

COALMINING RELATED DEATHS, HUNTER VALLEY, NSW 1926-1950 (2008)

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With this work the Society has now produced three volumes covering fatalities associated with the coalmining industry of the Hunter Valley since its earliest settlement.

The coverage is as before. Some 470 fatalities are included, mainly the result of accidents on the many and varied jobs within the mines of the Hunter Valley, but also other deaths attributable to the presence of those workings – drownings in dams, accidents with colliery trains, at least one suicide - in over 90 collieries.

While the emphasis has been on the individuals who lost their lives, it is again possible to track the further development of the industry. Three further advances in mining become evident in this period. First, the enactment of the NSW Workers' Compensation Act in 1926. Secondly, the winning of coal in the Hunter Valley came to the surface as 'open cuts', which themselves were a revolution in technique and use of specialised machinery. The third of these developments is very possibly explained by the period itself, 1926-1950, when men who had served in either (or possibly both) of the World Wars, returned to their dangerous civilian occupation with the knowledge, and experience, of the potential of the steel helmet to save life. Comment on this appears regularly until legislation in 1941 began to address this issue, no doubt leading to further regulation (beyond the scope of the present work), to ensure the universal adoption of a safety helmet.

The bravery and self-sacrifice of men in dangerous rescue operations are a shining light in the darkness of nearly 150 years of tragedy and disaster. Several instances occur of men having to be restrained from rushing into dangerous situations before rescue work could be planned, and also of more volunteers offering than could safely be sent to an accident scene. There is no reason to suppose that this will ever cease, no matter the direction of this and other similar occupations.

