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BEYOND THE 1960s I

Literary Reflections

The following two chapters explore the West Coast's literary and historical writing that built upon the foundations laid by the centennial generation. Coalminers and their communities stand at its centre. We begin by tracing the literary antecedents that portrayed coalfields life and played a significant role in shaping attitudes and assumptions. This sets the discussion against a backdrop provided by Pat O'Farrell's finely and imaginatively drawn recreation of his family's experience of the Grey Valley in the middle years of the twentieth century that forms the core of *Vanished Kingdoms*. Commentators most frequently, and rightly, praise the book's contribution to the literature of the Irish diaspora. Less often remarked is O'Farrell's unequivocal restating of the Grey Valley's unequal and unrelenting nature as it confronted the changing forms of modern capitalism. It is this theme that stands at the centre of the discussion that follows.

As different as the 'West Coasts' of Pearson, O'Farrell and May were, their perspectives set the terms upon which the Coast took its place in the unfolding national story. Pearson's mix of realistic analysis and literary artifice deeply connected to the natural world presented the omnipresent bush as imposing timelessness upon events and inducing among its people an introspection that both fostered community and defined its limits. O'Farrell's 'Coast' is similarly imagined: a tragic, isolated place where life is played out in a 'cheerless rotting damp' and the human spirit is stretched to its limits. Neither the acquisitive, individualistic instincts unleashed by the discovery of gold, nor the insatiable demands of industrial capitalism provided the basis for an enduring equilibrium between people

and place. By figuratively standing on the slopes of Scandinavian Hill alongside 'Jimmy the Slogger and Liverpool Bill, Gentleman George and Yankee Dan', Phil May sought to understand the rush of '65 in its own terms. The result was a closely textured and rich account of the interaction between the diggers and the land over which they swarmed. May's historical perspective possessed a comparative dimension rooted in the diverse nature of the experiences that diggers brought to the quest for instant riches. The balance sheet he drew up on the endeavours of its foundational generation acknowledged achievement and innovation and counted the cost for individuals and region within a framework that remained defiantly optimistic.

In the late 1980s when O'Farrell revisited his literary Grey Valley, he did so with a perspective enhanced by an unsurpassed understanding of the Irish diaspora and the adjustment and adaptation critical to the process of migration. There is a noticeably more vigorously expressed analysis of the conflict between mine owners and organised labour. The emphasis is now upon the tragic dimensions of an unequal struggle between the remote forces of international capitalism and migrant miners whose communal environment was so raw and devoid of resources that it left them, collectively and individually, cruelly exposed to the demands of prolonged industrial battles with their employers. The efforts to establish the customs and working practices of the old world, which supported the expansion of industrial unionism in the new, were imbued, O'Farrell now suggests, with a 'utopian idealism'. Theirs was a 'naïve and passive confidence in the omnipotence of combination' that induced a 'warm glow of (false) commonality and the illusion of shared strength'.¹ The belief was that they were 'fighting for a principle'—an abstract idea that, no matter how imperfectly understood, betokened a widespread sense that right was on their side.

'Men must have dreams',² is O'Farrell's judgement of this late nineteenth-century Grey Valley coalfield idealism. The immediate aftermath, in his view, was closer to nightmare: the newly created unions were swept aside amid mass dismissals and widespread impoverishment. Before the community could reconstruct itself, on 26 March 1896, 65 miners were killed in an explosion at the Brunner mine, the worst mining disaster to that date in the colony's history. Reflecting upon the combined impact

1 O'Farrell, 'Noble National Myths', p. 34.

2 O'Farrell, 'Noble National Myths', p. 34.

of industrial defeat, economic stagnation and mine disaster, O'Farrell is struck by the grimness of life in the Grey Valley. Brunner's tale, of dream and disillusion followed by disaster, read 'like bad melodrama, desperately sad, ruled by dark and largely impersonal forces, with the human actors shadowy and uncomprehending, caught in the grip of their fates'. It was, O'Farrell suggests, 'a grim play, now badly dated, hard to believe, of no inspiration save for endurance, a performance which will never be staged again'. By the late 1890s, he laments, 'Brunner was dead—breathing, but yet an economic and psychological corpse'.³ Brunner's misfortune was to be in a struggle with unrestrained monopoly capitalism as the familiar coalfields life-cycle of expansion, contraction and decay neared its nadir.

O'Farrell's reprise of his earlier account of the Grey Valley came in the 1990s as capitalism, in its corporate garb, was pursuing a neoliberal agenda that allowed 'dark and impersonal forces' to prevail once more. Against this background, O'Farrell now invoked what had become the dominant metaphor of West Coast writing, historical or fictional: the quest to build community against insuperable odds. Its concerns were those common to pioneering literature: the absence of the recognisable tangible and intangible forms of social cohesion and the physical and climatic obstacles that stood in the way of its achievement. As coal and timber proved incapable of providing a viable basis for a flourishing local economy, the celebration of past achievement that coloured Coast literature takes on the more sombre tones characteristic of the literature of nostalgia. The emphasis is upon the withering of community as a pervasive neoliberal political agenda allowed the market to dictate the future and made little allowance for the ability of the regions to adjust to the new political economy.

O'Farrell's perspective on the foundation years of Grey Valley mining communities has its roots in the challenges they mounted to the political economy of the late nineteenth century. In contesting the supposed sanctity of the law of supply and demand upon which the expansion of a largely unregulated industrial capitalism depended for its legitimacy, Brunner miners were reluctant followers of the Denniston miners, newcomers from British coalfields.⁴ Both communities were cruelly exposed in this contest with international capitalism. The apparent futility of their struggle forms the essence of O'Farrell's treatment of nineteenth-

3 O'Farrell, 'Noble National Myths', p. 35.

4 Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, pp. 17–51.

century coalfields communities. It is a historical perspective that echoes the popular literary responses to the Coast that had flowered briefly on the coalfields in the early years of the twentieth century. Described variously as proletarian, working-class or socialist, such writing forms part of an essentially moral response to the economic transformation that followed the Industrial Revolution.⁵ As imperial offshoots of the 'workshop of the world', West Coast coalfields provided a challenging environment for industrial capitalism.

The first literary interpreters of life in West Coast coaltowns came from within. They were migrant miners fresh from British coalfields and hopeful that they had left the evils of industrialisation behind them. The most well-known of them was Edward Hunter (1885–1959), a young Scot, who came to the West Coast as part of the influx of British and Australian coalminers drawn to the expanding New Zealand coalfields in the first decade of the twentieth century. He came as a committed socialist influenced by Keir Hardie and Bob Smillie of the Independent Labour Party. West Coast workers first made Hunter's acquaintance as readers of the mouthpiece of New Zealand radicalism, the *Maoriland Worker*. As 'Billy Banjo', he articulated, in verse and in prose, the grievances of mining communities. His early writing drew upon his experience of the Scottish coalfields and the insidiousness with which the mines circumscribed the lives of those born to mining families. Sprawling pit frames and chimney stacks, he wrote, 'robbed the young of those daisy bedecked play-fields of childhood' and 'poverty drove ... young boys into the pits where "boy life" gradually loses its cherished aim, "its meaning of worth" and "girl life" was woven into the "mills of greed" in distant city factories'.⁶ It was a picture couched in old world terms and as such resonated with the historical sense of injustice and oppression that characterised the thinking of the British colliers who fashioned New Zealand coalmining unionism in the late 1880s.

Hunter and his family moved to Denniston in 1912. From within this remote enclave of British colliers, he began to articulate a more belligerent stance. When the 1913 General Strike was proclaimed Hunter welcomed it as a 'people's revolt'⁷ against a social order he believed morally

5 Richardson, "Billy Banjo": Coalminer, Socialist. Poet and Novelist', in Pat Moloney and Kerry Taylor, eds, *On the Left: Essays on Socialism in New Zealand*, Dunedin, University of Otago Press, 2002, pp. 73–86.

6 Richardson, "Billy Banjo", p. 75.

7 *Maoriland Worker*, 29 October 1913.

unconscionable. In Westport, as a member of the Buller Miners' Central Committee, he helped organise public demonstrations. At Newtown Park in Wellington, he was arrested and charged with sedition for allegedly telling assembled unionists that the Massey Government's violent response to the strike justified revolution.

