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## The Voices of Kembla

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## The Voices of Kembla

### Abstract

The story of the Mount Kembla Mine Disaster is, at its essence, one of ordinary people enduring catastrophe of the most extreme kind. When I first contemplated writing something about the Disaster, I knew it had to be about the human experience of those involved. It was the human dimension of the disaster that had struck me so forcefully back in 1977 at the time of the 75th Anniversary when I first seriously encountered the Disaster Story. I wanted to record the stories that lay behind the names on the monuments and headstones, and to let the miners and their families live; to have them speak something of their lives, their experience of the disaster, and of life afterwards... And in their telling their stories I hoped that perhaps they might help us understand the disaster experience at least a little—what it means to experience such a traumatic event and what the Kembla Disaster means for us 100 years on.

# The Voices of Kembla

Conal Fitzpatrick

My poor wife  
bade me  
God speed  
every leavin’

pitting  
hope  
against  
foreboding  
grieving

one day  
she knew

The story of the Mount Kembla Mine Disaster is, at its essence, one of ordinary people enduring catastrophe of the most extreme kind. When I first contemplated writing something about the Disaster, I knew it had to be about the human experience of those involved.

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I wanted to record the stories that lay behind the names on the monuments and headstones, and to let the miners and their families live; to have them speak something of their lives, their experience of the disaster, and of life afterwards...

And in their telling their stories I hoped that perhaps they might help us understand the disaster experience at least a little—what it means to experience such a traumatic event and what the Kembla Disaster means for us 100 years on.

Fourteen or so years later and the result is *Kembla The Book of Voices*. It’s what I’ve always thought of as a tapestry of dramatic or imagined voices of the men and women of Kembla at the time of the Disaster. Like a tapestry each voice or panel gives a glimpse into an individual life; cumulatively they open a window into the life of the Mount Kembla community of 1902.

In researching the Disaster, I found that certain individuals

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and groups impressed themselves on me from the beginning. One of the first was Micky Brennan, the wheeler, whose story contains elements of premonition, mystery and personal tragedy.

Micky Brennan, who was good with horses—the young man who had come to work at Mount Kembla Mine only a short time before. And who on the morning of the disaster is reported to have said, *'This place will go up one day. I'm getting out tomorrow'...*

Micky Brennan—the only one whose body was never found...

The ponies sensed it  
skittished a bit,  
and the air went strange an instant  
haggard and palled.  
Then she skillioned!  
scattering us like grass-seed,  
on barren road  
and unforgiving stone

What adds to the tragedy of Micky's story is his father's sorrowful and unrelenting search for him until his own death two years later, coming to search the mine every weekend, sadly without ever finding him.

Micky Brennan..  
They kept his coffin  
out in the tool-shed  
for years  
And his father  
came up every weekend  
Hopin'

Not all of the voices I wrote with Micky in mind made it into *The Book of Voices*, but in the singular piece which is specifically his, Micky reminds us quietly of the importance of his story and of what he has to tell us—

Inscribe this  
on a stone somewhere,  
Good morrow  
to you one and all,  
I'm with the horses  
leavin'  
Mickey Brennan

Here, Micky reminds us that his story and his words are significant. He tells us to inscribe his words *in stone* for they are

important: they need to be preserved for all time. And in bidding us *good morrow* and telling us he's leavin'—that '*leavin'*' on a line by itself—the phrasing and the tone suggest an acceptance on his part, and a reassurance for those left behind that everything will be all right..

There is a strange postscript to Micky's story, one that has always intrigued me—a second Micky Brennan came to work at Mount Kembla not long before the mine closed in the 1970s. Fred Kirkwood has a photograph showing this other Micky Brennan and some workmates sitting just inside the entrance of Kembla Mine under a message whitewashed large on a cross-beam. It reads:

—Merry Christmas Everyone—Micky Brennan 1970—

It's almost as though Micky is calling to us again..

I remember the first time I read Catherine Brownlee's accounts of her experience of the Kembla Disaster...

A ball of flame  
burst  
out of the entrance...  
A great black cloud  
poured up into the sky  
blotting out the sun...

A few years on and I was lucky enough to meet and spend time talking with her daughter, Kathleen May Fry, when I learnt more of Catherine's very vivid memories of that terrible time.

Catherine Brownlee was born Morriss and lost both her father and a brother in the Disaster. When I came to write *Catherine's Story* I tried to imagine Catherine Morriss, Catherine Brownlee's mother, in her little cottage at The Heights at the moment of the explosion. It's not meant as a factual recreation, more an imagined account of what her inner experience might have been, hearing that dreadful sound and feeling the ground shake beneath her feet, and knowing instinctively that her worst fears had been realised.

