



The University of Newcastle
History Club
Department of History

**STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS
IN
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY**

No. 7

1982

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PREFACE

The 1982 issue of Student Research Papers continues the practice began last year of publishing the best first year essays on aspects of life and work in Newcastle 1938. As explained in the last issue, the History Department of the University, along with colleagues from the C.A.E., is involved in research and writing for the 1938 volume of The Australian Bicentennial History Project. We have been training selected students to interview Novocastrians about life in 1938 from an interview schedule arranged by the National Oral History Project connected with the 1938 volume.

Ten students were selected this year to carry out at least one interview (one student Barbara Gaudry interviewed four people) and then, on the basis of controlled background reading, to write an interpretative essay on the problems deriving from work (or the lack of it) which faced a family during 1938. The results, like last year, were varied and many of the same problems were encountered despite our ironing out many of the wrinkles associated with the 1981 project. These papers are valuable mainly as training exercises for our first year students. We have continued to publish them in this form because, in spite of their incomplete nature, they help to give outsiders a glimpse of the rhythms of private experience associated with life in Newcastle and the coalfields.

The papers by Gaudry and Owens deal with the lives of men in Newcastle heavy industry in 1938. Payne's paper also deals with that work experience but adds a dimension to do with the Anglican church and its handling of industrial issues. The effects of religion, of Primitive Methodism specifically, on the lifestyle and expectations of a mining family at Dudley is also highlighted in Curtis's essay. Finally, Deacon examines reflectively the meaning of a single person's life experience in 1938 within the wider pattern of 'history'.

These are tentative steps towards 'people's history'. We hope the Student Research Papers will contribute a little to the data for a social history of this area and with it, to the story of what it meant to be an Australian in 1938.

Sheilah Gray
Peter Hempenstall
Margaret Henry

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WORK AND LIFE IN DUDLEY 1938:

EVERYTHING WAS ON THE UP AND UP

by Annette Curtis

An investigation of the problems deriving from work in 1938 through interviews with an old resident of Dudley, Mrs.A., reveals that, although life was difficult by modern standards, and problems were many, for Mrs.A., life, materially, was improving. Mrs.A. spent her childhood and grew to maturity in Dudley, an isolated, closely knit mining community where traditions and memories lingered.¹ Miriam Dixon claims that the entire woman is, so to speak, to be seen in the cradle of the child.² To understand the hardworking and conservative Mrs.A. in 1938 necessitates a brief look at her formative years.

Dudley Colliery is situated on the coast south of Newcastle and it began operations late in the 19th century. Dudley was encircled by natural as well as man made barriers, and was a thriving community.³ Until its closure in 1938 the colliery had been one of the most exhaustively worked mines in the Lower Hunter. Local men were able to seek work during slack times at the neighbouring Redhead or Burwood Collieries.⁴

Farmers and coal miners still lived a dawn to dusk existence in the early years of the twentieth century, interrupted by large meals cooked by their women folk.⁵ Mrs.A. was born into a farming family at Glen Innes in northern N.S.W., the only daughter of a family of five children. In 1909, when Mrs.A. was aged two, the family moved to Dudley to find work. They soon became established in the community. Mrs.A.'s father worked as the ostler at the Dudley Colliery, and her mother established a dairy farm to serve the local people. The ostler was responsible for the care of the pit horses. Each day began at 2.30 a.m. for the 12 year old Mrs.A., who helped to feed and prepare the horses with her father for a 7 a.m. start at the pit. She then helped her mother prepare breakfast and 'crib' - the food and drink for her father and brothers for the day - and finally, before going to school, delivered milk to neighbours. Mrs.A.'s life of work and service to her family was accepted without question, and she derived pleasure from being useful to her parents.⁶ Her early home had the basic necessities and, though poor, Mrs.A. always had plenty of good food (mostly home grown), and sufficient clothing. After completing her school life at Dudley Public School at 14 she stayed home to help her mother, as there were no job opportunities.