Edward Hunter emerged disillusioned from the disintegration of radical unionism that followed the collapse of the 1913 General Strike. Placed on probation by the courts and blacklisted on the coalfields, he worked briefly in freezing works, on the waterfront and as an itinerant union organiser. In early 1915 his wife Mary died and the care of their four children absorbed more of his energies and precipitated his return to Scotland in the early 1920s. Two major publications appeared in this period: *Ballads of the Track* (1918), a collection of 32 poems, most of which had appeared previously in the *Maoriland Worker*; and *The Road the Men Came Home* (1920), a largely autobiographical novel about life on the coalfields of Scotland and New Zealand, mostly Denniston.⁸ Literary historians have described Hunter's novel as belonging to a genre of naive social realism characterised by a 'crude mixture of biography and autobiography' spiced with a dash of 'explicit preaching'.⁹ Within the mining towns and among the working class, Hunter's crusade against the evils of industrial capitalism captured the moral fervour of time and place. As a 'wandering minstrel'¹⁰ of Britain's socialist left, he had made his way to the colonial coalfields, like many miners before and since, hopeful of building a better world. His unique form of 'social dreaming' envisaged mining communities remade and miners and their families freed to share fully in the fruits of progress.

Like many transient activists whose major works were published in their homeland, Hunter's outpourings faded into the colonial literary netherlands until rediscovery by New Zealand historians as they began to bring working-class experience more fully into the national story. Keith Sinclair, whose influential *History of New Zealand* elaborated a progressive and nationalist perspective that framed the historical agenda for a generation, had met Hunter in 1950 when visiting Labour Party

8 Edward Hunter, *The Road the Men Came Home*, London, The National Labour Press, 1920; Edward Hunter, *Ballads of the Track*, Auckland, The Cooperative Publishing Board, 1919.

9 Terry Sturm, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Auckland, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 125.

10 Erik Olssen, *The Red Feds: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour*, Auckland, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 101.

branches in Glasgow.¹¹ The old Red Fed had won his way onto the Glasgow City Corporation on the socialist ticket in 1937 and represented the Cowcaddens Ward until his death in 1959, shortly after he had become the corporation's deputy chairman. During this time, his literary activism was expressed in what he described as 'community musical dramatic plays'¹² that drew upon the talents of working people and expressed the grievances of those disfranchised by poverty and educational disadvantage. The literary outpourings of 'Billy Banjo', the 'wandering minstrel' of the coalfields, began to attract scholarly attention in the 1980s. As historians focused upon the regional and occupational communities, they discovered the rhythms, patterns and concerns of everyday life and the previously unheard voices giving expression to them.

If Billy Banjo and his literary heirs represent a response to the lingering convulsions of industrial capitalism, Jean Devanny's novels of the 1920s and early 1930s present an unflinching portrayal of women's lives, a socialist/feminist indictment of unrestrained capitalism's capacity to strip away human dignity.¹³ She sketches its brutalising impact upon mining families cut adrift from mainstream society. Where Billy Banjo offered his readers a gospel of hope expressed in quaint and homely terms, Devanny laid bare, in bleak perspective, the crippling psychological and social cost of lives lived at the sharp end of colonial capitalism.

The eighth of William and Jane Crook's 10 children, Devanny was born in 1894, in Ferntown, near Collingwood. Some 20 years earlier her father, a boilermaker from Lancashire, had found work as battery manager at a goldmine and as a blacksmith and mechanic at various small coastal mines that characterised the Golden Bay coalfield at the South Island's northernmost extremity. The opening up of a new coal seam at Puponga, in the first decade of the twentieth century, brought new men and new ideas into a district that had been very largely unaffected by the first wave of coalfields unionism in the 1880s and 1890s. In its newer, more radical garb, unionism quickly took root among the 50 or so Puponga miners. Its arrival was signalled in 1904 by the construction of a miners' hall and by the formation of a small socialist study group. Rural in aspect and coastal in location, Puponga was typical of the West Coast coal communities

11 Sinclair, *Halfway Round the Harbour*, p. 128.

12 Richardson, "'Billy Banjo'", p. 85.

13 Carole Ferrier, *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1999; Heather Roberts, 'Devanny, Jean', in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 1998, *Tē Ara—the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4d13/devanny-jean.

in its isolation.¹⁴ Miners and their families made up more than half its 600-strong community. It was among them that William Crook settled his family in 1909. He was already succumbing to miners' phthisis and, as his daughter later wrote, 'anaesthetised'¹⁵ by periodic bouts of drinking.

In 1911, 17-year-old Jean married Hal Devanny, a 23-year-old hewer making his way within union ranks and an active member of Puponga's small socialist circle. These were the peak years of revolutionary socialist activity and the newly wed Devannys were soon moving among the rising generation of radicals we now know as 'Red Feds'. The platform pyrotechnics of these apostles of socialism stimulated enthusiasm and provided a framework in which individuals and communities could articulate protest. The arrival at Puponga of men unable to find work at Blackball in the aftermath of the 1908 Tucker Time Strike swelled the nucleus of union activists at Puponga. Within this cluster of radical miners, as housewife and mother, she began to explore the radical literature of the day. Like Edward Hunter, Devanny published her earliest writing in the *Maoriland Worker*. She explores the evolution of the family in a manner that reveals the influence of anthropological ideas then current within socialist writing. Under the capitalist system, married women, she wrote, were the economic, social and sexual property of their husbands. The notion that only a socialist state would allow women to achieve independence was fundamental to all her subsequent writing.¹⁶

The socialist community continued to nurture Devanny's literary development at a time when life on the coalfields was at its most turbulent. The closure of the Puponga mine, in July 1917, shattered the mining community and the search for work that followed disrupted family life. Hal scoured South Island coalfields looking for work. Jean and the three children stayed briefly in nearby Nelson with her husband's family before moving to Wellington where she joined Margaret Semple while husband 'Bob the Ranter' served his sentence for sedition in the Lyttelton Gaol. In 1918 the Devanny family was reunited after Hal found work at the Fairfield mine, some 6 miles south of Dunedin. Within two years, they were on the move again, this time to Wellington where Hal joined a group of tunnellers, led by Bob Semple and comprised largely of

14 Peter Dyer, *Coal Mines of Puponga*, Picton, River Press, 2003.

15 Ferrier, *Jean Devanny*, p. 15.

16 Roberts, 'Devanny, Jean', in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*.

displaced coalminers, working on the Orongorongo tunnel. Together the Devannys ran a guest house and became a part of the city's radical culture of young, itinerant labour activists.

It was from within this ever-changing community, where ideological distinctions between communist and radical Labour did not matter much, that Jean Devanny began to write. Her two coalfield novels—*Dawn Beloved* (1928) and *Poor Swine* (1930)—are set in Puponga and Denniston respectively.¹⁷ An *Otago Daily Times* reviewer described *Dawn Beloved* as 'the first attempt to depict in fiction form the home life of the West Coast miners and to analyse the reasons for his communistic tendencies'.¹⁸ It is the story of a young, artistic woman growing up in a mining community with a drunken miner-father and a mother with few resources other than her piano. Carole Ferrier's recent biography of Jean Devanny draws our attention to the similarities between her childhood as a coalminer's daughter and that of the most celebrated literary son of the Nottingham coalfields, D.H. Lawrence.¹⁹ Ferrier doubts that Devanny had read *Sons and Lovers* (1913), but there is no doubt that *Dawn Beloved* and *Poor Swine* derive just as surely from within the constricted domestic world of the mining family.

Poverty had many faces on West Coast coalfields. Devanny had seen or experienced many of them: primitive homes, undernourished and inadequately clothed children, and violent behaviour. A minimal middle-class presence meant the absence of even the most menial of paid household labour that might have given women a semblance of economic independence and swelled family income. In Devanny's view, coalfields poverty had other, less tangible, consequences for women. Confined to their two- or three-roomed cottages with only the most basic household belongings, theirs were lonely and limiting lives, as barren intellectually as they were materially and physically. Devanny had become peculiarly sensitised to the narrowness of women's existence on the coalfields after she engaged with the socialist study groups alongside her union-activist husband. It was a liberating experience that awakened her to the inequalities of class and gender and their manifestation on the West Coast coalfields.

17 Jean Devanny, *Dawn Beloved*, London, Duckworth, 1928; Jean Devanny, *Poor Swine*, London, Duckworth, 1930.

18 Carole Ferrier, 'Jean Devanny, 1894–1962', *Kotare*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2007, p. 102.

19 Ferrier, 'Jean Devanny, 1894–1962', pp. 102–3.

The closure of the Puponga mine in 1917 and the move to Fairfield had opened the prospect of access to the wider opportunities of city life and sharpened her awareness of the enormity of coalfields deprivation. Subsequent family moves to Wellington (and later Sydney) provided the opportunity for sustained involvement within radical fringes of the labour movement and eventually led her into the Communist Party in Australia.²⁰ In her passage from Puponga to Sydney, the West Coast coalfields stood as a constant reminder of the ugly face of industrial capitalism.

