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## BEYOND THE 1960s II

### The Historians

The three ingredients of West Coast history that formed the core of its written history—gold, coal and the strong Irish presence—have continued to preoccupy historians. They do so in ways that reflect the changes making themselves felt within the region as the age of industrial capitalism stuttered to its close. The continuity is marked by a greater awareness of the distinctiveness of the West Coast's exposure to the changes that were transforming the nation in the latter stages of the twentieth century. Parallel to, and at times converging with, this expanding body of regional writing, a popular narrative took root where the Coast is cast as an industrial wasteland increasingly being left behind in the new economic order. It was a process that contained the potential to obliterate the places and associated identities that had provided the fabric of regional New Zealand. The historians of the West Coast discussed here confront sometimes directly, and at other times more obliquely, this transformation and the local responses to it. Collectively, their work constitutes a distinctive regional voice that refuses to fade quietly into the past as a colourful reminder of the way things once were.

Within the second-wave of West Coast historical writing, the Irish experience has continued to occupy a prominent position. As historian Donald Akenson has pointed out, the West Coast was 'the closest thing New Zealand history has had to an Irish ghetto'.<sup>1</sup> Even more than in the colony at large, on the Coast Irish meant Catholic. The district has

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1 Donald H. Akenson, *Half the World from Home: Perspectives on the Irish in New Zealand 1860–1950*, Wellington, Victoria University Press, 1990, p. 202.

thus provided an ideal environment for exploring what has been seen as the most distinctive feature of New Zealand Catholicism during its first 80 years—a prevailing pattern of French priests serving predominantly English and Irish congregations.<sup>2</sup> Neil Vaney examined this dual tradition as it developed throughout a West Coast whose parameters he defines as stretching from Karamea in the north to Jackson Bay in the south. He sees the working compromise that developed as being rooted in the need to overcome the difficulties of isolation, terrain, climate and a pressing need for religious and social cohesion. On the Coast, French cleric and Irish laity worked at the sharp end of Miles Fairburn's idealised construction of life in colonial New Zealand—an environment characterised by the transient, unattached individual, adrift in an environment that offered few communal defences. Vaney's study suggests that, within even the most inhospitable environment, the Catholic Church provided an important collective means of constructing a more congenial way of easing adjustment to colonial life. It is perhaps a measure of the importance of the French clergy in this process, as O'Farrell has argued, that when the flow of French clergy ended in the 1920s and Irish clergy came to dominate, West Coast Catholicism lost more than it gained.

This change has been reconstructed by O'Farrell in *Invisible Kingdoms* (1990) when he reflects upon the West Coast history of his family. He brilliantly describes the Greymouth Catholic quarter as it had developed on the south bank of the Grey River in an area bounded by Chapel, Tainui, Alexander and Puketahi streets. At its centre, standing slightly above the town, was St Patrick's Church. Designed by F.W. Petre, the colony's leading exponent of Catholic Church architecture, its completion in 1888 was proudly hailed as staking out Catholicism's place in the town and its determination to play a role in the district's future. Behind the church clustered the Catholic schools: a convent run by the Sisters of Mercy, a boys' school run by the Marist Brothers and a community hall that acted as a base for an increasingly active Hibernian society. These were the visible signs of a cohesiveness that flowed readily enough, as O'Farrell has shown, into politics.

The politicisation was at its most obvious where education was concerned. Since the *Bowen Act 1877*, primary education provided by the state in New Zealand was intended to be free, secular and compulsory. Outside this

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2 Neil Vaney, 'The Dual Tradition. Irish Catholicism and French Priests in New Zealand: The West Coast Experience, 1865–1910', MA thesis, University of Canterbury, 1976.

there had developed a network of segregated Catholic schools—effectively a private system funded by fees and donations—that was essentially Irish and Catholic. The Irish Catholic community of the Grey Valley was in no doubt that they confronted an increasingly hostile and overwhelmingly Protestant educational system. The struggle by Greymouth Catholics to maintain their educational institutions, as elsewhere, drew more tightly the bonds of nationality, religion and, increasingly, those of class. To O’Farrell, as we have seen, the rise of the Red Feds, the new disciples of socialism, coincided with a stage in the evolution of the Grey Valley’s Irish Catholic community. Ireland and Irish issues became less important in the lives of individual Catholics and Catholicism more generally. It was a shift in attitude that was hastened, O’Farrell believed, by the arrival of his parent’s generation from Ireland in the early twentieth century. The product of a calmer Ireland, they brought a fresh determination to build anew.

Lyndon Fraser’s compelling recent analysis of the West Coast Irish experience, *Castles of Gold: A History of New Zealand’s West Coast Irish* (2007), places these developments within a broader context.<sup>3</sup> His richly textured monograph skilfully uses the approaches of demographer, ethnographer, family historian and biographer to produce a path-breaking study of the Irish community within a regional New Zealand framework. It follows the fortunes of the Irish from the beginning of the gold rush until the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922. His conclusions confirm and strengthen major elements of the West Coast experience proffered by May, Pearson and O’Farrell. The Irish, like the wider gold rush population May described, frequently came to the Coast from Australia and their lives continued to possess an Australasian dimension. Fraser also endorses O’Farrell’s view that the attachment of Irish migrants to ‘home’ was seldom:

Nationalist or ideological, or related to Ireland as a whole. It was quite a particular affection for and loyalty to, a small group of people—immediate family and close friends—and a certain limited area or specific place—in my family’s case a group of villages and towns in central Tipperary: Ballinderry, Borrisokane, Nenagh, Birr. Dublin or Cork or Limerick or Belfast were irrelevant to this commitment: they were virtually foreign places, some of them totally unknown.<sup>4</sup>

3 Fraser, *Castles of Gold*.

4 Fraser, *Castles of Gold*, p. 156. The quotation comes from Patrick O’Farrell, ‘Catholicism on the West Coast: Just How Irish Is It?’, *New Zealand Tablet*, 3 May 1973, p. 54.

Something of this evolution from Irish Catholic to Greymouth Catholic was evident in political events taking place as O'Farrell, May and Pearson constructed their particular 'West Coasts'. In 1960, local Catholic activists celebrated the selection of 'Paddy' Blanchfield<sup>5</sup> to succeed J.B. (James) Kent as Labour candidate for the Westland electorate. Following, as he did, three Australians and a Scot, Blanchfield was the district's first New Zealand-born Labour MP. It is hard to imagine a candidate more truly representative of Greymouth Catholic Labour. The 48-year-old baker and chairman of the local branch of the Labour Party had been born in the town in 1911 as the 'unholy alliance' of the Reds and the Greens was undermining the Liberal Party's support in the district. Blanchfield had been involved in civic affairs for more than 20 years: deputy mayor of Greymouth for four years; and a member at various times of the Grey Electric Power Board, Westland Catchment Board and the local Licensing Committee. His enthusiasms were many and varied; twice West Coast steer-riding champion, he had played senior rugby league for Marist and served terms as president and secretary of both the club and the West Coast Rugby League. His voice was familiar up and down the Coast as commentator for both the racing and trotting fraternities.

In 1947, as O'Farrell has described, Greymouth's conservative Catholic Labour activists had been unable to find a candidate to succeed James O'Brien, and quietly acquiesced in the selection of James Kent. Thirteen years later, Blanchfield was publicly endorsed by the Left in terms that asserted regional independence. The suspicion that national officials of the Labour Party were about to impose their own choice on the electorate provoked a public rebuke from the Communist mayor of Brunner: such decisions, he wrote, should rest 'with the democratic mass'. Whatever else they were, the succession of Grey Valley political representatives—Webb, Holland, O'Brien, Kent and now Blanchfield—they were of the place. Greymouth was just that: Greymouth, local. A mixture of the 'Red and the Green' and the in-between.

