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## **The Mt Kembla Mine Disaster, 1902: Quarrying the Seams of Evidence to Assay the Human Response**

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### **Introduction - principal concerns**

The aim of this research has been to explore the human response to the 1902 Mt Kembla mine disaster right through to the present day. We have had three major concerns during the course of this research. The first has been to make extensive use of oral history. Disaster memories are particularly tenacious, a phenomenon which has been labelled 'the death imprint'<sup>1</sup>, and oral history is probably more fruitful in disaster research than in many other areas of historical activity. Oral testimony for this study began to be collected in 1976. Most, not all, of those interviewed were children at the time of the disaster, and most have passed away since their interviews.

A second concern of this study has been to examine the voluminous evidence bearing on the disaster in the light of research into disasters by social scientists, especially that of sociologists and psychologists. That research has questioned the stereotypes so popular in journalistic accounts of disasters and has established that panic, paralysis, stupefaction, and antisocial and manic behaviour after disasters are not as common as popularly thought. Armed with this insight the historian will look at contemporary newspaper accounts of such behaviour with a healthy scepticism. The findings of social scientists also make sense of apparently

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1. R.J. Lifton and E. Olson, 1976:2. On the 'death imprint' see also R.J. Lifton, 1965:260; A.J.W Taylor, 'Hidden Victims and the human side of disasters,' UNDRO News, March/April 1983, p.8.

random phenomena and give coherence to the analysis by dividing a disaster into discrete phases: pre-disaster, impact, emergency, reconstruction or rehabilitation, long-term. It is in the study of the middle three of these five phases that research by social scientists has been particularly rewarding.<sup>2</sup> We have pillaged that research relentlessly in search of the illuminating hypotheses in those phases.

But we have also sought to throw light on questions to which social scientists yet have few answers, particularly in the predisaster and long-term impact phases: how is a community's response to a disaster shaped by the historical experience of the community before the disaster? how does the response of the state-wide institutions of commerce, law and politics relate to the local community's trauma? what is the long-term impact of disaster on a community? what impact do monuments and annual memorial services have on the memory of the disaster?

The third and perhaps most distinctive contribution of this study is in the area of pre-disaster and long-term post-disaster concerns, in the breadth of the time-span in which the disaster has been located. Most disaster studies, popular and sociological, begin with an account of the disaster itself. Journalistic accounts start with the impact of the disaster agent - explosion, fire, flood, cyclone, earthquake - because that is considered the point of greatest sensation. Sociologists, who have written far more extensively on disasters than historians,<sup>3</sup> rarely have the time or the resources to study the pre-disaster community and in any case prefer to study human activity as it happens. A true history of a disaster, however, must set the context and begin further back. If a disaster is a disruption of a functioning social system,

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2. Wettenhall (1975:10) summed up the prevailing satisfaction with the results of such research with the claim that '... scientific scholarship has established a generally-accepted conceptual structure of disaster as a type of event, at least in certain essentials and as applied to the Western European / North American / Australasian cultural system'. Psychologist A.J.W. Taylor dissents from this optimism. Disaster research, he believes, is still 'empirically weak and experimentally difficult' with problems of 'methodology, design, and logistics'. 'But,' concedes Taylor, 'despite the lack of an agreed methodology and research design, there is general agreement over the sequential stages of disaster . . . warning, threat, impact, rescue, remedy and recovery' (1983:6ff).
  3. The neglect by Australian historians of the richly-documented and socially-illuminating field of disasters is shared by historians of every continent. The neglect is remarkable: most disasters are better documented than other human events, illuminate social relationships with the efficiency of any stress test, and pin-point issues of the historical process, especially the causes of historical change and the nature of progress. We hope that our study might alert historians to some of the opportunities in this field, which is white unto harvest. On the neglect of and possibilities for historians in disaster research, see John C. Burnham (1988) and also Piggin (1987).

the social system must first be understood.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the social, economic, and industrial history of Mt. Kembla during the two decades preceding the disaster were extensively studied.

