E., and dips 2° to the N.W. You get at once into an uniform seam of coal, from 5 ft. 6 in. to 8 ft. thick. Coal on each side, sandstone overhead, and slaty black stuff under foot. The latter comes up every here and there in what are called rolls, from a foot to 3 ft. high, squeezing up the seam of coal. The mining is as easy as possible. The miner, who gets 20s. a ton, or 10s. a skip of 10 cwt., merely undercut the coal with a pick, and the latter falls of itself. A man can earn in this way, by filling twelve skips, 10s., and by filling fifteen skips, 12s. 6d. a day. Boys drive the ponies employed in hauling the skips, and get from 6s. a day, down to 2s. 6d. a day to the boy who opens and shuts the door which closes the draught. When a man works in a narrow place he gets 1s. 6d. a yard extra, and the men working shifts get paid by the job. The mine (Mount Keira) employs altogether sixty people, and Mount Pleasant (which is close by) the same; but Mount Keira is more regular, and gets more coal. The two are getting now about 1000 tons a week. But this is irregularly done, and cannot be depended upon as a statistic. As the demand is irregular, both here and at Bulli, and as the great endeavour is to avoid a double transfer of coal, as a rule, coal is sent up when wanted, and therefore a lookout is kept for the steam collier from the mouth of the mine. When she gets near the port a steam whistle is sounded, and the men all come to work, cutting, filling, and embarking, leaving two-thirds or so of the trucks full when the steamer is loaded. If they be not wanted for another vessel, they then go to their homes—all the most respectable owning small farms or renting land from the company. They are mostly colonial born, though some are English and Irish. This is certainly the paradise of coal miners. The whole of the permanent men only amount to about eleven out of the sixty at Mount Keira. We did not go to Mount Pleasant; but having walked through Mount Keira for an hour and a half without dirtying anything, we came out. They have as yet come to no water; but if they do they will have a tough job to get rid of it, as there is nothing to stop its filling the mine.

(To be continued next issue)