

Rich Land, Wasteland – How coal is killing Australia

by Sharyn Munro

(Pan Macmillan Australia, 2012, RRP \$29.99)

A review essay by Len Puglisi

If you've ever had doubts about what the economic rationalist/ neoliberal ethos,¹ or corporate-consumerist capitalism,² might mean for an Australia inside a mining boom as the dominant driver, look no further than this book by Sharyn Munro.

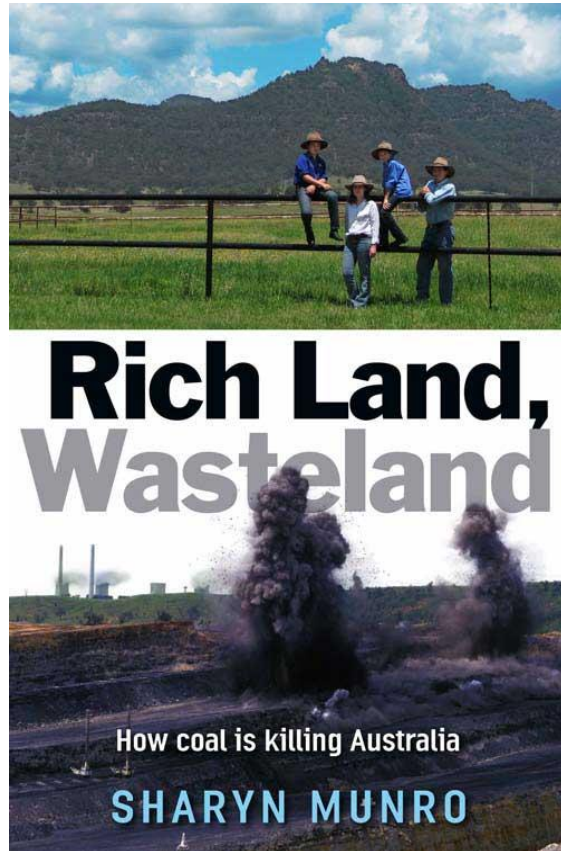
Munro has undertaken a wide-ranging spread of on-the-ground interviews with people in many of the agricultural regions of Australia, has attended untold meetings and culled myriad reports and tribunal/court hearings. In doing so, she has documented a sad tale: displacement of people and loss of community, flora and fauna; severe health effects on many people; loss or degradation of prime land and water courses; and industry intransigence, obfuscation and, it would seem, shameless deceit.

She describes the scope of mining activity which covers vast areas – especially in NSW, Queensland and West Australia, but also potentially for places she calls 'the new frontiers' in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania.

The book presents Australians with a penetrating story of a transformative industrial impetus that will require a herculean effort to reverse, albeit through a transitional period of no doubt topsy-turvy times and a media blitz by mining corporates to delay their wind-back.

Furthermore, and perhaps most sadly of all, the 'degradation' of government services and its officers at all levels is undeniable: talking up economic growth while minimising an effective balancing public sector role, thereby demeaning their expertise and reputation. Obfuscation or just a lack of personnel and resources in dealings with the public shows up an extraordinary tale of ineptitude in keeping mining companies to their regulatory/permitted/contracted obligations. Clearly, 'driven' Governments have 'mortgaged' themselves to an avalanche of local and foreign capital investment.

Meanwhile, as might have been hoped for in the business media, the boom-time expansion of this mining wealth and power has not been examined for its harmful effects but celebrated as



¹ See SPC member Arthur Gibbs's *Towards a Better World* (2012) exposition and analysis of these and other terms.

² See e.g. James Gustave Speth, 'America the Possible: A Manifesto, Part 1' Orion magazine, for a discussion of this mode of economic growth and where it's the leading US environmental magazine. <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/6681>.

a contemporary saviour. It's a far cry from media efforts in the past, especially in the era before the 1980s, for editorials to argue that governments play a lead role in ensuring the benefits of growth in wealth and income are fairly spread throughout the community, including especially lower income earners. Today, in the financial press, there is bandied about such tags as 'class warfare' and 'class envy', while simultaneously publishing regular glossy magazines entitled, 'Boss', 'Luxury', 'Life and Leisure' (for those with expensive tastes), 'Great Escapes'... The brazen incongruity of their position is beyond belief.