This disaster, however, was not only a disruption of a functioning social system, it was also an irruption in the private psyche and the small world of the village family, in both of which the ripples of the disaster are still felt to this day. Hence we have explored the meaning of the present memory of the disaster without which the study would not have been conceived in the first place. Indeed, probably the most distinctive thing about this research is that it has been conducted at all, a result of the extraordinary fact that this disaster is still commemorated annually almost nine decades after it happened.

## **Layers of evidence**

History is the appropriate use of evidence. A fascination of this study is that many layers of evidence are available to be quarried like seams in a coalfield. These seams have been laid down in the successive discrete phases of the response to the disaster over the past nine decades. The evidence surviving from the emergency and recovery phases immediately after the disaster - sometimes labelled 'the post-disaster utopia' - is essentially altruistic in tone. This was succeeded by sources full of acrimony reflecting the resurfacing in the later investigation phase of pre-disaster industrial and class rivalries. The still later anniversary gatherings were characterised by mellower recollections as survivors and relatives relived their greatest trial and celebrated the triumph of the human spirit. In turn, memories of heroism and suffering were intensified as the circle of survivors contracted with the passage of the years. We are now in a fifth phase - the post-survivor phase - and, amazingly, there is no certainty that its end is in sight.

As the historian digs through each stratum of evidence to get to the original event, allowances must be made for the peculiar qualities of each, just as the miner has to adjust to the peculiarities of each seam he works. The historian is concerned to collect ore from each stratum. He is not concerned exclusively with the original event. Social scientists would develop a taxonomy of such phases. That was not our concern in our book, but let me here proffer a few suggestions towards the development of such a taxonomy which might be taken up by one better qualified than I for the task. Apart from the emergency, recovery or reconstruction, and

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4. That this requires an understanding of the prehistory of a disaster-affected system has been recognised by sociologists themselves even if they have not proved adept at meeting this need.

investigation phases which will be familiar to all students of disaster, it is here suggested that the long-term impact needs to be divided into three distinct phases - the club or anniversary phase when the disaster legend is forged; the surviving remnant or celebrity phase, when the legend is defended; and the post-survivor phase when the legend is analysed.

### 1. *Evidence from the emergency and recovery phases*

Important distinctions may be observed between these, the two earliest of the post-disaster phases. The feelings of surviving victims seem to move from anguished shock to despairing grief. 'Not many wept,' observed journalists of the women at Mt Kembla (*South Coast Times*, 9 August, 1902). This is consistent with research on disasters which has shown that, in the emergency phase, while the rescue operation is in progress, little shock or grief is expressed. There is too much to occupy the mind, and there is a strong, if miserable, consolation in the fact that all - 'the sisterhood of suffering' - are involved in the same calamity (Prince 1920 [1968]:147; Baker and Chapman 1962:127). A doctor at the Kembla disaster site bore this 'glowing testimony' to the fortitude of the victims' relatives two days after the explosion:

... the bereaved people, even including the widows and young girls, were singularly calm and self-contained . . . and during the whole of the appalling situations which came under his notice he observed breakdowns in three instances only. (*Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate [NMFMA]* 4 August 1902).

We cannot tell what the doctor meant by a 'breakdown', but he was probably expressing the widespread Anglo-Saxon antipathy to public manifestations of hysteria or apparently uncontrollable weeping or sobbing (Griffin and Tobin 1982:20). The doctor was speaking two days after the explosion towards the end of the emergency phase. With the onset of the next phase - the recovery or reconstruction phase - the experience of grief seems to have intensified. This is consistent with the experience of the normally bereaved who often report that the first three days following bereavement are easier than the succeeding thirty (Beutel 1975:32).

In this post-emergency recovery phase, stoic behaviour is observably less evident. The plight of the poor Kembla women as they waited at the pit mouth for up to sixty hours for news of their husbands and sons has unquestionably left the most indelible impression on the minds of witnesses. One reporter wrote: The grief of those who recognised in the dead a husband, father or brother, was so poignant as to cause the strongest-willed observer to turn aside and hide his tears (*Sydney Morning Herald [SMH]* 2 August 1902).