Hunter and Devanny expressed two different strains of the literature of protest that emerged from early twentieth-century coalfields—the communitarian and the more personal. Hunter’s quieter and often quaintly old-world voice strove for authenticity and conveyed commitment to the international mining community. The loyalty of class and occupation, rather than the bonds of Empire or the appeals of colonial nationalism, offered the surest path to combating capitalism and improving their way of life. Devanny’s literary voice was just as surely directed at the perversions wrought by industrial capitalism. Her literary voice struggled at first to be heard—restricted as it was by the banning of *The Butcher Shop* in 1926, nominally for its likely detrimental impact upon the nation’s immigration program. The immediate impact of Devanny’s writing was thus minimal. What distinguishes her literary reputation from that of Hunter is its revival in the 1980s within a feminist and socialist rather than regional context.²¹ Yet, in different and complementary ways, Edward Hunter and Jean Devanny may now be seen as frontrunners of a regional literature of protest grounded in the changing realities of time and place.

The 30 years between the polemically inspired writing of Hunter and Devanny and the publication of Bill Pearson’s *Coal Flat* coincided with a major transformation of coalfields life. The creeping depression that spread across the coalfields of the Western world in the 1920s reached its nadir in the early 1930s. Despite a war-induced recovery in the 1940s, the decade that followed brought a gradual dismantling of the traditional coalfield community. The patterns of rise and fall that historians have subsequently sketched out became clear to contemporaries as mines closed and communities withered. The socialist idealism that informed

20 Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1988; Jean Devanny, *Point of Departure: The Autobiography of Jean Devanny*, edited by Carole Ferrier, St Lucia, Queensland University Press, 1986.

21 Jean Devanny, *The Butcher Shop*, edited and introduced by Heather Roberts, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1981, pp. 7–26.

the industrial and social legislation introduced by Labour governments of the 1930s and 1940s was now losing its sheen. A new generation of coalfield radicals—fewer in number than their predecessors—sought answers, as Jean Devanny had done in the 1930s, within the Communist Party. It is this disintegrating and dispirited world of the Grey Valley that provides the inspiration for a diverse coalfields literature as redolent with protest as its precursors.

The hindsight that allows us to see more plainly the effects of one of capitalism's periodic convulsions upon the traditional Grey Valley coalmining communities is prompted by the onset of yet another some 40 years later. A generation of writers, alienated by a Labour Government acting as the handmaiden of corporate capitalism, looked backwards to an age when Labour seemed bent upon civilising capitalism. No one better exemplifies this literary continuity than Mervyn Thompson (1936–1992),²² the coalfields' closest literary heir to the mantle of Edward Hunter. Unlike Hunter, Thompson's frame of reference was not so much that of international socialism but rather a uniquely personal amalgam of attitudes shaped in formative years spent in the Grey Valley coaltowns of Runanga and Reefton. 'Class'²³ is the cornerstone of all Thompson's work. He came to cast himself—somewhat melodramatically—as a 'working-class upstart' in combat with the 'privileged classes'.²⁴ It is a self-parody that allows Thompson to assert the social purpose of his writing and place himself at the forefront of a cultural popular front committed to achieving a national drama rooted in the New Zealand experience and sympathetic to the aspirations of the socialist left.

The West Coast took centre stage in Thompson's highly personalised attempt to play his part in the evolution of a distinctive national theatre. His forte was the solo song-play that 'harked back to the solo performers of gold rush days'.²⁵ *Coaltown Blues* (1984) mixes the autobiographical and the political. It traces the recurrent pattern of dream and disillusion that shaped the working lives of the generation of miners with whom he worked at Burkes Creek, near Reefton, in the 1950s. His rendering of the coalfield's past and left-wing hopes follows the contours of the deeply embedded oral tradition of the pits. It celebrates the heady days of the Red Feds and the birth of the Labour Party and places the miners in

22 Thompson, *All My Lives*.

23 Mervyn Thompson, *Passing Through and Other Plays, Introduction by Howard McNaughton*, Christchurch, Hazard Press, 1992, p. 6.

24 Mervyn Thompson, *Singing the Blues*, Christchurch, Blacktown Press, 1991, p. 53.

25 Thompson, *Passing Through*, p. 5.

the vanguard of New Zealand's socialist movement. The rise from the years of coalfield's despond during the Great Slump gives way to the triumph of Michael Joseph Savage's Labour. Now the miners had their own men at the heart of things. Bob Semple, Paddy Webb and Angus McLagan, men who had worked at the end of a pick at Runanga or Blackball, constituted a powerful triumvirate within the new government. Coalfield activists hoped that they would together put an end to the tyranny of the pits by nationalising the nation's mines and freeing New Zealand from the worst evils of capitalism.

The fading of this socialist dream in the late 1940s and early 1950s brings down the curtain on Thompson's *Coaltown Blues*.²⁶ On the coalfields, as elsewhere, the Labour Government's introduction of military conscription, and especially its continuation in peacetime, brought protest. To many on the Left, it seemed that Prime Minister Peter Fraser had become a Cold War warrior even before the real war had ended.²⁷ Ideological tensions gathered apace in a postwar economy in which the Labour Government proved, in the view of radical unionists, to be better at controlling wages than prices. The widening gulf between the militant unions and the Labour Government was a symptom of a more general disaffection with a leadership worn down by the problems of managing the economic transition from war to peace. The discontent was the backdrop to Labour's defeat at the polls in 1949 and the industrial upheaval of 1951.

To Grey Valley coalminers, their strike against the emergency regulations implemented by Sidney Holland's National Government in its dispute with the nation's watersiders in 1951 was legitimised by the principles of union solidarity. By appealing to the collective ethos of the workplace, they were setting out the terms of engagement for a struggle to defend their communities against a winding back of the government's commitment to the coal industry that they believed imminent. There was an air of inevitability about the manner in which the strike was embraced. Gone was the tragic mix of fatalism, naivety and utopian dreaming that O'Farrell detected in the Grey Valley miners' involvement in the 1890 Maritime Strike.

In its place was a more complex mix. The West Coast miners were no longer newcomers berated for their foreign twangs and dangerous ideas. They had played their part in creating a labour movement, elected

26 Mervyn Thompson, *Coaltown Blues*, Wellington, Victoria University Press, 1986.

27 Michael Bassett with Michael King, *Tomorrow Comes the Song: A Life of Peter Fraser*, Auckland, Penguin Books, 2000.

men to parliament and had become indispensable to the Grey Valley economy. Men from the coalface had helped remake the coal industry and strengthen inspection systems in ways that made them safer and gave the miners greater influence in the everyday operation of their mines.²⁸ Their strike in opposition to the emergency regulations was, in many ways, the ‘last hurrah’ of a coalfields generation that knew their communities were an endangered species. They invoked past struggle and celebrated achievement, but there was precious little naivety as they turned to defend union and community in time-honoured ways. In Grey Valley mining towns, 1951 assumed something of the status later afforded to the heroic struggle of British miners in 1984–85. The British Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s determination to employ the comprehensive armoury of the state to destroy the National Union of Miners led by Arthur Scargill may have been more brutal than the implementation of Sidney Holland’s emergency regulations, but each marked the imminent demise of the traditional mining community.²⁹

An important ingredient in the reception of Thompson’s *Coaltown Blues* was its timing. It was written and first performed in 1984, as Thatcher’s battle to the death with the miners raged and as New Zealand’s fourth Labour Government turned its back on its heritage and plunged headlong into a frenzy of free-market activity that was the envy of conservatives everywhere. David Lange’s party won office in 1984 with strong support among a middle class increasingly alienated by the pugnacious National Party Prime Minister Robert Muldoon. In the face of mounting international opposition to South Africa’s apartheid policy, Muldoon had resolutely plunged the nation into the divisive 1981 Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand. Now seen as marking a turning point in the nation’s history, the protest and social dislocation that it wrought thrust issues of race and gender into greater prominence. Labour’s electoral success owed much to its ability to construct a broad and progressive alliance that drew these forces, together with the anti-nuclear vote, into an unwieldy alliance with its traditional working-class base. It was a process that obscured Labour’s economic intentions.³⁰

28 Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, pp. 257–84.

