

THE BULLI MINE DISASTER CENTENARY

The disaster at the Bulli Colliery which occurred at 2.30 p.m. on Wednesday 23 March 1887, was an explosion which killed all those working underground at the time. There were 81 victims, men and boys. One boy who had been working and was leading his horse to the entrance of the mine was blown by the force of the explosion through the tunnel mouth to safety.

The news of the disaster shocked the Australian community; it was the first experience of a major civil tragedy, the worst of any mine accident experienced in what was a dangerous industry. Fifteen years later a similar explosion at Mt. Kembla was to kill 96 miners. The Bulli and Mount Kembla disasters remain the worst in Australia's history of coal mining.

At Bulli the local community was stunned. Fifty women had lost their husbands. Thirty of them were pregnant. 180 children had lost their fathers. Fourteen of the boys killed were under the age of 18; most of those had not long had their 16th birthday. There were harrowing scenes at the mine, with women, their families and neighbours, miners who had not been working and all the rest of the community, waiting for the rescue parties to bring out the mangled bodies. There were more horrifying and pitiful scenes at the burial ground at St. Augustine's Parish Church at Park Road Bulli, where 60 of the bodies were buried one after the other. Eight were buried at the Catholic ground in Fairy Meadow, 13 at the Presbyterian Churchyard at Corrimal. There were of course some Wesleyans and Primitive Methodists too, but the Methodist Church, built in 1865, had no graveyard and the public cemetery was not opened until the late 1890s.

Bereavement for the miners' wives or mothers also meant the loss of the family's breadwinner. There were no widows' pensions, no government system of compensation. The Miners' Lodges had a contributory system and usually paid 10 shillings weekly to the families of members killed in the mine; on this occasion the money was immediately made available and the fund was exhausted. Public appeals were quickly started, at Bulli and Wollongong and in Sydney and other major cities. The New South Wales government established a fund and a committee to investigate each case on its merits for sharing in the fund.

The details of the disaster were closely examined at the Coroner's Court and then by a Commission of Inquiry established by the Government. It was found that the victims had died either as a result of the impact of the explosion or by suffocating through the carbon dioxide gas which filled the sections of the mine after the explosion. There had been no official reports of methane gas being present before the day of the disaster, though there had been unofficial reports. Carelessness of management and men had been responsible for the use of a naked

flame to ignite a fuse for shot firing. Safety provisions in the existing Mines Regulation Act had not been properly observed; there was no deputy in the mine when the charges were being prepared for the breaking-up of the coal. The government decided to make an immediate start on the production of a better Mines Regulation Bill; it was to take nearly 10 years to finalise.

There are interesting reports of the disaster and its aftermath in the **Illawarra Mercury** and the daily papers of Sydney as well as in weekly and monthly publications of the time. An enterprising photographer peddled 'Scenes of the Disaster'. The facts are available in official sources; the findings of the Committee of Inquiry into the Causes were published as part of the Parliamentary Papers of the Legislative Assembly. But history itself is like a graveyard: significant material is buried with the memories of witnesses ignored or not consulted. Official reports do not always contain facts required by modern historians. Connections between events are glossed over because they are not seen as important by those instituting the reports; or facts might make for discomfort or embarrassment (no unionists were asked to be on the platform for the public meetings of appeals for funds; the representatives of the unionists had to insist on their rights to be present in the investigations in the mine preparatory to the official inquiries). Sometimes pieces of evidence are destroyed in the name of progress or convenience: the unnamed graves, the mounds showing smaller bodies of boys next to their larger fathers, even some of the graves with elaborate monumental stones, have been levelled for a future memorial garden at St. Augustine's. At other resting places they have been bulldozed and buried beneath the surface. The Primitive Methodist Chapel, used after the merging of the Primitives with the other Wesleyans as the Bulli Shire Council offices, then as a miners' recreation centre and union office, then as a Workers' Club, has been razed to the ground to make way for expansion of drinking facilities. The official monument with the names of all the miners killed in 1887, with additional names for later tragedies, still stands, though there are some plans for its removal.

The Miners' Union, the foundation of unionism in Illawarra, started at Bulli in 1879 when the miners refused to hew coal for a ship containing Chinese in its crew; the Seamen's Union was on strike about the use of Chinese, paid lower rates than the Australians. In 1889 miners struck work against threatened wage cuts. The 1880x were prosperous times but the southern mine owners, in competition with the longer established northern industry, tried to attract sales by lowered prices and therefore lower wages. They had other difficulties. Where Newcastle had a safe deep water harbour, the southern owners had had to build their own jetties which ships often had difficulty in approaching because of rough seas. For these reasons they resisted unionism's growth more vigorously than their northern colleagues.

The strike of 1886 lasted until January 1887, a period of six months in which the owners evicted their workers from company-owned dwellings or from cottages on company-owned land. These became the temporary homes of non-union labour brought in by the owners under the protection of armed special police provided by the Government. The unionists tried to persuade these 'blacklegs' to go away. The women of the mining community aided them, even standing in the way of a company locomotive pulling wagon loads of non-union labour

to the Bulli mine; then with babies in their arms and children hanging to their skirts they begged the men not to take their husbands' jobs, the bread from their children's mouths, the roofs from over their heads. It was the first time, but not the last, that the women acted as auxiliaries in the union cause.

Funds exhausted, the miners had to return on the owners' conditions. At Bulli this meant that not all the men were re-employed; blacklegs who wished to stay were encouraged by the owners to do so; the unionists had to take part in a ballot for employment; only married men and boys could apply. It was the "lucky" ones who returned to work for a month and then died in the disaster.

One of those who was banned from work was John Barnes Nicholson who was the first paid official of the Illawarra Miners' Union. In 1891 he was to be elected as the pioneer Labor Party member of parliament for the area. He married one of the widows of the Bulli Disaster. Another on the banned list was George Henderson, who became the union official in Nicholson's stead. He was a lay preacher, a Methodist who had chosen to become a Primitive Methodist because he felt that their beliefs were more democratic. A third was William Wynn, lover of music and church choirs. His eldest son was one of the 16-year-olds killed at Bulli. William Wynn kept a diary of life in Bulli in the 1880s*. All these men have descendants still living in the Bulli area.

Old Bulli mine closed in the year of the centenary of the disaster which had halted production only temporarily in 1887. Its beginning in 1863 brought about the establishment of Bulli township, the Methodist Church of 1865, the public school four years later, then the Anglican, Catholic, Salvation Army Churches. There were several hotels: the Bulli Family Hotel, built in 1888, still survives, beautifully restored. The railway station looks the same as when first opened in 1887. South Bulli mine, which opened in 1888, brought more miners to the area. The population of Bulli-Woonona was second only to that of Wollongong.

Bulli is a historic place. It held a significant position in the coal trade which led to the making of Port Kembla, first as the place for a large deep-water port and then as a centre for industry, then as a site for the steel industry, its growth after World War II, the consequent enlarging of Wollongong's population by newcomers from many lands.

Captain Cook passed this way in 1770, trying unsuccessfully to land near Bellambi. Bass was a visitor in 1796. The first cattleman, Captain Throsby, aided by local aborigines, descended Bulli Mountain in 1815. Cornelius O'Brien farmed land down to Bulli Point in the early 1820s. Westmacott lived on the same land in the 1830s and tried to start a coal mine on Bulli Mountain in 1839. He plotted the roadway which later became Bulli Pass, down which so many people have travelled on their way to the Illawarra.

Bulli deserves to retain its scenic beauty, its old buildings and the community traditions which are part of its heritage.

*The diary is to be published in 1988.