

S994 005
8
No. 8 1983

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

HISTORY CLUB

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS

IN

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

No. 8

1983

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for the forthcoming Bicentennial History, this series of published student research papers and a larger array of unpublished essays and surveys by students of this department and of the neighbouring C.A.E.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.

Sheilah Gray
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

Above the ground in 1938

by Dot Trim

Men employed by the coal mining companies in the late 1930s were faced with frequent stoppages causing loss of wages and unsatisfactory working conditions which in turn contributed to danger to health and safety. Added to these issues was the fear of unemployment: a fear that lingered from memories of the depression years. To the married man with a family to support these issues were a constant source of worry whereas the young single man, while still concerned, may not have been as deeply affected. The latter appears to be the case for Mr A., a single man in the late 1930s.

The third of five children, Mr A. was born at Charlestown and has lived there all his life. The tendency for children to follow in their parents' footsteps is true of the A. family, as all five children have remained in the area. Mr A. was born in Charlestown and lived his entire life there, his two elder boys followed their father into employment at the mines.

Charlestown in its early years was a small mining village. M.T.Daly states that most of Newcastle's modern suburbs commenced as mining towns and grew up independent of the port town.¹ Charlestown is situated six miles from Newcastle, and before transport links improved was considered to be isolated. People settled there to be near to their work place. Mr A. considered his family belonged to the working class as did the majority of the families living at Charlestown in the late 1930s.

Mr A. senior was working in the mines during the depression years and although never unemployed he was lucky to have one or two days work some weeks. Mr A. remembers times were hard during those years but the family thought it fortunate to have a roof over their heads, food on the table and reasonable clothing to wear. The worst of the depression was over by 1934 but for many individuals economic recovery was slow and every wage counted.

In 1933 Mr A., at the age of fourteen, left school after approximately six months' secondary education and commenced work at John Darling colliery as a stable boy. Mr A. said that further education did not make any difference to work opportunities and if a job became available it was best to leave school and take it.

John Darling colliery was opened as a result of an increased demand for coal by the steel industry. A geological survey was carried out in 1922 and John Darling colliery was begun in 1925, first producing coal in 1927.² By 1937 John Darling was the largest mine in the Broken Hill Proprietary group.³

Mr A. obtained his position at the mine through his father, who was a coal miner who had worked at Waratah, Dudley and John Darling collieries. This arrangement of employment was not unusual then and still occurs to some extent even now. Mr A. attended an interview and remembers feeling

a bit strange about his first job which was, in fact, in the stables belonging to the colliery. He remained in the stables until 1940-42 (Mr A. was unsure of the years) and then went into the mine as a shiftman.

Mr A. had six miles to travel to work each day. He worked a broken shift in the stables. Work commenced at 5 a.m. until 10 a.m. then resumed at 3 p.m. until 6 p.m. Because of lack of public transport at those hours Mr A. rode a bike to work; in later years he used a motor bike. Mr A. did not particularly enjoy his work in the stables, but said, "You had a job to do and you did it - beggars can't be choosers".⁴ Conditions were not too bad in the stables. Four people were employed there, three youths and one older man who Mr A. referred to as the 'boss horseman'.

The stables were close by the pit top. Mr A's duties included feeding the horses, cleaning the stables, harnessing the horses and taking them to the pit-top ready for the wheelers each morning. Mr A. said the horses returned to the stables by themselves. To use his words, "glad to get out, poor devils".⁵ After they returned they were hosed down and the boss horseman was responsible for checking the condition of the horses and for deciding if they were fit to go down the mines. Mr A said that the horses sometimes developed bad shoulders or suffered from injuries.

Alan Walker noted that the coal mining industry has always been,⁶ notorious for the extent and the frequency of its industrial upheavals. John Darling colliery was no exception although Mr A. was not always affected by these disputes, his father and older brother were as they were employed in the mine. He recalled that the horses were sometimes used as a reason for going out on strike, for example there was a strike in August 1936 over the condition of a horse sent down the mine. It was said that two horses had been injured and this one was the only horse available. The wheelers objected to the horse and the men left the mine and held a meeting. They would not return until the horse was replaced. Mr A. recollected that the wheelers would sometimes "go out" over the condition of a horse when they wanted a day off.

In July 1937 a wheeler was suspended for ill treating a horse. Mr A. remembers this wheeler as "a hot headed fellow who hit the horse over the head with a sprag".⁸ There was a demonstration by the men followed by a well-prepared stay down which commenced on the 30th July. One hundred and eighty seven workers stayed in, the majority of whom were wheelers. Mr A. recalls the men, women, and children waiting at the gate to the colliery. Police were there to control the crowd and the gates were kept locked until the men came out. There was a big reunion when the men left the mine at 8.10 p.m., 31 July, after thirty seven hours and ten minutes.⁹

This was not the finish of the dispute however; B H P told the men there would be no further work until they would guarantee there would be no more interruptions to operations that year. After a meeting held by the men Mr Hoare (President of the Northern District Miners' Federation) issued a statement saying the real issue of the dispute was not the horse. It was B H P's refusal to consider a log of claims directed towards increasing wages, safety, and employment opportunities. The men refused to guarantee there would be no further interruptions and so B H P closed its three collieries, Burwood, Lambton B and John Darling.¹⁰

The New South Wales Industrial Commission then called a compulsory conference and a compromise was reached.¹¹ The men agreed to guarantee uninterrupted operations and all B H P mines resumed work on 2 August 1937.

