

Tom Roberts, Fred McCubbin & the Bulli Mine Disaster

Earlier this year I published an illustration of an extraordinary piece of ephemera in the form of a Benefit Concert Ticket from Port Adelaide to aid the victims of the Bulli Disaster.

I commented then that the little blue ticket was indicative of how widespread was response to the tragedy. So strong, in fact, that - after reading Humphrey McQueen's biography of Tom Roberts (Macmillan, 1996) - it is now apparent that even the art world compelled to attempt to make a contribution.

As McQueen records, three days after the explosion (which occurred on the 23rd March, 1887) the Australian Artists Association (AAA), on a motion of John Ford Patterson and Fred McCubbin, voted to ask each professional member to donate a painting on behalf of the relief fund.

McQueen claims that McCubbin encouraged the proposal in tribute to his brother who died after being caught up in machinery at a flour mill in 1881. McQueen also adds that John Longstaff had won the travelling scholarship with his painting entitled *Breaking the News*, which depicted a mining tragedy at Clunes - but which then became a work that gained in appeal because of the Bulli disaster.

This tale of spirited support, however, has a dismal end.

McQueen remarks: "The artists social conscience toward the Bulli mining community had not been equalled by their organising capacities to stage the auction; in mid-June [Tom] Roberts moved that the few paintings that had been contributed be disposed of by some other means. Failing at that as well, the AAA returned the canvases to their owners." (p.182)

McQueen's biography is highly recommended. Even if you are not interested in art or artists, it's full of lots of general Australian history and all sorts of arcane detail. This seems to have annoyed most reviewers, but to me is the great strength of McQueen as a writer: he produces specialist histories which can be enjoyed by everyone. The chapter titles too are a joy for literary critics like myself. Few historians are as well read in British and Australian Literature as McQueen. I even doubt there are many literary critics who've read as widely as McQueen. It's a very fat and expensive book (\$60; 784 pp.) but Corrimal Library already has a copy.

Our local library service really is a wonderful benefit to the public.

Joseph Davis