Industrial Pastoral: Lake Macquarie Coal Miners’ Holidays
Russell McDougall and Julian Croft

As Stephen Page and Joanne Connell note in their mapping of the field, leisure studies is a largely post-war development, evolving internationally out of geography, economics, sociology and a range of other disciplines mostly in the social sciences rather than the humanities. Historians have not ignored the subject – there are plenty of historical studies of sports and recreation, the development of national parks, and so on. Yet, while leisure clearly has a vital and dynamic relation to work – culturally, politically, psychologically – labour historians in Australia appear to have been less interested in this area of research. We, the authors of this article, are primarily literary scholars rather than historians, but we have been puzzled by this apparent neglect.

It is not our brief to examine the contemporary meanings of ‘leisure’ in relation to ‘work’ (or ‘forced labour,’ to adopt Guy Standing’s important twenty-first century distinction). Instead, our own study of coal miners’ holidays around Lake Macquarie from the late nineteenth and into the second half of the twentieth century considers the bygone rituals and activities of their holidaying from the vantage point of our own present location in an age where ‘simulation and nostalgia lie at the heart of everyday life.’

Our method draws considerably on participant-observer social anthropology, though our collaboration might be considered to result from a kind of split consciousness, one of us having grown up in the society under focus while the other, a regular visitant, remained on its periphery, looking in. But we write in retrospect, and this is not the usual manner of ethnographic fieldwork, its diaries and notebooks filled with jottings of the moment. Our collaboration raises larger questions that must remain outside the scope of our present study: about participant-observation, and the level of integration presumed by the backward glance of a literary imagination coloured by nostalgia for a lost world. These are the ‘enigma variations’ discussed by

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1 This essay is an expanded version of the paper, ‘Coal Littoral,’ delivered at the CRNLE ‘Something Rich and Strange’ Conference, 13–15 December, 2005, at Penneshaw, on Kangaroo Island.
3 Some attention has been paid to ‘industrial welfarism’ (so-called), but that was employer-sponsored ‘leisure’ and, as Nicola Balnave and others have argued, was an aspect of labour management, rather than (as we shall argue here) a workers’ practice of self-reliance imbued with agency. See Balnave, ‘Company-Sponsored Recreation in Australia: 1890-1965,’ Labour History, 85 (November 2003), 129-152.
4 By our analysis, Labour History, since 2003, has published just two articles that focus on the changing meanings of leisure in relation to labour, and both of those were on sport.
5 Guy Standing, Global Labour Flexibility: Seeking Distributive Justice (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999). There is an extensive body of research on work and leisure – see, for example, John T. Haworth and A.J. Veale, Work and Leisure (London: Routledge 2004), and S.G. Jones,, Workers at Play (London: Routledge 1986). We have not attempted to review historical research on the development of the working class holiday, which has been a fruitful avenue of enquiry in Britain,
Russell McDougall and Julian Croft. ‘Industrial pastoral: Lake Macquarie Coal Miners’ Holidays’.
D. Huon in his study of ecological history.\textsuperscript{7} We write from the perspective of a different enigma, as part of a generation now arrived at that point of ‘future shock’ where, as Humphrey McQueen recognises, ‘leisure is more of a problem than overwork or unemployment.’\textsuperscript{8} Perhaps the greatest difficulty in recreating the past is the constant sense of reading through the present, which gives the writer the frustrating sense of the mirage: a quasi-reality always retreating in front of one. Contemporary reports are read through current eyes by those who were not present; those who were there rely on memory, selective, partial and forced, in the story which we have used to make sense of where we are now. We have tried to create a fluid yet aware response to these problems. This has necessitated a multi-modal presentation (theoretical discussion, empirical evidence from contemporary sources, autobiographical retrospection and poetry) in order to explore the dynamics not only of the subject of this paper, but the process of making sense of it. The result is not a memoir, nor a fictional recreation, but an attempt to fuse objective and subjective realities in the past into some account of an historical process that can be recreated in the present through memory and imagination as well as documentary research. While there are elements of retrospective historical research in our method, there is also an attempt to recreate the social psychology of camping holidays in a specific area immediately after World War Two.\textsuperscript{9}