That the historian's voice in post-1960 West Coast should find its strongest and most persistent expression in coalmining disasters should surprise no one. The litany of past tragedies was imprinted in the histories that mining communities passed down through the generations. The mass grave at Stillwater for 33 of the 65 miners who died in the Brunner disaster

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5 Patrick Blanchfield (1911–1980) was MP for Westland, 1960–72; West Coast, 1972–78.

of 1896 was for many in the 1940s and 1950s a grim and decaying reminder of how great a cost mining families had borne. My paternal grandmother lived almost directly across the road from the grave and regularly took me as a youngster on her visits to the grave. Its massive size was both frightening and somehow defiant. Bob Henderson's 1956 poem, 'Stillwater',<sup>6</sup> powerfully captures its simple grandeur:

No tall church spire marks these lonely grounds,  
Where virgin bush in silent peace surrounds.  
No generations past lie sleeping here  
In Land of Promise for the Pioneer.  
Seldom the name of Mother, Wife or Daughter  
Is spelt on these grey headstones at Stillwater.

Here in this hallowed ground the tombstones new;  
Each in modest form but silent view,  
Tell the brief story of a miner's death.  
In Brunner, Tyneside or in Coal-Pit Heath.  
A comrade seeks his service to relate:  
No less bare justice pleads his cruel fate.

In 1971, as I was about to follow the footsteps of Patrick O'Farrell to Canberra to begin a study of miners and steelworkers in the Wollongong area, I took a photo of the mass grave just in case, in my absence, it succumbed to the relentless growth of the West Coast bush. I scarcely needed the photo to keep the memory alive. The coalfields of the Illawarra region that were to preoccupy me for the next few years possessed their own grim monument to a disaster that took 96 lives at the Mt Kembla mine in 1902. Born of the same phase of lightly regulated industrial capitalism, the two disasters pointed to a universal reality of coalfields life. Both gave rise to studies that throw much light on the nature of mining disasters and their place in community consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

Such studies were part of a 'greening of the memory'<sup>8</sup> and owed much to the lingering death of the traditional coalfields. Decaying coaltowns, and the monuments that recorded starkly their worst fears, spoke with a dignity that demanded a continuing place in the historical landscape.

6 Bob Henderson, 'Stillwater', in Blackball History Group, eds, *Blackball Beckons: A Selection of Poems from Blackball, Moonlight and Surrounding Districts*, Westland, NZ, Blackball History Group, 2000.

7 Stuart Piggin and Henry Lee, *The Mt Kembla Disaster*, Sydney, Oxford University Press/Sydney University Press, 1992; Brian Wood, *Disaster at Brunner*, Greymouth, Brian Wood, 1996.

8 Piggin and Lee, *The Mt Kembla Disaster*, pp. 236–37.

They invoke overtones of utopian solidarity—a desire to perpetuate the memory or create an enduring myth that speaks to the mainsprings of humanity. They stand apart also from the sordid reality of the disasters of which they are a product as historical landmarks of occupational, community and regional identity. They possessed a largely unrealised potential to become sites of radical protest against the remorseless unfolding of capitalism's cycles of growth and contraction as expressed within the limits set by coal seam and technology. The 1896 Brunner mine disaster cast a long shadow throughout the Grey Valley coalfield, though its role in the radical upsurge that followed at Runanga and Blackball has been rarely acknowledged. Wherever Brunner miners and their families went in the aftermath of the disaster, their presence was a reminder of a brutal truth of coalfields life: death in the pits was an ever-present possibility, either as part of a single largely unremarked mishap, or by some larger conflagration from which no generation of miner was spared.<sup>9</sup>

By the 1960s, Brunner symbolised disaster and decay. The re-enactment of the discovery of the Brunner coal seam that marked the district's participation in the celebration of Westland's Golden Century faithfully recorded that past. It evoked eulogy and commemoration but essayed no vision of the future. Brunner had played its part in the West Coast story and the future would depend upon new vantage points. By this simple recognition of economic reality, the mayor and councillors of a soon to be legislated out of existence Brunner Borough Council effectively gifted Brunner to the historians. It is perhaps the tragedy of the demise of 'King Coal' in the Grey Valley that the decline was lingering and painful in nature. The sequence of pit closures that spelt the end of the traditional coalmining communities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century did not signal the exhaustion of coal deposits. There was always the hope that new technologies and new markets would breathe life into the coaltowns. Coalmining did not immediately become a 'sunset industry', but increasingly exhibited the characteristics of an industry in retreat.

These uncertain times paradoxically deepened the bonds of place and identity just as they were undercut by political and ideological change. The dominance of the National Party during the postwar decades removed the political will to sustain recently nationalised mines. In the

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9 John Benson, *British Coalminers in the Nineteenth Century: A Social History*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1980, pp. 28–64.

years that followed the 1951 lockout of the nation's waterside workers, Grey Valley miners accepted that industrial defeat would usher in change. They had struck in protest against the imposition of draconian emergency regulations by the Sidney Holland National Government. After the crushing of the watersiders and the subsequent return of the government in a snap election, the miners were left exposed to the retribution of a rampant Holland. In the years that followed, it became an article of faith in the coaltowns that the confrontation with the National Government marked the beginning of the end for Grey Valley mining communities.<sup>10</sup>

Over the next half century, economic, technological and attitudinal changes redefined the Grey Valley and its place in the West Coast identity. The most significant and obvious change was the demise of the traditional coalmining town that had grown up around the pit that gave it life. Changes in transport had, since the 1940s, been making it increasingly common for miners and their families to live in the bigger towns and travel daily to work by train or bus. The wind back of production accelerated the trend until pit closure left the once vibrant mining towns to find roles in a regional economy that was struggling to establish its place in the remaking of the national economy after Britain's decision to join the European Common Market in 1972. Unlike mining communities on the Buller coalfield, Blackball and Runanga ceased to function as traditional coaltowns, but neither imitated the demise of the goldmining towns that preceded them and quietly assumed the mantle of ghost town.

The two mining towns now sit like defiant reminders of a past that refuses to die. The untapped resources of the nearby Paparoa Range feed the hope that the right combination of new technology and rising demand for coal might encourage a new generation of capitalists to breathe new life into 'King Coal'. It is precisely this stubborn refusal to abandon a past hard won that lies at the heart of a Grey Valley identity and informs much of the region's recent historical writing. The detailed studies of the mining disasters that have punctuated the Grey Valley's history have been accompanied by community histories seeking to record a fading past. There has been a tendency to promote the Grey Valley coaltowns, and especially Blackball, as the birthplace of the New Zealand Labour Party. To a Labour Party hijacked in the 1980s by a leadership that traduced its socialist heritage, the decaying Grey Valley coaltowns offered a symbolic means of reconnecting with its past: to many, the

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10 Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, pp. 284–303.

rediscovery of the socialist Grey Valley coaltowns was simply grist to the mill of the developing tourist industry; others found irony in the growing interest in the legacy of industrial workers whose dominance within the labour movement had vanished and whose exposure to the unfettered forces of corporate capitalism increasingly mirrored that of the late nineteenth century.

