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CONCLUSION

Enduring Past – Elusive Future

The historians whose work stands at the centre of this book have made sense of the European experience of the Grey Valley's past in a variety of ways. Phil May's evocation of the rush of 1865 takes its stand unequivocally alongside the individual digger. His *West Coast Gold Rushes* traces the evolution of the gold rush phenomenon and the manner in which it was shaped by its peculiar West Coast setting. In the sequence of Pacific borderlands rushes that began in California in 1849 and moved to eastern Australia before washing up at Hokitika, the West Coast diggers were a comparatively experienced group. In following them along the creeks and gullies threading their way through the dense impenetrable bush, he was traversing the familiar terrain of his childhood and discovering his particular 'West Coast'. It was a Coast with which he was at ease and one that his pioneering study did a great deal to define. The celebrated final passage of *The West Coast Gold Rushes*, in which May invites the reader to motor up the Waimea Valley, speaks to an enduring past and a timeless land.

Pat O'Farrell's 'West Coast' is equally enduring, if more confronting. The combination of isolation, rugged and impenetrable bush and incessant rain created an alien environment that tested all who engaged with it. The magnates of industrial capitalism and the apostles of unionism from British coalfields struggled to impose their will upon its capricious rhythms. To O'Farrell, the struggle that took place between these two unyielding forces in the name of ideologies shaped in other environments was a tragic mismatch of time and place. The first round of industrial conflict in the Grey Valley and the Buller coalfields was, in this

sense, fought out between equally uncomprehending newcomers adrift in an environment to which they were only slowly adjusting. Neither the nostrums of industrial unionism buttressed by moral argument that rested upon a sense of injustice nor the economic orthodoxies that sheltered behind the doctrine of the law of supply and demand could triumph in such an environment. O'Farrell's interest in the stalemate between these two ideas and the continued struggle between them as coal became increasingly crucial to an exporting economy forms the framework in which he reflects upon the Grey Valley environment. Whether discussing the rise of the Red Feds at Runanga and Blackball or the burgeoning Grey Valley Irish Catholic community, his 'West Coast' is shaped in the world of the mind as individuals came to build community anew. These preoccupations are later imaginatively demonstrated in his brilliant recreation of the public and private worlds of his parents as they play out their role in the Irish diaspora in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The relationship between the world of ideas and the physical environment is more directly drawn in Bill Pearson's *Coal Flat*. The people of his coalmining town exist at the fag end of unionism's attempt to build community from within a company town and with its expectations raised by a partnership with a Labour Government that had nationalised the nation's mines. Closer to O'Farrell than to May in his interpretation of the Grey Valley, Pearson shares their fascination with an enduring natural environment that demanded resilience and fortitude from those who wished to live with it and from it. Whereas May's account of the handful of years that were the West Coast's golden ones captured and revived the vibrant enthusiasm of the times, there was less optimism and precious few heroes in Pearson's coaltown. The expectations of the people of *Coal Flat* are ever diminishing; their individual lives circumscribed by both the changing economic realities of the coal industry and the limited horizons of isolated single-industry towns. The predicament of Pearson's people is, above all else, that of individuals caught in a timeless, enduring and brooding land where seasonal rhythms and landscape remain largely impervious to the passage of human beings.

Many readers have interpreted this as a pessimistic assessment of life in 1940s Grey Valley coaltowns. Whatever the validity of this reading, Pearson's treatment of the bush environment is almost reverential and may be traced to the inspirational Ted Kehoe, a teacher at Greymouth Tech and an early conservationist. His weekly radio talks on native bush, birds

and Māori culture were immensely popular and have recently been the subject of a successful piece of community theatre. Written and directed by Paul Maunder, 'Ted, Poppy and World War Two'¹ weaves together excerpts of Kehoe's radio talks with a series of vignettes that explore elements of the local past through the eyes of a variety of people; most notably, Margaret Alice Joyce (1884–1964),² the eldest sister of Irish writer James Joyce who, as Sister Mary Gertrude, was a teaching nun in the Grey district's Sisters of Mercy community from 1910 to 1949 and a conscientious objector in a Punakaiki cave. As an attempt to draw together elements of Grey Valley experience, Maunder's conscious evocation of the recent past harks back to the balladists of the goldfields, the politically inspired coalfields verse of Billy Banjo, the song-plays of Mervyn Thompson and the more recent *The Shadow of the Valley*, the powerful stage play crafted by Susan Battye and Thelma Eakin. This impressive literary tradition acknowledges and reinforces an intense relationship between people and place.