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For most Australians the notion of the littoral is of the coast, for this is where most of them live. An equally interesting, though rarer culture of habitation is on the margins of lakes. The lacustrine littoral is different. It does not have the oceanic presence that offers an outward perspective to different lands and cultures; for example, it is impossible to sit on an east coast beach and not be aware of the Pacific unfolding before one’s eyes from New Zealand through Polynesia to Chile, or on a west coast beach not to be aware of the complexities of the Indian Ocean’s civilizations, with their long history of trade and contact, so different from that of the ‘Black’ Atlantic and its traditions of slavery. But lakes are contained, domestic, and inward looking. The lacustrine littoral causes us to reflect on the pastoral and even the pre-settlement modalities of living.

Such reflections can be seen in Les Murray’s \textit{Buladelah Taree Holiday Song Cycle} (1976) in which the poet mimics the style of Berndt’s translations of traditional


\textsuperscript{8} Humphrey McQueen, ‘Whatever Happened to Alienation?’ \textit{Arena Magazine}, 62 (Dec-Jan 2002-2003), 20.

\textsuperscript{9} In the major book-length study of the history of holidays (or ‘getting away’) in Australia, Richard White’s collaborative survey of holidays from 1768 to the present, \textit{On Holidays: A History of Getting Away in Australia} (North Melbourne: Pluto Press, 2005), Chapter Four ‘The Heyday of the Holiday: 1945-1975,’ 119-152, sets the political and economic contexts of the phenomenon we treat in this paper. As contemporaneous observers and participants in the rituals we describe we are unlike the ‘professional’ historians of White’s book. The difference is that we are interested in the psycho-social, anthropological dimensions of holidays for a specific working-class group of underground miners in the Hunter Valley of NSW.

Aboriginal song cycles to describe the summer holiday rituals of Murray’s home area, the Great Lakes Shire to the north of the Hunter Valley. The poem celebrates the land and rituals of summer, though the point of view is that of the local, recording the arrivals of outsiders who then progressively become more and more a part of the local habitat. It is not tourism that Murray describes, but the deep ritual of transhumance, whereby the visitors are part of an annual cycle that links the land and its human community. They are not transients, bent on sightseeing. Rather, the campers who set up for extended residence on the margins of these lakes over the Christmas period are part of a long human tradition, of transhumance, and Murray sees in it a process of acculturation of the white ‘tribe’ to their new environment.

While Murray’s Jindyworobak annexation of Aboriginal song form and culture might be seen as ethically problematic, clearly the practice of living in different habitats at different times of the year is a human practice both ancient and culturally diverse. Transhumance is most often associated with alpine areas, where cattle are moved to higher altitude grounds in the summer, and often the human herders move in summer settlements with them. Rituals, religious and secular, are associated with this movement to summer grounds, and permanent structures are often built to accommodate the seasonal transfer of whole families to the summer pastures. Some classify the practice as a form of nomadism. But its cyclical, predictable, and quasi-permanent nature distinguish it from traditional nomadism.

Our interest is in the evolution of this ancient practice within an industrial economy, particularly that of coal mining, and with its precise evolution on the east coast of Australia. In this form of transhumance, not only does the group change its habitat, but also its mode of living, from that of the industrial worker to the pre-industrial hunter-gatherer. Miners from the coal mining towns of the Hunter Valley preferred a transition to the littoral of Lake Macquarie to that of the nearby Pacific beaches because of the lake’s relative safety for children, its fish stock, and its reputation (which locals knew to be false!) for being shark-free. In their extended summer holidays when the mines were closed down for machinery maintenance, roof, water and safety inspections, miners and their families could move for two to three weeks based around Christmas and New Year from the cash economy and wage slavery to an ‘aboriginal’ economy of fishing and communal living. In contemporary newspaper reports and in the mythologies of generations of children the miners’ summer littoral was an almost pre-lapsarian pastoral, in which fish and prawns were in abundance, the sun shone (though often thunderstorms interrupted the idyll), and people were relaxed and co-operative. This particular form of transhumance we define as Industrial Pastoral.