On the 19 January 1967, I was sitting in the work room of the *Greymouth Evening Star* offices working steadily through the newspaper's files. News of an explosion at the Strongman mine near Runanga brought first a stunned silence and then a rush to have something ready for the early afternoon paper. From its opening in 1939, Strongman had been the flagship of the first Labour Government's mining program and the standard-setter for the mining industry. It was, at the time of the explosion, New Zealand's largest underground mine—employing some 240 men—and its impeccable safety record was jealously guarded. The journalists, printers and compositors and general staff who gravitated to the newsroom as the tale of rescue and recovery unfolded were scarcely independent observers: they had brothers, fathers, husbands, relations and friends working at Strongman. Were they working that shift?<sup>11</sup>

Nineteen men lost their lives that day at the Strongman mine. It was the Grey Valley's worst mine disaster since 65 men were killed at Brunner in 1896. The explosion had sent a fireball through a section of the mine and smoke and firedamp (methane gas) made recovery of the bodies hazardous. Fifteen were recovered on the day of the explosion and it was several weeks before a further two bodies were able to be brought to the surface. It proved impossible to recover the final two bodies and the tunnel was sealed off. Within the mining fraternity, the soul-searching that began almost immediately, especially among those who worked in the pits alongside the men who had perished in the explosion, focused on the individual practices and procedures upon which they collectively relied. In the words of a truism of the pits: 'a miner's life is always in the hands of his workmates'. Nothing imperilled lives underground more than a general complacency that permitted a gradual erosion of safety standards and a casualness in following the letter of regulations. Such also was the verdict of a Commission of Enquiry set up to report on the Strongman disaster.

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11 Peter Ewen, *Strongman: Three Score and More*, Greymouth, Peter Ewen, 2006.

The explosion at Strongman inevitably stirred memories of Brunner. By now the mass grave at Stillwater had become very largely separated from the emotional outpourings with their overtones of utopian community solidarity and had slipped quietly into the realm of myth and family legend. The death of Brunner as a coaltown and the distance of the grave from Runanga and Blackball diminished its historical power. By raising questions about the long-term viability of underground coalmining in the Grey Valley, the Strongman disaster brought past, present and future to the fore: would Runanga and Dunollie, Blackball, Wallsend, Dobson and Taylorville mimic Brunner and disappear as the coaltowns had done?

It is now possible to see that the demise of the older Grey Valley coaltowns had begun in the late 1940s. By the late 1960s, as the district's second century began, the Coast became increasingly at the mercy of changing economic and social goals as the nation sought to respond to Britain's decision to join the Common Market. Thereafter, the Coast was to take its place among the supplicants seeking to piece together a means of encouraging local enterprise by way of regional assistance programs, grants and subsidies. It was a dispiriting exercise. Small clothing manufacturing plants were established by Lane Walker and Rudkin in the larger centres—Hokitika, Greymouth, Reefton and Westport. In the wake of mine closure, Blackball leaders had confronted the reality of small, relatively isolated industrial communities—their populations were too small and too male. At the political level, the appetite for regional development evaporated throughout the 1970s and spectacularly so in the Grey Valley. This is clearly seen in the case of the short-lived Matai Industries. In the lead up to the 1972 general election, an understanding developed between Norman Kirk, the leader of the Opposition, and Kevin Meates, a Christchurch businessman, that a Labour Government would support the establishment of a woodware, metalware and plastics industry on the Coast. Four factories were subsequently opened in Reefton, Greymouth, Runanga and Westport, employing 347 workers. In office the Kirk Labour Government's enthusiasm for the venture waned.<sup>12</sup>

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12 Barry Gustafson, *His Way: A Biography of Robert Muldoon*, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 2001, pp. 131–34; Margaret Hayward, *Diary of the Kirk Years*, Queen Charlotte Sound and Wellington, Cape Catley and Reed, 1981, pp. 117, 131.

The eventual collapse of Matai Industries was as sudden as it was prophetic. In early 1974 the company was placed in receivership and the protracted process of litigation that followed was a reminder that, as the Chief Justice was to put it, political promises were not binding contracts.<sup>13</sup> These words found fertile ground in a popular interpretation of West Coast history that adds a 'sense of betrayal' to the more familiar themes of isolation and apartness. The failure of Matai Industries to fulfil the hopes of those who put their faith in state-sponsored regional development marks the end of a generation of thinking about the Coast. The economic malaise of the early 1970s brought to an end, as Jim McAloon has written, the 'long global post war boom' and the New Zealand economy 'fell into the worst crisis since the Great Depression'.<sup>14</sup> On the Coast, the downturn came as a crisis within a crisis. Over the next two decades the region adjusted, as best it could, to the ideological leap back into the laissez-faire ways of the nineteenth century that put the region at the mercy of the market place.

This complex web of historical reflection, tragedy and economic downturn gave rise to new trends in historical writing about the region. The initial focus was Brunner rather than Blackball or Runanga and the impetus came from within the Grey Valley. The immediate impulses at work behind this second wave of historical writing were intertwined and complementary. They drew upon an increasing national interest in the historic place as a marker of the past and definer of local identity. Grey Valley enthusiasts successfully promoted the claims of the Brunner mine site as an industrial archaeological project for what was then the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. They were also expressed in a distinctive form of community theatre. In 1977, Susan Batty and Thelma Eakin, teachers at Greymouth High School, led their students in researching and producing *The Shadow of the Valley: A Play about the Brunner Mine Disaster, 1896*.<sup>15</sup> Their stated intention 'was not just to compile a factual account, but also to discover and record the people's experience of the Brunner mine disaster'.<sup>16</sup> The first and subsequent performances in Greymouth before audiences that 'belonged' were 'deeply moving' occasions.<sup>17</sup>

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13 Meates v Attorney General [1979] 1 NZLR, p. 415; Meates v Attorney General [1983] NZLR, p. 308.

14 Jim McAloon, *Judgements of All Kinds: Economic Policy-Making in New Zealand, 1945–1984*, Wellington, Victoria University Press, 2013, p. 150.

15 Susan Batty and Thelma Eakin, *The Shadow of the Valley: A Play about the Brunner Mine Disaster, 1896*, Wellington, Oxford University Press, 1980.

16 Batty and Eakin, *The Shadow of the Valley*, p. 7.

17 Wood, *Disaster at Brunner*, p. 229.

In the words of Peter Hooper, Grey Valley teacher, poet and novelist, the play was: ‘our own history transmitted into an art form’.<sup>18</sup> In sentiment and community engagement, there is a clear connection with the outpourings of Edward Hunter, the migrant Scottish coalminer who, as Billy Banjo, had chronicled West Coast coalfields life in ballad and verse when coal was king and the Red Feds were in revolutionary mood. Hunter had returned to Glasgow shortly after World War I in the wake of the death of his wife and, in the decades that followed, found his radical voice alongside the ‘Clydeside Reds’ and served a term as deputy mayor of Glasgow. By the 1960s he was engaging the workers of Scottish mining towns in what he called ‘community dramatic musical plays’ similar in spirit to that emerging in the Grey Valley.<sup>19</sup> And, as we have already seen, *The Shadow of the Valley* was soon to be followed by Meryvn Thompson’s highly personalised rendition of West Coast mining life, *Coaltown Blues*.<sup>20</sup>

*The Shadow of the Valley* was timely. Its reception locally may be located in a mood of nostalgia that had its roots in an awareness of the passing of an age. The desire to capture the lived experience of a community before it was too late interacted with and was an expression of a ‘greening of memory’ and a proclamation of local identity. It thus helped shape contemporary attitudes to the past in ways that ultimately produced visible and permanent recognition of Brunner’s place in the evolution of the Grey Valley. The mass grave at Stillwater was spruced and thrust back into public consciousness. The brick kilns that had been so dominant a feature of the industrial environment surrounding the Brunner mine entrance stood proudly visible once more as excavation and restoration work rescued the past from the bush that threatened to overwhelm it. The interpretative aids that signposted the plant and processes that had made Brunner the hub of the Grey Valley coal industry until the disaster of 1896, spoke of the past in ways that drew attention to present predicament.<sup>21</sup>

The study of the disaster as a West Coast event and a phenomenon in its own right began within this framework. *Disaster at Brunner* (1996), a commemorative history by Brian Wood, is a path-breaking and insightful account of the making of the disaster and the community responses to

18 Wood, *Disaster at Brunner*, p. 229.

19 Richardson, “Billy Banjo”; Pat Moloney and Kerry Taylor, *On the Left: Essays on Socialism in New Zealand*, Dunedin, University of Otago Press, 2002, p. 85.

