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STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS

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PREFACE

The 1983 issue of Student Research Papers brings to a close the series of good first year history essays on life and work in Newcastle in 1938. For the past three years, as part of the department's involvement with the 1938 volume of the Bicentennial History Project, we have been training selected students in interviewing techniques and documentary research methods with a view to building up a mosaic of impressions about the social history of this area during the 1930s. The project has resulted in nearly 100 interviews on life in 1938 for the National Oral History Project, a chapter on unemployment in Australia for the forthcoming Bicentennial History, this series of published student research papers and a larger array of unpublished essays and surveys by students of this department and of the neighbouring C.A.E.

We have adopted the practice of publishing only the best local history essays each year. The group of selected students in 1983 was smaller than in previous years and, given our group method of proceeding with the project, the range of work we were able to achieve was somewhat circumscribed. Nevertheless the three papers of this issue provide information which helps to build up the pattern of social life we have been exploring during the last three years.

The papers by Doyle and Trim both deal with the lives of men who were involved in coal-mining in the Newcastle area in 1938, and show to some extent the impact coalmining had on the whole family. In contrast Munro's paper is based on an interview with an architect who left Australia to gain experience in England and Europe before returning to Newcastle to practise in 1937.

The 1938 project is now completed. Because of staff shortages we have decided not to mount a similar project in 1984 but to use the year to review the success or otherwise of this series. For it is important to emphasize that the essays issuing from this local history research have been training exercises largely for first year students and it is time to assess whether they have been effective teaching exercises. We expect to be back in 1985 with a new series of Student Research Papers to continue what we hope is a useful instrument in reconstructing part of the Australian past.

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Peter Hempenstall
Margaret Henry

CONTENTS

"WE ENJOYED EVERY OUNCE OF LIFE THEN" - A VIEW OF COALMINING

by Annette Doyle 1

ABOVE THE GROUND IN 1938

by Dot Trim 7

"MODERNE - COME BACK TO EARTH!" : A VIEW OF AN ARCHITECT
AND ARCHITECTURE IN NEWCASTLE IN 1938

by Paul Munro 14

"We enjoyed every ounce of life then" -

A view of coalmining

by Annette Doyle

"But they were the days then. They were really good times. We never had no money or nothin'. We enjoyed every ounce of life then".¹ Despite a practically nonexistent social life and a ten-year period of unemployment, Mr Doyle was one of the lucky people to be employed in the coal mining industry. He recalls the Newcastle workplace in the late 1930s with a touch of nostalgia. Such an attitude is "the voice of the past....and it is a voice worth listening to".²

Born in Singleton in 1905 Mr Doyle, who lived most of his life in the former mining settlements of Lambton and Jesmond, gained much experience in his early working years. At the age of fourteen he left school and worked as a messenger boy at Walter Neve's Furniture Store in Newcastle for 14/- per week. His father was the foreman at Wallsend Coke Ovens and, as was the custom, his son could have joined him. Mr Doyle preferred to work elsewhere "because it was too hot there".³ Later he became a pit-top labourer at Jesmond mine, an employee at Jesmond soap factory and a shunter, then a wheeler at Lambton Borehole Colliery at Redhead until the mine closed in 1926.

Throughout the depression and until 1935, Mr Doyle was unemployed. A survey in October 1940 showed that 22% of the 3,134 registered unemployed miners in the Newcastle and coalfields areas had not worked since before May 1932.⁴ His brother, who was unskilled, had little hope of finding any job in the 1930s and his two brothers-in-law were also part of those statistics. One had been rejected as a police recruit because he failed the physical, and supplemented the family budget by selling blackberries door to door. Mr Doyle and his brother, whilst on relief, worked for the Lambton Council digging gardens, cleaning gutters and general maintenance work. They even worked as far as the Hawkesbury River on government road works.