The term ‘industrial pastoral’ has come into existence of late. Marshall Berman, writing of Philip Roth’s 1997 novel, American Pastoral, uses the term to identify a way of writing the tragedy of the industrial city. It implies nostalgia for a time when the city was an industrial utopia, when life was more ‘real,’ more ‘authentic,’ when
people made things that had a purpose, and their lives had a purpose too. Similarly, Edward Ifkovic, writing about the popular early twentieth-century U.S. novelist, Harold Bell Wright, observes Wright’s escape from the horror of American life by way of an easy equation of the garden with the machine. If the fear of the machine is translated into the heightened terror of the sublime, the machine loses its sting. If God is responsible for all human progress, including industrialism, America must be good. By means of this romantic plotting, Ifkovic says, ‘the turn-of-the-century romancer created a new America - the industrial pastoral.’ Other versions of industrial pastoral have been applied to Europe. Nancy Locke, writing on Manet’s representations of urban squalor in tribute to Baudelaire for example, describes Paysage as ‘industrial pastoral.’

From these unexpectedly diverse delineations it will be seen that ‘industrial pastoral’ is a genre of considerable complexity, involving both a physical and also a psychological dimension. The most convincing and closest to our own understanding is Herbert Sussman’s explanation of the Victorian genre. The transformation of Blake’s ‘green & pleasant Land’ into the England of ‘dark Satanic Mills’ prophesied by Milton, Sussman tells us, has been overstated. ‘Industrial development was confined to a range of cities in the midlands; the cherished countryside of village and field largely remained unchanged.’ Elizabeth Gaskell, in her 1848 novel Mary Barton and again in North and South in 1855, reveals a nation divided into the industrial north and the agricultural south. Yet, as Sussman reminds us:

Even in the manufacturing districts, in the days before urban sprawl a clear boundary marked the edge of the industrial city and the preindustrial country; in coal districts sheep grazed in the next field from the pit heads. Workers could easily take expeditions to a rural world that started at the edge of town. As recorded in the literature of industrialism, the easy physical movement from central city to sheep fields and country inns, from industrial north to rural south not only registers the varied landscape of the period, but also enables a complex genre of industrial pastoral, a physical and also a psychological journey into the rural world that remained a vivid memory for the first industrial generation.

In Australia, the dominant debate of the 1890s revolved around the question of the City versus the Bush. But by the 1920s that opposition, while still in operation, had largely lost its force, and had been diverted into a binary of the littoral and the land. Thirroul, where D.H. Lawrence wrote much of Kangaroo, now a beach suburb

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of outer Wollongong, was once a coalmining settlement. For Lawrence, it was the opposite of industrial pastoral. The ocean is a ‘snarl,’ the waves are venomous, the shore a ‘ruin’ and a ‘catastrophe.’ Men are mining, farming, making roads, shouting politics. ‘But all with that basic indifference which dare not acknowledge how indifferent it is, lest it should drop everything and lapse into a blank.’ The littoral for Lawrence symbolised the terrifying chaos of an Englishness ‘all crumbled out into formlessness ... without any core or pith of meaning.’ The lack of containment terrified him – ‘shallow waters spreading, undyked.’ The looseness of society, its seeming lack of pattern, he associated with a loss of control or will. ‘They all rushed from where they were to somewhere else, on holidays. And to-morrow they’d all be working away, with just as little meaning, working without meaning . . .’

But the mining communities did have a pattern, which we express with the term ‘industrial pastoral.’ Lawrence, understandably, was blind to the subtleties of the life of miners in the new world. He had no sense either of their history or of the ways in which they had accommodated to their new environment.

**Autobiography and Social History**

**McDougall:** When I was a boy on Lake Macquarie, a little to the south of Newcastle, my father worked for a coal mine in nearby Awaba. Awaba was the bush. The small town I lived in, Toronto, is on the foreshore of the lake, and was then pretty much a mining community. In 1948 the Awaba State Coal Mine was established, primarily to provide coal to the new Wangi Wangi Power Station, then the largest in the Southern hemisphere; and in June 1954, a month before I was born, my father commenced employment at the Awaba mine. Many of the miners were the pioneer sons of small rural communities like Mulbring, Brunkerville, Mount Vincent and Wallis Plains - men with names like ‘Red Harry’ Goodser, ‘Pancho’ and ‘Shannon’ Field, ‘Screwy’ Williams, ‘Cock’ Murrell, ‘Dablo’ Wellard, ‘Snatchblock’ (‘Snatchy’) Ingle, ‘ Chips’ Baker and ‘King’ Russell Field (‘King of Awaba’).