Immanent throughout this writing was an identity that had grown alongside an, at times, aggressive exploitation of the region's natural resources. The enduring, isolated landscape that had slowly and often at great cost to individuals and communities yielded the mineral resources that supported an export economy was now, as its second century of European occupation began, called upon to serve a new ideology. Like the disciples of unionism who had sought to build the coalfields anew in the late nineteenth century, the environmentalists of the late twentieth century were cast as outsiders, people who had not earned the right to determine the future. The moral landscape of the early conservation movement and its language of extremes rubbed up uneasily against an ingrained sense of place that carried with it a sense of belonging. The wilderness aesthetic that lay at the heart of environmentalism, with its desire to maintain a pristine environment against further exploitation, was met by what amounted to a regional assertion of a custodial right to manage 'worked landscapes' rooted in the natural rhythms of growth, decay and replenishment. The contest that ensued was resolved politically. The West Coast Accord that at first sought to provide a compromise,

1 Paul Maunder, 'Ted, Poppy and World War Two', presented by Kiwi/Possum Productions, Regent Theatre Greymouth, 28–30 August 2014.

2 David G. Wright, 'Joyce and New Zealand: Biography, Censorship, and Influence', in Richard Brown, ed., *A Companion to James Joyce*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2008, p. 223; Richard Corballis, 'The Provenance of Joyce's Haka', *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 1, Fall 2006, pp. 127–32.

ultimately imposed the will of the government in a manner that struck at regional autonomy and created, in the words of one recent writer, a ‘narrative of betrayal’.³

When Philip Ross May asked, in the introduction to *The West Coast Gold Rushes*, whether it was appropriate to acknowledge a debt to a place, he was identifying with the place of his birth and childhood. He was also acknowledging a curious dichotomy that existed in the 1960s within New Zealand’s attitude to its past. Attachment to a place sat uneasily alongside the canons of an embryonic historical profession. Like its British parent whose emergence had coincided with the birth of the nation state in the nineteenth century, the New Zealand academic historical community was national and imperial in its perspective.⁴ In their view, the lightness of history’s touch in the new society deprived it of cultural maturity, bred parochialism and led easily to antiquarianism. This attitude infused the planning for the New Zealand Centennial (1840–1940) project, but, as Kynan Gentry has pointed out, the historical enthusiasms it let loose ‘strengthened the very [regional] identities they sought to diminish’.⁵ The West Coast variant of this mid-century historical impulse proved to be distinctive and enduring.

Those who sought in the 1960s to interpret the West Coast’s past could scarcely escape the confrontation between people and place that stood almost as starkly present as it had been a century earlier. Whatever particular preconceptions they brought to their writing, they began from a shared recognition that theirs was a pioneering endeavour, a scrap of the past that needed to be told on ‘its own terms’.⁶ In different and complementary ways they became involved in what a later generation would call ‘a history from below’. In the specifics of time and place, and the interaction between the two, they were drawn into frameworks that made nonsense of the charge of narrow parochialism levelled from within academe and by the middle-class imperial-minded who dominated the nation’s historical societies of the day. No one who follows the fortunes of Phil May’s Gentleman George or Yankee Dan or Pat O’Farrell’s workers or the inner workings of Bill Pearson’s fictional mining community can escape the global contexts that shaped the playing out of lives on

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

4 Kynan Gentry, *History, Heritage and Colonialism: Historical Consciousness, Britishness, and Cultural Identity in New Zealand, 1870–1940*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015, p. 3.

5 Gentry, *History, Heritage and Colonialism*, p. 234.

6 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 14.

the Coast. Whether it was the turbulent and largely unplanned arrival of diggers drawn from the goldfields of the Pacific borderlands or the more orderly migration of miners from British and Australian coalfields as industrial capitalism spread its tentacles, those who peopled the West Coast were well aware of the impersonal forces that had propelled them there and continued to shape their lives.