These ineradicable scenes of suffering following disaster have been labelled as I have already observed 'the death imprint'. Eric Hunt wept as he relived the scene seventy-five years later:

And a stretcher would be brought out with a body on it [pause] and you'd see these women rush at it [pause], they'd lift the bags that were thrown over the top of the stretcher, they'd lift the bags and if they recognised [pause] if they recognised it was one of their own then they'd let out a scream [pause] and they'd throw themselves on top of these poor unfortunate devils.

Eric Hunt then shook his head violently, trying in vain to dislodge the image from his brain. He muttered vehemently, 'Damn the thing, I say'. (Interview with E. Hunt, November 1976).

Different as the expression of grief appears to be in the emergency and recovery phases, the tone of evidence coming from both phases has a number of affinities. Negative antagonisms are swept away first by imperative need and then kept at bay by powerful feelings of dependence and interdependence. Gone is the antipathy between management and worker, and the worker's irritation with paternalism is translated into grateful co-operation.

Dr James Robertson, engineer and director, who hitherto had terrorised all the residents of Mt Kembla with his pomposity and rudeness, was sick in bed in his Sydney home when the disaster occurred on the afternoon of 31 July 1902. He was not, as rumour had it, with the other directors, congratulating them on the 'splendid' ventilation in Mt Kembla Mine (*NMHMA* 4 August 1902). He caught the 5.55 p.m. train to Wollongong and arrived at the mine about 10 p.m. when he assumed control of the rescue operation, a responsibility he exercised for the next four days.<sup>5</sup> All, including himself, were aware that the leader, demanded by the situation, had arrived:

Dr Robertson . . . stood out above the rest as the strong individuality. He got his search parties together, directed them, and saw to other operations. There were some good officials ready under proper direction to do effective executive work, and little by little calmness superseded excitement (*SMH* 4 August 1902).

The evidence from these earliest phases comes embalmed in sentimentality, especially in the latter reconstruction phase. The press reported thus on the recovery of the body of the manager's adopted son:

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5. Report of the Royal Commission, p.711 (Evidence of Dr James Robertson, 5 March 1903); Department of Mines and Agriculture. Inquiry under Section 10 of the Coal Mines Regulation Act, into the Conduct of Mr William Rogers, Manager of the Mount Kembla Colliery. In Conduct of Mr Rogers, As Manager, Mount Kembla Colliery, p.146 (Evidence of Dr James Robertson, 27 July 1903). In VPLA, Session 1903, Vol.5; *SMH* 14 August 1902.

'I've found him at last,' said Adam Frost, the hauling contractor, to Mr. Rogers, the manager. 'Who have you found?' was the weary reply from the saddened manager. 'Your stepson, Tom Rogers. Here's his cap. I know it well by the patch over the peak. The cap has been torn by a blow or something. When I found it I searched round carefully and found poor Tom. We have also found Stafford. He was not far from Tom.' 'Well,' said the manager resignedly, 'get a stretcher party and fetch them out.' (*SMH* 4 August 1902).

The evidence is reported by the newspapers in such a way as to invite sympathy from the readership, as if the journalists perceived instinctively that the wider the public sympathy the more rapid the healing. In these phases no elaborate explanation is offered. Dead heroes in 1902 were embalmed with the quasi-religious idealisation of martyrdom, but no theodicy is given. These earliest phases impose the necessity of coping, not of understanding.

## 2. *Evidence from the investigation phase*

With the on-set of the investigation phase, the altruism and interdependence vanish and the old antagonisms based on industrial reality and force of habit resurface. Paternalism becomes galling again, particularly in its attitudes to the distribution of relief moneys, a step rarely achieved without rancour which deepens in direct proportion to the length of time taken to complete the relief operation.

It is interesting that much of the evidence about the escape and rescue operation after the Kembla explosion comes from the testimony of witnesses at the Royal Commission when the bitter rivalries had reasserted themselves. Such evidence depicts the rescue operation in a far less rosy light than the journalists who had reported on the same operation during the emergency phase.