They shod my horse, they rigged my steel-cabled flying fox, they provided the electrics for my train set, they built my billy-cart, and my first set of bookshelves. Sometimes I overheard them talking in a hush of the Bellbird explosion (1923), the Northern Coal lockout and the Rothbury Riot (1929), the days before safety lamps and central rescue stations, the dangers of windblast, and who among the three of four local doctors was the best in an emergency. I was twelve when the roof fell in at Wyee (1966). The highlight of all my early school holidays, from the time I was six, was walking down the mine with the mining men, a mile underground to the face, where they would drill the face by hand, and then would let me tamp the drill-holes with explosive sticks of Dynabell and Ajax. I shoved the detonators into the sticks, the shot firer ran the wire from the detonators to the charger behind a sheltering wall of brattice that hung from the roof, and I wound the handle of the charger tight to make the thunder and blow the face. My father still ties his tomato stakes with the same

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17 Lawrence, p. 379.
18 Lawrence, p. 33.
19 Lawrence, p. 33.
20 Lawrence, p. 33.
All the ritual events of the mining community took place on the shores of the lake, including the Christmas-holiday fishing camps at Toronto and Wangi Point, or on the eastern side at Swansea and Pelican, on Little Pelican and Coon Islands, or further a-field on the Tuggerah Lakes, at Budgewoi and Toukley. Though the local libraries of the now densely populated Central Coast sadly have no record of such events, I remember prawning with the mining men in the shallow waters off the camping area at Budgewoi.

About ten houses from where I lived was the house of my co-author’s grandparents. For Julian Croft, contact with the lacustrine mining culture was a little different.

**Croft:** In the early nineteen-fifties my grandparents moved from the city of Newcastle to Toronto on the shores of Lake Macquarie. I swam, fished, and sailed there during my adolescence and watched the town gradually change from a self-contained town serviced by a steam train, to a car-based dormitory suburb of a growing urban sprawl which by the end of the twentieth century stretched, more or less continuously, from Newcastle south through Sydney to Wollongong, a conurbation cynics called New South Wales. With the growth of the suburbs, the seed villages disappeared. Many were based on pits, or other traditional pursuits such as fishing or dairying; some, like Toronto and Wangi Wangi combined both fishing and holiday trade. The holiday season was most evident at Christmas, when the mines in the coalfields at Cessnock and Kurri Kurri shut down for several weeks. Then local parks filled up with tents, and the streets, wharves and jetties were crowded with strangers, many of them sitting patiently side by side for yards, with lines and rods in their hands waiting for blackfish, whiting, leatherjacket, bream, and if they were lucky, flathead and flounder. The kids like my co-author, Russell McDougall, ran wild and had different customs, played different games, even seemed to speak in a different way. It was very tribal, and suggestive of an older way of life which had been displaced more than a hundred years ago.
years before, though no-one would have thought of that analogy then. What seems remarkable now was how easily these immigrants had instinctively taken up those older seasonal transhumance structures of living in the midst of twentieth-century urban and industrial life, and how fitting that it should be taken up into the Antipodean Christian celebration of the summer solstice.

Lake Macquarie was originally named ‘Reid’s Mistake,’ after Captain William Reid. In 1800, when Reid sailed from Sydney to collect a load of coal from Coal River (as the newly discovered Hunter River then was known), he entered the lake by error.\footnote{The standard history is Keith H. Clouten, \textit{Reid’s Mistake. The Story of Lake Macquarie from its Discovery until 1890} (Lake Macquarie Shire Council, 1967).} The early mines of the Newcastle area were the first in Australia, and they were all within a stone’s throw of the beach. Settlers found first coal near Newcastle in 1791. Soon the convicts were mining all along the coastline from Stockton as far as Glenrock Lagoon. In modern times there were still a number of mines around Newcastle that were located within a stone’s throw of the beach, among them: the Burwood Mine at Whitebridge, which in fact ran a mile or two out under the sea; the Lambton B Mine at Redhead; the John Darling Mine at Belmont; and the Wallarah Mine at Catherine Hill Bay, adjacent to Moonee Beach. But the littoral experience of miners in these places was very different from the pattern of transhumance with which we are concerned that existed on the west side of the Lake and up on the Cessnock field.

Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld set up his Mission to the Awabagal first at the ocean end of the lake in 1831, but when that failed he moved to the western lakeshore, re-establishing it at Punte, on the site of the future township of Toronto and including all of the peninsula that comprises today Carey Bay, Coal Point and Kilaben Bay.\footnote{Threlkeld is credited with conducting the earliest and most accomplished of all pre-twentieth-century investigations of Aboriginal languages. Cf. Hilary M. Carey, ‘Lancelot Threlkeld and Missionary}
The Mission lasted ten years, toward the end of which the Reverend began to mine for coal near the southern tip of what is now Coal Point. On the east side, at Swansea Heads, Threlkeld bought ten acres for loading and storage. He floated the coal across the lake and down the channel by barge at first, transshipping at Swansea for transport by ocean schooner. But the operation was later simplified by the purchase of shallow-hull schooners that could navigate the channel and the lake.

Thus coal was the first industry on the lake. It is likely that Threlkeld used Aboriginal labour when he could to work the Ebenezer Mine, since the government refused to supply him with convicts and he had difficulty attracting white men to the task. He soon ran into financial difficulty, however, and in 1844 the whole of the Ebenezer Estate (re-named ‘Mulberry Hill’) was sold at auction to the Excelsior Land Investment and Banking Company. The mine continued to be worked off and on by a variety of leaseholders until the early twentieth century.

In the early 1840s a timber depot was established not far from Toronto at Awaba. This was the second industry in the area, and it developed a close relation with the first, the timber cutters supplying the props to keep the roofs up in the mines. The Awaba timber-cutters holidayed east of Awaba, six or seven miles to the south of Toronto at Wangi Wangi. The area had been settled in 1842, but in 1897 the whole of Wangi Point was declared a reserve, along with all the foreshore of the village. Coal had been discovered inland in the vicinity of Cessnock in 1892, and over the next decade and a half collieries were established nearby at East Greta, Stanford Merthyr, Pelaw Main, Abermain, and Hebburn. This created a land boom, and by 1926 Cessnock had a population of 12,000 within a one-mile radius. With the development of the Cessnock coalfield, Wangi Wangi became a popular Christmas camping spot for the miners, who joined the timber cutters on the foreshore. Many of the timber-cutters were related, and they set up camp as a single community near Lake View, with the Cessnock miners congregating further out on the Point.

Of course, there was fishing on the lake, a kiln at Swansea for making lime from oyster shells, and there were timber cutters. But coal was the first real industry.


The Tyranny of Transport
There were a number of other miners’ camps around the lake, most notably at Speers Point, on the north side, which is closer to and more accessible from Newcastle. The 1828 land grant that opened this area ran from the eastern bank of Cockle Creek to encompass the present day townships of Boolaroo as well as Speers Point. In 1843 the Lochend Colliery opened and mining began at the foot of the hills behind the Point; and in 1916 the Speers Point Gully mine opened.

Steam trams were introduced in 1912 to connect Newcastle and West Wallsend with Speers Point via Brush Creek (now Edgeworth). But if you were coming from the Hunter coalfields this involved a long journey. From Cessnock to Speers Point miners and their families holidaying at the lake had to travel on a private railway line by a roundabout route through Maitland to Hamilton, where they joined the trams: it was forty-five miles, and it cost five shillings and sixpence first class, or three shillings and eleven pence second class. It was virtually impossible for a man to take his family for a day’s outing on the lake from the coalfields, for the journey from Cessnock to
Speers Point took half a day just one-way. So his access to the lake was restricted to Christmas and Easter holidays. Even then, if he wanted to go to Wangi, he had to hire a truck and travel by a very poor road down through Mulbring, as not many families could afford to own a car; alternatively, if he went by train and tram to Speers Point he had a long and expensive voyage at the end of that journey to get across the lake to Wangi by ferry.

