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DUST AND DREAMS

A regional history
of mining and community
in south east New South Wales,
1850-1914.

by Barry McGowan

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Australian National University.

June 2001
I certify that this thesis is my own work containing,
to the best of my knowledge and belief,
no material published or written by another person
except as referred to in the text.

Barry J. McGowan

22 June 2001

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Abstract

Until recently the focus of interest in gold mining history has been Victoria, and to a lesser extent Western Australia. The New South Wales story has, in contrast, attracted relatively little research or interest, the Lambing Flat race riots often being the only instance in which the New South Wales gold fields are specifically mentioned. Furthermore, mining history has tended to emphasise the unusual, dramatic, and colourful aspects of the gold rushes at the expense of an investigation of what mining was like most of the time.

Recent scholarship produced especially for the sesquicentennial anniversary has helped broaden the focus of gold mining history beyond its traditionally rather narrow focus. This thesis is part of this new scholarship. Not only does it have a New South Wales focus, but also it places gold mining in a broad context, discussing other forms of mineral exploitation and examining the effects of mining generally within a regional setting. It also uses material evidence such as field surveys, photographs and maps, extensively, demonstrating its importance to the historian. The thesis contributes to this growing body of work with new questions and new research, and helps broaden the focus of Australian mining history.

The thesis is a regional history of mining in south east New South Wales in the years between 1850 and 1914. It differs from most regional histories in that the focus is on one industry, and from most mining histories in that all the mining fields within the region are discussed, large and small, gold and base metals. The region is large and includes a number of contiguous and representative fields in the Southern Tablelands, the Braidwood and Shoalhaven, Monaro and South West Slopes Districts of New South Wales.

There are several themes in the thesis.

One is the history of mining itself, focussing on mining technology, and the ebb and flow of particular fields as a result of factors such as resource discovery and depletion, changed economic conditions, technological change, mining regulations, and weather patterns. The thesis examines in depth the changing value of mineral production on the fields, a task of considerable difficulty, since before 1875 there were no official statistics of any real value. There is attention to the environmental effects of mining.

A second theme is the contribution of mining to regional development through the settlement of towns and villages and the encouragement given to ancillary industries and infrastructure. It is in this discussion that the material evidence is particularly useful.

A third theme concerns the cultural development of the communities, with attention given to the relationships between working miners their wage based colleagues, the Chinese miners, and the nature of everyday life in these communities. The thesis argues that there is a culture which embraces most forms of mining.
Prologue and acknowledgements

My thesis is the end of an odyssey that began 18 years ago in the wilds of Tasmania, astride the rusting remains of a railway line, and within sight and smell of a heavily polluted river. The scene, though degraded, had some attraction, for the dead and decaying trees and the sluggish, if not moribund river, were set against a backdrop of brightly coloured river sands. It certainly evoked questions, and I felt strongly compelled to write. The article was modest, and was submitted successfully to a popular magazine generally given more to ribaldry than serious historical discourse. But it was enough. Unbeknown to myself at the time, I had taken my first tentative steps on a journey that was to repeatedly take me from one end of the continent to the other, and to change my life in ways I could have barely contemplated.

Over the next few years further bush odysseys and a flood of articles followed. A two month journey through north and central Queensland turned my curiosity to an abiding interest. I was increasingly drawn to the derelict citadels and ruined landscapes of the outback. All pretense of traditional vacation destinations such as beach and city were abandoned for the remote interior and successive vehicles were gradually upgraded to full 4WD status. Some of the journeys were perilous. Silent prayers were fervently offered that the next dune would bring me in sight of a long anticipated land mark, or that the chaos of bull dust and potholes, or in some instances the deep oozing mud, would vanish as quickly as it came. In time these landscapes became my family’s playground, for it was not all toil, and there were warm fires at night and quiet contemplation amidst the silent splendour of the bush.

With these experiences came other journals such as heritage and 4WD magazines, for readers of the latter are amongst the most inquisitive of all. Inevitably my focus shifted. What of the region in which I lived? I had heard rumours of lost towns in the bush. Some of these could be visited on day trips. What had been an antiquarian interest became more intense, for as a local I had access to sources and contacts that I could only access fleetingly on my longer journeys. A three part series on ‘lost mines’ in the Canberra region all but sealed my fate. A heritage project on historic mining sites in the local region followed, cobbled together with whatever leave and forbearance I could muster from work.

My first book was based on this project. The book launch was an exciting, but in some ways somber occasion, for I had tasted of the fruits of recognition, and wanted more. In a fateful conversation, a neighbour, Ray Spear, an academic at the ANU, asked whether I had considered undertaking doctoral studies. Initially, I thought this a bit premature, for I was only just finishing my second degree, a BA, and was about to commence work on yet another heritage project. But it was exactly what I wanted to do, and I was fortunate that the proposal was supported enthusiastically by two ANU lecturers, Ian Farrington and John Merritt. My application was successful, and within twelve months I had left my comfortable work environment of some 26 years behind, and had embarked on a new career, combining my studies with heritage consultancy work. The dream had become a reality.

There were always people. Many of them were fossickers and farmers. But sometimes it was only the publican, his wife and a few exuberant clientele. Without them, however, little would have happened, and most of the sites would not have been located. Local landowners in the Canberra region are fiercely proud of their heritage. They don’t wish it to be neglected and abandoned, and are usually overwhelmed when anyone
shows an interest in it. There had been no attempt to record any of mining sites in the region. I was truly blazing a path, but I had many willing helpers.

These men and women gave freely of their time, sometimes in very trying circumstances. Rugged terrain was the norm. On many occasions we were faced with nearly impenetrable thickets of tea tree and blackberry bushes. At other times an unexpectedly difficult journey meant that, with fading light, we faced the very real prospect of a long and uncomfortable night in the bush. Many trips were undertaken in inclement weather conditions and involved fording rivers and creeks, sometimes in flood conditions. Some journeys were made in the height of summer, with searing heat and humidity and the water in the bottle almost too hot to drink.