At one stage during this period there were nine mines idle, apart from the B H P mines, and four thousand six hundred and thirtyfive men were affected.¹²

Another issue of importance to coal miners in the late 1930s was the trend towards mechanization. Mechanization ranked high in significance as a means to stabilise the industry which had suffered a drastic decline between the years 1925 and 1930.¹³ Alan Walker noted two factors responsible for this drastic decline in N.S.W.: the loss of overseas markets and local disputes.¹⁴

Mechanization, to the extent of the introduction of one coal cutter in 1936 and one coal loader in 1937 in the Victoria Seam tunnel, had already taken place but with this exception up until 1938, John Darling Colliery was mainly worked by contract miners using picks and shovels to fill one ton skips which were hauled by horses underground.¹⁵ The skips were then wound in the shaft to the surface. This method had its drawbacks and from 1938 the mine was progressively changed.¹⁶

The mine workers saw mechanization as an immediate threat. It was generally feared that machinery would cause further unemployment in an industry that was already grossly over-supplied with labour.¹⁷ Mr A. cannot recall feeling that his job was threatened but his father was concerned that complete mechanization would displace him. This fear of displacement, by the men, was to result in a long and bitter struggle.

In 1937 disputes began at particular mines where mechanization was being introduced, notably Burwood and John Darling. Mr A. said he recalls the dispute was over who was going to man the machinery. Gollan recalls that "the company at first insisted that it should choose the men to operate the machines, and the union insisted that seniority should apply".¹⁸

In September 1937, a strike which was to see one thousand men idle and last three months, began. Mr A's father and brother were among those men and as the strike lengthened Mr A. was off work as well - when the pit ponies were sent to pasture on 11 November.

On 11 October the Miners' Federation paid out the first strike pay. Mr A. recalls this strike pay was only available to married men suffering severe hardship with families to support. He added that when the men returned to work they had to pay this money back to the Miners' Federation.

Mr. Jefferies (B H P Colliery General Superintendent) issued a statement in November saying there would be no loss of hands at John Darling colliery due to mechanization for eighteen months.¹⁹ Gollan states that there was no complete resolution of the difference between the company and the union. The union finally accepted a modified seniority principle and the men returned to work on 7 December 1937.²⁰

Working conditions had long been an issue in the coal mines. Mr A. saw his employment in the stables as a stepping stone to joining his father and brother in the mines. Mr A. recalled he felt the 1938 dispute over the log of claims to improve working hours, safety, and health hazards was of importance to him as these issues would one day also affect him. On 7 September 1938 twenty three thousand men stopped work; including dependants one hundred thousand persons were affected. With the exception of one or two privately owned mines every coal mine in Australia was idle for six weeks.

During these strikes families survived by "ticking up" goods at the local shops. Mr A. said the business people would stand by the miners until the strike was over and they were able to pay up. "You didn't feel any different to anyone else because we were all in the same boat around here".²¹ People stood by and helped each other as much as possible. Mr A's mother had £20 and she would lend £1 at a time to friends and neighbours around the area and they would repay her when they could.²² In exchange for this service the people would bring Mrs A. home produce. The A. family, unlike many others, did not have a backyard garden or keep poultry.

From earliest times²³ mine owners had been indifferent to the health and safety of the miners. Mr A. said he did not consider the owners to be indifferent at the time. He said these issues were hard to remedy until more modern mining methods were introduced. He could not recall many serious accidents at John Darling in the late 1930s, "maybe a couple killed",²⁴ but he was not certain.

Coal dust and dust artificially introduced into the mines was a menace to the health of those employed underground. Mr A. said there wasn't any underground plumbing for water to spray the dust in the 1930s. His elder brother was employed as a 'water bailer'. His job was to take a fortyfour gallon drum of water down the mine and spray the travelling ways. Mr A. recalls his father and brother were lucky as their health did not suffer from working down the mines. Many miners suffered severe deterioration of health from pulmonary diseases. Mr A. remembers some men had difficulty breathing and coughed a lot as though they had tuberculosis.

In retrospect Mr A. and his family faced the same issues in their workplace in the late 1930s as the mine workers all over Australia. There was a constant struggle between the employers and the employees. The employers fought for more efficiency and greater production, the employees fought for what they considered to be their rights. Judge Drake-Brockman described the history of coal mining in Australia as "an unbridled and unregulated contest between employers and employees...."²⁵ The years from 1937 to 1940 saw a number of minor and major strikes but through these stoppages the miners achieved the greatest changes ever made to their advantage.²⁶ To gain these changes the workers had to put up with inconvenience and loss of wages often resulting in material hardship.

In 1938 Mr A. was nineteen years old, single and working above ground at John Darling Colliery. He felt that he was lucky to have a job and had an obligation to his employers and his parents. Even though the issues the coal miners faced did not always directly affect Mr A., he was indirectly affected through his father and older brother. Being young and employed above ground did not give Mr A. an immunity to the struggle of the mineworkers.

