



Review Article

Mining in Australia: An historical survey of industry–community relationships



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ABSTRACT

The article sets out to provide an historical survey of the industry–community relationship in the Australian mining industry. The mining industry had a vital role in encouraging population growth, regional development, and industrial diversification. The relationship is understood through three key themes. Firstly, the industry–community relationship was underpinned by geology. Since ore was often found across large areas, mineral ‘regions’ developed. Secondly, the industry–community relationship was specific to particular places in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Mining towns became very distinctive communities that shared economic and social characteristics. Thirdly, the industry–community relationship did not finish at the town limits. The history of the mining industry in Australia offers a strong case for exploring the effects of both global and local impacts. Communities were heavily influenced by local economic and geological realities but as the twentieth century progressed the close geographical relationship between industry and community began to disperse with wider regional and interstate effects. The article posits ‘community’ as a description of a geographically specific social formation, but this final theme moves towards seeing ‘community’ as a wider concept transcending place and geography.

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1. Introduction

The extraction of mineral resources in Australia has had a profound effect on the nature and shape of Australian history, and

continues to be an important part of the Australian experience. While the Indigenous people of Australia utilised resources of the earth for cultural, technological and trade reasons, the focus of this article will be on the settler economy and how the large-scale extraction of mineral resources was established as a major industry usually carried out by private enterprise. This was one component in a much larger global enterprise that saw settler economies established throughout the Anglo-World (Belich, 2009).

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The aim in this article is to offer a broad synthesis of overarching industry and community relationships over the more than 225 years since European colonisation in 1788. The importance of this question lies in the profound and highly specific effects that the industry had at a local or community level, and the ongoing contemporary concern from the mining industry and many of its critics to explore, understand, and improve the industry–community relationship. Furthermore, the post 2001 mining boom, particularly strong in the Australian states of Queensland and Western Australia, has shone new light on older historical experiences. A number of recent popular or general accounts of mining history seek to contextualise mining in Australian culture and society (Cleary, 2011; Knox, 2013; Pearse et al., 2013). Numerous media and scholarly accounts are increasingly common, focusing on the nature of the boom, its precise community effects including issues such as rising housing costs, men and women's experiences, and the effects of a fly in fly out workforce, among others (some examples include Hoyle, 2014; Taylor and Simmonds, 2009; Lovell and Critchely, 2009; Terzis, 2014).

In light of this contemporary context, a survey of past relationships, focused at a very high level, will be a useful scene-setter for present-day analysis of concepts such as the 'corporate social responsibility' and the 'social license to operate' (Post, 2000; Dahlsrud, 2008). In itself the 'social license to operate' embodies one specific form of community relationship with mining, though its definition, interpretation, and legal basis vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Franks (2012) has outlined the various Australian state-based legislative requirements governing 'social impact assessments' and 'community engagement', while Bice (2014), found that the concept varied from company to company. If a social license is present, or deemed to be present, then it indicates a level of broad acceptance and approval where the economic benefits of employment and wealth generation are seen to outweigh the industrial, personal, cultural and environmental risks. While the contemporary context helps frame this contribution, the historical focus is on nineteenth century developments, particularly from 1851 through to 1900 when gold, base metals and coal mining towns were established in Australia. The coal mining industry is used as a case study to explore the impact of mining in particular communities. This is underpinned by the fact that coal mining was such a large employer. In 1933, for example, coal mining employed 22,243 of the 68,327 male employees in mining, or some 33%, mostly located in NSW. The coal industry's numerical importance continued into the latter half of the twentieth century. It still constituted 33% of the male mining workforce in 1976, even if the location of that workforce had moved towards the new coalfields of central Queensland (See Table 1 – Sources for 1933 Census, 1976 Census).