Within New Zealand, the West Coast long remained an outlier, an extension of the planned settlements of Canterbury and Nelson. Not the least of its problems was where, precisely, it fitted within an evolving colonial system of governance. As André Brett has pointed out, removing 'New Zealand's wealthiest goldfield' from the provincial system and placing it under a centrally controlled experimental system of local government in 1868 recognised 'the challenges created by a sizeable transient population unsuited to bureaucracy'.⁷ It was an experiment that was quickly swallowed up in the remaking of national politics that produced the briefly flowering province of Westland (1870–76) and then swept the provincial system into the dustbin of history in 1876. Hokitika's brief flowering as the goldfields capital of Westland Province was cut off before it could impose its regional leadership more securely. Before the rise of 'King Coal' made Greymouth and the Grey Valley the dominant power centre, the goldfields capital loomed large in the rise of the Kumara publican Richard John Seddon to the premiership in 1893. By the time of Seddon's death in 1906, the democratic impulses of the goldfields were being challenged by more radical demands emanating from Grey Valley coal communities.

Whatever its intent, the new radicalism grew from and expressed a new relationship between people and place. Unlike those who had rushed unknown creeks and gullies in search of alluvial gold, those who filled the coaltowns entered communities whose broad contours were familiar to them. Their interaction with the land they mined was cautious. Their work practices had been honed according to the collectivist traditions and customs of the pits they had worked. The instinct that drove the provision and consolidation of community was similarly born of familiar circumstances: remote and harsh environments, primitive housing, neglectful and absentee owners, exhausted coal seams and markets that fluctuated. Necessity bred improvisation that, over time, produced an

⁷ André Brett, *Acknowledge No Frontier: The Creation and Demise of New Zealand's Provinces, 1853–76*, Dunedin, Otago University Press, 2016, p. 194.

attachment to place that was at once defiant, ingrained and pragmatic. Set at some distance from the port towns of Greymouth and Westport, the coaltowns were long regarded as communities apart. Even within the Grey Valley the separate histories of individual coaltowns were well understood. Their ‘foreign twangs’ maintained by the continued influx of new arrivals, from Scottish and English coalfields often by way of Australia, were said by conservative critics to be matched by equally foreign ideologies. Their opposition to conscription during World War I had seen them pilloried as disloyal and cast to the very edge of an emergent national story in which loyalty to King and Country went hand in hand. With the establishment of the Communist Party headquarters at Blackball in the 1920s, the Grey Valley had its own ‘Little Moscow’ and a reputation as the cockpit of revolution.

These attitudes persisted in Grey Valley coaltowns throughout the next half-century. In a manner, perhaps unique within the New Zealand experience, history, people and place melded together in an enduring relationship whose influence is still apparent. The cluster of historical studies that trace the causes and consequences of the region’s mining disasters—from Brunner in 1896 to Pike River in 2010—sit at the centre of a body of regional writing that possesses a rare and immediate connection with the present. In different and complementary ways, the post-1960 historical writing captured a past that was not so much retreating before the onslaught of neoliberalism as being casually cast aside. At the same time, the future of the place literally became contested terrain as environmentalists campaigned to preserve the nation’s remaining native forests. The convergence of these contradictory impulses heightened political sensitivities and stimulated a local patriotism that one writer has described as a ‘narrative of betrayal’. It also revealed, in miniature and in advance, the growing gulf between city and hinterland as regional economies aligned to an older economic order lost their relevance.

The last hurrah of a retreating age or part of a literature of regional resistance: how best do we characterise the second generation of Grey Valley writing? If we compare the regional/national perspectives of the two generations of writers who stand at the heart of this book there are two major contrasts. Whereas May, O’Farrell and Pearson, in different and complementary ways, asserted the regional nature of New Zealand life, they did so as part of an as yet incomplete and developing national narrative. They wrote at a formative moment that saw the emergence of two rival interpretations—the one radical, nationalist and Pacific-centred, the

other suggesting more conservative and derivative foundational impulses that were British in origin. Their West Coast studies were written just as these rival streams of interpretation were beginning to influence historical thinking and writing. The generation of Grey Valley writers that followed wrote as a major philosophical shift was taking place within the historical profession. In broad terms, this change in emphasis embraced the global over the national, diversity over distinctiveness, and in doing so widened the gulf between the university and public spheres in which the historical craft was pursued.

The historical moment in which the 1960s writing of May, O'Farrell and Pearson made its appearance was at once celebratory, regional and nationalist in aspiration. It takes its place within a transitional phase of historical writing; one that witnessed a determined attempt to develop a national story in which New Zealand featured as something more than a footnote to the tale of Empire. Historians commonly date this process as having its genesis in the Centennial Project (1940) in which the nation's academic historians and middle-class-dominated historical societies predominated. Their preference, as Kynan Gentry has pointed out, was not so much regional as a national story contextualised within an imperial framework designed to avoid the parochial and the narrow.⁸ The monumental regional histories of Otago and Canterbury that are its most enduring legacy reflect the depth of regional patriotism and, perhaps paradoxically, interest in the national story. The celebration of the West Coast's first century that followed took place in the shadow of this historical enterprise. It spoke of a regional experience that offered a building block for a fuller national history.