During this time Mr Doyle became very familiar with the hardships of the needy. His mother and sisters, and his father, who was mayor of Lambton in 1931, organised unemployment relief. His father was also an active member of the St Vincent de Paul Society and his work with the poor encouraged in Mr Doyle an attitude that was to survive to the present day. Only recently he gave his three piece suit, which cost him £7.12.6, a week's wages in 1926, to the St Vincent de Paul.⁵ He has always appreciated anything he was fortunate enough to call his own. In 1935 B H P reopened the Lambton Borehole Colliery and Mr Doyle was employed as a shunter and then worked on the coal cutter. His brother and brothers-in-law remained unemployed for some further years.

With the reopening of the mine came mechanisation and a place in history for the Lambton Borehole Colliery as the first mine in Australia to raise coal by completely mechanised methods.⁶ Mr Doyle worked with a unit of twenty-three men on the Victoria seam of coking coal used in the steel industry. The seam was at a depth of 200 feet and Mr Doyle

worked over an area of threequarters of a mile in any direction. An Ingersol punching cutter machine worked by compressed air and operated by two men would have taken about one hour to cut an eight foot bore nine feet into the coalface and twentyfour feet wide. With the coal cutting machine operated by two men the same amount of coal could be cut in fifteen to twenty minutes. A daily production cycle consisted of cutting, boring, firing, loading and timbering. Mechanisation was seen initially as a threat to the miners and appeared to favour the owners. Communist propaganda leaflets such as "Mechanisation: Threatened Catastrophe for Coalfields" were printed in editions of 30,000 or more and conditioned the miners' anxiety. W.Orr's warning words were that "the coalowners' plans for further rationalisation, if allowed to mature would destroy the economic life of the coalfields" but in the view of the miners it merely meant a reduction of employment opportunities. Mr Doyle did not feel threatened even though the workforce did show a tendency to outgrow the labour needs of the industry. His attitude was "you couldn't do anything about it, so why worry?" He'd been through bad times before. In 1925 there were 24,038 men employed giving an output of 11,396 tons; in 1933 only 13,349 men were employed with a decreased output of 7,118 tons; by 1940 there was still considerable unemployment even though the output had risen to 9,550 tons and the employment to 16,812.

Frequent stoppages occurred because 'in general, miners believed that they would only win concessions by industrial struggle'. The failure to come to quick decisions between owners and miners in a strike was demonstrated in a decline of Newcastle's coal export trade between 1935 and 1939. Most of the coal mined at Lambton Borehole Colliery during this time was used at the B H P steel works so this was not a reflection of any action by Mr Doyle and his workmates. A national strike was planned in July 1938 and in September was finally declared. A log of claims consisted of a 30 hour week (five 6-hour days), uniform mine regulations throughout the commonwealth, stringent steps in safety and health precautions and complete abolition of the coal dust problem. 23,000 miners were affected by the strikes, 90% of these men belonged to the Miners' Federation; 8,000 were active Newcastle miners and stood to lose collectively £60,000 per fortnight; 250 were employed at Lambton Borehole Collieries.

Safety and health were high on the priority list of the Miners' Federation log of claims. The ever present risk of falling coal, high voltage of electrical equipment, fast moving locomotives and skips were all basic factors. Mr Doyle had worked in knee-deep water for days at a time and because of a change in the seam being worked at Lambton Borehole, there was more water under mechanisation. At Lambton Borehole large steam pipes running through the change rooms did provide hot showers and dried the men's clothes that were hung over them. The water money of 1/6 per shift was little compensation for the cramps, bad back and arthritis which the men suffered as a result of the water. Dust was an acute problem and finally forced Mr Doyle to quit the mines in 1953. Dust from the coal brought the danger of silicosis. Spraying the travelling ways with water increased the humidity which in turn caused various skin diseases. The use of steel skips was designed to eliminate the problem of coal dust dribbling through the timber cracks onto the roads, and a flow of fresh air was increased and controlled to get better ventilation. Compensation for dust could not be claimed by Mr Doyle but it was claimed for two separate accidents caused by falling coal. His head was split open and his arm was severely damaged and the "compo doctor was the only official to show