I tried to get a sense of her emotions and to imagine her shock, and her trying to cope out of that numbness. The mind's sense of everything moving in slow-motion, the unreality of it all, and the terrible sense of knowing the worst yet retaining some sort of desperate hope... And I wanted to convey her sense of unreality by having her mention the little details of her kitchen, the threads of her daily living upturned and thrown all askew—

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That instant  
I knew,  
the long rumbling  
running on and on  
underfoot,  
and  
all  
through  
the sharded particles  
of shuddered air.

I went quiet inside then,  
and stood there  
in the little kitchen  
amidst the shaken still...

The dumb newsprint walls  
loud-astounding,  
the carded crockery  
large and in pieces on the floor,  
and the coking coal  
collapsed and startled  
bedlam about the hearth,  
struck  
familiar  
things

Then dressing  
particular—  
slow  
in my church-early clothes,  
I set out chill  
down the sudden significant hill  
to the graven pit

...the dragging time,  
whatever life  
at the last would bring,

and for all intents  
the greeting  
and goodbye

The Disaster archives in Wollongong City Library contain photos of women waiting for news at the pit-top in the hours after the explosion. We see them standing apart, grouped together and anxious, caught in a common plight. More vivid still are the oral accounts describing *“the stream of women pouring along the road to the mine following the explosion”*, how *“not many wept”*

and how some “*waited there for up to three days*”.

You can feel the suffering, the tenuous hanging on and the underlying strength of those women behind the accounts as they waited there in the dark and the bitter cold, alone yet somehow drawing strength from each other. In *Aftermath* I tried to catch a sense of their fear and their grief bearing down on them, while at the same time their quiet strength is bearing them up—

Aftermath

How the weeping was

a kind  
of held whimpering

bearing  
them

something  
holy

As the hours passed the scene became grimmer as the rescue parties began to emerge with the dead. One news report of the scene at the pit-top tells us—

“As the rescue party emerged bearing a stretcher covered with branches and gum leaves, she could no longer contain herself and rushed forward, crying out in terrible anguish as she ran, ‘And ain’t it Ned ’ ”

A witness to all of this reflects on it as follows—

.....  
I picture them  
the relentless dead

rowed senseless  
in the ill-loomed  
Fitting Shed

as if  
to fathom dread

their turned-out pockets

wastrel, brutish  
stones  
instead  
of bread

And,  
*Ain't it Ned?*

a voice  
outcries  
the wilderness  
undead

*Oh, Christ, say  
Ain't it Ned..*

Another woman describes her experience from that time with a quiet sadness—

Jesus  
I breathed,  
tore  
stricken  
down  
that day

It took  
four good men  
to lift the stone away  
He just lay

Her experience mirrors that of many of Mount Kembla's women as their vigils came to an end.

It's impossible for us to imagine the enormity of losing four of our children at once but that was the Egan family's experience at Mount Kembla in 1902. There were eight Egan brothers working in Mount Kembla Mine that day. One of the survivors, contemplating why the disaster claimed some and not others, and the terrible toll exacted on the Egan family comments grimly—

If selection here  
was random,  
by God  
the bias  
shook us Egans hard

In the course of my research, I visited the Egans' grave in Wollongong Cemetery. I went there one day just on sunset... To stand before their resting place, the four brothers lying side by side, is a jolting experience. It reinforces the dimensions of the Disaster's human impact, and the Egan family's personal tragedy—



In Memory Of

**MY DEAR SONS**  
**THOMAS, MICHAEL**  
**DENNIS & EDWARD EGAN**  
*ALL NATIVES OF KIAMA*  
WHO WERE SUFFOCATED BY  
GAS EXPLOSION  
IN KEMBLA COLLIERY  
ON 31 JULY 1902  
AGED 32, 29, 20 AND 19 YEARS  
*LORD HAVE MERCY ON THEIR SOULS*  
**ERECTED BY THEIR SORROWING**  
**MOTHER, SISTERS & BROTHERS**

The Egons were great sportsmen and were “marvellous cricketers”. They were members of the Mount Kembla Cricket Team which played regularly at the Kembla Heights Cricket Ground. Eight of the eleven team members were to die in the Disaster. In the wake of the explosion the Company took part of the cricket ground and made it the Windy Gully Cemetery.