The story is only roughly sketched for the twentieth century, and I have not covered developments in the oil and gas industries because they did not give rise to significant communities. Such an historical synthesis as presented here relies heavily on the work of other scholars, and seeks to bring together what is a diverse and often highly detailed historiography to make some general claims. If this encourages Australian scholars of mining to contest, refine or support the argument, or provides opportunities for scholars of other nations and regions to engage with comparative assessments, then all the better. I have already suggested that Indigenous people and their relationship to the earth's resources will not be the focus of this article, though it will be made clear that the development of a settler-controlled mining industry had profound effects on Indigenous people, their land, and culture. Industrial and technological innovation and adaptation – a vital and engaging area of historical analysis – will not be covered here, except to the extent that it influenced community and industry relationships (Davey, 1996; Frost, 2002).

2. Historical overview of the industry

Mining has played an important role in the development of the settler economy in Australia, with the nineteenth century experience being dominated by coal, gold, silver, and base metals. The Australian gold rushes, which began in earnest from 1851, saw rapid development of new towns, large population increases, and the establishment of a skilled and experienced workforce and engineering profession. In Victoria, where rich alluvial gold was extensively mined from 1851, the settler population grew from 77,345 in 1851 to 538,628 in 1861 (Vamplew, 1988: 26; Maclean, 2013: 84–90). By 1900 the mining industry generated £20.1 million of GDP in current prices; more than the pastoral (£16.3 million) and agriculture sectors (£12.3 million), and almost matching manufacturing (£23.8 million) (Vamplew, 1988: 133; Butlin, 1964: 22). The two or three decades from the 1880s were central in establishing the mining industry's importance with major new finds, significant infrastructure development, and success in solving a number of technical and metallurgical challenges (Richmond and Sharma, 1983: 38; Blainey, 1994: 249–261; Mouat, 1996). These technical breakthroughs included the successful development of flotation methods of separation at Broken Hill (refer to Map 1 for location of this town and all others mentioned in the text). This enabled the continued growth of the town and its industry, effectively extending the longevity of the mining field. The base metals industry in the 1880s was at the forefront of industry expansion, with the large mines in far western NSW, central and north Queensland, and Tasmania leading the way. The total tonnage of copper production, for example, began to increase in the 1860s where it stood at 124,000 tonnes per annum in 1866, continued at around 100,000 tonnes in the 1870s, and then increased to 470,000 by 1913 (Vamplew, 1988: 86–90).

Table 1 tracks the number of workers employed in the mining industry from 1901 through to 2001. The peak year in terms of employment was 1901 and employment levels gradually declined as mines reduced their labour requirements through the increasing use of steam, electric, and diesel powered machinery. The basis of these figures is the regular Commonwealth census so they do not capture the boom and bust cycles that beset the industry. Some figures are unusually low such as the 1921 figure (in the midst of post-war recession), and the 1933 figure (at the tail end of the Great Depression).

Beyond the employment levels for mining, profits from mining funded large-scale industrial development in Australia, which was newly federated in 1901 with a population of almost 3.8 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). The flow on effect of mining, through indirect employment for example, is very difficult to estimate. Mining profits were re-invested in new industrial and manufacturing ventures. For example, profits from the wealthy silver-lead-zinc find at Broken Hill in far western NSW financed major industrial development such as a new iron and steel works at Newcastle, New South Wales (NSW) from 1915, rapid expansion of the Port Pirie smelters in South Australia the same year, as well as new mining ventures such as the Mount Lyell gold and copper mines in Queenstown, Tasmania from 1892 and north Queensland copper at Chillagoe after 1897 (Eklund, 2012: 9–16; Kerr, 2004; Kennedy, 1982).

Australia's position was further enhanced by close financial, political, and cultural ties with Britain, which was the source of, on average, 35% of all domestic investment in the Australian colonies from 1861 to 1889 (Maclean, 2013: 105; Dyster and Meredith, 2012: 1). As Belich noted, British investors were inclined to favour the 'Angloworld', including the British settled dominions, even when other sites presented more advantageous returns (Belich, 2009: 115–119). This overall picture of economic growth and

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