20 Thompson, *Coaltown Blues* (1986).

21 Geoffrey G. Thornton, *New Zealand’s Industrial Heritage*, Wellington, A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1982, pp. 99–103.

it. Here, and in his later *Coal Gorge and the Brunner Suspension Bridge* (2004),<sup>22</sup> a fascinating heritage and environment study, Wood has ensured that historians have finally done Brunner and its people justice. What defines both works is a steadfast determination to understand the relationship between people and place in its complexity. This is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the final section of *Disaster at Brunner*, ‘Memorialising the Disaster’. Two chapters, ‘Disaster Memory’ and ‘Disaster Commemoration’, trace the ways in which Brunner’s past and present have continued to march side by side.<sup>23</sup> The mass grave at the Stillwater cemetery was, as Bob Henderson’s poem suggests, defined by its colonial and pioneering setting. Time had not yet bestowed a sense of continuity or permanence. The notion of a congregation of the Christian dead that once dominated churchyards and symbolically linked them to the congregation of the living was giving way to more secular cemeteries. As the dead increasingly came to serve the new gods of memory and history within a more secular society, gravestones and monuments regained their importance as sites of individual, family and community (both local and national) identity.

The immediate concern in the aftermath of the explosion was to answer the question—where are the dead? The desire to recover the bodies had in 1896 answered a powerful human need to keep the dead close. At Brunner, all bodies were recovered by workmates and miners from Blackball, some of whom were said to have run the 20 kilometres to relieve exhausted rescue teams drawn from a workforce whose number had been effectively halved by the explosion. It was the miners too, whether from nearby Blackball or from Brunner, whose task it was to dig ‘The Big Grave’. Initially conceived as the burying place of all 65 victims, the mass grave at Stillwater ultimately became the resting place of 33 miners as family and religious preferences dictated. In its scale and form, the large concrete-stepped plinth with obelisk pointing towards the heavens, framed by an ornate wrought-iron railing, was a stark grave and a moving memorial to all the 65 miners killed in the explosion.

Erected by relatives and friends, it expressed the historical bonds of occupation that reach back to the old world and the developing ones of place that together proclaimed a singular solidarity. The list of names enshrined on the mass burial plot proclaimed community solidarity—

22 Brian Wood, *Coal Gorge and the Brunner Suspension Bridge*, Greymouth, Brian Wood, 2004.

23 Wood, *Disaster at Brunner*, pp. 217–48.

Brunner miners buried together. In the process of mourning, the grave was also a tangible way of ‘recuperating the dead’ or keeping them alive in the community of the living. This form of collective mourning and commemoration has, in modern times, come to invoke the dead to serve secular gods. The rituals of time and place that prevailed in Brunner in 1896 were cast in a more religious mode and sought to ease the dead out of this world and safely into the next.

Over time, the ‘Big Grave’ at the Stillwater cemetery became a place of commemoration. The Brunner community was never able to recapture the pre-eminent role it had proudly fashioned as a coaltown and industrial complex. The future lay with the newer Grey Valley mining communities developing at Runanga and Blackball. Brunner’s population had been declining before the explosion (by nearly 600 between 1891 and 1896). Falling demand for coal led to ‘short-time’ in the pits and, in keeping with coalfields tradition, the young men had moved on. Brunner was in no shape to weather the impoverishment that came in the wake of the disaster. The political and legal processes that sought to explain the disaster and determine where responsibility lay brought scant improvement. A royal commission exonerated the mining company and attributed the disaster to an unknown miner who had fired a blown-out shot that backfired and ignited coal dust, setting off a series of explosions throughout the mine. A subsequent case for negligence brought against the mining company in 1898 was successful but ultimately overturned by a Court of Appeal decision in favour of the company’s English debenture holders. In 1906, a decade after the disaster, the mine closed and the adjacent St Kilda pit followed in 1921, leaving small cooperative groups as the only coalmining activity at Brunner.

The legacy of the Brunner disaster was thus in the hands of an ever-shrinking community. Until the formation of the Brunner Old Boys’ Association in 1930, remembrance was private rather than public. For many years local shopkeepers marked the anniversary of the disaster by closing their shops to mark ‘Black Thursday’. Thereafter reunions of the association and anniversaries (of the Brunner Borough Council, European settlement of the district and of the disaster itself) became occasions of public commemoration. Such civic and public ceremonies as occurred took traditional form—the laying of wreaths, the idealisation of the mining community—and were expressed in the sentiments of secular religion. A notable feature of the commemorations was the absence of any overt attempt to link them to protest—union or otherwise. As an

affirmation of an ongoing partnership of the living and the dead they stood in opposition to the logic of the marketplace that detached economics from society and reduced it to abstract calculus, assigning individuals the status of mere units of economic calculation.

There was a noticeably sharper and more political edge to the commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the Brunner disaster and the laying of a wreath by the mayor of Brunner at the 'Big Grave' in 1956. The ranks of the Brunner Old Boys' Association had thinned and union officials began to play a bigger role within community affairs. The new tone was in part a product of a union militancy grounded in the ideological gulf that had grown between the industrial and political arms of the labour movement in the aftermath of the 1951 lockout. It was also rooted in the frustrations that developed as the future prospects of Grey Valley coaltowns narrowed. If frequently less remarked, the Brunner disaster had also played a role in sharpening the push for safety in the mines that formed a constant element of mining unionism from the days of the Red Feds until the election of the first Labour Government in 1935. The new edge of the 1950s might also be viewed as reconnecting the commemoration of the disaster at the grave site with the community solidarity of work and place proclaimed in the commemoration of all 65 miners killed in the Brunner explosion.

Few of those gathered at Stillwater in 1956 could remember the events of 1896. Fewer still would have needed reminding of the capriciousness of the pits. Nine miners working in the nearby Dobson mine, little more than a kilometre down the Grey Valley from Brunner, had lost their lives in 1926 in an explosion reported to have been heard 10 kilometres away at Runanga. One of those killed was James Richards (47) whose father and uncle had died in the Brunner explosion 30 years earlier. If the random hand of fate captures accurately the national profile of Dobson mineworkers, the passage of time had worked little change. Five of the nine men who died as a result of the Dobson explosion had come from British coalfields and two of their number were newcomers from the depressed Scottish coalfields. Like the British colliers of the nineteenth century who preceded them, they and their families had carried with them to the Grey Valley the legacy of disasters past they had absorbed on the coalfields of the old world.

