

## **The Spirits of Kembla** **A Meditation at the Centenary of Australia's Worst Disaster**

At 2.03 pm on Thursday 31 July 1902  
The Mount Kembla Coal Mine exploded killing 96 men and boys. It is still the largest peace-time land disaster to afflict Australia.

Two things are unique about the Kembla disaster: its magnitude and its memory. There has been no bigger disaster on land in Australian history; no other local community has had to survive the death in one day of 96 of its young and finest men; and, when combined with the Bulli mine disaster of 23 March 1887 when 81 died, no other Australian region has been so faced with the horror of sudden death as the mining villages of Illawarra. The Kembla disaster is unique in its magnitude.

It is also unique in its memory. No other Australian calamity has been remembered so tenaciously and so faithfully for so long. This memory is 13 years older than Anzac Day. Every year for 100 years the Kembla disaster has been commemorated. The centenary of the Bulli disaster was commemorated in 1987, but there were many years when it was not commemorated, at least, publicly. There has never been a year when the Kembla disaster has not been commemorated.

What is the meaning of this memory? And why is it so important that those still unborn at the time of the disaster and those whose parents and grandparents were still unborn continue with this memory? It is because in the memory of this event reality finds us. In a world where it is increasingly difficult to get in touch with reality, Mount Kembla has a greater opportunity to find it than most. That might be a strange beatitude of blessing which might come out of this awful tragedy. Admittedly this reality is more easily felt than explained, but energetic efforts have been made to do both. The annual commemoration has been the real bedrock for this effort. And in addition to Kevin Stone's history of Kembla and the full-length history of the disaster written by Henry Lee and me, the memory has generated Wendy Richardson's highly-commended stage play, 'Windy Gully', and much poetry, culminating this centennial year in Conal Fitzpatrick's praiseworthy *Kembla: The Book of Voices* (Kemblawarra Press, 2002). There the feeling and the explanation are combined so successfully. Conal explains the meaning so well because he has felt it so deeply. So there are a lot of resources now on the disaster. On such foundations a great film will be made one day. It will have to be great to be worthy of this disaster which has everything.

The reality with which the Kembla memory confronts us is the reality of our outer world, the reality of our inner world, and the reality of the next world. The true spiritual meaning of the Mount Kembla disaster and its memory might be sought in the interface of those three realities. The meaning is found in the three-way struggle between the capitalist spirit, the human spirit and the divine spirit. Kevin Stone spoke on Thursday of understanding the disaster in terms of geography, grief and grace. I think he is saying the same thing. Geography and the capitalist spirit, grief and the human spirit and grace and the divine spirit

### **The Reality of our outer world: the traumas of the Capitalist Spirit**

The grimy reality of the miner's lot at Mount Kembla has always been in sharp contrast with the glory of the emerald rain forest beside the azure sea. Capitalism until recently has been no respecter of the environment. But the miners were not unaware of the beauty of the mine's locale. Conal Fitzpatrick's disaster victims voice its beauty even in death:

I have always indrawn  
the sweep down the valley:  
the lantern blackboys  
the upraised palms  
the generative bush  
and the pulsing ocean beyond . . .  
Bury me facing

Following the explosion the beauty and the sun which produced it were blanketed by a great cloud of black smoke. Fowls thinking it was nightfall went to roost. The thunder clap was followed by an eerie silence, the subject of a number of Conal Fitzpatrick's 'voices':

The roar was utter  
utter the silence after

Mine explosions and fires with enormous loss of life, usually caused by the use of naked lights, were regular features of industrial capitalism's demand for more coal from deeper and therefore increasingly gassy mines.

Everything burned  
without and within  
Pure terrible  
the industry  
of sin

The safety lamp had been invented ninety years before the Kembla disaster, but it slowed production through its inferior light, and owners were not prepared to compensate miners for the inconvenience. Ironically, as Fred told us on Wednesday, it was an issue before an arbitration hearing at Wollongong at the very time of the explosion. Neither management nor men were particularly keen to use the safety lamp under such conditions, and the miners in the other mines in the region were annoyed at having, without any extra pay, to use safety lamps after the Kembla explosion.