any interest".¹⁹ Sick pay of one day for every twentyfive days worked was never claimed by Mr Doyle although many of his workmates took the day off whether they were sick or not. Mr Doyle believed that "you were lucky to have a job and you stuck to it".²⁰ A rescue room with ambulance stores, oxygen apparatus and direct telephone communication to every working area was provided at Lambton Borehole.²¹ Sometimes men did not work to safety regulations and caused risk to fellow workers and a loss of time to the industry. For example, the borer's job was to bore eight holes into the work area and insert the powder; if it did not explode work would cease in that area for 24 hours. Often two or three fuses would be inserted together and there was no way of knowing if all the fuses exploded.

Working conditions did improve between 1934 and 1939 and "were the greatest ever made to the advantage of the workers in the mining or any other industry".²² Hours worked in coal mining compared favourably with other industries, and wages paid were much higher.²³ Usual hours for a production shift were from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. The maintenance shifts were from 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. and from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. A meal break of thirty minutes and travelling time to and from the coalface were included in the eight hours calculated for a working day. An average of six hours was actual working time at the coalface.²⁴ Mr Doyle only worked day shift because like many other workers, he did not own a car, he rode a bicycle to Broadmeadow station and caught the train to Redhead. A weekly ticket cost him 6/8 and entitled him to return by the same train at 3.30. The family had owned a T-model Ford but because they could not afford the running costs gave it to relatives. Car registration cost £9.10.00 and a licence cost 10/-.²⁵

Contract wages were paid to men according to their output and effort. Average wage in 1947 at John Darling was £3.0.4 per shift and £2.10.0 per shift at Burwood.²⁶ Mr Doyle and the other miners at Lambton Borehole were paid on a daily rate. In 1935 Mr Doyle's wage was 25/6 per shift.²⁷ Machine men, which included cutters, borers and loader operators received the highest wages in the unit (with the exception of the deputy). In 1946 they received 32/11 and in 1947 the wage was 35/2.²⁸ Under contract wages individual miners were capable of earning more than the deputy whose wages were more stable and not affected by a decline in output. A week's pay for a deputy in 1947 was £9.7.8.²⁹ Many of the miners could not keep pace with the increased output even for the extra wages and were often agreeable to strike action because it meant a rest.³⁰

In 1936 Mr Doyle had married a young lady from Wallsend who was employed as a waitress and counterhand at Wade's Cafe throughout the 1930s. She belonged to the Hotel and Restaurant Union and the wage for an apprentice in 1938 was 14/6 per week. After six months it was 17/6 but Mrs Doyle's wage was 37/6 per week because she had worked there longer than twelve months.³¹ Women were not expected to leave Wade's once they were married but Mrs Doyle chose to leave and managed to budget with no skimping on essentials, especially food. Both Mr and Mrs Doyle emphasised this point several times throughout the interview and even today "always plenty of food",³² is high on the list of priorities.

Mr and Mrs Doyle lived in a modest timber dwelling at Lambton "a little suburb where everyone was happy"³³ and considered themselves very lucky indeed. Not so lucky were those families who lived in the shanty towns and unemployment camps at Platt's Estate at Waratah; "Texas" at Carrington or "Hollywood" at Jesmond. Mr Doyle can recall the little tin or bark humpies on the southern end of Jesmond Park and how people

relied on one tap for water and had no sewerage facilities. Some tended small gardens to supplement their diet and caught the occasional rabbit. His opinion of the upper class was indifferent - "we never had much to do with those people - there wasn't too many of them around".³⁴ "People with money, they kept to their own class in those days".³⁵ Apart from the occasional dance, family wedding or Christmas dinner, Mr Doyle's social life centred around cricket or football. He and his wife never attended the Newcastle Show nor dined out at a restaurant. An outing with their son, born in 1937, was a picnic at the beach or a visit to relatives. Church attendance was a very important part of the family life and the parish priest was a frequent visitor to the household.