The Oxford History of New Zealand (1981 and 1992) and the plethora of subsequent general histories published over the next quarter of a century, whatever their perspectives, reflected a continuing preoccupation with the nation.⁹ The standard bearer of the shifting emphasis within the universities is *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*.¹⁰ Published in 2009, it eschewed the tale of national self-fulfilment in which European settlement of a Polynesian homeland progresses from colonial outpost

8 Gentry, *History, Heritage and Colonialism*, p. 234.

9 Belich, *Making Peoples*; James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Auckland, Penguin Press, 2001; Michael King, *Penguin History of New Zealand*, Auckland, Penguin, 2004; Mein Smith, *A Concise History of New Zealand*.

10 Giselle Byrnes, ed., *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, South Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 2009.

to independent nation-state. Rather, its proclaimed objective was to move away from the quest for national distinctiveness, to draw out the similarities between the New Zealand experience and that of other settler societies and to emphasise the diversity of that experience. The use of multiple identities (culture, class, region, sexuality and gender) to refute the notion of national exceptionalism proceeds with scant attention to political context and, in the words of one Australian reviewer, presents New Zealand as ‘just another ensemble of cultural forces’.¹¹

Regional history sits uneasily within the cultural forces that made up the new identity History. By their very nature, the patchwork of regions that constituted the nation prized their distinctiveness. In its earliest manifestation, West Coast historical writing was, as we have seen, commemorative—a record of settlement constructed within a colonial framework. It was concerned with the national concept only to the extent that it sought to advance the colony’s cause within the British Empire. The centennial generation of writers who stand at the heart of this book reached beyond imperial sentiment at the very moment that an embryonic national history was born. In different and complementary ways, May, Pearson and O’Farrell attach their particular ‘West Coasts’ to elements of the past that were beginning in the 1960s to define a national narrative. Through the particularities of place they were able observe how global forces made and remade life within a region destined to remain an outlier in the national story. Whether tracing the diaspora that was the nineteenth-century gold rush, or the more ordered arrival of skilled coalminers predominantly from British coalfields, or observing the inner functioning of the communities, they created in their writing a distinctive regional perspective that remains unrivalled. It provided the foundation for future writing by attaching elements of the local experience to shifts in the economic and political contexts, national and global, that reshaped lives in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

A recent writer has urged historians to ‘take place seriously’ and has done so in a manner that invokes Bill Oliver’s earlier appeal for a new kind of history.¹² From his vantage point at the end of the 1960s, Oliver had observed a trend he called the ‘nationalisation of regional life’. He believed the process had gathered pace from the 1890s and suggested

11 Stuart Macintyre, ‘Review: *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, edited by Giselle Byrnes’, *Labour History*, no. 98, May 2010, p. 279.

12 Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand’s Colonial Past*, Wellington, Bridget Williams Books, 2012, pp. 262–63, 274; Oliver, *Towards a New History?*

it might provide a useful framework for observing and understanding the New Zealand experience. Tony Ballantyne has observed that this prospect had instead been sunk under the weight of ‘textual criticism and questions of cross cultural representation’¹³ and a simultaneous tendency to privilege the global and diminish the nation-state. Set against these developments, the written West Coast/Grey Valley histories share much with the host of studies throughout the world that tell the story of regions and communities cast aside in the post-industrial age. They sought to understand the past just as the visible and tangible evidence of its shape and form slid from view.

To describe such writing as being grounded in some kind of nostalgia for an idealised past ignores the role of place in connecting past and present. Whatever their specific purpose, collectively West Coast historical writing allows us to trace out the interaction between one isolated region and the changing economic, political and social forces that reshaped it from the middle of the nineteenth century. Born in the aftermath of the last of the gold rushes of the Pacific borderlands, the Coast experience encapsulates starkly the making and remaking of modern capitalism. The Grey Valley and Buller coalfields towns were the product of industrial capitalism, at first in colonial and later in its international garb. They stood at the sharp end of the struggles between labour and capital that reshaped New Zealand politics. Until the demise of the steamship, they possessed a degree of economic power within an export economy and were able to convert this into political influence. In the 1940s they used this to achieve the nationalisation of the mines and to squeeze out more influence in the decision-making that governed work in the mines around which their communities had developed. This democratisation of work built upon the collectivist ethos that had shaped the very fabric of Grey Valley mining communities with their unions, cooperative store, swimming pool, sportsground, picture theatre and community hall. It was these constructive engagements with the circumstances of time and place that lay at the heart of the first generation of West Coast writing.

