Two centuries of coalminers' toil helped build the nation's wealth

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A COUPLE of years ago I was one of a group of academics who wrote a study of coal in Australia for the American mining giant Peabody.

It was a scholarly study, with good research, bringing together people from different fields to produce a detailed perspective on Australian coalmining, past, present and future.

In retrospect, Peabody probably felt it did its dough. The company had planned to use the report in its fight with the Rudd government over its Emissions Trading Scheme. At the time, it probably expected it would need hard evidence about the significance of the coal industry as ammunition in the debate, whereas it turned out that all the miners needed to spook the government was a few million dollars' worth of advertising. Who knew? Well, they know now, as does every other company with an axe to grind with government.

My part in the report was to supply some background history. I learnt a lot from the experience, not least that it's possible to find anything interesting once you start researching it, even coal.

Australia has been mining coal since 1797, when some marines chasing escaped convicts stumbled on a coal seam next to the Hunter River. The town of Newcastle was established in 1804, and working at the "Coal River" became a secondary punishment for convicts who had committed further crimes in NSW. The Hunter Valley mines were based on 19th century technology, as were the mines on the West Moreton field at Ipswich, west of Brisbane.

Labour relations were modelled on 19th century conditions too. In my research I came across The Coalminers of New South Wales: a history of the union, 1860-1960 (1960) by Robin Gollan. A communist in his earlier days, he left in 1957, along with so many others, following the Hungarian uprising. His work was strongly influenced by the British Marxists, especially Harold Laski, who supervised his PhD, and by E.P. Thompson, whose book The Making of the English Working Class uncovered the lost world of working-class customs.

The Grimethorpe Colliery Band will tour Australia later this month, having outlived the mine by nearly 20 years. In his book, Gollan describes a world straight out of Brassed Off. He uncovers a rich cultural life in the mining towns, but it was a claustrophobic, sexist world as well, full of male bonding rituals and devotion to old-fashioned union politics, where "to do your darg" was to do a decent day's work.

It was also a world of Us and Them. During industrial clashes, and there were many, violence flared. During a lockout at Rothbury in 1929, police fired on union demonstrators and killed an innocent bystander with a ricocheting bullet.

The unions were strong because the mines were dangerous, and miners needed whatever protection they could negotiate, though there was nothing to be done about "black lung". As early as convict times, men had been invalided out with "asthma", almost certainly silicosis.

Ipswich was a union town too, but less radical than the Hunter Valley, with a working-class culture that tended more towards Methodism and Welsh choirs.

Perhaps because it is only an hour away from Brisbane by train, Ipswich was a less claustrophobic mining town. However they did participate in the great strikes of the late 1940s.

Power shortages affected everyone during these strikes.

By WWII, Australian industry relied on electricity, and electricity relied on coal-fired generators. Besides, electricity had become essential in the home, for light, cooking and heating. My parents married during one such strike in 1946. The wedding reception was held by candlelight. Very romantic, until my mother's bridal veil caught fire.

In one of the defining moments in labour history, the Labor prime minister Ben Chifley called in the army to get the coal moving again.

The wonder of it is that Chifley, originally a train driver from Bathurst, could have imagined that the army could do the work. Underground mining was far too dangerous to hand over to untrained soldiers.

Open-cut mining is another world entirely. The State Electricity Commission in Victoria first experimented with open cut in the 1920s at Yallourn in the La Trobe Valley. Environmentally it can be a disaster.

Yallourn's coalmine eventually gobbled up the town itself in the unremitting hunger of the SEC for coal.

Mining can and does move mountains, and reclamation is expensive. But while the old deep-sunk mines of Newcastle and Ipswich were miserable places to work, open cut is safer. Since the early 1960s, with the opening of the Bowen Basin in Queensland, it has become the norm.

But there are no Welsh male choirs or Grimethorpe bands in the Bowen, or Surat, or Galilee Basins. The old world of working-class practices has gone, and on the whole a good thing too.

But in the world of fly-in, fly-out mining, the social capital that gave men a sense of co-operative purpose and pride in a dangerous, dead-end job has gone as well.

Men no longer expect to spend a lifetime down the coalmines, and it is the owners, not the workers, engaged in a game of brinkmanship with government today.

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http://learnearnandreturn.wordpress.com. In 2009 she wrote the chapter on the history of coal in Coal and the Commonwealth edited by Peter Knights and Michael Hood, with funding from Peabody Australia.