In 1925, aged 18, she married into a Primitive Methodist family, who had been pioneers in the district. Sons followed fathers to work in the mine and Mr.A. worked with his father and brothers from the age of 14.⁸ During the 19th century Newcastle mining communities had a preponderance of Primitive Methodists. This was largely due to the large number of coal miners who migrated from Northern England, particularly from the towns of Staffordshire,⁹ Durham and Northumberland where the Primitive Methodist faith originated. After the Dudley Colliery explosion of April 1898 the names of several victims were listed in the Newcastle Morning Herald as coming from Durham and as being of the Primitive Methodist faith.¹⁰

Methodism encouraged the individual to rationalise work through self-discipline; ideally "the labourer must be turned into his own slave driver". As well it was a religion which encouraged an apolitical and anti-radical lifestyle. Mrs. A., through her marriage, shared these meanings and evaluations derived from Methodism and they reinforced her conservatism in life.¹¹

British coal miners also brought to Australia traditions of co-operative societies, lodges and various other cultural institutions. They had all been founded and fostered for working class defence and provided centres of social cohesion.¹² The Rechabite Lodge was very active in Dudley and all Mrs. A.'s family were members. The Independent Order of Rechabites gained strength in Newcastle mining communities, and the first Tent was opened in Dudley in 1893.¹³ Its members abstained from alcohol, while juveniles received instruction in temperance, social enjoyment and sports.¹⁴ Mr. & Mrs. A. have never tasted any alcoholic drinks and attribute this to their allegiance to the Rechabite Order;¹⁵ no doubt there were also sound economic advantages for a poor family to abstain. P. Haslam recalls that he noticed an important social change in young people in 1938 as the influence of the Independent Order of Rechabites waned after a century of influence in Newcastle mining communities; and the powerful liquor interests advertised widely and supplied liquor efficiently in Newcastle.¹⁶

Three children were born to Mrs. A., two daughters and a son, aged 12, 10 and 3 in 1938. She felt fortunate to have had well behaved children who made little demands on the family finances. Her only aspirations for them were that they should grow up to be "honest and hard working like their father".¹⁷ Deductions were made for contributions to the ambulance and hospital fund through the Miners' Lodge so the family had no worry if medical attention was required. In the lives of coal miners' families, death or injury were ever present possibilities and danger their everyday companion. For the women folk fear for the safety of their men was an accepted part of family life.¹⁸ Mrs. A. recalls the horror she felt when several ambulances raced past her home in January 1926 to the Redhead Colliery where an explosion had occurred. Her husband had been working underground the day before and she felt relief to find he was safe, since he had been working above ground that day. At the time she was pregnant and confined to bed due to illness so she felt particularly vulnerable to the prospect of an early widowhood.¹⁹

From earliest times mine-owners had been indifferent to the health and safety of workers.²⁰ The coal industry in N.S.W. from 1914 to 1939 remained substantially unchanged and indifferent to the needs of the miners.²¹ Strikes and lock-outs were Mrs. A.'s experience year in year out in spite of the fact that Dudley Colliery had less industrial strife than the south Maitland coalfields. The Dudley Colliery miners were often levied from their pay²² by the Miners' Federation to assist their fellow unionists on strike. Women aided the miners in times of trouble particularly in the difficulties caused by long periods of economic distress.²³ In the year before the depression began, the mining industry had nearly a quarter of the work force living below subsistence level.²⁴ Mrs. A. recalled that many people were undernourished at this time.