More recent Grey Valley historical writing derives its impetus rather more from the recognition that, in the last 50 years, the region has been at the sharp edge of capitalist transformation. The rolling back of the state and the concomitant deregulation of the economy and dismantling of industrial legislation amounted to the crudest political assault upon

13 Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire*, p. 274.

New Zealand's industrial hinterland in modern times. Blinded by the seductive simplicity of neoliberal doctrines, wilfully ignorant of the lessons of the region's past and disdainful of democratic engagement, the political class has left such communities to wither in capitalism's wastelands. The process of embedding neoliberalism and its corporate structures placed New Zealand among the least egalitarian of the 'developed market economies'.¹⁴ Coincidentally, and perhaps paradoxically, the hollowing out of the region's industrial potential came in environmental garb. The proclamation of an 'Accord' between central government, local authorities and an assortment of economic and environmental interest groups defined a sizeable portion of the region as a national park. The compromise at its core that attempted to regulate the milling of native timbers was recognition that regional economic, social and political sensitivities mattered. The stealthy imposition of a total ban on milling native timber that followed indicated the limits of this dialogue and the realities of political power.

Heritage and conservationist activity within the made environment expanded in the 1970s as the decline of the region's traditional industries became evident. By putting industrial archaeology and working-class lives at the centre of their activities and by reaffirming the integrity of the past, they enhanced community understanding of the region's present circumstances. They did so as the combined forces of global and corporate capitalism continued to hollow out communities once proudly independent and defiant. They fed into and form an important element of a community response to the recasting of the regional environment that was being wrenched away from them. In different and complementary ways, they helped reinvigorate a sense of injustice first nurtured on the West Coast coalfields of the late nineteenth century. The moral component of this foundational coalfields unionism fused with a hard-nosed pragmatism that sought self-determination at the coalface and beyond to produce a community of purpose and creativity. By a combination of industrial, political and community initiative, they had used their understanding of their working and living environments to negotiate the circumstances of time and place. These achievements and the understandings upon which they rested were swept into the dustbin of history as the nation's apostles of neoliberalism legislated away the safety regulations and systems that offered the best protection against calamity.

14 Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, p. 407.

The amoral adherence to an ideology that recognised neither people nor place looked backwards to the unfettered capitalism of the nineteenth century and acknowledged few constraints beyond the crude operation of the marketplace.

The attempt to ride roughshod over the past reckoned without the enduring elements of a distinctive regional culture. It was one embedded in the remnants of a once vibrant industrial community and possessed a moral authority that rested upon past achievements. The values upon which they rested reached beyond nostalgia to embrace fundamental issues of humanity. This past was hauntingly present in the effigies of protestors who blocked the road to the Pike River mine entrance in early February 2017 as part of their campaign to reclaim the bodies of the 29 dead miners entombed since 19 November 2010. Their protests reach back to invoke the spirit of countless battles past. Few of the modern-day protestors might be able to recite the once familiar coalfields litany of struggle that began with the pit-top meetings associated with the rise of industrial unionism in the late 1880s. Their protests arose directly from the pool of understanding that had supported and shaped the nature of the relationship between a community and its environment for more than a century and a half. Their actions stand in rebuke to what one historian has memorably called the ‘enormous condescension of posterity’¹⁵ and as a reminder to the ruling elites of global capitalism that the past wears a regional and a human face. To historians, the effigies of Pike conjure up W.H. Oliver’s dictum: ‘there is a place called New Zealand, and it is, and always has been, found where people live, and not where the evidence is easiest to assemble’.¹⁶

One of the reasons why West Coast writing has maintained its distinctive character may well reside in the fact that the physical determinants of life have been enduring ones. Confronting the region for the first time in the late 1990s, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David Fischer was in no doubt about what set the West Coast apart:

[W]e decided to visit the west coast by an old road that crossed the Alps at Arthur’s Pass ... we crossed the summit and suddenly found ourselves in a winter storm of extreme violence. The wind rose to a howling gale, and thick rods of rain blew horizontally in our

15 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), 3rd edn, London, Gollancz, 1965, p. 12.