There were other difficulties. A prosperous decade in the 1880s had resulted in a lot of strikes as the men pressed for better conditions. The strikes and lockouts were monumental battles and left a legacy of bitterness. In the depressed 1890s the miners were in no position to strike, and work was so intermittent that they struggled to make a living wage. Few were prepared to report such inconveniences as the presence of gas in the mine or other threats to safety, and, following the explosion, most could not wait to get back into the Kembla mine. Economic realities seemed to eliminate any expectation that mining could be anything other than dangerous. Accident and death were inevitable. Or as Conal Fitzpatrick put it:

A mole has an earth  
and a miner the pit.  
How each life's  
destiny presses it.

The conflict between management and men was swept away in the emergency phase of the disaster as both sides of industry combined to overcome the unwelcome threat to their livelihood. But the distrust soon resurfaced. There were the usual unseemly disagreements over the relief funds, and dissension broke out over the awarding of medals for the relief operation, when the managers recommended to the Humane Society that they be awarded gold medals and the miners for the most part had to be content with silver or bronze medals. This disaster generated three inquiries: an inquest, a royal commission, and an investigation into the conduct of the manager. A record has been kept of every word spoken at each of those inquiries. They are massive reservoirs of information, deep mines from which the historian can dig the ore of a bitter spirit, because they reflect the conflict endemic to industrial capitalism, a conflict between capital and labour.

### **The Reality of our inner world: the tribulations of the Human Spirit**

Continuing to work in a dangerous occupation requires outward public complacency. When a job has to be done, there is little point in talking about how dangerous it is all the time, but it cannot dispense with the private anxiety either of miners or members of their families. Following the Kembla explosion innumerable dreams, presentiments, and warnings, portending catastrophe, were reported.

- Run
- You are not to let him

Powerlessness to improve safety also resulted in fatalism, many superstitions, and a concern not to offend either 'mother nature' or God. Swearing and taking the Lord's name in vain were all looked down upon. At the time of the explosion 283 men were working at the mine. If all of those and the members of their families were chronically at risk of private anxiety, it is no wonder that so much data has survived of nightmares and presentiments.

The explosion left eight dead and twenty-one injured, six of whom were at the mine mouth and fifteen within the mine. The latter and 239 others were endangered by the afterdamp, the poisonous gas which follows a mine fire or explosion and makes its victims want to sit down and sleep.

These last yards  
the afterdamp  
has clamped me fast  
its anvil bandedness.  
Lay down  
lay me down  
I drown in slow ether.

That most of the survivors came within an ace of sharing the fate of those who died explains why there are so many stories of near death and so much speculation on the sufferings of those who died. Conal Fitzpatrick is motivated in his Kembla poems by the desire to let the dead speak, since the death of the young ends the normal prospect of many conversations. Feeling deeply the scandal of early and sudden death, Fitzpatrick's 'voices' are mainly those of the dead:

They will number me  
among the slain unsung  
My fifteenth year  
hardly begun

It came so quick  
I nary had time to fathom  
I was a moment heartsick  
then gone

Bear me up gentle  
my poor broken body  
Lay me in a green space

Mine disasters kill men and create sisterhoods of suffering. The most indelible impression left on those who converged on the mine site after the explosion was of the plight of the widows, some of whom waited for up to sixty hours for news of their loved ones. 'Poor Mrs Dunning' lost fourteen relatives in the disaster. Their coffined bodies were stacked up in every room in her house. The agony of bereavement, of course, was not confined to the wives. The father of 14-year old Jacob Nelson was the first to discover he was bereaved. Jacob's five-year old daughter never forgot the image of her father, crashing through the front door, holding his hands high above his head, and crying, 'Jacob, Jacob'. Disaster death is the intensification of death. The effect of so much suffering is cumulative and contagious, a pitiless battering of the human spirit.

### **The Reality of the next world: the travail of the Divine Spirit**

When the outer and inner worlds separated to breaking point at Kembla, it was mainly to the Christian faith that surviving victims looked for healing and harmony.

Maybe there is in the human spirit an innate sense that we must turn to the divine for help when things get out of control, and that it is the divine spirit which brings harmony to us again.