Mrs. A.'s family was not affected as badly as others during the depression days in Dudley, receiving help through close relatives, local storekeepers' credit and the presence of two wage earners in the family (her brother-in-law lived with them). The family's life did not reflect the dreariness of the dark depression days even though Mrs. A.'s husband and brother-in-law were forced to do odd jobs as carriers.²⁵ A study in the 1970s of people who were voting for the first time during the depression years revealed that the depression did not affect markedly the attitudes of those who lived through it. It was seen by most of the interviewees as an external calamity, which may have acted as a unifying rather than a divisive influence. The depression affected all classes of people including many business men, professionals and farmers who lost their incomes; not all the unemployed were unionists. Instead of encouraging class conflict it may have made Australians aware of their common desperation.²⁶ Mrs. A. was aware of some instances of families losing their homes in Dudley during this time but knew of no one from her community living in unemployed camps in 1938.²⁷ An indicator of the importance of food to Dudley families in the 1930s can be seen in an advertisement by the local Methodist Church for a cooking competition in which the first four prizes were a bag of flour or food parcels, and subsequent prizes were silver spoons, etc.²⁸

The BHP Burwood mine in neighbouring Kahibah, where Mr. A. was employed in 1937, began to prepare for mechanization that year, when the Miners' Federation, under its militant communist leadership, was articulating its programme for the implementation of increased wages, safety and employment opportunities. Even though strikes were prevalent in these years and men lost wages, the adoption of the Miners' Federation programme received full support, as the problems and injustices were there for every mine worker to see.²⁹ The depression price for coal meant the miners were working long hours and Mr. A. recalls that the 1938 National Strike offered them an opportunity to rest from their labours.³⁰ Mr. A. did not lose time off work during the six week long strike, or receive any hostility from the men on strike, as he had become independent by venturing into business as a contract carrier for the Burwood Colliery. He was employed with his brother and brother-in-law digging the tunnel to replace the shaft at the Colliery to prepare for mechanisation. Mrs. A. thus saw her husband fully employed in the digging and removal of earth.

Though this time was good for the family materially, it was at the expense of normal family life. For the next three years Mr. A. and his employees slept on the job in the cab of his truck, which he borrowed, and worked seven days a week - day and night - digging the tunnel. It was a time of constant worry, tension and responsibility for Mrs. A. as she needed to have food prepared and ready for the men who might call in for a meal at any hour. To help at home in this routine her elder daughter left school at fourteen, while Mrs. A.'s ageing parents also needed constant care at their home.³¹

Mrs. A.'s family ideals were part of conservative sentiments present in Australian society in the 1930s.³² Joseph Lyons epitomised them as the hardworking, honest, kindly, unadventurous and devoted family man. He offered a sense of security as Prime Minister of Australia and his success lay in his simplicity and plainness.³³ It was a time of strict censorship laws, the Government assuming the role of sole interpreter of what was good for society.³⁴ Yet for all its dreariness,

the decade cannot be dismissed as one of complete stagnation.³⁵ The average man's style of living was made more comfortable, and a sense of opportunity returned.

Mr. & Mrs.A. were paying off their modest home in 1938 and contributed 15/- per week to the Starr Bowkett Building Society. They in fact won the draw in 1938 and this paid off their home entirely.³⁶ Home ownership was a bastion of the miners' system of self-defence, as the Premier Stevens told Parliament in 1937: "...the average man aspires to his own home, particularly the man in poor circumstances". Mrs.A. saw this sense of opportunity as the economy recovered and the N.S.W.'s budget balanced for the first time in a decade.³⁷ By 1938 the fully-employed man's purchasing power had recovered to exceed pre-depression levels.³⁸

Australians did more than recover material assets at this time. They showed the adaptability and resourcefulness in time of hardship,³⁹ which has been characteristic of many of the pioneering forefathers. Mrs. A. showed these traits as she adjusted to life at this time. The long arduous days of relentless toil were being rewarded for Mrs.A.'s family, but their conservatism made it difficult to change their life-style when financial circumstances improved. Mrs.A felt life was "on the up and up in 1938",⁴⁰ even though the family continued to work as laboriously as they always had.

A visit to Mrs.A.'s home is seen by her as an opportunity always to turn on a typical "miners spread" with food in abundance, reminiscent of a Geordie Supper. Her home is still decorated in the style of 1938 and little concession has been made to developments in furnishings since then. Her energies are still spent, as they were in 1938, in providing home cooked food and comforts for her family, and all others willing to share her hospitality.