Victorians would have heard reports of protests from people affected by mining activities in NSW, Queensland, west Australia including the intrusions into the extraordinary landscapes of the Kimberley region. Billions of dollars, already invested and still coming, have been celebrated as their own justification, and Australia's prosperity is riding on these.

But just how extensive the impact of these developments will be may not have reached into the consciousness of southern States, and if it did, it might stir more awareness of what's at stake, including the view that 'local and international companies have Gippsland firmly in their sights, plus the Dandenong Ranges and the region around the Bay of Islands Coastal Park, near the iconic Twelve Apostles'.

Understanding the lessons from Munro's book could be an important step towards engendering the precautionary awakening throughout Australia, and not only in the immediate mining areas, which she demonstrates is now vital.

On page after page, Munro reports people's shock, horror and anger at the sudden transformations happening in their lives and their communities, the degradation of the soils and water courses, and the sense of betrayal they feel from government bodies they thought were there to protect them.

It's possible to choose from almost any page in the book for these expressions of dismay. Some particular examples follow as presented by Munro or out of the mouths of individuals (all named in the book)³: They provide a glimpse of what the mining boom really means for 'grass roots' Australia.

For local communities: 'In some years' time, what will we have? There won't be any little towns; Chincilla will be a ghost town...already it's different; so many new people, and rents gone up so much that people have had to leave; it's all out of whack – they have no respect for the social fabric of the small communities.' (p. 242).

For individuals' financial situation: 'Three mines were each discharging 2 megalitres a day of minewater – legally then – into the river. Many Hunter mines are 'wet', and have to get rid of the saline water they come across. This was a dry season, the water in the creek was low, the pump foot valves had to go deep – where the saline water sinks to and lurks. (She) had to dry off half her dairy herd as she couldn't grow feed for them. She was losing more money each year: \$40,000, then \$80,000, then over \$100,000... Unable to cope any longer, she offered to sell to the mine; they didn't want to buy her out. For two years she struggled on before she convinced them to change their minds. They only agreed on condition that she kept the dairy operational to show that it and mining could co-exist!... She feels that one of the hardest things to take in this mining versus farming issue is that 'people on land came to know that... they would not be treated fairly; they would be paid for the farm and that's all... they ought to be compensated not just for the value of the property but for the whole process of looking for another place and re-establishing.' (p. 25).

³ The names of all quoted persons are omitted in this review in the hope that readers will be further enticed to go to the book itself for verification!

For local air and noise pollution: ‘Now... half the time it’s too dusty to be outside; it’s too noisy and unpleasant... the whole atmosphere of Camberwell is different.’ In her parent’s orchard by the creek, she has seen that the peach fuzz collects dust until the fruit resembles ‘grey balls of mould’; that ‘grey sludge streams from the horses’ noses’, and that, after rain, ‘cakes of grey and brown mud fall from the cows’ coats’. (p.14)

‘There was dust on the grass and on the barley crop. The milk was being rejected because of the dust content in the milk. Refrigerated milk vats had to be washed out with special detergents and the lids left up for so many hours for the odours to evaporate, which is when the dust would come in. After many complaints (the company) changed the door positions in the dairy, which helped a little. Seems that ‘no impact’ was losing out to ‘evidence of the eyes’. (p.24)

For agriculture: ‘Caroona is roughly between Gunnedah and Quirindi. The Liverpool Plains are so flat that the horizon dances with mirages and so wide that the furrows disappear into a pinpoint of perspective. Their deep black soil and abundant aquifers produce a winter and a summer crop, which isn’t possible everywhere, with grain and seed yields 40 percent above the national average – wheat, corn, sunflowers, canola, sorghum (for cattle and chook feed), barley, chickpeas, soybeans, mung beans, olives, turkey, pigs, lamb, beef, wool and cotton. Farmers there had spent fifteen years working with the government to change their systems and reduce water use; water, they were told, was a resource that could no longer be exploited... Hardly was the agreement in place when another state government department, Mineral Resources, called a public meeting at the Caroona Hall about a proposed mining lease...(p.189)