Indeed after the Appin Disaster, 26 July 1979, when 14 died, David Kemp, the Miner's Lodge Secretary ended his three minute speech with a reflection on the prospect of harmony. I regard this address, at the memorial service, as the Gettysburg address of the mining industry. You will remember how during the Civil War following the Battle of Gettysburg both sides gathered to consecrate some land in which to bury the tens of thousands who were killed, and a preacher spoke for two hours words which no-one remembers, and then along came Lincoln and in a few minutes said it all:

In a larger sense, we cannot dedicate. . .we cannot consecrate. . . we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us. . .that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion. . . that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain. . . that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom. . . and that this government of the people. . .by the people. . .for the people. . . shall not perish from the earth.

Well, to return to David Kemp at Appin, he talked for a few moments about the friendly arguments among the miners about different codes of football, and about the aussies and the poms on the cricket field, and in politics, about Nifty Nev and Cocky Fraser, and then he just said,

Faith is to believe that God brings harmony to you, with neighbours and friends, and with the world.

And then he sat down. No explanation of how that related to what went before or how it applied to the disaster in any explicit way, but everyone loved those words and were helped by them.

To deal with conflict, in this case between the capitalist spirit and the human spirit, and to bring harmony, that is one of the great benefits of faith in God. And there was plenty of that around at Mt Kembla in 1902.

Management ordered the digging of a mass grave in Windy Gully cemetery for the internment of victims. It has been an ongoing scandal over the years that no monument was erected there by the captains of industry, and a source of great satisfaction that on Thursday 1 August 2002 a monument, donated by BHP Billiton, was unveiled as part of the centenary commemoration. It was also good that the place of the mass grave identified, and now marked with four stakes – it would be good if a more permanent memorial could be erected there. But actually few bodies were buried in that mass grave. Relatives and friends resisted all efforts to depersonalise funerals. They heard the 'voices':

Whatever the count  
Whatever  
Remember me

And, in all the rush, and the need to bury bodies quickly, none was buried without a service taken by a clergyman.

There was no general memorial service which has become a recognised feature of modern disasters, and a very good idea they are too. That function may have been served by the military funeral given to disaster hero, Major MacCabe, who died in the rescue operation and was revered as a Christ figure who laid down his life for his friends. His was 'a noble deed

and a noble death' declared Gerard D'Arcy-Irvine, then Rector of Wollongong, who was to preach at Henry Lawson's funeral twenty years later. D'Arcy-Irvine had installed above the communion table in the Mount Kembla Anglican Church a stained glass window depicting Christ leading his lambs out of what is now taken to be the adit of a coal mine. The translation from darkness to light, from the blackness of the pit to the glory of heaven, was, from the first, understood to be Jesus' work. In the Bible of course Elijah anticipates Christ in his ascension to heaven. In the layered imagery of Fitzpatrick:

I have ridden like the prophet  
on a flammatory, blood-sundering comet  
Laddering the stars

The hope that the victims are now with Christ in his resurrection arises in Fitzpatrick's poetry from their identification with him in his crucifixion, in the holiness of their sufferings, in the anguished submission of their prayers, in their feeling the absence of God in their own Gethsemane. It's a hope not all can share, for not all are believers, but it is the only hope that any can have. And for those who have it, it is a glorious and certain hope. And it is the prayer of those who do have it, that those about whom they do not know whether they had it or not, are safe in the arms of Jesus. It is not, after all, our certain hope which saves; but Jesus who saves – we warn all to make their eternal salvation sure by coming to Jesus; and for all who have died, including the disaster victims, we hope that all will have relied on Jesus more than we knew.

What's the meaning of the memory? Fitzpatrick gets us closer to feeling and seeing it. If anything, industrial capitalism's grinding spirit accentuates working-class dignity:

Leave my blackened boots  
by the cottage door.  
Let every caller know  
this was a working man's abode

Whatever the meaning, it must be simple. It cannot be fancy:

We were plain men.  
Don't make of us  
more than we were,  
than I am.  
Give us a plain end

Simple? OK. But the human spirit cannot be left simply as dust:

We were poor men  
wrought extraordinary  
What does suffering  
make of the heart?  
Over time  
Glory

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**Conal Fitzpatrick, *Kembla The Book of Voices* may be obtained from the Kemblawarra Press, PO Box 169, Wauchope, 2446 (phone 6585 1369), \$26.45 including postage or Mt Kembla Mining Heritage Inc ☎ 02 4271 3737 [www.mtkembla.org.au](http://www.mtkembla.org.au)**