The most celebrated escape from the Mt Kembla mine was the work of Deputy David Evans who led about 70 men on a three-hour long circuitous route to safety. At the Royal Commission a miner, John Sells, sought to diminish this achievement. He suggested the party was an ill-directed stampede driven by panic and selfishness. When, in the course of their flight, they came upon a miner, Charles Woodroof, lying between the rails, his mouth in the dust, most of the men rushed past. Sells remonstrated in words he confessed were 'a bit strong': 'Jesus Christ, mates, are you going to go by and see a mate like this?' 'Every man for himself', they replied, maintaining that this was the instruction which Evans had given them on setting out. Sells and three others then forsook the rest. They put Woodroof on a trolley in the main haulage road and made for the exit.

Evans apparently saw no need to share his glory with anyone else. Sells, on the other hand, seems to have been motivated by a desire to deflate the importance of mine officials. In an amazing scene at the Royal Commission

perhaps skilfully orchestrated by miners' advocate, Lysaght, Sells insisted that Evans was a good deputy because he was easy-going and allowed the men to break a litany of regulations (*RRC* p.210f, 15 January 1903). The Company's barrister, Wade, after five days of frenetic research, dredged up past accusations against Sells of immorality and violence to throw doubt on his integrity (*RRC* p.215f, 20 January 1903). Sells was as upset by this tactic as the modern reader is appalled.

Further evidence of bitterness in this investigation phase was generated in the divisive three-year long process which led to the awarding of medals. John Sells wrote to the Minister for Mines complaining that the undeserving had been 'greatly praised' by the press while those who 'ran the greatest risks' were not mentioned.<sup>6</sup> Among the great risk-takers he numbered himself, 'although,' as the Chief Inspector for Coal Mines commented, 'he might have left that for others'.<sup>7</sup> Sells is not only an interesting example of self-promotion and of the tendency of people in the emergency phase of a disaster to underestimate and misinterpret the behaviour of others. But he is also interesting because his letter to the Minister for Mines is the only extant evidence of an attempt in the investigation phase to evaluate different degrees of risk during the emergency phase:<sup>8</sup>

I should think that the greatest risk was the time of the explosion, certainly. The next greatest risk or dangerous time would be immediately after the explosion, why it was a stampede for home, of course, none of those praised by the Press, barring Frosts and Ridley, remained behind to help the weak. I saw almost 50 pass by and run over the bodies of two men and one boy and none of them attempted to rescue them, I cursed them. Out of the whole mine I think that I am safe in saying that the only ones who remained behind and who attended on the weak endeavouring to carry them out are Harry James, Jack Peace, John Sells and Arthur Clinton, the last named two did not get out until 5.30 p.m. when one of them immediately reentered the mine and assisted to bring out the first dead body brought from the mine (Abe Skilling) . . . When men were seen to enter the mine and return in safety you could get plenty of volunteers.<sup>9</sup>

Evidence in the investigation phase is more likely to be characterised by mendacity than that imparted in the early more generous phases. David Ritchie, Secretary of the Illawarra miners' association, had shared the widespread belief in Mt Kembla's reputation as a gas free mine. Five days after the disaster, in the altruistic recovery phase, he wrote to George

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6. John Sells to John Kidd, Minister for Mines, 16 December 1902. 9/1935, Archives Office of NSW.
  7. Memorandum of A.A. Atkinson, Chief Inspector for Mines, 2 January 1903. Box 9/1935, AONSW.
  8. Unfortunately the report of the secretary of the Humane Society on the basis of which medal-winners were selected has been lost.
  9. John Sells to John Kidd, Minister for Mines, 16 December 1902. 9/1935, AONSW.

Henderson, a former Secretary of the same association, and now Secretary of the coal miners' union at Collie in Western Australia:

I presume that the news of the explosion at Mt Kembla would come as a great surprise to you, as it did to us all here. I had never had any reports of gas from that Colliery, but there is no doubt now that there has been some gas to cause such an explosion although the coal dust theory is much in evidence at present amongst our mining experts.<sup>10</sup>

In the investigation phase, Ritchie served as one of the three Royal Commissioners and did his best to establish that reports of gas in the mine before the explosion were legion and common knowledge, but that they were ignored or covered up by a complacent management. It was a disingenuous move on the part of one who was prepared to twist the truth in his attempt to saddle the company with responsibility for the disaster.