Indifference towards politics and world events was also reflected in Mr Doyle's disposition. He never attended political rallies nor discussed politics, and during the meal break, in between jam sandwiches and hot tea, he listened to the usual discussion rather than give an opinion. The fact that his father was interested and concerned with local government made no difference in his behaviour - politics were never discussed at home!³⁶ His family were all Labor voters because they believed in the Labor policy and Mr Doyle "always liked to belong to the working class because...that's as far as (he) wanted to go and (he) was quite happy to be in that class of the workers and friends".³⁷ Little enthusiasm was felt for the Royal Family, the abdication of Prince Edward or the coronation of George VI. The observance of Anzac Day received no response nor did the Melbourne Cup day. Mr Doyle saw nothing to worry about from overseas countries and regarded America and England as the strongest powers.

"....Obviously untrue or inaccurate information is in itself of historical significance since it often provides clues to attitudes".³⁸ Whether time has taken its toll on Mr Doyle's memory or not, his attitudes have survived to the present day. They provide background information for a history of the miners in Newcastle in the late 1930s, "concerned with how they lived, what they thought about life, how they spent their working time and their leisure".³⁹ Mr Doyle's story has been a small part of that history.

FOOTNOTES

1. Taped interview with Mr F.R. Doyle, 23 July 1983, Tape 1:2, 26-28.
2. G. Osborne & W.F. Mandle (eds), New History: Studying Australia Today Sydney 1982, article by Douglas & Spearritt p.68.
3. Untaped interview.
4. J.C. Docherty, Newcastle: the Making of an Australian City, Sydney 1983, p.74.
5. Interview Tape 1:1, 222-224 and Tape 1:1, 140-142.
6. "The Newcastle Coalfields History", B H P Collieries Brochure Newcastle 1947.
7. Untaped interview.
8. "The Newcastle Coalfield Development and Modern Working Practice" B H P Review Feb/April 1939.
9. R. Gollan, The Coalminers of New South Wales: a History of the Union 1860-1960, Melbourne 1963, p.201.
10. W. Orr, Mechanisation: Threatened Catastrophe for Coalfields, Newcastle 1934.
11. Gollan, Coalminers, p.201.
12. Untaped interview.
13. Gollan, Coalminers, p.240.
14. ibid, p.204.
15. A. Walker, Coaltown: a Social Survey of Cessnock N.S.W., Melbourne 1945, p.38.
16. N.M.H., 8 September 1938.
17. N.M.H., October 1937.
18. Gollan, Coalminers, p.217.
19. Untaped interview (and taped interview Tape 1:1, 173-178).
20. ibid.
21. J. Fallins, "The Newcastle Coalfield History, development and modern working practice", B H P Review, Feb/April 1939.
22. Gollan, Coalminers, p.213.
23. J.W. Turner, "Labour and capital in the N.S.W. coal industry: an historical survey", B H P Journal 1978, p.20.
24. H. Elford & M. McKeown, Coalmining in Australia, Melbourne 1947 - last page.
25. Tape 1:1, 148, 375-388.
26. Elford & McKeown, Coalmining, last page.
27. Interview Tape 1:1, 140-142.
28. Elford & McKeown....
29. ibid
30. A. Walker, Coaltown, p.52.
31. Interview with Mrs Doyle, Tape 1:2, 85-87.
32. Interview with Mrs Doyle, Tape 1:2, 135-138.
33. Interview with Mr Doyle, Tape 1, 393-395.
34. ibid 402-403.
35. ibid 405-406.
36. Interview with Mr Doyle, Tape 1, 436 and 453-458.
37. ibid 419-423.
38. Osborne, New History, p.66.
39. Gollan, Coalmining, p.vii.

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