Sussman says that, in England, while industrialism strengthened the opposition of City and Country, it also paradoxically reduced it, particularly with the coming of the railway.\textsuperscript{25} But the Australian relationship was even more complex.

In 1926 a parliamentary standing committee on public works considered a proposal to build a railway that would join the Hunter coalfields and the Lake, from Cessnock to Cockle Creek (not far from Speers Point). This had been mooted twice before, in 1915 and in 1922, but on these occasions it had been a private company proposing the construction, the Caledonian Colliery Company, and the government had decided that a private line would rob its own railways of too much revenue. Industry and leisure remained divided. The Minutes of Evidence taken by the 1926 parliamentary committee are revealing. It is clear from the evidence taken from members of the coalfields and lake communities that both considered the proposal socially desirable. The Mayor of Wallsend, Alderman Robert Edward Lee, commented on the fact that the greater population of the Maitland-Cessnock coal miners were migrants or descendants of migrants from the Newcastle coalfield, who had relatives in Newcastle and looked upon it as their home. He also noted the sweltering summer heat of Cessnock.\textsuperscript{26} Harry Ford, a check weigh-man from Cardiff, built his case on health grounds. ‘Cessnock,’ he said, ‘is by no means a healthy place.’\textsuperscript{27} Swimming was good for the health, and the lake had a lot of free salt-water baths. The Newcastle city engineer, John Francis Shine, suggested that, with construction of the proposed line, a trade in the supply of fish from the lake to the coalfields might be entertained.\textsuperscript{28} Many men allegedly had been advised by doctors to get out of Cessnock if they could. But most were not able, because their work was there. About 300 men who worked on the coalfield chose to live on the lake, but they were forced to keep two houses.

In the end the opposition to the proposal from the Railway Commissioners was too strong. The government line between Maitland and the coal port of Newcastle had already been quadrupled, and the building of a line that would bypass that route running directly from Cessnock to the Lake, they argued, would lessen the traffic through Maitland. In reality, passenger traffic was the smallest consideration. As the Chief Traffic Manager of Department of Railways observed, the cost of coal haulage was favourable to the existing route, for while the distance was greater the gradients were easier through Maitland than those of the proposed new line. So the proposal did not go ahead. Had it succeeded, it would have cut the distance and the cost of travel

\textsuperscript{25}Sussman, ‘Walks of Life: Industrial,’ 252.
\textsuperscript{26}Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works Report Together with Minutes of Evidence Relating to the Proposed Railway from Cessnock to Cockle Creek (Sydney: Alfred James Kent, Government Printer, 1926), 11.
\textsuperscript{27}Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works Report, 16.
\textsuperscript{28}Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works Report, 16.
by rail between the coal fields and the lake by more than half, and the whole journey would have taken less than twenty minutes.

In the early part of the century the Hunter Valley miners worked a six-day week. They were not given any holiday pay, but they were allowed two weeks’ holiday at Christmas time. The combined tyrannies of distance and poverty preserved the lake’s inaccessibility to the Cessnock coalfields, reserving it as a destination for extended holidays only. By 1941 all day wage and contract employees in NSW coalmines were paid one day’s annual leave for each lot of twenty-five shifts. That meant a maximum of ten days paid annual leave per year, although a Miners’ Federation employee who worked 225 shifts or more in a year was entitled to an additional five days annual leave, making a possible total of fifteen days for these employees. Add to that the paid public holidays and over Christmas/New Year he might manage perhaps four whole weeks at the lake.

**After the Second World War**

As part of the return to normality after World War II, holidays were the marker that despite the upheavals of the past six years things were still the same in some spheres of life. Along with the heart-breaking appeals from mothers for news of missing sons, some missing since 1942, and letters from returning POWs, the newspapers of December 1945 show little difference in their reports of the preparations for camping holidays from those of 1938. The tent cities were still being constructed on the shores of Lake Macquarie, men and women were fishing from wharves; men looked after toddlers, women washed. The end of war made large supplies of army surplus tents available cheaply. Cots, greyhound pups, the kitchen sink, were all unloaded from trailers and cars, the petrol ration having been increased slightly for the holiday season. By 1948, 20,000 people were camped around the Lake in the holidays. That year, the miners worked their last shift on Thursday 23 December and looked forward to three weeks’ paid leave, the longest in their Union’s history. Some tents had been pitched a month earlier to reserve a space.