An interesting index to the tone of evidence in the investigation phase is the poetry, most of which was written in the early years following the disaster to accompany the annual commemorations. Such poetry is concerned with protest on the part of the suffering or with its principal antidote, theodicy, which appears to have been written mainly by non-victims.

In the poem 'A Widow's Lament' the reality of the women's world in a coal-mining community most clearly emerges, and it is significant that the poem sounds a note of protest. Women took umbrage at the treatment of the widows by the male trustees of the relief funds. 'A Widow's Lament' is also about a woman taking umbrage. Ostensibly she is lamenting the absence of her late husband, but that is not where the poem's real meaning lies. Rather 'they' are criticised for wondering why her hair is grey and for forgetting the intensity of her suffering in the ordeal. Behind her lament is the point made so well about the post-recovery phase by W.H. Auden in his reflections on Breughel's 'Icarus':

. . . everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster.

The sun still shone, and the ship with 'somewhere to get to . . . sailed calmly on'.<sup>11</sup> The resumption of normalcy by everyone else after a disaster is a source of resentment among the bereaved (Quarantelli and Dynes 1976:147). In the face of such insensitivity, she, the Kembla widow, defiantly

10. David Ritchie to George Henderson, 5 August 1902. ICEA Letter Book, April 1901- May 1903. ANUABL T3/11/4.

11. 'Musée des Beaux Arts,' in Edward Mendelson (ed.), W.H. Auden: Collected Poems, Faber and Faber, London, 1976, p.147. I am indebted to Kate O'Neill for this reference.

refuses to smile - ever! Here the reality of loneliness is poignantly captured. The indiscriminate use of 'they' is produced by her grief. 'They' are like shadows in the background, powerless to relieve her loneliness even in their kindness:

Alone I stood  
And gazed on his dear face, his dear cold face,  
And told them he was mine.

Nevertheless, in 'A Widow's Lament' the protest remains incipient. It is so, or non-existent, in all the Kembla poems. For the first and only time in this poetry the war between capital and labour is referred to in the poem 'Mount Kembla'. But the poem has no interest in sparking protest. It does the precise opposite, advances a stereotyped theodicy, and ends with the inane hope that the post-disaster utopia, when management and men temporarily sank their differences to preserve life, would henceforth be the norm in the mining industry: 'And thus make earth a stepping-stone to heaven'. So the investigation phase is the one in which protest sometimes develops, thus provoking the necessity of reassuring reflections, including theodicies.

### *3. Evidence from the club phase - forging the legend*

In the first three years after the disaster, the Kembla churches were 'densely crowded' for the memorial services, and, included among those who thronged the roadway - 'a most unusual sight' - were non-Catholics attending at St Clement's the solemn commemoration of the souls of those who died. The 1906 commemoration was overshadowed by news of an even bigger disaster: the California Earthquake. After that, memorial services rarely attracted large crowds, and it was sensible that they be confined largely to one Church. Up to the end of World War I the Catholics appeared to commemorate the disaster most conscientiously. From 1920 the Church of England seized the initiative and has retained it ever since. In the nonsectarian atmosphere of Mt Kembla no-one appears to have objected to this arrangement.

The memorial occasions were like the annual meeting of a club for survivors and their families. They developed into opportunities to share stories about the disaster which were first family and then community traditions: stories about fateful coincidences, amazing escapes, lucky near misses, and appalling suffering. Usually every year some new person turned up and new perspectives were gained on the old traditions or hitherto-unheard experiences were shared for the first time. Some stories were

repeated endlessly to form the core of the disaster legends: The manager, Mr Rogers' declaring the mine the safest in the world at the precise moment it exploded; the self-sacrificing rescue operation of MacCabe and McMurray; Mrs Dungey's gruesome ordeal with her decapitated husband; and the ghost of Mickey Brennan.

