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The Voices of Kembla

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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

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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
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—
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 SUCCOATED 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 Egans 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 Egans, 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 numness one of the
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, censer

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
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 unlived 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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