The past was ever present. Its monuments, mass grave and memorials stood nobly amid sealed mine entrances and crumbling mine buildings—the telltale signs of an industry struggling for survival and a region in search of a future. The disaster at Strongman (1967) brought past and present together once more. The mine's status as flagship of several generations of union endeavour and standard-setter for mine safety unsettled the mining community. Had laxness permeated the attitudes and practices that had served them well? This sober reflection upon the real and ever-present danger of the pits is evident in Peter Ewen's *Strongman: Three Score and More* (2006). Ewen was of the place. His coalminer father's *Far from the Sun*, published the year before the disaster, was an insightful insider's recreation of life at Runanga in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>24</sup> The Ewens trace their mining pedigree back to the migrant miners who left the Yorkshire coalfields for Denniston in 1879 and despatched men to Brunner in 1896 to help in the aftermath of the disaster. To Peter Ewen, the 65 miners who perished at Brunner were 'soldiers of industry'<sup>25</sup> who in the Grey Valley assumed an importance akin to that bestowed upon the men of Gallipoli.

Ewen's metaphor implies the notion of the class war. Equally it embraces the idea of territory and casts the miners as the standard bearers of a local identity under siege. The disaster of 1967 stands at the heart of his history of the Strongman mine. It is tempting to see his discussion of the likely cause of the disaster, written four years before the Pike River explosion that took 29 lives on 19 November 2010, as pointing to changes in mining practices that were putting lives at risk in the mines just as pit closures eroded the ranks of experienced miners. As their number diminished, so too did the body of instinctive wariness and respect for the regulations and procedures that recognised the peculiarities of individual pits. Ewen's account provides space for viewpoints from within this working community. Nowhere more effectively than in the reflections of two of the district's most respected mining officials: Harry Bell, a former chief inspector of mines and Strongman manager (1974–77), and Tom Brazil, chief inspector of mines and manager of Strongman (1955–63). Their discussion of the difficulties maintaining safety standards within an environment that sanctioned lower levels of inspection prompts Ewen to lament the passing of an age 'when genuine Mine Inspectors carried their tools of the profession and regularly walked the beat'.<sup>26</sup>

24 Ewen, *Far from the Sun*.

25 Cited in Wood, *Disaster at Brunner*, pp. 245–46.

26 Ewen, *Strongman*, p. 71.

In its timing and its argument, this critique was part of an emergent regional protest. It was a protest that was both complicated and intensified by the growing national debate about the conservation of the natural environment. The continued milling of the West Coast's luxuriant native bush, the nation's last substantial remnant of unspoiled natural forest, became central to this debate.<sup>27</sup> The West Coast timber industry had been built by Australian capital and some two-thirds of the region's rimu-cut had previously crossed the Tasman. The introduction of export quotas for indigenous timber in the 1920s set limits on this trade, but it was the environmental impulse of the 1980s that brought the issue to the forefront of national consciousness.<sup>28</sup> In 1986 the David Lange Labour Government responded to concerns about the preservation of native forests by establishing a Ministry for the Environment and negotiated an 'Accord' between West Coast authorities, the sawmilling industry and conservation interests that permitted sustainable logging of native timber. An uneasy compromise that struggled to define what constituted 'sustainable', the 'Accord' was swept aside by the Helen Clark Labour Government in 1999. Thereafter all logging of native timber in state-owned forests ceased and 80 per cent of the West Coast's land area was designated Crown reserve or national park. As compensation, the region received a lump sum of \$120 million for regional development to be administered by a Trust with all significant expenditure requiring the approval of government-appointed advisers. The need for this approval raised suspicion. Would the bureaucratic state once more find ways to ride roughshod over regional initiative?

The doubts were soon to be expressed in what one historian has called a 'narrative of betrayal'.<sup>29</sup> Its two major threads—the dismantling of the coalfields and the locking up of the forests—came, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, to colour perceptions of the Coast. This is most clearly evident in Paul Maunder's *Coal and the Coast* (2012), a highly personal response to the explosion that killed 29 men at the Pike River mine on 19 November 2010 in the Paparoa Range, near Blackball. Maunder contends that the community response to the disaster was conditioned by, and contributed to, the sense of alienation. Regulatory approval for the Pike River mine was seen by many, he argues, as 'the original carrot offered to Coasters

27 Nicky Hager and Bob Burton, *Secrets and Lies: The Anatomy of an Anti-Environmental PR Campaign*, Nelson, Craig Potton Publishing, 1999, pp. 156–78, 221–39.

28 Michael Roche, *History of Forestry*, Wellington, New Zealand Forestry Corporation/GP Books, 1990, pp. 401–32.

29 Maunder, *Coal and the Coast*, p. 66.

in return for locking up the forests into national park'.<sup>30</sup> The mine was situated on Crown land administered by the Department of Conservation and its proposed escape shafts were within the boundaries of the newly proclaimed national park. The tragedy at Pike River thus brought together the two threads of the developing narrative of betrayal—timber and coal.

The Pike River disaster thrust the issue of mine safety, long at the very heart of mining unionism, to the forefront of national consciousness. The efforts by coalminers to achieve greater worker control through the appointment of check-inspectors drawn from their own ranks and supported by pit committees had long expressed generic occupational concerns. The mix of mutual interdependence and self-reliance came in the Grey Valley to define a distinctive regional culture. The history of this quest for mine safety, described in my *Coal, Class & Community*, reaches back into the coalfields of the old world.<sup>31</sup> Here it is sufficient to remind ourselves that the coalfields of the Grey Valley and the Buller were the crucible in which mining unionism was forged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and a vital component of the rise of the working class as a political force. In 1935, the election of the nation's first Labour Government provided the means of strengthening the voices of the miners in the day-to-day working of the pits.

Never before, or since, have men who had laboured at the coalface in the Grey Valley been in a position to influence the daily experience of work in the mines. As frontrunners in the emergence of industrial unionism in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Blackball and Runanga were the launching pad for two generations of coalfield radicals. Paddy Webb and Bob Semple, who had spearheaded the rise of the Red Feds at Blackball and Runanga, were part of the influx of miners from the depressed Victorian coalfields in the first decade of the twentieth century. They were the disciples of a variety of industrial syndicalism that was American in origin and put its faith in unionism's ability to confront and conquer capitalism at the point of production. Webb had been the first to make the transition to political activism and, in 1913, was thrust to the forefront of national politics when, as a representative of the fledgling Social Democratic Party, he successfully won a by-election to wrench the seat of Grey away from the Liberals.<sup>32</sup>

30 Maunder, *Coal and the Coast*, p. 77.

31 Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, pp. 78–86, 119–25, 162–66, 260–89.

32 Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, pp. 142–44; Richardson, 'Politics and War: Coal Miners and Conscripting, 1914–1918', pp. 129–31; Franks and McAloon, *The New Zealand Labour Party, 1916–2016*, pp. 65–66.

