

Danger, Death and Disaster in the Crowsnest Pass Mines 1902-1928. By Karen Buckley. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004. xxvi + 189 p., ill., app., bibl., notes, index. ISBN 1-55238-132-3 \$34.95)

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This book provides illuminating detail on the related topics of danger, death, and disaster in the coal mines that straddle the southern border of British Columbia and Alberta. The author has carried out a good deal of

research on a topic that rarely attracts the attention it deserves, although overall her book suffers from a lack of focus. It is not clear whether this is intended to be an oral history, a community study, or perhaps an exploration of community trauma. None of these approaches is pursued consistently, and some curious silences further weaken the book's effectiveness. The most significant omission is the absence of any extended discussion of the miners' efforts to reduce the perils of the underground work environment. Too often, miners seem to be passive victims of their employment.

Most scholars would argue that mining's dangers reflect the specific circumstances of the industry and that these hazards can be, and in fact are, dramatically reduced by appropriate regulation. Thus Jim Whiteside's fine study bears the title, *Regulating Danger: The Struggle for Mine Safety in the Rocky Mountain Coal Industry* (Lincoln, 1990), a book that Buckley does not appear to have consulted. The word "struggle" in Whiteside's subtitle underscores the fact that the creation of a safe work environment was not something welcomed or pursued by all. Companies opposed legislation that would add to the cost of doing business, and provincial governments did not over-exert themselves in their attempts to enact such measures.

Prior to the passage of liability acts, common law concepts such as assumption of risk, the fellow servant rule, and contributory negligence informed the attitude of both courts and employers to mine safety. Thus the passage of British Columbia's Employers' Liability Act in 1898 was an important divide, inaugurating a completely different legal regime. With the passage of the Workmen's Compensation Act in 1902 (not coincidentally, an initiative of a coal miners' representative in the British Columbia legislature), the employer had to provide financial compensation when a worker was killed on the job, set at \$1,500. Although the book is silent on this issue, the coal miners of the Crowsnest Pass were not. From 1910 to 1912, their union engaged in an important legal struggle to ensure that miners' families would receive this benefit, after it was denied to the widow of Albert Krzus, an Austrian miner. The widow had remained in Europe while her husband traveled to work in Fernie, British Columbia, where he died in a mine accident. The Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company argued that the 1902 act was intended to compensate only families resident in Canada. The case went all the way to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, England, which ruled in favour of the widow. Union officials subsequently traveled through the region, describing the victory's significance to the miners whose dues had funded the lengthy and costly appeal.

Although the book is ostensibly about the coal mines of both Alberta and British Columbia, the former receives far more attention. The author does not appear to have consulted some of the relevant literature from the latter province, notably the monographs on coal miners and mining by John Hinde, John Belshaw, and Eric Newsome, nor the illuminating articles of Andy den Otter and Al Seager (only one of which she cites) on Alberta mines and miners. Had she done so, she might have been more sensitive to the ways in which the work of coal mining was contested, and how safety issues were often central to this contestation. For example, the devastating 1902 mine disaster at Fernie sparked not one but two commissions of inquiry. The author describes only the first of these (p. 4-5), but in many ways the second was the more interesting. It was struck in 1904 to investigate charges that British Columbia's Inspector of Mines, Archibald Dick, took pay offs from the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company, and consequently was responsible for the 1902 explosion in the mine. Evidence heard by this latter commission provides much detail about the regulation of mine safety as well as the concerns of workers and their union about this regulation.

This book provides telling detail of the dangers of the Crowsnest Pass mines in the early twentieth century, as well as the way in which the local communities came to terms with miners' deaths. As such, it is an important chronicle of those towns and the region, even though it fails to acknowledge adequately the efforts of miners and their union to deal with the dangers that too often led to death and disaster.

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