Amenities were basic but surprisingly comprehensive considering the effects of war-time austerities and post-war scarcities. Wangi Wangi, the most favoured of the spots on Lake Macquarie for Christmas campers, had benefited from a £2,500 grant from the Joint Coal Board to re-model the swimming baths, toilets, showers, water supplies, kiosk and shelter sheds. Part of the Coal Board’s 1948 deal with Lake Macquarie Shire Council was that preference for camping sites should be given to miners’ families, and that a caretaker be appointed to regulate the grounds. Five years later in 1953, new areas had been opened up; amenities had improved, with hot and cold showers at some grounds; but the traditional transhumance holiday for miners still had not changed markedly. Newspaper reports of campers, particularly in the miners’ areas, record a peaceful, contented ‘happy picture’ where fish and prawns are running, children are playing, and men and women are at ease. It is indeed an industrial pastoral.

There is surprisingly little imaginative literature on coal mining in Australia. Stephen Knight, reviewing the recent novel by Newcastle writer, Greg Bogaerts, entitled *Black Diamonds and Dust* (2005), writes:

*Wangi Wangi and Its People*, 65.
The mining story was for long the flagship of working-class fiction, from Zola’s *Germinal* (1885) through the confrontational British Marxist novels of the between wars period such as Lewis Jones’ *Welsh Cwmardy* (1937) to the almost nostalgic resistance-remembering of the American film *Matewan* (1987).  

But Boegarts’s novel has been hailed as only the second proletarian novel to be written in Australia to focus on coal-mining, the first being Harold Wells’ *The Earth Cries Out* (1950), which details mining life in the Hunter Valley coalfields in the first decade of the twentieth century. Its tenth chapter includes a lyrical description of miners’ holidays at Lake Macquarie in that period. There are much earlier depictions of mining in the Newcastle area, most notably Frank MacNamara’s (*The Earth Cries Out*) which details mining life in the first decade of the twentieth century. Its tenth chapter includes a lyrical description of the early Newcastle mines. James Tucker’s *Ralph Rashleigh* (written in the late 1840s) also describes the hardships of convict mining there. Katherine Susannah Prichard wrote a short account of the dangers faced by the miners as a result of the pressures of war-time mining (‘Hero of the Mines’), a subject also movingly dramatized by Jim Comerford in his short story ‘On the 3 Slant Pipe Line.’ But apart from MacNamara’s satire, few significant poems seem to have been written from mining experiences in the Hunter.

Possibly this is a reflection of the socialist realist prose tradition encouraged by the Labor movement, though song lyrics and ballads are an exception and would reward more research. More recently, Green politics have provided the impetus for literary expression in the region. Consequently, literary responses to coal mining have become more critical of the damage inflicted on the landscape of the Hunter Valley. With increasing mechanisation, above-ground open-cut mining and its obvious impact on the environment through large scale earth-moving and generating of major dust pollution, the human dimension of older mining practices has been lost. Sharyn Munro’s account of her isolated life on a mountain in the ranges behind Singleton and Muswellbrook shows clearly the early twenty-first century ecological attitudes to open-cut coal mining and the looming confrontation between climate-change activists and huge new mining projects. It is a great change from the earlier view of mining which stressed the organic, village life of the nineteenth-century underground pit culture, a phenomenon that persisted until the last quarter of the twentieth century.

In the 1990s Julian Croft wrote a series of poems about the Toronto and Lake Macquarie of his youth, including one entitled ‘Miners’ Holidays.’

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Croft: What started me was a poem I have known for many years, but scarcely understood, Paul Valery’s ‘La Cimetière Marin’ which conjures up a summer sea and landscape at Sète on the Mediterranean coast. It is a poem of the deep image and the even deeper symbol that defies direct articulation, and it luxuriates in the play of light and water in fluid ambiguity. I write in a much more direct way, but I wanted to convey something of the wonder of that memory of childhood summers of water and light, but also the social dimension which went into them – something Valery’s poem is short on. I wanted to preserve something of the magical quality of the annual ritual of Australian summer holidays, especially those of the mining communities of the Hunter Valley coalfields.