Inevitably there were snakes, which I never saw until almost too late, when a savage hiss reminded me that I had but yet again narrowly avoided stepping on one. Even travelling in the Pajero was not always safe, for there were several heart in the mouth trips on rapidly deteriorating tracks, with few opportunities to beat a retreat. But there were serendipities too; lunch time breaks on the banks of the Shoalhaven or Mongarlowe Rivers or the picturesque glades of Bells’ Creek on a still and warm autumn day. The lighthearted banter of my companions was always there, and now with my quest ended, it is that which I miss the most.

Sadly, some of my companions have now passed on, yet it seems only yesterday that we were talking and laughing together. If I have to attribute my work to anyone then it is to these, my now silent friends, in particular the late John Clark and Ted Richardson. Both men had a vivid and entertaining memory of the past and both had been miners, and I learnt much from them. It is not possible to mention every other person, but there are some who stand out. For instance, Neil Waddell, who has pushed relentlessly for a proper recording of the heritage of the Araluen gold field and Bessie Williams, who has put so much effort into promoting the history of the Windellema area and its attendant mining sites. Dallas Ford and Kevin Smith were two others who had a strong local memory of the past, and proved invaluable in locating and recording many sites in the Shoalhaven River, Nerriga area. Paul Dann and Stephen Wright were my frequent companions on many forays into the Braidwood area, particularly the Mongarlowe and Bell’s Creek gold fields. The names of those who provided historical and site information and accompanied me on my trips is set out in the Bibliography.

Thanks also go to the various historical societies and their tireless workers, who are the unsung heroes of Australian history. Patricia Clarke, as editor of the Canberra Historical Journal, helped me publish a number of articles for the journal and gave me my earliest and most formative encouragement. The Canberra and District Historical Society sponsored me for my first substantial heritage project and the Braidwood and District Historical Society for the second. In the latter project I received considerable assistance from Netta and Nevin Ellis, and I benefitted from the use of the resources of both societies on a number of occasions. Other local historians to provide important assistance were Dick Littlejohn, Peter Blundell and Peter and Win Doolan of the Murrumburrah and District Historical Society, and Keith Clarke of the Snowy Mountains Historical Society. Keith Clarke and Peter Doolan were invaluable in helping locate sites in the Cooma and Harden areas respectively.

My thesis has been unique in its strong multidisciplinary approach. My panel included Professor Ann Curthoys and John Merritt from the then Department of History, Ian Farrington from the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology and Richard Baker
from the Department of Geography, all from the Australian National University. I am extremely grateful for their constant encouragement and, in particular, their assistance in helping me to clarify the themes and questions of my work. My relationship with John and Ian predated the commencement of the thesis and I thank them warmly for their guidance and friendship. The interest shown in my work by other university colleagues, such as Anthea Hyslop and staff of the former History Department, such as Tracey Deasey and Marion Robson, was also a constant source of encouragement.

Richard Greene and John Field from the Departments of Geography and Forestry respectively at the ANU also provided guidance in environmental matters, and two of their former students, Christina O'Grady and Katrina Cousins, assisted with my study of the Araluen catchment area. In the field I was also assisted by Michael and Jenny Lambert Tracey, and more recently by Lindsay Smith, with whom I have had many fruitful discussions on the archaeology and history of the Chinese. I have also benefitted from my attendance at several workshops on the Chinese organised by Henry Chan and my participation in the Australian Mining History Association conferences organised by Mel Davies, a lecturer at the University of Western Australia and president of the Association. Mel’s leadership in this area has been vital to all students of Australian mining history.

No work of this magnitude could be completed successfully without enormous assistance from staff of various archives and libraries. These include the Newspaper, Petherick, Photographic and Manuscript rooms of the National Library in Canberra, the State Records Centre of NSW, the National Australian Archives and the Mitchell Library in Sydney. Two people who provided constant assistance were Al Bashford of the Department of Mineral Resources Library, Sydney, and Bev. Allen of the Australian Geological Survey Organisation Library, Canberra. I also received help from the Lands and Soils Conservation office at Braidwood and Sydney Water. Obtaining quality photos was critical and for this I am most grateful for the care and attention of Nick Lourandos and staff at the City Camera House.

Tasks of this magnitude are not completed without the support and forbearance of family and friends. In this regard I am indebted to my two sons, Andrew and Douglas, who endured numerous bush trips and their occasional hazards and discomforts, with nary a grumble, and to my companion, Chong Choe and her children, Sean and Genie. Chong helped me immeasurably in preparing the tables in the appendices and in providing advice, support and solace, particularly in those trying times when a myriad of competing deadlines and other distractions beckoned. Last, but not least I should mention my many friends from other walks of life for their constant interest and encouragement in my work. I thank you all.
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Abbreviations

AMA = Amalgamated Miner’s Association
AR = New South Wales, Department of Mines, Annual Report.
GPO = General Post Office.
km = kilometre.
m = metre.
MLA = Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly
NAA = National Archives of Australia
NSWLA = New South Wales Legislative Assembly.
NSWLC = New South Wales Legislative Council.
oz = ounces of gold.
SRCNSW = State Records Centre of New South Wales

All measurements have been converted to metric, except where citing regulations for the size of leases and claims. Imperial measurements are used for currency. As a guide to standards of living then and now, an ounce of gold in the nineteenth century was valued at about £3 10s. On the data presented in Appendix Four a yield of one ounce a week was, therefore, the equivalent of at least good wages, often more. Current $A prices for gold (as of June 2001) suggest that it has held its purchasing value reasonably well over the last 100 years.
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