Semple entered parliament in 1918 as MP for Wellington South under the banner of the New Zealand Labour Party, formed in July 1916. A colourful pit-top orator who had cut his teeth on the coalfields of Victoria and Western Australia, he was in his element riding a wave of discontent and anti-conscription sentiment in a by-election campaign rooted in working-class protest. His initial experience of the parliamentary chamber was, like that of Webb, brief. In the 1914 general election, Webb retained his seat but was subsequently imprisoned for 10 years when, as an unmarried man of eligible age, he refused a conscription order. He did not re-enter parliament until 1933. Semple lost his seat in the 1919 general election and did not return to parliament until 1928. Within the first Labour Government the pair were joined by Angus McLagan, the Scot who had arrived at Blackball at the end of World War I. With thinking shaped by the second wave of syndicalism and the burst of radical expectation that flowed from the Russian Revolution, 'Gus' was to become arguably the country's most influential unionist in the 1920s and 1930s as the coal industry entered the first stages of a collapse that was to prove terminal. From Blackball, McLagan witnessed, as leader of the United Mine Workers' Union and the Communist Party of New Zealand, the first withering of coalfield communities as an international crisis in the coal industry deepened and merged with the Great Depression of the 1930s.<sup>33</sup>

Semple, Webb and McLagan were a powerful coalfields voice within a Labour Government (1935 and 1949) that responded to the problems of the coal industry with a program of gradual nationalisation. They brought to this process an understanding of the mentality of the coalface where public ownership was seen as a means of bringing to an end the 'tyranny of the manager' by linking nationalisation with greater worker participation in the decisions that determined safety in the mines. There can be no doubt that the trio presided over the nation's most sustained attempt to improve mine safety. Under their watch, the administration of the certification process became more responsive to local conditions and more insistent upon higher levels of competence, and the educational role of the Schools of Mines on the coalfields was enhanced. Unions that had been severely weakened during the long Depression of the 1920s and 1930s began to play a greater role in the day-to-day negotiation between management and miners that characterised work in the pits. Labour's

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33 Richardson, *Coal, Class & Community*, pp. 252–60.

*Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Amendment Act 1936*, by effectively making union membership a precondition of employment, strengthened the union's hand in the remaining privately owned and operated pits.

During World War II, worker involvement was formalised by the creation of pit committees charged with maintaining production and safety standards and empowered to approach Mines Department inspectors independently of mine managers. In practice, agreements reached between the Mines Department and state miners formed a basis for achieving uniform standards across the mining industry. That these agreements were achieved without recourse to the Arbitration Court reflected a higher degree of cooperation and involvement than previously experienced on the coalfields and was demonstrated in a sharp decline in the days lost due to industrial stoppages often associated with safety issues. Between 1946 and 1961, the mining industry's share of the nation's industrial stoppages fell from 40 per cent to 11.6 per cent.<sup>34</sup> Accidents that resulted in death still happened; most occurred in small privately owned pits standing, as it were, on the fringes of the new system.<sup>35</sup>

Just as it had been the crucible of radical unionism in the early twentieth century, the Grey Valley became a front runner in the remaking of democracy in the workplace. The reforms of the 1930s and 1940s had stopped short of the miners' best hopes: workers' inspectors did not possess the power to stop a place. Only a few of the more radical spirits on the coalfields persisted in the quest for the full democratisation of the pits; most miners acknowledged recent achievements and turned their attention to combating the changing economic circumstances of the postwar coalfields. Nothing divided the old Grey Valley coalfield order from the new more dramatically than the confrontation that spread from the lockout of the nation's watersiders in 1951. In its aftermath, the traditional mining community withered as pit closure became an ever more imminent reality. It was a process accompanied by fundamental changes in the methods employed in the mining and transportation of coal. Underground mining increasingly lost its dominant position to open-cast operations. Where underground operation prevailed, it became

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34 Ralph Rantoul, 'The Coal Mines Council', *New Zealand Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 3, no. 1, May 1978, pp. 21–30.

35 W.P. Brazil, 'Legislation—Changes and Implications: A Summary of the Evolution of Coal Mining Safety Legislation Together with a Traditional Viewpoint. Presented by W.P. Brazil, Francis Mining Company, to Coal Producers Federation of New Zealand Inc., 1995 Seminar and Annual General Meeting, May 1995', ms, private collection.

more mechanised and new techniques were employed in taking coal to the surface. One of the more damaging consequences of this changing mining environment was the destruction of the communities that had nurtured and supported the disciplines and traditions that sustained mine safety.

In its smaller scale and operation, the underground coalmining landscape increasingly came to resemble that of its pioneering and most dangerous years. The explosion of gas and dust that brought 19 fatalities at the Strongman mine on 19 January 1967 was a tragic reminder of the need for ongoing vigilance in this changing environment. Yet, over the next 40 years the lessons of Strongman were forgotten and the collective 'pit-sense' that formed the basis of local practice gradually eroded. The Schools of Mines, once the principal educative organisation of the mining industry, were closed. At the same time, legislative and administrative changes stripped away foundations. The inspection processes once attached to the Mines Department were placed within the Labour Department. The positions of Chief Inspector of Mines and Check Inspector were abolished. Changes in industrial law, flowing from the *Labour Relations Act 1987*, had the effect of destroying the United Mine Workers of New Zealand (UMW)—the historic voice of coalminers nationally and the organisation that had done most to shape the safety provisions within underground mines. With fewer than the 1,000 members required to constitute a separate union, the UMW became part of a composite national body, the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union.

Equally damaging to the fabric of mine safety was the *Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992*. It repealed the *Coal Mines Act 1979* and subsequent amendments through to 1988, and placed work safety within the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) section of the Department of Labour. In the process, many coal industry-specific and long-standing protection mechanisms were removed or weakened. The regulatory looseness produced by this transfer came just as mechanisation brought new techniques into the pits. The new machines and methods opened the way for the employment of men from outside the traditional mining community with little if any knowledge of the mines they worked and largely ignorant of the legacy of disasters past.

The most incisive analysis of the decline in safety standards that accompanied these changes came in a 1995 paper by Bill Brazil—then a mine manager in the Grey Valley for the Francis Mining Company. A product of the old system working at its most robust, Brazil was a member of one of the district's most prominent coalmining families. His father Tom was manager at Strongman (1955–63) and, after a year as inspector of mines at Huntly on the Waikato coalfield, returned to the Grey Valley as assistant district manager for the West Coast and subsequently became New Zealand's Chief Inspector of Mines. Sons Kevin and Bill became managers at Grey Valley and Buller mines just as coalmining was taking on the appearance of a sunset industry. They did so in ways that reveal the different pathways that existed within the mining industry at the peak of its development: for Kevin this meant study at the School of Mines at the University of Otago; Bill, on the other hand, left Greymouth's Marist Brothers' High School in 1959 and started work at the Strongman mine managed by his father. As part of the generation that experienced the most regulated phase in the history of the nation's coalmining industry, the Brazils understood that its systems of inspection and control depended upon the interlocking involvement of unions, management and individual miners.<sup>36</sup>

What Bill Brazil saw before him on the coalfields of the 1990s was a safety system compromised by 'bureaucratic incompetence' and held together by a 'rubber band'. His report charted the erosion of the collective pit-sense by legislative and administrative changes that had their origin in the neoliberal infatuation with trimming the regulatory functions of the state and reducing the role of unions in the workplace. Lives, he argued, were being put at risk by changes in the nature of the mining industry and the stripping away of safety provisions driven by ideology and ignorance. It is a measure of his frustration that he reached back to the pioneering and largely unregulated coalfields of the nineteenth century and the Kaitangata disaster of 1879 as marking the extent of the decline in standards. It was a decade before a government review (2008) acknowledged shortcomings in safety provision and recommended that a 'check inspector' be made mandatory in all mines and given the authority to stop a pit. This endorsement of what had been a fundamental tenet of the traditional

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36 Peter Ewen, *Pike: Death by Parliament*, Christchurch, Pit Pony Press, 2014.

view expressed by Brazil and by miners' unions for more than a century was pertinently presented as a safeguard against commercial pressures and poor decision-making in the daily operation of mines.