Mine disasters have a universal tendency to produce such legends<sup>12</sup> which, although somewhat inaccurate, are 'more solidly established in folklore than the events which really occurred' (Bell 1979-80:91) Three procedures have been suggested as involved in the composition of these legendary traditions: embellishment; the telescoping of history; and the acquisition of archetypal overtones as universal themes are added. The stories about Mickey Brennan, whose body was never recovered after the disaster, perfectly illustrate all three. His father, the legend has it, went to the mine every weekend for eight years to enquire if his son's body had been found. This is an embellishment as his father died two years later. The legendary attribution to Micky Brennan of the words, 'God strike me dead' on the morning of the explosion, is the result of a desire to demonstrate the universal folly of tempting the Creator, while the confusion of this habit of cursing with that of another miner, Laidlaw, who did not die in the disaster but was subsequently drowned in a boating accident, is an example of the telescoping of two historical events into one (Bell 1979-80:100).

In this club phase, membership of the club is rather loosely defined and includes, apart from survivors and their families, those who wish to use the commemoration for purposes of industrial leverage. The Miners' Federation, although rarely represented at the memorial service, attempts every now and then to use the commemoration for that purpose. At the thirty-eighth anniversary, the President, Fred Lowden, drove home the moral:

... although we cannot do much except mourn their loss, all our members should be resolved to emphatically declare that so far as they are concerned 'There will be no more holocausts like the disaster of Mt Kembla'. 'Safety first' should be the watchword of all members, especially those underground. That this is difficult can be appreciated by reason of the fact that at present production is for profit and not for use, but we can all assist by bringing about that 'Production for use and not for profit' when safety and not profit-making will be the key-note (*Illawarra Mercury* [IM] 26 July 1940).

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12. Bell (1979-80) cites as sources for data about legends in British coal mining history the works of R.L. Galloway, *A History of Coal Mining in Great Britain*, 1882, facsimile, Newton Abbot, 1969, and *Annals of Coal Mining and the Coal Trade*, 2 vols, 1898 and 1904, facsimile, London, 1971. He also recommends sampling the 12 Mining Accidents volumes of the Irish University Press facsimiles of British Parliamentary Papers.

For the sixtieth anniversary the Miners' Federation sponsored a commemorative service at the monument in the Wollongong Rest Park because they were then involved in a big campaign to improve safety (*IM* 1 August 1962). Similarly, the theme of the intermittent treatment of the disaster in the journal of the Miners' Federation, *Common Cause*, has been the need for vigilance about safety in the face of the owners' lust after profits.<sup>13</sup>

The fiftieth and seventy-fifth anniversaries were big events. Both attracted reigning archbishops to take the memorial service. Historians, too, were attracted to both events. The Illawarra Historical Society had taken the initiative in planning for the fiftieth anniversary, and 100 people braved the torrential rain to hear a member of the Society, Southern District Mining Engineer for the Joint Coal Board, Gordon Sellers, read the most careful account of the technical aspects of the disaster prepared since the report of the Royal Commission.<sup>14</sup> Not so careful were the earlier remarks of the President of the Society, Gordon Worland. He said that the harrowing scenes at the entrance to the shattered mine were still matters of poignant memory, which was right: as the names of the ninety-six victims were read and a minute's silence was observed, a journalist observed many 'inaudible tears'. But Worland's remark that, 'The far-reaching effects of this explosion on the conduct of mining tends to assuage the sorrow of its occurrence', owed more to wishful thinking than to objective observation (*IM* 1 August 1952). But such comments are more common in the club phase than Seller's careful analysis, which I suggest is more typical of the post-survivor phase. The seventy-fifth anniversary was attended by Wollongong University historians who suggested to the local press that the current predilection for investigative journalism might be devoted to procuring a medal for the last survivor, Eric Hunt, in line with the historical evidence if not with popular tradition. The journalists performed this task with commendable zeal<sup>15</sup> and to the satisfaction of Eric Hunt and his heirs.

The club phase is the most mellow of the phases engendering evidence on the disaster. It is characterised by camaraderie and is more heroic than analytical.

