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## Illawarra Unity: Introduction 2003

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## Illawarra Unity: Introduction 2003

### Abstract

Welcome to this special edition commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Mount Kembla Mine Disaster where we focus on the work of performers and artists who still record our Labour History. The mining disaster of 1902 left an indelible mark on the community of Mount Kembla, the death of 96 men and boys, the scared fabric of family and community life has become an integral part of the rich cultural history of the Illawarra Region. The contributions to this edition are representative of creative and ongoing 'voices' that record and mark the significance of events that contribute to Labour History. These 'voices' emerge as ongoing testimony of the importance to community of maintaining the memory of specific historical events and as such are an important contribution to the understanding of links between Labour History and Community.

# Introduction

Welcome to this special edition commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Mount Kembla Mine Disaster where we focus on the work of performers and artists who still record our Labour History. The mining disaster of 1902 left an indelible mark on the community of Mount Kembla, the death of 96 men and boys, the scared fabric of family and community life has become an integral part of the rich cultural history of the Illawarra Region.

The contributions to this edition are representative of creative and ongoing 'voices' that record and mark the significance of events that contribute to Labour History. These 'voices' emerge as ongoing testimony of the importance to community of maintaining the memory of specific historical events and as such are an important contribution to the understanding of links between Labour History and Community.

Many of the contributors to this edition are nationally acclaimed artists and writers and a number of them live in the Mount Kembla community. Each contributor was invited to share in a celebration of his or her work about the disaster by performing at an event organised by the Illawarra Branch of the Labour History Society at the Mount Kembla Hotel on the 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2002. The obvious significance of the works in representing the community's feelings about the disaster was reflected in the responses of the packed house to the presentations. Their responses prompted us to ask the artists to select a 'part' of the work they presented during this event and reflect on the creative process for this edition of *Unity*. The quality of work, their talent, their love of history and their connection to Mount Kembla are reflected in their individual contributions.

Song writer and singer Kevin Baker's *The Mount Kembla Mining Disaster* is well known in folk music circles (the haunting sound of this powerful song echoes through my head as I write this introduction). Kevin's reflections outline his need to write this particular song and his passion for the "heroism, compassion and struggle for justice against the odds".

Like Kevin, Conal Fitzpatrick first became aware of the disaster during the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations during 1977. His book

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*The Voices of Kembla* was launched during the commemoration week, and is the result of a 'fourteen years or so' journey exploring 'the stories that lay behind the names on the monuments and headstones'.

Des Davis's contribution comments on the relevance of fiction in plays such as *Windy Gully*. Des's comments reflect his 23 years experience as Artistic Director of Illawarra's highly regarded profession theatre company—Theatre South. *Windy Gully* has been one the most successful plays produced by Theatre South, attracting large audiences over a number of years in several different productions.

The author of *Windy Gully*, Wendy Richardson, reflects on life at Mount Kembla and the songs she wrote about the tragedy over a fifteen-year period. These songs were performed by the Union Choir, who are well known in the region for their performances of labour and union songs and were delighted to at last be able to add Wendy's songs to their repertoire.

Stuart Piggin and Henry Lee's *The Mount Kembla Disaster* (1992) is regarded as the definitive text on the mining disaster. In this edition of *Unity* Henry reflects on some of the myths about the disaster from the perspective of a 'writer of history'.

A very different contribution comes from Cate Stevenson. Cate was the Chair/Secretary of the Mount Kembla Mine Disaster Centenary Committee. Cate, along with her committee, provided the vision and successfully implemented their vision for the weeklong celebrations. Their work exhibited all the creativity and passion demonstrated by the 'other' artists represented in this edition. Her short article reflects the 'art' of organising.

**Frances Laneyrie**