

When Coal Was King: Ladysmith and the Coal-Mining Industry on Vancouver Island. By John Hinde. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003. viii + 288 p., illus., maps, bibl., index. ISBN 0-7748-0936-1 \$24.95 pb. / ISBN 0-7748-0935-3 \$85. hb.)

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Volume 28, 2005

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800491ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/800491ar>

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Éditeur(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (imprimé)

1918-7750 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Morier, C. (2005). Compte rendu de [*When Coal Was King: Ladysmith and the Coal-Mining Industry on Vancouver Island.* By John Hinde. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003. viii + 288 p., illus., maps, bibl., index. ISBN 0-7748-0936-1 \$24.95 pb. / ISBN 0-7748-0935-3 \$85. hb.)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 28, 91–94. <https://doi.org/10.7202/800491ar>

***When Coal Was King: Ladysmith and the Coal-Mining Industry on Vancouver Island.* By John Hinde.** (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003. viii + 288 p., illus., maps, bibl., index. ISBN 0-7748-0936-1 \$24.95 pb. / ISBN 0-7748-0935-3 \$85. hb.)

Ladysmith is a picturesque town 14 miles south of Nanaimo, on the east coast of Vancouver Island. A century ago, Ladysmith was home to hundreds of coal miners and their families. Coal baron James Dunsmuir's nearby Extension mine provided employment for these colliers. In the decades before the Extension pits ceased operations in 1931, Ladysmith miners, their wives, and children created a community, adjusted to the

unstable conditions of the coal industry, were devastated by pit disasters, and weathered a lengthy miners' strike from 1912-1914. John Hinde's *When Coal Was King* thoroughly examines these developments, while correcting several stereotypes and assumptions about Island coal miners, their communities, and their endeavours to organize.

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, British Columbia was basking in an economic boom, based mainly on natural resources. On Vancouver Island, coal was indeed king, although its extraction from the earth's depths was fraught with uncertainty. Contemporary mineralogists and geologists confirmed what colliers already knew: the coal seams on the Island were unpredictable and their overlying conglomerate unstable. Explosive methane gas and airborne coal dust, along with the deadly carbon monoxide that swept through a mine after an explosion, were constant dangers. Add to these considerations the everyday hazards of mining—heavy coal carts, ornery horses and mules and unforgiving haulage machinery—and it is little wonder that the Vancouver Island coal mines were regarded as among the most dangerous in the world.

How the Ladysmith miners and their families dealt with the demands of the industry is a major focus of Hinde's book. Far from the superstitious and fatalistic miners of lore, Island colliers were constantly concerned with safety and underground working conditions. In contrast, mine owners such as James Dunsmuir took a laissez-faire approach to mine safety and fought tooth-and-nail against union and government intervention in the industry. In any case, Hinde demonstrates that Dunsmuir had little to fear from provincial mine inspectors—enforcement of regulations was lax, penalties for infractions were negligible, and inspectors most often attributed accidents, injuries, and deaths to miners' assumed carelessness. At the coal face, colliers were aware of their dilemma: they were paid to mine coal, not to be safe; taking time to monitor or improve their workplace meant a smaller pay packet. Chillingly, Hinde points out that doomed Westray, Nova Scotia miners in May 1992 were in a similar situation, with production bonuses undermining safety considerations. Coal mining companies, apparently, have few historians on their payrolls.

Hinde takes his readers down into the tunnels and rooms of the mine, describing the methods, equipment, and intricacies of winning the coal. Ladysmith miners were skilled and proud workmen, intimately attuned to the sights, sounds, and smells of the pit. One did not become an accomplished collier overnight; young men in the mines rose through the ranks, beginning their careers on the picking table or as members of the vast haulage network underground. The gradual introduction of steam-

powered machinery into the mine did not make skilled colliers redundant, and Hinde argues that the miners' drive to organize derived not from their job insecurity, but from their sense that their abilities and knowledge were integral to the coal industry.

Above ground, the cultural and social development of Ladysmith was indelibly affected by the nature of work in the Extension pits. Miners' wives played a crucial role not only in keeping families solvent and functioning, but also in creating a community. Eschewing static, class-based analysis, Hinde instead argues that a community is as much a *process* as a *place*—Ladysmith residents had multiple loyalties that shifted with the circumstances. Even among the miners themselves, divisions based upon occupation and, especially, race hindered efforts to organize. Asian miners, much maligned and thought to be inherently unsafe, were not approached by the Knights of Labor in the 1890s, the Western Federation of Miners in 1903, or the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) in 1910. This exclusion, Hinde believes, was the Achilles heel of the miners' organizations.

The final two chapters of *When Coal Was King* analyze in detail the miners' strike of 1912-1914, and the riots that erupted in Ladysmith and at the Extension pithead in August 1913. Safer working conditions, improved wages, and recognition of the UMWA were the miners' demands, with the latter condition most strongly resisted by Island coal operators. Shunned by the union, local Chinese miners joined imported strikebreakers in the pits, while poorly-trained special constables were sent to the coalfields by the provincial government. Hinde examines government and union documents, local newspapers, and dispatches filed by a Pinkerton undercover agent to illuminate the tension and sense of outrage in the community. Challenging previous historians' interpretations of the strike and riots as being revolutionary in nature and premeditated by the UMWA, Hinde maintains that Ladysmith miners and their families were not radical class warriors; the riots in 1913 were indicative of a community reacting against assaults to its sense of moral propriety and balance. The Pinkerton spy sensed the indignation, and commented that the arrogance of the special police and belligerence of the strikebreakers caused much resentment in the coalfields. The women of Ladysmith were very active throughout the strike, riots and resulting trials, and Hinde contextualizes women's agency in the town with more widespread demands for suffrage. Altogether, the author provides a thorough and sensitive post-mortem of Ladysmith's most troubled days.

Well-researched, lucid, and supplemented with almost two dozen photographs, *When Coal Was King* will appeal to a variety of readers. Ladysmith residents will appreciate the first scholarly analysis of their

town's original inhabitants and of the miners' strike and riots, which still figure in the community's collective memory. Labour and family historians will appreciate Hinde's sensitive treatment of the confluences and divergences of class, gender, and race. Those interested in British Columbia history and the prominent role of the coal-mining industry in the early-twentieth century will find much of interest in the book as well. In the early 1900s, industrial capitalism held sway in the new province, while workers and their families contested its restrictions, organized, and created homes and communities. Ladysmith's story is one piece of that larger picture.

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