For rivers, streams and wetlands: ‘What better way to attack a city than through its water supplies? What better way to attack a country than through its water resources for people, stock and agriculture? Both are happening here, but by negligence rather than deliberate act...The attack on our water is threefold: The depletion or contamination by mining or drilling under or near any part of our intricate, fragile and interconnected water systems; the amount of water they use, extracted to get at the coal or CSG, to process the coal, and to burn it for power; and the pollution from their waste water, the disposal of which is an unresolved problem of major consequence, so it can’t be acknowledged as such.’ (p.276)

For global warming and CO2 effects: ‘In December 2006, a young activist...of Rising Tide Newcastle, won an historic victory in the Land and Environment Court against Planning’s acceptance of the ‘flawed and invalid’ environmental assessment for Anvil Hill. This meant that Planning must consider the climate change consequences in environmental impacts from a mine – not just the direct, onsite emissions, but also the indirect, from the coal’s eventual use. The 10.5 million tonnes of coal from Anvil Hill, when burnt, would produce 12.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide a year – equivalent to doubling the number of cars on NSW roads. That case is still quoted internationally... But it didn’t matter what anyone did or said, or how evidently right they were, for in June 2007 Planning Minister Sartor approved Anvil Hill regardless, under the villainous Part 3A.’ (‘State significance’ decision power reserved to the Minister.) (p.188.)

For historic houses and notable gardens: ‘It is now over three years since we drove away and watched our home of almost all our lives disappear in the rear vision mirror. A majestic home and property... that 30 years before was highly prized in a pristine and productive part of the (Hunter) Valley. At the time of driving away the whole area was little more than a dustbowl for the numerous mines crammed in together – a moonscape of open cut mines...’ (p.13)

For the integrity of governments and government advisers: ‘...this formidable pair fights to ward off the latest mine as well as to make the others accountable. Consent conditions when a mine is approved are supposed to see to that; it’s all part of the spin that rules not only exist

but are respected, abided by, monitored, enforced, and their breaches penalised – as occasionally they are, at a slap-with-a-feather level. For example, \$1500 means nothing to a company whose profits are counted in billions, and you have to catch them at it first and prove it. And the ‘you’ tends to be vigilant locals, not the few and under-deployed staff of government agencies like the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) or the Department of Planning, who set the conditions. Every time they boast how many conditions have been placed on a new approval, unless they announce new staff to police them, those conditions mean nothing. The mines monitor and report on themselves. It’s like having laws and almost no police force, instead relying on the lawbreakers or the victims to report the crimes.’ (p.10.)

For the growing power and pressure exerted by local and overseas companies: “Mining has always been an activity which directly affected only a small number of landholders at any single time, so there hasn’t often been this kind of uprising before,” said rural consultant..., who represents some of the 2000 to 3000 farmers who expect to have gas wells or pipelines on their properties. “Now, suddenly, you’ve got this enormous, tremendously increased level of activity and of intruding into properties on a scale never before seen. The rush is on because coal seam gas has to start making money, fast, to justify the billions of dollars invested in it.”(p. 343.)

And there are many, many more sad and confronting examples of these dysfunctional situations throughout Munro’s book: intrusion into Aboriginal lands, intrusions in public lands and Nature Reserves, mal-effects on wineries and horse-racing studs, onerous conditions for fly-in/fly-out and drive-in/drive-out workers and deleterious effects on families, road and rail disruption, personal health effects from dirty air (particulate matter, PM10, PM2.5, PM1.0; orange dust and smoke from explosions), effects of infrasound low frequency noise (ILFN), dredging for ports and destroying around coral reef systems, coal chain power lines...