29 David Howell, ‘“Goodbye To All That”: A Review of Literature on the 1984/5 Miners’ Strike’, *Journal of Work, Employment & Society*, vol. 1, no. 3, September 1987, pp. 388–404; Dai Smith, ‘The Longest Strike: In 1926 It Was the Employers; Now It’s the State’, *The Listener* (UK), 15 November 1984, pp. 11–12.

30 Jonathon Boston and Martin Holland, *The Fourth Labour Government: Radical Politics in New Zealand*, Auckland, Oxford University Press, 1987.

Thompson's emergence within the theatre world flourished alongside and, to some degree, within this evolving progressive movement. In 1980, while in his early 40s, he published a confessional autobiography, *All My Lives*, that made explicit and public the tensions he believed to be at work within the theatre world. His account is built around an intimate portrait of his West Coast coalfield origins and the extent to which this defined (and limited) his participation in the growth of a national theatre. Work and play are the physical core of the working-class culture that Thompson describes. And it is primarily through them that he comes to the understanding of community and identity that shapes his literary representation of the coalfields. Nowhere is this view put more strongly than when Thompson berates the middle-class theatre set for their condescending attitude to sport:

Eyes clouded by distant cultural mists, they fail to see beyond the stereotypes of rugby, racing, beer, and plaster gnomes ... This lack of interest in sport is, of course, evidence of virtue, and we are meant to admire them for their superior sensibilities.³¹

It was a caricature of the theatre set's attitude to sport and pitted an Anglophile, 'cultured' middle class against a vigorous and vital working class more at ease with its environment.

Thompson's quest for a national theatre that explored the nature of the relationship between people and place grew naturally from this dichotomy. It also drew heavily upon personal experience and a unique blend of nostalgia and optimism. In this respect it is a literary voice that contrasts sharply with that of Bill Pearson, whose concerns about the place of the artist in a national culture that, he believed, prized physicality and material culture lent an ambiguity to his attitude to the coalfields. Thompson, of course, knew the darker side of mining lives and, lest he be thought guilty of idealising the working class and its community, he took care to qualify his reflection:

I do not deny the rot and the hollow ... I merely suggest that our writers have spent rather too much time pretending that the rot and the hollow is all there is, that it is the whole truth. And have therefore failed to bring into theatrical life the positive life that resides in our people [...] I am not asking for an idealised view of our lives, just a fuller one ... There's life in these here isles! And a damn sight more particularity in our people than some of our writers will allow.³²

31 Thompson, *All My Lives*, p. 50.

32 Thompson, *Singing the Blues*, pp. 66–67.

There is no sign of idealisation in Thompson's characterisation of Runanga where most of his West Coast life was spent. By any measure, his Runanga years were tragic and unhappy ones. He does not spare the town. It would, he wrote in *All My Lives*:

have strong claims to enter the *Guinness Book of Records* as the ugliest and most depressing town on earth. Slovenly in posture ... The rain falls hard and often on the rough scrub-and-swamp terrain of the town ... people live, mainly in houses of such drabness that one wonders how anyone of even moderate self-esteem could dwell in them for more than five minutes.

In Runanga the unpretentiousness of the Coaster is taken to the extreme where it becomes ugliness pure and simple. Barely anything has altered since the thirties—the slump came, the slump went, but Runanga sits there still as a visible reminder and symbol. It seems so temporary, but there is something indestructible about it all the same; another iceage might come and go but the town would still be there at the end of the aeons—a testament to man's ability to survive at the lowest ebb of his existence and to aspire to nothing, except perhaps physical dominance over others. A human race which lived as unpretentiously as Runanga lives would still exist in Neanderthal rock and slime.

The town is laden with improbable paradoxes. It is full of hard-drinking men but boasts no pub [sic]. It is fanatical about sport but poorly equipped with sports grounds. It prides itself on its sporting heroes, the impressive number of its sons who have played rugby league for New Zealand, but it has built no monuments to them. It worships its women and will not tolerate swearing in front of them, but it drives them slowly mad.³³

The unflattering assessment of Runanga found little support among Thompson's literary contemporaries. Writing at much the same time, Geoffrey Moorhouse, the celebrated English journalist, historian and writer, who had worked as a reporter for the *Grey River Argus* in the mid-1950s (1954–56), saw Runanga and the Grey Valley coaltowns very differently.³⁴ The son of a Lancashire clergyman, and a proud northerner, steeped in the 13-man code, he was a stalwart supporter of the Wigan

33 Thompson, *All My Lives*, pp. 13–14. A surprising claim given that it ignores the establishment of the Runanga Workingmen's Club in late 1947 in the aftermath of the 'beer boycott' of that year. It was this beer boycott that is drawn upon by Bill Pearson in *Coal Flat*. See Ch. 5, esp. pp. 103 ff.

34 Moorhouse, *At the George*, pp. 137–44.

club. And it was through rugby league that he first learned of the Grey Valley coaltowns. In 1946, the diminutive Blackball and West Coast stand-off half Ces Mountford had signed with Wigan. As a 19-year-old he had missed selection for the 1939 Kiwi side to Britain (abandoned after just two games against club sides—St Helens and Dewsbury) and has subsequently been thought, by many critics, to be the best player never to have played for New Zealand. At Central Park the ‘Blackball Bullet’, as he became known, quickly became a local hero, scoring 17 tries in his first season with the club. In 1947, when Wigan faced a touring Kiwi rugby league side, he took the field against his brother, one of six Grey Valley coalminers in a 25-strong touring side—four from Blackball and two from Runanga. The image of the Blackball Bullet loomed large in Moorhouse’s thinking as he sailed for New Zealand in 1954 to see for himself the West Coast rugby league nursery.³⁵

Moorhouse’s subsequent reflections on his experience of the Coast appear in *At the George* (1989), a collection of essays on international rugby league. His concern is to capture the combination of people and place that made Grey Valley coaltowns such bountiful rugby league nurseries. When revisiting the district in the 1980s, Moorhouse writes, he experienced a sense of having come to the end of a world whose edge was ‘just out there’ beyond a Greymouth that seemed ‘alien yet recognisable’.³⁶ There was, he wrote:

a strange familiarity about it that had nothing at all to do with the fact that I once knew it pretty well ... With its faint air of depression, of having seen better days, with its workaday and rather bleak dignity, with that loveliness of hills behind it and that blankness of ocean before, with its isolation from the rest of the country, with its taste for Rugby League and with, even, the simple utility of its name, Greymouth is the antipodean version of Workington.³⁷

The bush environment of mining communities in the Grey Valley, Moorhouse believed, set them apart from Britain’s coaltowns surrounded, as they typically were, by ‘almost unrelieved urban and industrial

35 John Coffey and Bernie Wood, *The Kiwis: 100 Years of International Rugby League*, Auckland, Hachette Livre, 2007, pp. 118–23; John Coffey, *Canterbury XIII: A Rugby League History*, Christchurch, John Coffey, 1987, pp. 117–19.

36 Moorhouse, *At the George*, p. 144.

37 Moorhouse, *At the George*, p. 144.

sprawl'.³⁸ The 'forests of matai, kahikatea, pokatea, hutu, totara and other' natives that almost smothered the region, created a unique backdrop for the isolated mine settlements and their rugby league grounds. Blackball 'snuggled down in a cleft of the Paparoa Range' was, he wrote, 'a paradigm of the tiny' Grey Valley coalfield towns. Wingham Park, rugby league headquarters, was evocative of the game and its environment. Its 'neat and well-kept grandstand' stood roughly midway between Runanga and Greymouth and possessed an 'unforgettable setting, lonely beside the highway in the middle of those bush-covered hills'. League grounds in Sydney 'might easily be in Brisbane' and 'one could envisage' others in Lancashire 'on the other side of the Pennines'. Wingham Park, however, 'could not possibly be anywhere else but where it is'. It symbolised a people as rooted to their environment³⁹ as were those in the West Riding heartland of the game.

Something of this sense of harmony between people and place is present, as we have seen earlier, in Pearson's *Coal Flat*. It is evident also in J.M. Ewen's *Far from the Sun*.⁴⁰ Published in 1966, three years after Pearson's *Coal Flat*, and somewhat overlooked in most literary surveys, it possesses an authenticity that derives from intimate connection with the Runanga community in which it is set. Like Phil May and Bill Pearson, Ewen attended Greymouth Tech. Born in 1932, a decade after Pearson, his high school years overlapped with May's but he left, aged 14, to begin work in the mines, as his father had done before him.⁴¹ The community that he presents in *Far from the Sun* owed its very existence to the state experiments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the colony's first state coalmining community, Runanga and Dunollie possessed a symbolic importance to a generation of coalminers for whom nationalisation was the cornerstone of a socialism proudly proclaimed above the entrance to their now iconic Runanga Miners' Hall.

