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Contextualising the Mount Kembla Disaster

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Contextualising the Mount Kembla Disaster

Abstract

The Mount Kembla explosion of 1902 was the greatest mining disaster in Australian history. However, the violence which it did to the miners and their families was by no means unusual. The South Coast mines also hold the unenviable record for the second greatest disaster, in terms of fatalities in Australian mining history. Only a few years before the Mount Kembla disaster, in 1887, 81 miners were killed by an explosion at Bulli. Further explosions occurred on the northern coalfields in 1896 and 1898, killing thirty. As recently as 1980, an explosion at the Appin mine killed 14 miners.

Contextualising the Mount Kembla Disaster¹

Ray Markey

The Mount Kembla explosion of 1902 was the greatest mining disaster in Australian history. However, the violence which it did to the miners and their families was by no means unusual. The South Coast mines also hold the unenviable record for the second greatest disaster, in terms of fatalities in Australian mining history. Only a few years before the Mount Kembla disaster, in 1887, 81 miners were killed by an explosion at Bulli. Further explosions occurred on the northern coalfields in 1896 and 1898, killing thirty. As recently as 1980, an explosion at the Appin mine killed 14 miners.

These spectacular events only represented the tip of the iceberg of violence done to miners. Coal mining in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was characterised by the sheer drudgery and constant danger of the labour process. The organisation of mining work itself exacerbated danger. Miners themselves were responsible until the turn of the century for baling water and erecting timber roof supports. This cut into their earnings, since they were paid so much per ton of coal hewn. Piece-work of this kind actually placed earnings and safety in competition with each other.

Many of us were taught in school of the extreme dangers of the British coal mines during the industrial revolution, without ever being told how much more dangerous Australian mines were. During the 1880s the annual death rate averaged 3.4 per thousand employees in New South Wales coal mines, which exceeded the death rate of 2.9 per thousand for the notoriously dangerous British mines. The New South Wales death rate in the mines dropped below 2 per thousand employees for most of the 1890s, but mining remained far more dangerous than other occupations.

Apart from fatalities, many miners were injured and maimed each year. Despite a falling death rate during the 1890s, the annual rate of serious injury increased significantly, from 5.4 to

6.5 per thousand employees. Under-reporting of 'minor' accidents involving loss of sight, burns and breakages of limbs were also common. Darkness and dampness in the pits were a liability to health, and fibrosis and silicosis were common occupational diseases for miners. Falling roofs, explosives, winding machinery, insufficient ventilation, gas, coal dust and water were ever-present sources of danger, producing a constant fearful expectancy in mining communities.

Over 40 years after the Mount Kembla disaster, Alan Walker noted in the Cessnock district that fear of the dangers associated with mining was a contributor to industrial stoppages. He found that more than half of a large sample of miners whom he surveyed admitted to thinking often or very often of the dangers of their job. A school teacher interviewed by him stated that

I have often noticed in school that when the whistle at the nearby pit blows, telling of an accident, a tenseness comes over the children. For some time they will sit deathly still.²

A social worker also observed that

I know one miner, who no matter how early he leaves for the pit, always kisses his wife and children good-bye, even waking them to do it, because he says he might not return.³

Following most of the major disasters mentioned here official inquiries were conducted, and management was clearly shown to be negligent. Yet, from the time of the first government efforts to legislate for safety in 186, mine owners consistently opposed state intervention in their affairs. Improvements in safety came slowly. Miners' lives were valued less than the cost of coal in the Australian society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The ever-present danger of the mines, and the impact on dependents as well as miners, was a major contributor to the strong sense of coalfields community. Relative geographical isolation from the main cities, together with the strength of local tradition reduced communication with 'outsiders'. The homogeneity of a workforce connected almost exclusively with one industry also produced an overriding community rhythm of work and non-work. 'Rituals of mutuality' were enmeshed in work and non-work activities, such as traditional May Day celebrations from the 1890s, and the rhythmic community holiday ritual associated with fortnightly Pay Day. Those involved in service industries were economically and socially dependent upon the miners. Trading high points occurred in the miners' pay week, lows in the 'off-week'. Shopkeepers also suffered when miners went on

strike or were unemployed, and as a corollary, miners received strong community support in generous credit and other ways, during these periods. On the northern coalfields the *Newcastle Morning Herald* was also affected by community organicism, in displaying an unusual sympathy for miners' struggles. Newcastle juries, and even magistrates, were uncomfortably sympathetic to arrested strikers during the nineteenth century. This necessitated the transportation of many court cases to Sydney so that justice might be done to these men.

Notes

- 1 Except where otherwise indicated, this article is based on R. Markey, *The Making of the Labor Party in NSW, 1880-1900*, NSW University Press, Kensington, 1988, pp. 79-81.
- 2 A. Walker, *Coaltown. A Social Survey of Cessnock, NSW*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1945, p. 51.
- 3 *Ibid.*