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13. CC 25 July 1959, 30 July 1960, 23 January 1965, 10 October 1970 and 2 February 1976.

14. Mount Kembla Disaster Commemoration, Special Bulletin, Illawarra Historical Society, 1952.

15. *IM*, 23 March, 24 March, 29 July & 1 August 1977; Daily Telegraph, 1 August 1977.

#### 4. *Evidence from the surviving remnant, celebrity phase - propagating and safeguarding the legend*

In 1950 the cult of the last survivors commenced when D.J. Davies, who had accompanied his father to the mine on the day of the explosion, wrote his recollections of the disaster for the local newspaper, the South Coast Times and included a list of seventeen known survivors who still lived in the district (*SCT* 31 July 1950). At the fiftieth anniversary (1952) twelve survivors attended the service in the Rest Park. A popular radio announcer, Margaret Broadfoot, who had taken to writing a daily column of social news for the other Wollongong paper, the Mercury, headed her report on the anniversary with the dramatic words, 'I take tea with a hero', a report on the only still-living survivor who had been awarded a medal, Arthur Clinton (*IM* 8 August 1952).

From then on, the death of each survivor was an additional opportunity for the press to go over the disaster story yet again. The coverage of the disaster in the thirty years following the fiftieth anniversary was far more extensive than in the thirty years before it. A report on the fifty-sixth anniversary listed fifteen known survivors, but there was no mention of the one who was destined to be the last survivor, Eric Hunt (*IM* 31 July 1958). Eric surfaces for the first time in the Newcastle Morning Herald for 1 August 1959 when a very full coverage of his experiences at Mt Kembla was given. In 1969 he made a 'pilgrimage' to the mine and cemetery which was reported fully in the local press (*IM* 23 May 1969). Then in 1973 journalist Phil Quine announced with a flourish to the unimpressed cognoscenti that he had located yet another survivor of the disaster, namely eighty-eight years-old Eric Hunt of Stockton, Newcastle (*Sunday Telegraph* [South Coast Edition] 30 September 1973). A better 'last survivor' could not have been invented by any author of fiction. Eric's recollections had been vivid and harrowing and were recounted unfailingly with great emotion. There was a polished, almost a celebrity air, about the accounts of the last survivors which now took on the form of a ritual, or better a liturgy.

Meanwhile, with the decline of the major public commemorations, the annual village commemoration in the Soldiers and Miners Memorial Church at Mt Kembla, has become a more defiant affair. To ignore the commemoration is a form of ingratitude which Fred Kirkwood, the guardian of the disaster memory, has denounced more than once:

We are living in times when the coming generation will accept everything that the pioneers fought and died for, but their memory we no longer honour or respect . . . So we must at all times - and it has been my privilege in life - respect those who

have gone before. We've got to try to impress upon the coming generation that what was gained was fought for by trial.<sup>16</sup>

Fred had felt vindicated by the 1979 Appin mine disaster when fourteen miners died. Just a week later at the seventy-seventh anniversary service at Mt Kembla, Fred, one hand resting on the monument - his oratorical stance - announced defiantly, 'Some people want us to drop this memorial service. Appin proves we must never let it die.'

The annual sharing of legends at Mt Kembla revived the camaraderie enjoyed at Kembla in the immediate aftermath of the disaster and strengthened the solidarity of the little group as they met each year. Fred knew that it was important to allow that to happen, but interestingly neither he nor anyone else would continue to embrace traditions once they were shown to be false. The memorial service was the opportunity to compare versions, and, it is probable that the continuation of the service has actually served to correct much of the tradition. Disasters which have not been commemorated annually may have allowed legendary material to luxuriate unchecked to a degree not experienced at Kembla. Fred, although born after the disaster, has been the custodian of a remarkably authentic folklore, which befits one who sees himself as the guardian of the great tradition.<sup>17</sup> Having done more than any other individual to facilitate the development of the disaster memories into community traditions, however, Fred is resorting to indoctrination now that the normal processes of socialisation are breaking down. The survivor remnant phase is characterised by more intensity than the one it succeeded.