More than any New Zealand coaltown, Runanga exhibited the range of communal endeavour that underpinned mining communities in their new world environment. Co-op, miner's hall and workingmen's club defined the world outside the pits and offered the more serious-

38 Moorhouse, *At the George*, p. 139.

39 Moorhouse, *At the George*, pp. 138–44.

40 J.M. Ewen, *Far from the Sun*, Christchurch, Whitcombe & Tombs, 1966.

41 Carol Dawber, 'Voices of the West Coast: An Investigation into the Development of a Distinctive West Coast Character in New Zealand Fiction', PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, 2012, pp. 40–41, 152–55.

minded miners—if more rarely coalfield women—a variety of pathways to communal and individual self-discovery. For Jack Ewen it was the library of the Workingmen's Club that allowed him to immerse himself in the growing body of contemporary, left-leaning British literature and to realise through it his own literary talents. He later acknowledged A.J. Cronin's *The Stars Look Down* (1935), as the literary model for his attempt to capture the reality of life on the coalfields.⁴² The social realism of *Far from the Sun* owes less to ideology than either *Coal Flat* or the West Coast-centred writing of Mervyn Thompson. Neither lament nor call to arms, it captures the mood of uncertainty that pervaded the Grey Valley in the early 1960s.

By contrast, Eric Beardsley's *Blackball 08* (1984) shares some of the political concerns that engaged Thompson.⁴³ A literary critic has considered it an exercise in reminding 'the 80s generation of young, politically aware activists about socialism and the formation of the New Zealand Labour Party'. Andrew Little, former leader of the New Zealand Labour Party, and son of 'High Tory' British parents, acknowledges *Blackball 08* as his 'first introduction into trade union history in New Zealand'.⁴⁴ To accept the view that *Blackball 08* is 'as much historical and political commentary as novel', is to place it alongside Edward Hunter's fictional but heavily autobiographical *The Road the Men Came Home* and Pat Hickey's '*Red*' *Fed. Memoirs*.⁴⁵ To group Beardsley's fictional version of events with these labour classics, however, risks ignoring the extent to which *Blackball 08* is shaped by considerations of place and community that go beyond the polemical.

Like Thompson and Moorhouse, Beardsley has also revisited his literary West Coast in autobiographical garb. In the pages of *Sliding Down the Hypotenuse*,⁴⁶ he sketches his West Coast 'experience'. Physically, his presence in the Grey Valley was brief and took second place to Christchurch as the place he called 'Home'. His father, a fitter and turner by trade, was

42 Dawber, 'Voices', p. 40; A.J. Cronin, *The Stars Look Down*, London, Gollancz, 1935.

43 Eric Beardsley, *Blackball 08*, Auckland, William Collins Publishers, 1984.

44 Simon Nathan, 'Five Books About Blackball', *Scoop Review of Books*, 5 August 2008, www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0808/S00056.htm; see also Diana Wichtel, 'Commentary: Interview: Andrew Little', *Listener*, no. 3712, 2 July 2011, pp. 22–26.

45 P.H. Hickey, '*Red*' *Fed. Memoirs: Being a Brief Survey of the Birth and Growth of the Federation of Labour from 1908 to 1915, and of the Days that Immediately Preceded It*, Wellington, New Zealand Worker Print, 1925; reprinted by Wellington Media Collective, Wellington, 1980.

46 Eric Beardsley, *Sliding Down the Hypotenuse: A Memoir*, Christchurch, Canterbury University Press, 2011.

made jobless as the Great Depression struck and took his young family across the Southern Alps for a job at a small sawmill at Bell Hill, 'smack in the middle of a valley of ancient rimu behind Nelson Creek'.⁴⁷ As one of a number of mill settlements that sprang up along the railway line to Otira, between Stillwater and Te Kinga, Bell Hill had much in common with the camp-like communities of the early coalfields. Beardsley recalls a settlement of 'ugly family cottages, knocked up with more haste than skill'.⁴⁸ A community had grown haphazardly around a noisy, 'ramshackle mill'. Accompanied by the 'hissing thud and chug of the steam engine', saws 'howled all day long' and 'sawdust and shriek filled the air'.⁴⁹ When there was no rain things became even worse:

Sawdust heaps all over the valley kindled and glowed and there was a haze of blue smoke everywhere ... fires broke out, striking fear into the bush settlements and producing smoke so dense the lowering sun looked like a burnished brass ball.⁵⁰

Nothing was scarier to the young Beardsley than the 'semi-wild cattle foraging among the dry firewood and potato and apple stores under the house, setting up alarming vibrations as they bumbled about'.⁵¹ These experiences confirmed for Beardsley that at Bell Hill his family had existed on the very margins of society. The Grey Valley mill communities were as much cut off from 'civilisation' as the better known and more pilloried coaltowns.

The times, however, were as out of joint for the timber industry as they were for coalmining. The widespread abundance of readily milled timber throughout the colony made it difficult for an isolated region that relied upon shipping its timber from notoriously difficult river ports. The early development of the local timber trade rested upon investment from outside the region and, by the outbreak of World War I, half the timber milled on the Coast was bound for the Australian market. It was not until the completion of the Otira rail tunnel in August 1923 that access to the Canterbury timber market became economically viable. But new attitudes to the management of the nation's forests were taking hold. The introduction of export quotas for indigenous timber, formulated after

47 Beardsley, *Sliding Down the Hypotenuse*, p. 18.

48 Beardsley, *Sliding Down the Hypotenuse*, p. 30.

49 Beardsley, *Sliding Down the Hypotenuse*, p. 30.

50 Beardsley, *Sliding Down the Hypotenuse*, p. 32.

51 Beardsley, *Sliding Down the Hypotenuse*, p. 36.

the creation of the New Zealand Forest Service in 1919, constrained the development of the West Coast timber industry that exported some two-thirds of its rimu-cut to Australia. Worse still, as the troubled 1920s slid imperceptibly into wider economic depression, the Canterbury market for timber failed to materialise. By mid-1931 nearly 70 per cent of the district's sawmills were idle or operating fitfully, and roughly half the timber workers were jobless.⁵² Timber stacks left to rot on the skids in the wet and damp as orders evaporated created a starkly surreal image.

The Beardsley family's experience at Bell Hill in the 1920s, as the mill community became part of a widening capitalist crisis, gave them an introduction to the world of radical activism. They had known little when they moved to the Coast of the mill settlements' reputation as bolt-holes for pacifists. As legend has it, during and after the Great War, the district was well-known, in Irish and socialist circles, as a refuge for men wishing to evade conscription and make common cause with local Irish nationalists. They were joined by a handful of radicals drawn to the district by its proximity to 'Red Blackball', the Grey Valley's own 'Little Moscow'. In 1926 the Communist Party established its national headquarters in the coaltown as part of a campaign to widen its influence among industrial workers nationally. Party members had been active in the creation of the West Coast Timber Workers' Union in 1918 and, by the time the Beardsleys arrived, its two most prominent officials, Alex Galbraith and Jack Doyle, had thrust themselves to the forefront of Grey Valley unionism.⁵³ For Eric's father, exposure to the radical critique of the bush ideologues proved life-changing. When the mills shuddered to a halt and the family returned to Christchurch he was an activist in the making.

Eric Beardsley's literary road to 'Blackball 1908' might thus be said to begin at Bell Hill. His understanding of those who later peopled his literary world was further sharpened by his family's experience of Depression life in the Christchurch suburb of Aranui. It was there that he discovered something of the diversity that existed within the radical working-class community. His recent memoir presents an evocative portrait of the

52 Peter McIntosh, 'The Timber Industry in Westland, 1865–1939', MA thesis, University of Canterbury, 1990, p. 175.

53 McIntosh, 'The Timber Industry in Westland', pp. 279–87; Kerry Taylor, 'Galbraith, Alexander', in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 1998, *Tē Ara—the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4g2/galbraith-alexander; Alexander Galbraith, 'Reminiscences on the Early History of The Communist Party of New Zealand', ms, 1949, author's collection; O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, pp. 263–64, 267; Richardson, 'Class, Community and Conflict', pp. 107–8.