Looking back on Mrs.A.'s life, her childhood, marriage and on 1938 it is relevant to make the following points about problems which had their origins in the work and employment of her family at that time. The work was hard, and the hours long. There was little time for leisure and demands on the family were heavy, particularly on the women folk. There was little time available to put into practise any radical actions, if indeed, her conservative attitudes were in any way affected by them. Even though, in her own words, "everything was on the up and up in 1938", with her home secure and her family well provided for, it was impossible for the family to break out of the long established routine of work before all else. Mrs.A. continued to work and live as she always had, though she was materially better off. She felt happy, usefully occupied and sure of her place in the society to which she belonged. Her problems were not diminished but she had a life that many in 1938 would have envied.

FOOTNOTES

1. J.C. Docherty, 'The Second City: social and urban change in Newcastle New South Wales 1900-1929', Ph.D. thesis, ANU, 1977, p.25.
2. Miriam Dixon, The Real Matilda: woman and identity in Australia 1788 to 1975, Ringwood, 1978, p.57.
3. Newcastle Morning Herald, 1st April, 1975.
4. Ed Tonks, History of Redhead Colliery, Broadmeadow, 1981, p.1.
5. Readers' Digest Services Pty.Ltd., Australia's Yesterdays: A look at our recent past, Sydney, 1974, p.276.
6. Interview conducted with Mrs.A., Dudley, 13th July, 1982, tape 1:1, 05-40.
7. Winifred Mitchell, 'Wives of the radical Labour Movement', in Women at Work, eds. A.Curthoys, S.Eade & P.Spearritt, Canberra, 1975, p.2.
8. Interview, tape 1:2, 706-754.
9. J.C.Docherty, op.cit., p.21.
10. Newcastle Morning Herald, 2nd April, 1898.
11. Robert Moore, Pit-men, Preachers & Politics: The Effects of Methodism on a Durham Mining Community, Bristol, 1974, pp.9-25.
12. J.C.Docherty, op.cit., pp.32-33.
13. Historical records, Dudley Public School.
14. Family Magazine of the N.S.W. Rechabite, April, 1949, pp.8-16.
15. Interview, tape 2:1, 055-132.
16. P.Haslam, 'Newcastle 1938', taped interview, p.2, Newcastle University Archives.
17. Interview, tape 1:2, 464-486.
18. Robin Gollan, The coalminers of N.S.W.: A history of the union 1860-1960, Melbourne, 1960, p.97.
19. Newcastle Morning Herald, 22nd January, 1926.
20. Robin Gollan, op.cit., p.2.
21. Ibid., p.114.
22. Historical records, Dudley Public School.
23. Winifred Mitchell, op.cit., p.2.
24. Robin Gollan, op.cit., p.179.
25. Interview, tape 1:1, 164-193.
26. D.Aitken, et al, 'What Happened to the Depression Generation?' Labour History, Vol.17, 1970, pp.174-81.
27. Interview, tape 3:1, 06-16.
28. Pamphlet, Dudley Methodist Church 1936.
29. Robin Gollan, op.cit., p.203-204.
30. Official Year Book of N.S.W., 1939, p.651: Interview, tape 1:2, 510-527.
31. Interview, tape 1:1, 140-153.
32. K.J.Mason, Experience of Nationhood: Australia and the World Since 1900, Sydney, 1975, p.96.
33. F.K.Crowley, op.cit., p.434.
34. K.J.Mason, op.cit., p.96.
35. F.K.Crowley, op.cit., p.442.
36. Interview, tape 1:1, 244-254.
37. F.K.Crowley, A New History of Australia, Melbourne, 1977, pp.436-442.
38. Ibid., p.446.
39. Fred Alexander, op.cit., p.129.
40. Interview, tape 3:1, 016.

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