FOOTNOTES

1. M.T. Daly, The Growth of Newcastle and Its Suburbs, published for Hunter Valley Research Foundation, Monograph No.24, Maryville 1966.
2. Collieries Brochure, 1947. Obtained from John Darling Colliery.
3. N.M.H. 1 September 1937.
4. Taped interview 13.7.83, count 238 tape 1 side A.
5. Untaped interview 24.8.83.
6. A. Walker, Coaltown: A Social Survey of Cessnock, New South Wales, Melbourne 1945, p.46.
7. N.M.H. August 1936.
8. Untaped 24.8.83.
9. N.M.H. 31 July 1937.
10. N.M.H. 2 August 1937. R.Gollan, The Coalminers of New South Wales: A History of the Union 1860-1960, Melbourne 1963, p.205, 209.
11. Gollan, Coalminers of N.S.W., p.209.
12. N.M.H. August 1937.
13. C.H. Martin, The Australian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, Presidential Address 1976. "Evolution of an industry - coal", Victoria 1976, p.15.
14. Walker, Coaltown, p.37.
15. J. Fallins, "Steel Industry's Colliery Development", reprint of a series of articles published in the June, Sept., Dec. issues of the B.H.P. Review, Melbourne 1947.
16. Unpublished, B.H.P. Company Limited, John Darling Colliery.
17. Gollan, Coalminers of N.S.W., p.211.
18. Gollan, Coalminers of N.S.W., p.212.
19. N.M.H. 11 November 1937.
20. Gollan, Coalminers of N.S.W., p.212.
21. Untaped 24.8.83.
22. This information supplied by Mr A's neice.
23. Gollan, Coalminers of N.S.W., p.2.
24. Interview taped 13.7.83, tape 1 side A count 311.
25. Cited in Gollan, Coalminers of N.S.W., p.214.
26. Gollan, Coalminers of N.S.W., p.213.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

INTERVIEWS

Taped interviews with Mr A. at Charlestown on 13th July 1983.

Untaped interviews with Mr A. at Charlestown on 2 and 24 August 1983.

BOOKS

- D. Cusack Southern Steel, London 1953.
 J.C. Docherty Newcastle: The Making of an Australian City, Sydney 1983.
 H. Elford & M. McKeown Coal Mining in Australia, Melbourne 1947.
 L. Fox (ed) Depression Down Under, Sydney 1947.
 R. Gollan The Coalminers of New South Wales: A History of the Union 1860-1960, Melbourne 1963.
 G. Kingswell The Coalmines of Newcastle, New South Wales, Newcastle 1890.
 F. Mauldon A Study in Social Economics: the Hunter River Valley, New South Wales, Melbourne 1927.
 A. Walker Coaltown: A Social Survey of Cessnock, New South Wales, Melbourne 1945.
 H. Wells The Earth Cries Out, Sydney 1950.

OTHER SOURCES

- B.H.P. Collieries Australian Institute of Energy Lecture Series on Black Coal, "Underground Mining", D. Stone, July 1979.
Charlestown Centenary 1876-1976. Published to celebrate Charlestown Centenary, 1976.
Centenary of Education Charlestown 1879-1979. Published to celebrate Charlestown Public School Centenary, 1979.
 M. Daly The Growth of Newcastle and Its Suburbs, Hunter Valley Research Foundation, Monograph 24, Maryville 1966.
 J. Fallins "The Newcastle Coalfield. History, Development and Modern Working Practice". Reprinted from B.H.P. Review, February, April issues 1939, Melbourne.
 "Steel Industry's Colliery Development". Reprint of a series of articles originally published in the June, September, and December issues 1947, of B.H.P. Review, Melbourne.
 S.R. Gray "Social Aspects of the Depression Newcastle 1929-1934", M.A. thesis, University of Newcastle, 1981.
 B. Gordon & T. Jilek Industrial Disputes and Structured Change: The Case of New South Wales Black Coal 1900-1960. Research report on occasional paper No.14, University of Newcastle, 1974.
 P. Haslam "Notes on Newcastle in 1938", Newcastle University Archives.
 G. Hindmash The Coal Mining Industry..Its Development to Date and Future, No.2, Melbourne 1946.
 C. Martin The Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, Presidential Address 1976, "Evolution of an Industry - Victoria 1976.
 Newcastle University, Student Research Papers in Australian History, No.6, 1981 and No.7, 1982.
 Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners Advocate, items recorded in relation to coal mines - clippings contained in scrap book borrowed from John Darling Colliery: 1936, 1937, 1938.
 W. Orr Mechanization: Threatened Catastrophe for Coalfields, 1934-1935.

- A.G.L. Shaw "Australian Coal Industry 1929-1939", Economic Record
Vol.19, June 1943.
- Unpublished "The B.H.P. Company Limited, John Darling Colliery".
- Unpublished Collieries Brochure, 1947.
- Lake Macquarie Municipal Council, Lake Macquarie: The Way it Was.
A series of cassettes on the history and development
of Lake Macquarie 1983.