‘Radicals, Rebels and RapsCALLIONS’⁵⁴ he knew in 1930s Aranui. At their centre was Sidney Huguenot Fournier d’Albe (1870–1960), a descendent of French Huguenots, scion of an aristocratic Alsace family and colourful activist. His life story is the stuff of socialist mythology. Educated at a German gymnasium and in England, his ideological pathway to Marx began with English Fabian Socialism in the 1890s and later embraced the revolutionary socialism that took root among the Welsh miners of the Rhondda Valley. There, during the Tonypandy Riots, he was struck heavily by a soldier’s rifle and sustained a facial scar that lent a certain menace to his appearance.

Blacklisted on the coalfields, Fournier went to sea, deserted in New York and reached New Zealand as the radical phase of pre-war industrial unionism reached its peak. He found work on the Wellington wharves, joined the Socialist Party and the Red Federation of Labour and, during the 1913 General Strike, became a member of the Central Strike Committee. In 1917 he was arrested and imprisoned for his role in a Free Speech Fight on Clyde Quay organised by the Conscription Repeal League in defiance of the War Regulations. He shared the exercise yard of the Terrace Gaol with a future Labour prime minister, Peter Fraser, and other radicals who became household names in the socialist circles of the day. Denied work on the wharves after his release from prison, he moved to Christchurch and was soon on the Committee of the General Labourers’ Union and conducting Marxist study groups at his home in Aranui.⁵⁵

Beardsley’s recollections provide a more intimate picture of Aranui’s apostle of international socialism. He recalls a man of ‘presence and passion’, a ‘verbose neighbour with revolutionary instincts’ whose ‘one empty eye socket, beaked nose, teeth like old piano keys and a voice to wake the dead marked him as a man to be reckoned with’.⁵⁶ His unmistakable voice that boomed above the hubbub of the city’s unemployed protest meetings was just as frequently heard by the young Beardsley in operatic song or reciting poetry. The general Christchurch community first became aware of Fournier in the mid-1920s when the *Lyttelton Times* ran a campaign aimed at exposing the possibility that then existed for dual membership of the New Zealand Labour Party and the New Zealand

54 Beardsley, *Sliding Down the Hypotenuse*, pp. 86–98.

55 Herbert Roth and E.G. Beardsley, ‘Sidney Huguenot Fournier d’Albe’, *New Zealand Monthly Review*, December 1960–January 1961, pp. 21–22; Beardsley, *Sliding Down the Hypotenuse*, pp. 86–88.

56 Beardsley, *Sliding Down the Hypotenuse*, pp. 11, 87.

Communist Party. ‘Communist Creep’, the paper alleged, was colouring the Labour Party deepest Red. Fournier’s response was to go down on his hands and knees and creep along the footpath while asking puzzled bystanders, ‘How is that for Communist creep?’⁵⁷

Beardsley’s observations about the colourful and exotic Fournier and Christchurch’s radical socialist circle are the backdrop to his parents’ involvement in the city’s unemployed protest movement. Those who took to the streets were a fluid and ever-fluctuating group that defied the controlling instincts of civic authorities and Communist Party officials: to the former, they were an unruly menace to property and a threat to order; to the latter, they constituted a ‘vast battleground of factions’⁵⁸ lacking clear ideological purpose. Connie and ‘Ted’ Beardsley were prominent figures in this radical community and typical of its independent character: Connie joined the Working Women’s Movement founded by the Communist Party in October 1934 to establish a base among working women; Ted was even more active within the General Labourers’ Union, among the jobless and within Marxist study groups. Neither escaped the conformist tendencies of the Communist Party. Connie was regarded by party officials as too individualistic and dominant a figure among the city’s unemployed single women. Ted’s unspecified ‘deviations’ brought expulsion and may be linked to an attempt by the party to distance itself from the ‘reformist’ Labour Party, which it denounced as a party of ‘disrupters and enemies of the working class’.⁵⁹

Blackball 08 grows from a desire to understand the experience of this diverse group of ‘rebels’. The capitalist convulsion of the 1920s and 1930s had cut the working class adrift from their workplaces and, in doing so, removed the cornerstone of community and family life. Beardsley’s perception of this dislocation is shaped by personal experience of the interaction between those who wanted ‘to change workers’ lives for the better’,⁶⁰ in the here and now, and those whose revolutionary enthusiasms demanded a more radical remaking of society. At the heart of his depiction of working-class life is the relationship between a dominant, masculinist culture rooted in the physicality of work and a socialist minority that aspired to create a more egalitarian and inclusive

57 Roth and Beardsley, ‘Sidney Huguenot Fournier d’Albe’, pp. 21–22.

58 Maureen Birchfield, *Looking for Answers: A Life of Elsie Locke*, Christchurch, University of Canterbury Press, 2009, p. 120.

59 Birchfield, *Looking for Answers*, p. 120.

60 Beardsley, *Sliding Down the Hypotenuse*, p. 87.

society. At Bell Hill and Aranui, Beardsley observed how this territory was negotiated within his own family. For his mother, Connie, industrial and political activism took its place alongside a love of literature and music and the demands of domesticity and family. She was drawn into public protest alongside destitute single women and housewives struggling to feed and clothe their children, and threw her support behind the Communist Party publication the *Working Woman*.⁶¹ Beardsley's reflections upon how his mother adapted to the more intense ideological fervour of his father led him to speculate about the gendered nature of early twentieth-century radicalism. Did the 'Brotherhood of Man', which his father and fellow activists hoped would be ushered in after the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, extend to women?

In locating women's oppression in the rise of class society, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had provided an answer. In their view, as production moved away from the household, women had become trapped in their individual families as the reproducers of society and cut off from production. The socialists within Beardsley's acquaintance recognised the significance of the Marxist analysis, but many struggled in their own lives to align theory and practice.⁶² Within the dominantly male, Communist fraternity of the 1920s and 1930s there was concern lest engagement with women's issues might expose the party to the reformist tendencies of 'bourgeois feminism' and divert attention away from the class struggle. Beardsley's firsthand observation of the progress of the 'feminist cause' within socialist circles is clearly demonstrated in *Blackball 08* when the feisty Elizabeth Rogers rebukes 'Paddy Webb' for his clumsy chauvinism: 'We don't only believe in socialism ... we live it'.⁶³

This awareness accurately points to a feature of radical and working-class life often submerged by the political and industrial contexts in which it is reconstructed. Beardsley rounds off *Blackball 08* by having Bob Semple reflect upon his generation's attempt to realise socialism in their time.⁶⁴ Of the Labour heroes of his day none is more associated with the masculine ethos in which the labour movement was born. He has been depicted as a revolutionary activist and rabble-rouser and as a vitriolic and vituperative orator whose physical presence intimidated opponents

61 Birchfield, *Looking for Answers*, p. 165.

62 Beardsley, *Sliding Down the Hypotenuse*, p. 59.

63 Beardsley, *Blackball 08*, p. 40.

64 Beardsley, *Blackball 08*, pp. 236–41.

and inspired followers. Neither contemporaries nor historians have found ideological consistency or coherence within his idiosyncratic version of socialism. Semple's preference for action rather than words has led a recent writer to describe his unique brand of radicalism as 'practical socialism'.⁶⁵ Firmly rooted in the rough and tumble working-class politics of pit top, street corner and protest march, Semple's socialism matched its surroundings.

Similarly, historians have had relatively little to say about the impact that radical or revolutionary activism had upon the families of individual ideologues. In his pioneering study *Labour's Path to Political Independence*, Barry Gustafson suggests that the radicals of Semple's era were 'more willing to subordinate their occupations, social life and even families to their political activities and ambitions'⁶⁶ than their rank-and-file labour contemporaries. A recent study by Carina Hickey provides a different perspective. By placing Semple's career within its domestic setting, Hickey demonstrates how the interplay between family, work and community created a distinctive working-class culture with its own style of leadership. When socialist activists like Semple moved around the country spreading the word, often spurned by timid hotel keepers, they relied upon the 'labour families' that formed the core of the organised working class.⁶⁷ Thus, when Semple, Webb or Hickey were at Puponga they were the guests of Hal and Jean Devanny.⁶⁸ Conversely, when the Devannys moved to Wellington after the closure of the Puponga mine they lived with Margaret Semple while Bob was imprisoned on Ripa (Ripapa) Island in Lyttelton Harbour. Jean Devanny subsequently recalled the experience of daily life in the Semple household: 'With motherly Mrs Semple, of typical working-class simplicity and quiet restful temperament and the whole of her unruly brood, I came to living on family terms'.⁶⁹

65 Carina Hickey, 'From Coal Pit to Leather Pit: Life Stories of Robert Semple', PhD thesis, Massey University, 2010.

66 Barry Gustafson, *Labour's Path to Political Independence: The Origins and Establishment of the New Zealand Labour Party, 1909–19*, Auckland, Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 48.