It may be a dream that this book could have the same place in Australia’s development literature that Furphy’s *Such is life* had for the droving era. But Sharyn Munro’s spotlight is certainly going to be somewhere up there as a major contribution to contemporary Australians’ understanding of what and how the mining industry has seriously dented the wonder and beauty of the country’s unique landscapes, as well as causing untold distress and hardship to individuals and communities.

The mining battle continues every day since Munro published this book in early 2012. Her documentation of events, people and places stands out not only as an instructive coverage of the main areas of conflict around Australia, but it also provides: a primer on the technical terms used daily in the industry; a lead into community fight-back approaches and the players involved; a slice of the attitudes of the industry participants; and a challenge to all Governments to get fair dinkum about taming the beast.

It’s hard to imagine that any Government will survive that does not engage effectively with the industry and its rough-shod tactics, its ill-judged blips in operations, and its patronising PR and planned approaches to confuse all who happen to get in its way.

The so-far large unasked questions that arise for Australian governments, its various administrative arms and for its people are: having hocked themselves into a mining boom of pivotal proportions for its prosperity, *can they now, if they wanted to, untangle themselves.* And in that process of untangling, in their dealings with local and foreign investors, will they face up to the challenge of *transitioning* all the way to a position of ‘de-growth’ (World Watch Institute), a Steady State Economy (Herman Daly/Geoff Mosley), *Prosperity without Growth* (Tim Jackson), or to some such agenda that would see financial actors come off the mining treadmill?

Munro reports various initiatives, emanating from the writings of eminent scientists and leading entrepreneurs, and also from forward-thinking trade unionists, for alternatives to coal and for reducing the amount of power we use. She also introduces the reader to some ‘democracy in the workplace’ initiatives including for the establishment or spread of workers’ co-operatives.⁴

All the ‘bottom-line’ issues, social, economic and environmental, are posed by Munro’s book: an economic sector rules our future which is distorting our basic sense of fairness and equal treatment according to law; and the on-the-ground damage to the unique land of Australia is being perpetrated to advance economic activities that are piling climate changing gases on to an already imperilled planet.

Meanwhile, it may be heartening to those wishing to tackle the mining industry’s poor performance that it’s not just in Australia where resistance is growing. As Katharine Marshall reports: ‘In far flung corners of the world, religious leaders are protesting against mining companies and projects... At the Washington National Cathedral an unlikely gathering of bishops, preachers, and advocates met on April 24 to explore how they might join forces both to draw attention to the harm that bad mining practices wreak on people and land, and to point to practical, positive ways to move forward.’⁵

Furthermore, analysing widely the coal industry’s future (in response to Graham Lloyd’s article, ‘King Coal still reigns’ in the *Australian*), Peter Newman reports: ‘Australia is not leading the charge on the adoption of clean energy, but it is certainly part of a global movement that will be seen in history as one of the great shifts in economic change. Perhaps King Coal is highly aware of this dramatic fall in its dominance in the power market place. The role of Murdoch’s empire in talking up Old King Coal seems to be one of “fiddlers three”, trying desperately to help keep the king merry as his kingdom collapses.’⁶

In a brave and major piece of work, Sharyn Munro urges: ‘We can be so much more than the world’s quarry, our futures calculated by corporate coal. We need not be helpless to stop it. Speak up for the smart, sustainable and humane Australia we could be instead.’

⁴ See also the writings of the Hon. Race Mathews, e.g., *Jobs of Our Own – Building a Stake-Holder Society – Alternatives to the Market and the State* (1999), and his work in progress, as well as initiatives of the UN for the International Year of the Co-operative. See <www.earthworkercooperative.com>

⁵ Katherine Marshall, ‘Bishops and Extractive Industries – A Human Face of Mining’, (Huff Post Religion, 14/5/12.) at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/katherine-marshall/bishops-and-extractive-industries_b_1461358.html

⁶ Peter Newman, ‘King coal dethroned’, *The Conversation*, 14/5/12