The disaster at the Pike River mine in 2010 revealed the full extent of the damage that had already occurred. The systems and safeguards that had been so hard won yet so quickly swept away had been the finest achievement of the collective solidarity of the mining communities. And, as Paul Maunder's evocative *Coal and the Coast* demonstrates, as pits closed and technological change reduced the predominance of the underground mine, the relationship between workplace and community loosened.<sup>37</sup> Amid the social dislocation that followed, the separation between making a living and making a life began to take on new and more individualised meanings. Maunder's narrative of the days immediately following the Pike River explosion in 2010 takes the form of a daily diary and records the sense of disbelief that engulfed the Blackball community as it became doubtful the bodies of entombed miners would be recovered. He describes the transformation that had been taking place since the 1960s. Blackball—once a company mining town—was now, he wrote, 'a village of 350, containing a diversity of people: some old-timers, some transients, a mix of people commuting to a variety of jobs, a few self-employed, a few beneficiaries, and a growing number of Filipino women'.<sup>38</sup>

The mining community that had once defined the terms of its own existence had withered. The historical rituals and traditions that once shaped community responses to tragedy had been hollowed out as the structures in which they were embedded were dismantled. Maunder suggests that a numbing social and emotional void existed in the immediate aftermath of the Pike disaster that was only too readily filled by an intrusive media. By attaching itself to 'what should have been a community ritual' the media created, he argued, an 'electronic "otherness"' that multiplied 'ad infinitum'.<sup>39</sup> Nothing encapsulated this more starkly for Maunder than the government-organised memorial service delivered on national television on 2 December:

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37 Maunder, *Coal and the Coast*, pp. 61–93.

38 Maunder, *Coal and the Coast*, p. 11.

39 Maunder, *Coal and the Coast*, p. 29.

On the day of the service, staged by the government's event management team at the Omoto Racecourse, most of Greymouth turned out, joined by Coasters who came home for the day from Christchurch. There was a strange configuration: the dignitaries on one side of the racetrack in a temporary grandstand, the ordinary people on the other side of the fence. The families sat in the normal grandstand, facing the dignitaries, the young women dressed in their best, faces well made up, the men looking uncomfortable in shiny suits. The union was not invited to speak.

The intent, often Irish faces of the locals basked in the sun, listening but strangely detached. As the service unfolded, speakers from church, state and corporation appeared on large screens and were relayed nationally and internationally, to provide images for the networks: of the nation grieving, of the dignitaries doing their job, of Greymouth watching ...<sup>40</sup>

Leached of its human integrity by television's insatiable quest for spectacle, the commemoration of the Pike River tragedy became an 'event'. That it was choreographed in such a manner did not so much mitigate as exacerbate the crudity with which the mining community had been exposed by the nation's politicians to the largely unfettered forces of corporate capitalism. Maunder argues it was this sense of political neglect and wilful disregard for the lessons of the past, whose consequences now became daily more starkly realised, that fed into an existing regional narrative of betrayal. 'Old Blackball' was critical to this construction of the recent past. Firmly implanted in folklore as the spiritual home of the New Zealand labour movement, by the end of the 1980s Blackball had become a metaphor for loss of community; a decaying reminder of the days when coal was king and a symbol of the economic malaise that beset the West Coast region as a whole. The tragedy at Pike River revealed the dark underbelly of the neoliberal thinking that had dominated New Zealand society since the 1980s. Men had gone to work and did not come home because ideology had triumphed over prudent stewardship.

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40 Maunder, *Coal and the Coast*, p. 29.

The past was heavy in the air at the Omoto Racecourse commemoration. It was to stalk the enquiries and investigations that followed. Rebecca Macfie's *Tragedy at Pike River Mine*<sup>41</sup> clinically records the frustration within the Mines Rescue Service in the hours and days immediately following the explosion. Caught up in 'the lumbering processes of the police and the Department of Labour',<sup>42</sup> they had been prevented from taking 'the steps they believed were necessary to control the mine atmosphere'.<sup>43</sup> Their anger became even more palpable as there were three further explosions in the mine (on 24, 26 and 28 November). This sense of a lack of regulation and definition of duties was precisely what had motivated Bill Brazil's impassioned attempt to chronicle the dismantling of the systems that offered the best hope of making a naturally dangerous workplace less so. The anguished calls from within the mining community to reclaim the bodies of the 29 men who had perished in the explosion highlighted the void in which a corporate mining venture had operated. The Pike River mine existed as a self-regulated entity set loose among the remnants of a once vibrant and self-reliant community capable of defining the terms upon which it engaged in the coalmining industry.

Rebecca Macfie's account of the Pike tragedy presents a grim chronicle of corporate capitalism at its most brutal. Her account draws upon evidence given in the Greymouth District Court throughout the winter and spring of 2011 and the early summer of 2012 to the Royal Commission established to ascertain the cause of the explosion. Macfie presents a sequence of events that reveal an undercapitalised company unrestrained by adequate regulation, operating within an industry where the union presence was 'limp' and community understanding increasingly diminished. She catalogues a steadfast ruthlessness in the face of 'numerous warnings of catastrophe that went unheeded' as production took precedence over safety. There was no adequate monitoring system operating in a mine working a coal seam known to be high in methane. Indeed, sensors had not been working for weeks before the explosion. The company had forged ahead with the development of hydro-mining before it established a second means of egress required by law and commissioned the system without the skilled workers to maintain it despite repeated spikes in the volume of methane released into the mine atmosphere.

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41 Rebecca Macfie, *Tragedy at Pike River Mine*, Wellington, Awa Press, 2013.

42 Macfie, *Tragedy at Pike*, p. 226.

43 Macfie, *Tragedy at Pike*, p. 226.

There had been, Macfie writes, ‘21 reports of methane levels reaching explosive volumes, and 27 reports of lesser, but potentially dangerous, volumes of gas’. The reports, which went unheeded, ‘continued up to the very morning of the tragedy’.<sup>44</sup> The litany of breaches of law reflected a weak regulatory regime and were duly and adroitly noted by the Royal Commission in its report: ‘The Department of Labour did not have the focus, capacity or strategies to ensure Pike was meeting its legal responsibilities under health and safety laws’.<sup>45</sup> The commission drew the obvious conclusion: ‘The Department should have prohibited Pike from operating the mine until its health and safety systems were adequate’.<sup>46</sup> The litany of failings at the Pike River mine constitutes an indictment of a political age that blindly followed an ideological imperative even as its nostrums were discarded elsewhere. The wilful disregard for the lessons of the past exposed all who worked in the Pike mine to the naked power of international corporate capitalism. Perhaps the cruellest cut of all was that the bodies of the 29 miners were entombed in the mine and with them the forensic evidence that would have provided a clearer understanding of the proximate cause of the explosion.

This uncertainty brought frustration and added to the widespread sense of betrayal. There was little satisfaction to be gained from the political and legal consequences. The resignation of Kate Wilkinson, the Minister of Labour, was immediate and anticipated. The Pike River Company went into receivership and neither appeared nor presented evidence in mitigation when prosecutions were brought by the Labour Department. In making her judgement against the company, Judge Jane Farish pointed to ‘a systematic failure of the company to implement and audit its own (inadequate) safety plans and procedures’. The ‘accumulation of errors and omissions which transpired over a number of years’ were ‘the health and safety event of this generation’ and ‘a worse case [was] hard to imagine’.<sup>47</sup> The company was fined \$760,000 and ordered to pay \$3.4 million in reparation to the families of the 29 men killed and the two men who managed to get out of the mine. The receivers revealed that remaining funds would allow payments of \$5,000 to each family. And still the evidence that might have enabled the police to bring a manslaughter charge remained with the bodies of the 29 miners in the bowels of the Pike mine.

<sup>44</sup> Macfie, *Tragedy at Pike*, p. 236.

<sup>45</sup> Macfie, *Tragedy at Pike*, p. 236.