67 Hickey, 'From Coal Pit to Leather Pit', especially pp. 14, 67–70, 89, 175; Libby Plumridge, 'The Necessary but not Sufficient Condition: Christchurch Labour and Working-Class Culture', *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 19, no. 2, October 1985, pp. 130–50; Nolan, *Kin: A Collective Biography of a New Zealand Working-Class Family*.

68 Ferrier, *Jean Devanny*.

69 Ferrier, *Jean Devanny*, p. 28.

As relatively new coaltowns, Runanga and Blackball in the early twentieth century lacked the deep family traditions of their old world counterparts. Their experience of family was nonetheless shaped by the chain of migration that began with the exodus of British colliers in the second half of the nineteenth century. For Bob Semple, the 'family' story was a tale that began in Scotland. His father, John, was born in Paisley in 1816, transported to Australia in 1847 and settled on the western goldfields of New South Wales, close to Bathurst. It was there, near Sofala, that Bob Semple was born in 1873, the fourth of seven surviving children, behind three older sisters and ahead of two further sisters and a brother. Carina Hickey's careful reconstruction of the Semple family suggests a strong and persistent sibling bond that was over time to shape a genuinely Australasian sense of identity. At the hub of the wider Semple family was the firstborn daughter Mary Ann. Nine years older than her brother Bob, in 1882 she married George Knight, a miner, and was to have 12 children. After the death of her mother five years later, Mary assumed a matriarchal role within the extended Semple–Knight families.⁷⁰

Ever on the move from one mining field to another, the Semples were representative of the migrant mining families that moved about Australasian coalfields in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. From Sofala the family had moved to Lithgow and then to Outtrim in Gippsland, Victoria, before making their way, at the beginning of the twentieth century, to Western Australia. There they settled initially near Collie, where a new coalmine had opened in the 1890s, before moving to Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie. It was in this migratory phase that Semple's younger and only brother John had responded to the politically orchestrated, imperialistic fervour that followed the onset of the Boer War and joined the Collie unit of the 6th West Australian Mounted Infantry contingent. He sailed for Durban in late April 1901 and was killed in an exchange with Boer forces within weeks at Grobelaar Recht, near Carolina, in eastern Transvaal. His death helped Semple define his attitude to war in working-class terms: the greed of capitalists led to war and their patriotic posturing ensured workers paid the price. He subsequently interpreted the introduction of compulsory military training throughout Australasia as part of the move to shore up imperial defence in the aftermath of the Boer and the Russo-Japanese wars, and a move towards military conscription.⁷¹

70 Hickey, 'From Coal Pit to Leather Pit', pp. 66–69.

71 Hickey, 'From Coal Pit to Leather Pit', pp. 67–69.

Anti-militarism was part of the ideological baggage that Semple and his nephews took with them when they joined the 'Australasian invasion' that transformed the New Zealand labour movement in the first decade of the twentieth century.⁷² So also was family. Two of his sister Ann's children, Hamilton (1888–1964) and George Knight, worked alongside their uncle in the pits and as his acolytes in the socialist campaign at Runanga. The 19-year-old Hamilton was elected to the executive of the Paparoa Miners' Union and became part of the socialist drive that was shaping industrial unionism. In 1914, shortly after the Red Feds were routed, their leaders blacklisted and unions driven back into the arbitration system that they had sought to destroy, he returned to the western New South Wales coalfields. Hamilton's Runanga experience was formative, launching him on a career of union and political activism that, upon his return to Australia in 1914, paralleled that of his uncle.⁷³

Opposition to military training was a critical ingredient of the extended Semple household. From Runanga, as the industrial turmoil that surrounded the rise and fall of the Red Feds continued apace, he campaigned for the repeal of compulsory military training and was fined for not registering his son as required. With the outbreak of war in 1914 and the intensification of the campaign against the introduction of conscription on both sides of the Tasman, Semple and Knight were quickly in the thick of it. Frequently in Australia as agent for the New Zealand Miners' Federation, Semple played an active part in the protest that accompanied the conscription referenda of 1916 and 1917. In New Zealand, where the Military Services Bill 1915 made opposition to conscription liable to result in imprisonment, he was among a group of labour leaders imprisoned for their defiant, secular and socialist opposition to what they saw as an imperialist war.

In the years immediately after the Great War, Knight and Semple rose to prominence within their respective working-class communities in ways that propelled them to the forefront of the Australasian labour movement. As anti-conscriptionist, radical unionists, they struggled to get work on postwar coalfields. In New Zealand, Bob Semple was never to return to

72 Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, pp. 87–125.

73 Hickey, 'From Coal Pit to Leather Pit', pp. 67–70; Christopher Cunneen, *William John McKell: Boilermaker, Premier, Governor-General*, Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, 2000, pp. 113, 132; Michael Easson, ed., *The Achievements of Sir William McKell*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1988, pp. 38, 78, 123, 135–37, 142; 'Hamilton Knight' (1888–1964), New South Wales Legislative Assembly: Former Members, www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/members/formermembers.

the coalfield that made him a household name. His subsequent career, nonetheless, set a pattern that in broad terms was replicated by his nephew in New South Wales. In 1918, after serving nine months of a three-year jail sentence for opposing conscription, Semple successfully contested the by-election occasioned by the death of the sitting Labour member A.J. Hindmarsh, a victim of the influenza epidemic, to become the Labour MP for Wellington South. The wartime protest vote that took him into parliament did not survive the peace and he lost the seat in the 1919 general election. After this false start to his parliamentary career, he organised and worked alongside his son in a cooperative party of miners to build the Orongorongo tunnel as part of a city program to augment Wellington's water supply. While engaged on this city project he entered local politics as a Labour representative on the Wellington City Council (1925–35) and became national president of the NZLP. In 1928 he re-entered parliament for Wellington East and became Minister of Public Works and Railways (1935–46) in the first Labour Government.⁷⁴

In New South Wales, Hamilton Knight was blacklisted and resorted to adopting assumed names before being employed at the state mines in Lithgow. By the mid-1920s he was president of the Western New South Wales division of the Miners' Federation and vice-president of the national body. His subsequent political career mirrored that of his uncle. After entering local body politics in 1921, as an alderman for the Lithgow Municipal Council (1921–28), Knight was elected to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly in 1927 as the MLA for Hartley (1927–47). He was Minister for Labour and also Social Welfare in William John McKell's Labor ministries (1941–47) and retired to become a member of the Industrial Relations Commission.⁷⁵

The similarities of these thumbnail sketches of the pathway that took two union activists into politics point to the commonalities within the Australasian coalfields experience. It is in the nature of working-class political parties that they derive their initial impetus and support from within communities of workers and their families and frequently from single industry settlements that often, as at Denniston in the 1880s, began life as little more than a campsite in isolated, remote and rugged

74 Cunneen, *William John McKell*, pp. 113, 132; Easson, *The Achievements of Sir William McKell*, pp. 38, 78, 123, 135–37, 142; 'Hamilton Knight', New South Wales Legislative Assembly: Former Members.

75 Hickey, 'From Coal Pit to Leather Pit', pp. 66–68.

settings. The union preceded community, becoming the instrument of its creation and the collective vehicle through which its collective aspirations could be achieved. Francis Bennett, Blackball's doctor during the depth of the Great Depression, makes this point with great force in a chapter of his posthumously published autobiography.⁷⁶ 'Coercion at the Coalface', he writes, by a coal company that 'paid the wages and nothing more', left Blackball miners and their families to fend for themselves.⁷⁷ Such self-help was the bedrock of coalfields life and an expression of the collective aspiration whose origins lay in the solidarity of the pits.