16 Oliver, *Towards a New History?*, p. 26.

faces. One side of the road became a waterfall. As we crept slowly around a hairpin curve, the other side of the road had vanished in an earthquake, and nothing remained but a narrow track of mud and water on the sheer edge of the mountain. The wreckage of shattered cars lay in the depths of Otira Gorge, two thousand feet below ...¹⁷

In Hokitika, he sensed ‘a different feel from other parts of New Zealand’: its ‘wide streets and wooden buildings with false fronts’ gave it ‘the air of a frontier settlement’. Town and region looked ‘west across the Tasman Sea’. In the ‘manners and speech’ of the inhabitants, he detected ‘a strong Australian flavor’.¹⁸

David Fischer’s fleeting encounter with the Coast and its people, and his immediate reaction to it, takes its place alongside countless incredulous initial responses to the region. The constancy of such responses over more than 150 years is unsurprising. It points to a distinctive, enduring regional identity and, perhaps unintentionally, draws our attention to the central argument of his elegant comparative study that traces the quest for fairness and freedom in New Zealand and the United States. How well have these two guiding principles fared in a region whose economy has rested very largely upon extractive industries, farming and tourism? The answer to this question has rarely been more clearly evident in fact or in its literary representation. More clearly than perhaps any other New Zealand region, the West Coast experience demonstrates how these two elements of democracy have been traduced by politicians in thrall to the market-driven, neoliberal nostrums of the late twentieth century. By rolling back the state and stripping away the regulations and customs that created the semblance of a worker democracy, they acted as agents of global capitalism. Paradoxically, as the state retreated from the workplace and from regional grants and subsidies, on the West Coast it came to be seen as the handmaiden of environmentalism. By the proclamation of a regional Accord, the political class of the day set the parameters of the region’s future.

One implication that might be drawn from the evocative conclusion to Phil May’s *West Coast Gold Rushes*—which invites readers to ‘motor up the Waimea Valley’—is that the future might depend upon the past.¹⁹

17 David Hackett Fischer, *Fairness and Freedom: A History of Two Open Societies: New Zealand and the United States*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. xii.

18 Fischer, *Fairness and Freedom*, p. xiii.

19 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 503.

The ‘greening of the memory’ might provide the transitional economy needed as the days of ‘King Coal’ recede. The centennial context in which he wrote provided an impetus to summoning up the past as a part of the wider process of shaping a future. Gold was predictably its initial focus. In November 1970, an open-air museum and historical park opened at Sovereign Hill in Ballarat, with a replica of the city’s nineteenth-century goldtown providing a model that was quickly taken up. By the end of the decade, two goldfield heritage ventures had opened on the Coast: Shantytown at Rutherglen, south of Greymouth, and a historic walkway and information centre at Ross, south of Hokitika. As front runners in the field, their origins reflect community endeavour and local fulfilment. The economic use of history and heritage took longer to be appreciated.

Grey Valley coaltowns have participated variously in heritage tourism. Brunner’s pre-eminent role reflects its historic status as the nation’s pioneering mining and industrial site. Part of the district’s importance in the renewed interest in the past lay in the excitement of rediscovering the landscape of the mining and brickworks complex that once stood boldly on the banks of the Grey River in the bleak confines of the Brunner Gorge. The combined efforts of industrial archaeologist and historian were needed to rescue the remains of a worksite largely overgrown by rampant bush. Brian Wood was at the heart of this symbiotic process. His splendidly crafted history of the Brunner mine disaster and painstaking account of the development of the suspension bridge that became the visual hub of the Brunner industrial complex represent the development in its purest form. Blackball has jealously nurtured its historic role in the emergence of radical mining unionism and embraced the title ‘birthplace of the New Zealand Labour Party’ increasingly bestowed upon it by those keen to retain at least the semblance of a connection with the party’s socialist origins. The iconic facade of the Miners’ Hall at Runanga—the final built remnant of the early twentieth-century socialist vanguard’s legacy—has weathered the passage of time and now stands precariously on the edge of historical tourism. Its future prospects remain uncertain as it is shuffled through the few options open to those who strive to acknowledge the past—a potential community centre or a museum that commemorates the labour and aspirations of a pioneering mining town.

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