<sup>46</sup> *Royal Commission on the Pike River Coal Mine Tragedy*, vol. 1, Wellington, Government Printer, 2012, p. 12.

<sup>47</sup> Macfie, *Tragedy at Pike*, pp. 238–39.



**Figure 5: Protestors at Pike River in February 2017 demand that the bodies of the 29 men who died in the explosion at the Pike Mine, 19 November 2010, be recovered. Re-entry of the mine is underway.**

Source: *Greymouth Star*.

A poignant memorial created out of a large boulder located near the portal of the Pike River mine and 29 smaller stones each representing a man killed in the explosion marks the beginning of the access road to the mine. Alongside the boulder a signpost points to the parts of the world from which the miners had made their way to the Pike mine. It captures the enduring internationalism of the coalmining community, and its changing hue. The old world no longer dominates: only two of the men are listed as having come from Britain, both from Scotland; three hail from Australia and one from South Africa. While nearly two-thirds of the men were drawn from the Grey Valley, only one is listed as being from nearby Blackball. The break up of the traditional mining towns that had begun to have a marked effect from the 1940s is reflected in the residences of those killed: Greymouth, nine; Runanga, five; Hokitika, two; Dunollie, Ngahere and Barrytown each contributed one; and three hailed from further afield, one from Nightcaps, a traditional Southland coaltown, and two from Christchurch. In this, as in much else, the workforce at the Pike mine was a patchwork of old patterns and improvisation born of necessity. Neither big enough nor sufficiently remote to need the working camps that made up the Australian FIFO (fly-in fly-out) mine sites, the Pike encapsulated the problems of the Grey Valley.

Viewed from a Grey Valley perspective, the Pike River mining project had seemed, at the early stage of its promotion, like an opportunity to tap into the global resources boom. That the coal being sought lay in a designated national park and was opposed by many on environmental grounds served only to galvanise support within the local community. As Macfie puts it, for 'a mere pinprick in the beautiful West Coast wilderness',<sup>48</sup> the Pike mine offered to open up the prospect of a new age of prosperity. There was much interest in its low-ash coal. Major Japanese steelmakers negotiated conditional long-term contracts. Two Indian companies, coke-maker Saurashtra Fuels and Gujarat NRE, a major coke-making and coalmining company, became significant shareholders. Between them they provided \$64 million in loan capital and invested \$84 million in shares. These international connections bred inflated expectations within a regional economy that was more familiar with 'bust' than 'boom'. The flow of work for local contractors and suppliers as development work began lifted confidence in the local economy. There was no shortage of investors keen to join in the global resources boom when Pike became the nation's sole publicly listed coal company.

The realities of geology and terrain soon imposed themselves in ways that exposed the fragility of the enterprise. At the heart of the problem was 'a 2.3 kilometre single-entry tunnel' that needed to be 'driven uphill through a major fault and into a gassy coal seam'.<sup>49</sup> The working assumption that tunnelling would be through hard rock that would be largely (90 per cent) self-supporting and therefore relatively inexpensive relied upon surface assessments and lacked the authentication only exploratory drill holes could provide. Bore holes meant delay and cost. Within Pike management there existed the view that conservationists would have caused more delay by opposing further intrusion upon the natural environment (though no one asked them). The cost and delay undermined confidence. What the public saw, however, was a display of optimism. In November 2008 the company announced they had reached the coal seam and were 'on track' to 'reach' the mine's 'steady-state production rate of one million tonnes per annum by mid-2009'. Greymouth's mayor, Tony Kokshoorn, welcomed the announcement as a 'major milestone for the West Coast' that 'promised enormous economic spinoffs for the region'.<sup>50</sup> As Macfie has observed, few saw behind the solid lump of coal proudly displayed

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48 Macfie, *Tragedy at Pike*, p. 46.

49 Macfie, *Tragedy at Pike*, p. 72.

50 Macfie, *Tragedy at Pike*, p. 69.

by the company to the crumbly nature of most of the coal that had been exposed. The 2007 prospectus had predicted that by now some 250,000 tonnes of coal would have been exported.

Meanwhile, the troubles in the pit were becoming increasingly evident. In the days before the ceremony to mark the official opening of the mine, there had been numerous gas ignitions believed to be caused by a new machine designed to bore through hard rock or coal. Three months after the celebration of reaching the coal seam, the ventilation shaft collapsed and all mining ceased. It was to take several weeks and 'a thousand helicopter flights dropping cement down the hole to plug the failed section'.<sup>51</sup> The collapse threw into sharp relief the questionable safety provision at the mine. It lacked any emergency exit. Any blockage to the 2.3-kilometre tunnel would mean that the only available exit for men caught underground was to climb a ladder attached to the side of the 111-metre ventilation shaft. The ladder structure was capable of carrying only six men at a time and its steep, awkward climb was judged 'extremely difficult' for even the fittest men, requiring 20 minutes to negotiate. Any emergency with fire, smoke and fumes would have made a safe exit 'virtually impossible'. The pressure that these problems put on costs led to the premature introduction of hydro-mining. Unlike the more conventional continuous coal-cutting machines that could be set to operate at consistent levels, minimising the prospect of dangerous surges in methane gas levels, hydro-mining needed the support of ventilation fans to keep gas levels constant.

The Pike River tragedy invokes comparison with the calamitous Brunner disaster of 1896. Pat O'Farrell places the earlier explosion within the context of the labour–capital crisis of the late 1880s and 1890s. He suggests a tragic melodrama played out in a grim and unyielding environment with the human actors caught in the maelstrom of historical forces they dimly understood. Accepting his judgement at face value, what, if anything, we might ask, has changed a century later? The circumstances that produced the death of 29 miners at the Pike River mine do not speak of human beings as the unwitting victims of some random, haphazard event that, because it seems inexplicable, can be attributed to what a more religious age might have called a 'God of the Gaps'.<sup>52</sup> Nor, in our age, might we take refuge in the secular and amoral 'systemic failure'. To absolve, in this

51 Macfie, *Tragedy at Pike*, p. 81.

52 Piggin and Lee, *The Mt Kembla Disaster*, p. 5.

way, the individual human beings and the wider society that prescribed the working environment, is to deny history and the efforts of the generations who had attempted to learn from its harsh lessons. Rather, we are confronted by a needless loss of life whose causes are directly attributable to sins of commission and omission by individuals blinded by an already discredited free market ideology and the imperatives of corporate capitalism.

To the generation who remembered the genesis of the Grey Valley coaltowns and a life governed by the rhythm of the pits, the Pike River disaster seemed somehow to belittle the past that their collective efforts had helped shape. Blackball and Runanga represent complementary parts of that past. As the child of late nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, Blackball was in essence a company town whose British owners contributed little to life outside the mine. The township that emerged in the shadow of the Paparoas was the creation of the miners and their families. Their sense of community was given collective expression by the union and was grounded in the solidarity and mutual obligations of the coalface. Thus, making a life and making a living became interwoven in ways that produced a fiercely independent coal town. Runanga's tale stands at the crossroads of Grey Valley coalfield's history. Its origins lie in the cautious state experiments of the Liberal Government (1891–1912) that embraced the establishment of the nation's first state coalmine. As Brunner slipped quietly into the past, Runanga had emerged as the talisman of the future; a model mining community that pointed towards the ultimate nationalisation of the nation's coalmines. Blackball and Runanga had once stood proudly as zealous guardians of a hard-won community independence. The Pike disaster demonstrates in a tragic manner that the history and peculiarities of place cannot be dismissed as inconvenient irrelevancies.

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