Family groups hastened the transformation from camp to community by adding a layer of social bonding. This combination of family and occupational cohesion that underpinned the lives of the extended Semple family can be observed in other coalfields lives. As the eldest of eight children born to Frank and Annie (Beaven) Sherman in Fernie, British Columbia, Annie Balderstone came to Blackball in the aftermath of the Great War as part of the coalfields diaspora that spread miners and their families throughout the new world. Her father had been born in Gloucestershire, England, in 1869, spent his formative years in the Rhondda Valley, moved to Canada in 1898 and settled in Crow's Nest Pass, a raw frontier region on the border of British Columbia and Alberta. The evangelical non-conformist tradition together with more secularly inspired critiques of industrial capitalism that he had imbibed in the Welsh valleys transplanted well.⁷⁸ In Canada his radicalisation was rapid. In 1903 he became foundation president of District 18 of the United Mine Workers of America and, while never entirely at ease with its doctrinaire Marxism, joined the Socialist Party of Canada. In these union-building days, before the emergence of union bureaucracies, the life of the full-time labour activist was extraordinarily arduous and drew heavily upon individuals and their families. As the eldest daughter, Annie had become absorbed into the everyday preoccupations of the peripatetic union leader, travelling to conferences and acting as her father's personal secretary.

76 Bennett, *A Canterbury Tale*; Rice, 'Bennett, Francis Oswald', in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*.

77 Bennett, *A Canterbury Tale*, p. 131.

78 Allen Seager, 'Sherman, Frank Henry', in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 13, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, first published in 1994, biographi.ca/en/bio/Sherman_frank_henry_13E.html.

In this role she met and married William Balderstone from Hull, who had joined the flow of British miners to British Columbia and was making his way within union and socialist ranks.⁷⁹

The Canadian and family experience that Annie and Bill Balderstone brought to Blackball allowed them, in the years after the Great War, to make their mark within the Grey Valley coaltown. At Fernie they had experienced at close quarters union efforts to find a form of industrial organisation best suited to a remote mining town. Left, as were Blackball miners, to confront absentee owners with scant interest in the welfare of the community that provided their labour force, Western Canada's miners had first tried to overcome the weakness of their isolation by organising themselves as District 18 of the United Mine Workers of America. They came increasingly to the view that district or local autonomy was more appropriate to their circumstances. It was an attitude that grew naturally from an ingrained localism that had its origins in the peculiarities of the coalface and led officials to endorse a declaration of independence and campaign for the creation of a separate and progressive Canadian Federation of Labour. The lessons of this struggle were fresh in the minds of Annie and Bill Balderstone and the notion of local autonomy seemed equally appropriate in Blackball.

The Balderstones' arrival in Blackball coincided with a period of intense debate about the future shape of mining unionism. A new generation of radicals seeking to revive the traditional militant alliance with watersiders and seamen was in the process of building a new national miners' organisation, the United Mine Workers of New Zealand. For the Balderstones these were familiar coalfield debates and they were quickly immersed in them. By the early 1920s, they joined a cluster of activist couples already prominent in the community. When reviewers of Beardsley's *Blackball 08* suggest that his reconstruction of gender relations within the Rogers household is anachronistic and idealised in its feminist dimension, they fail to recognise this element of coalfields life.

79 Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, p. 196.



Figure 4: Ann and Bill Bromilow (seated left) with Blackball Socialists.

Source: Courtesy Bromilow family.

In Blackball, as in other coaltowns, there were few if any opportunities for women away from the home. Socialist study groups were one of few avenues in which women might participate alongside men. In part, this was because they began, as is shown in Figure 4, taken in Blackball shortly after the Tucker Time Strike, as household meetings of like-minded individuals.⁸⁰ Here we see Ann Bromilow standing in the second row, to the right of a placard proclaiming socialism as the only chance workers had of building a better world. She had come to Blackball from Wigan where she had worked as a screen-girl sorting coal. It was there she had met her husband Bill and they had migrated to Blackball a few years later as a married couple without children. Within the socialist community, Ann was an organiser, a writer and occasionally a speaker at public meetings outside the Blackball Miners' Hall. In this way, the socialist groups offered women a public presence in community life similar to that offered by the evangelical churches. Few in number and little known outside the mining townships in which they lived, the influence of these

⁸⁰ Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, pp. 3, 5, 108–9, 131, 160.

socialist women is difficult to assess. At moments of heightened activity—during the Tucker Time Strike, in anti-conscription protest and during the bitter and divisive union struggles of the 1930s—they came briefly and conspicuously to the forefront. In giving women a place in *Blackball 08*, Eric Beardsley is not reading history backwards. He is describing a feature of the working-class socialist community that had largely escaped casual observers.

If we run forward from 1908, we can trace, through the activities of a number of Blackball socialist couples, the continuing importance of a feminist dimension to Grey Valley socialism. Not all have left a public profile but among the most conspicuous were Jack and Sophie Doyle. Unlike the Bromilows and the Balderstones, they were not part of the mining community but were a part of the cluster of timber mill settlements across the Grey River from Blackball. A New Zealander of Irish descent, Jack was radicalised during the anti-conscription campaign and in the early 1920s was a leading figure in the Communist Party's attempt to establish an industrial base among the miners at Blackball and the nearby sawmilling communities near Ngahere and Nelson Creek. From within this band of activists, it was possible for women to make their mark in more public ways. For Sophie Doyle this meant primarily a life of writing: columns for the Communist Party monthly paper, the Miners' Page in the *Grey River Argus*, and a cyclostyled newsletter for local children that set out to counteract the imperialism engendered in the classroom and the militarism imitated by a local boy scouts group.⁸¹

In different and complementary ways, these activist couples represent the major strands of socialism at work within the Blackball mining community. As early twentieth-century migrants from British coalfields and veterans of the Tucker Time dispute, the Bromilows were 'stayers'—a couple for whom Blackball was the final destination on the migratory chain. The passage of the Balderstones from old world to new had been less direct and, by the time they reached the Grey Valley, they had imbibed a socialism infused with an amalgam of west Canadian separatism and the more traditional radicalism rooted in the peculiarities of time and place. For their part, the Doyles' road to prominence in Grey Valley coalfield politics followed a pathway as familiar in the old world as in the new: radicalisation within the anti-conscription movement and

81 Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, pp. 208–12; Richardson, 'Class, Community and Conflict', pp. 106–27.

the Irish cause and subsequent commitment to the Communist Party. In the Grey Valley, the notion of an 'unholy alliance between the Reds and the Greens' was first hatched before the war in the imagination of Grey Valley Liberals fearful of being ground down between the rival forces of the Reform Party and the predecessor of the Labour Party, the Social Democrat Party. Doyle was, as we have seen, long to remain the *bête noire* of Grey Valley socialists, whether Green or Red, until the 1950s when Kruschew's invasion of Hungary caused him to renounce Communism.⁸²

Thus, when Beardsley presents a gendered dimension of early twentieth-century Blackball radicalism, he is accurately describing an element of coalfields socialism. The notion that this is somehow reading history backwards is to misunderstand both the evolution of New Zealand feminism and the role of women in mining towns. Feminism did not stop with the achievement of the franchise and lie dormant until the arrival of what came to be called its 'second wave', nor was its influence confined to the middle-class households that were a prominent feature of early feminism everywhere. Coalfield feminists were even more invisible than their working-class sisters in the cities and towns. To airbrush them out of history would be to perpetuate the condescension displayed by the few contemporaries who bothered to take the ideological push and shove of coalfields life seriously. Within their individual coaltowns and among the wider mining community of the Grey Valley and the Buller, radical women activists were a vital part of the labour family that laid the foundation for the nation's first working-class government. Together, they represent an element of Grey Valley radicalism that deserves a greater place in the history of both region and nation. When Angus McLagan, the Blackball Scot from the Midlothian coalfields, secretary of the United Mine Workers of New Zealand and the New Zealand Communist Party, took his place in the Labour Cabinet in 1941, his wife Sophie (formerly Doyle) became the most nationally prominent of the Blackball women activists.

In many respects, *Blackball 08* stands within a coalfields literary tradition that reaches back to the old world. Its imaginative recreation of an historic event that had already become a sustaining myth came at a critical juncture as that myth was beginning to fracture. Increasingly abandoned as the talisman of working-class authenticity by Labour's political leaders, except

82 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, pp. 263–64.

as an occasional adornment at election time, the story of *Blackball 08* had been left to historians and a fading oral tradition. For a generation of labour supporters and union members, it stimulated a reassertion of the socialist principles upon which working-class attitudes to capitalism were grounded. It stands on the cusp of, and forms part of, the remaking of a literary relationship between people and place, first kindled in the 1960s. It marks the arrival of a second wave of historical writing grounded as much in the distinctive relationship between people and place as that which lay at the heart of its foundational generation. *Blackball 08* reaffirms the authenticity of battles long ago. In doing so, it prepares the ground for historical perspectives that, as the following chapter suggests, confront the consequences for the Coast of perhaps the most significant transformation of modern-day capitalism.

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