##### *5. Evidence from the post-survivor phase - analysing the legend*

Now that the last of the survivors have gone, Fred clings even more tenaciously to the memory. He admits to a 'vacancy': 'It's a feel of something that's gone beyond recall . . . it's a part of your life that's gone.' It has developed in him 'a different outlook as far as historical things are concerned' - things which have 'very deep value'. What is less obviously true for all of us, is conspicuously true for Fred, namely that history is an

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16. From a sermon delivered 30 July 1978.

17. 'The Mount Mulligan stories I deal with are often quite preposterous ones told in ignorance by outsiders, whereas the Mount Kembla ones you mention are more solidly based, and still in circulation among the local people. The Mount Mulligan community, of course, is dispersed to the four winds, and it is difficult to pick up much common thread of folklore amongst former residents after twenty years of separation. This leads me to suspect that the Mount Mulligan legends are probably mostly of quite recent origin and their outrageous unreliability may stem from the fact that there is no longer a community serving as the custodian of more authentic folklore.' Peter Bell to Stuart Piggin, letter dated 21 April 1980.

imaginative creation, a personal possession which each one of us, Mr Everyman, fashions out of his individual experience, adapts to his practical or emotional needs, and adorns as well as may be to suit his aesthetic tastes (Becker 1932:228).

Part of Fred's 'individual experience' is the many conversations he has had with a number of the survivors, not only at the memorial service. With one, Harry Simpson, who was, before Fred, perhaps the most celebrated embodiment of the disaster traditions and who died in 1971 at the age of ninety-six, Fred had discussed the disaster and 'old times at Mt Kembla' for two or three hours every Sunday morning for years. Out of these conversations, Fred's imagination has created 'a pattern of remembered events' extraordinarily rich in detail. He knows the nicknames of many of the victims, where their bodies were when found, where they lived in the village, even what they grew in their gardens! Many of them live in his imagination even though he never knew them.<sup>18</sup> And as for his 'aesthetic tastes', the memorial service, which always includes the reading of Evening Prayer from the incomparable liturgy of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, has become for Fred a congenial instrument to convey to many hundreds of relatives, residents, and school children over the years something of the feeling he has about the disaster:

O God, whose never-failing providence ordereth all things both in heaven and earth: We humbly beseech thee to put away from us all hurtful things, and to give us those things which be profitable for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The post-survivor phase has its own sense of urgency, and there is now a felt need to produce comprehensive reflections and evaluations of the disaster and its impact. Apart from the present research Wendy Richardson produced a play, 'Windy Gully' (1989) which attracted large audiences in Wollongong and received favourable reviews in the Sydney Morning Herald and elsewhere.

## Conclusions

In a conference on contextualising disasters it is necessary to observe that the discipline of history is 'the discipline of context'. The context here is, of course, the local mining community, albeit a community frighteningly vulnerable to external industrial and political power. But what I have tried to show here is that the evidence which we evaluate in order to recreate the

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18. Fred Kirkwood is like a Griot, the repository of the experience of the race, in Alex Hayley's television series 'Roots'. See (1974 and 1977:p.viii).

whole event must be understood in a temporal as well as in a spatial context. The Mt Kembla disaster left its impact not only on miners, but also on their children, and even through its annual commemoration, on those not yet born. The children became part of the club and through close ties to the survivor remnant polished a tradition which they have been keen to pass down to the post-survivor generation. Why has it happened?

Normally, following a disaster the regaining of harmony in the inner world is achieved through some perceived improvement in the outer world - some improvement in safety and technological progress. There was precious little of that following the Kembla disaster. The lesson of Mt Kembla seems to be that where improvement in the outer world does not eventuate, victims and their relatives do not question their basic convictions, but assert them the more tenaciously. Tenacity has characterised the memory of the Kembla disaster to the present day. To evaluate that memory with any hope of sensitivity it is necessary to interpret the evidence for that memory in the light of the phase in which it was produced, in the altruistic emergency and recovery phases, the bitter investigation phase, the mellow club phase, the urgent survivor remnant, celebrity phase, or the reflective post-survivor phase.