In *Cricket Ground* I imagined the team of young fit men—the Egons, the Filbys, the Purcells and others—playing cricket there months before, the players crouched tense and alert waiting for the next delivery, almost like in a painting, unaware that a few months further on they would be back at this same ground frozen in position again—this time in death. It’s as though they are prefiguring their own deaths—

***Cricket Ground***

The new cemetery was carved out of  
a paddock traditionally used as the ground  
of the Kembla Heights Cricket Club.

Whispering gully

Young men  
set in a field

The game  
in measured stages  
one can hardly determine

still  
life

But young men so full of life can’t be held down that easily. Death can never fully contain them. In *After the numbness* one of the

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dead cricketers—perhaps one of the Egan boys—tells those left behind they can find them still, joyful and exuberant, at that place that has been so much a part of their lives and they of it—for they inhabit that landscape—

After the numbness  
and the dead ache  
have passed,  
go one afternoon  
to the mountain clearing.  
There, with the wallabies  
cropping dainty and watchful  
on the furthest verge,  
the shadows shifting  
their long shroud  
across the outfield,  
and the t'urible\* grasses  
waving like hands  
in the gullies,  
you'll hear the thwack!  
of ball against the willow,  
and the urgent calls again  
enlivened and boyish..  
It's there we'll meet you  
bursting  
Dan and me

\* t'urible: thurible, censor

\* Dan Egan, in fact, survived the Disaster. I have used poetic licence here because the name Dan just felt right for the piece...

All cultures place much importance and value on dying at home amidst familiar surroundings and loved ones. The fear of dying far from home is akin to the fear of dying alone.

The Hewletts, Alfred and William, and Reynold Hume, all in their twenties, were from Howard in Queensland. At some stage, they had come down to New South Wales in search of work and found themselves working at Mount Kembla Mine on July 31 when the mine erupted. As I visited their graves year after year I wondered about their lives before they came to Mount Kembla.

Were they mates, perhaps, who'd travelled down together to work at Mount Kembla Mine?

Later, I thought about their lives at Kembla, far away from home and family, and wondered about their quiet moments, their occasional moments of loneliness when they thought of home and the time when they might return there—

The saddest violins  
I ever heard  
was that night at Stone's

Such aching sounds  
sorely was my heart shaken

I harken it  
breaking

And what might have been their thoughts on the day of the  
Disaster as they lay dying overcome by gas?

Were there regrets, thoughts of dreams unfulfilled, and loved  
ones far away..?

So far from home..  
The farm in Queensland  
is a lost intention  
to me now

Shall I recompense thee  
in the new earth  
by and by?

Young death has its own poignancy. Particular to the Kembla  
Disaster was the number of young lives lost on that one  
afternoon—

2 were 14 years  
3 were 15 years  
1 was 16  
4 were 17  
3 were 18  
60% of those killed in the Disaster were under 35.

The death of so many young men and boys inspired a number  
of the voices in the collection.

From the anguished cry of the boy lamenting a life cut short  
as it is about to begin—

They will number me  
Among the slain unsung  
My fifteenth year  
Hardly begun

To the young man whose dreams will never be realised—

I went to the pit  
When I was seventeen  
Never left

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There is the boy reflecting on choices made earlier—

I thought of going  
to milk for Mr Ramsay,  
but then I never at the end.  
What might have been

And the young man thinking of the girl he leaves behind—

That day at Woronora  
Remember how  
I thought  
your feet beautiful  
Think of us then

And what of the young girls left behind? One of them speaks to us too—

...I was sixteen  
when it happened  
Bobby had begun  
To wooing me  
I never knew

That chopped off ending *I never knew* contains all the unfulfilled possibilities and opportunities lost, the potential lives un-lived and all the future creations, future lives come to nought for both of them. The tragedy of the young death is also the tragedy of those young companions and young loves left behind forever wondering...

The tapestry of lives which became *The Book Of Voices* attempts to catch the myriad *human* experiences of the men and women of the Mount Kembla Disaster. Each has a different story to tell—they all have their own truths and wisdoms to speak.

Their experience reflects something of our own, for in effect, they speak about what it means to be alive and to experience tragedy and loss. In a sense they help us towards some understanding of the meaning of the Mount Kembla Disaster, and the meaning of disaster experiences in the lives of people everywhere...

We were poor men  
Wrought extraordinary

What does suffering  
Make of the heart

Over time  
glory

Conal Fitzpatrick's *Kembla The Book Of Voices* (Kemblawarra Press, 2002 )

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