‘Miners’ Holidays’ is a simple poem that conveys something of the deep rhythms of industrial life in an environment so different from Lawrence’s antimonies of industrialism and the natural world.

Miners’ Holidays

morning and the park is tent-city
a tech drawing class
pyramids, triangular solids,
flat rhomboids of fly sheets
poles and lines, projections of planes,
orthogonic views of rooms
disappearing to infinity
so different from the mine face

evening and it is a chinese print
flat shadows on screens
the tilley lamp makes sail canvas
yellow parchment brushed
with faces and hands flat
as a cave painting and the smell
of cooking fish drifts over the grass
like lovers fleeing across a bridge

for four weeks a village sails in the town
full of immigrants who speak differently
have other customs and live miles away
square men and women used to cramped
spaces at work and home they fish
like they live, a tally for each darg,
no rest until the bucket’s full

the kids swim in space and grow in the sun
dream of blind horses in christmas paddocks
and yell up the sun, and moon in the dark
through furtive parks, where the swings
creak long into the night and the see-saw
bangs the hours to midnight and quiet
regular as seasons, tidal in their movements,
a black tribe, now white for its holy days
of summer, they treat play like work,
and when the moon hangs gibbous
as it was when they came, they turn their
backs with no regrets and return to the earth.

The poem provides a vision of the integration of twentieth-century industrial modernity with the natural rhythms of life, so different in Australia from the Old World – as can be seen in beach and surf culture, often an integral part of city life, but also in the transhumance practices of coal-miners and the lacustrine fishing holiday.

**Croft:** I had started high school and that new way of seeing things enters into the
first stanza with it visualisation of the miners’ camp in the near-by park as being like
a technical drawing. Morning encourages realism in representation, evening a move
into the world of symbol and romance, the flat perspective of Chinese painting and
the famous willow pattern design of fleeing lovers, for all good summer holidays have
that element of the erotic in them – even if you are only thirteen years old! The last
stanza plays with the idea of the transformation of the holiday, the miner’s quotidian
blackness now its natural colour of white; yet when their month of rest is up, they
return to the cycle of work without regret, as creatures of the earth, not of water and
light.

**The End of an Era**
At Wangi Wangi in the 1920s and ‘30s there were two dance halls with live music,
and a pontoon was moored beyond the jetty for dancing. There was also an
improvised rink for roller skating. In the ‘40s and ‘50s the Boolaroo Ambulance
Service ran a foreshore carnival, with a chocolate wheel and miniature train rides and
a merry-go-round with swinging boats for children. But by 1940, the Shire Council
was beginning to agitate to make campers pay for their holiday sites on the lake. This
stalled initially with the thought that the Council might have then to provide services
such as fresh drinking water and adequate sanitary arrangements. But by 1946 the
Council had begun to talk about removing the campers altogether. In 1952, it opened
the Wangi Point Camping Area (now the Wangi Point Lakeside Holiday Park),
developed largely with Joint Coal Board money. And in 1958 foreshore camping
outside that area was brought to an end by Council decree.

But the miners kept coming to the lake for another decade, in effect taking over
the formal camping areas and establishing them as tent communities. We, the authors
of this article, saw the tail-end of the tradition. There are a number of reasons why it

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35 Croft, 67.
36 Croft, 71.
37 Croft, 72.
ended. The construction of the Wangi Power Station and the Awaba Mine brought a rush of development to the Wangi area. The improved train service to Toronto made it possible to live on and commute from the western side of the lake to employment in Newcastle. Then cars became cheaper, and petrol as well, and families were able to travel further afield for holidays. Many of the miners headed up the coast, for the more conventional littoral holiday, at Hat Head, Seal Rocks or Forster. But the final nail in the coffin for the communal holiday was when the mines ceased to close at the holiday period around Christmas and began to produce 52 weeks of the year (with dog-watch and double-time wage facilities).

Conclusion
Transhumance was a brake on the demands of capitalism and a potent creator of legends of pastoral ease and communal sociability. In both the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because Hunter Valley miners lived on quarter-acre blocks endowed with productive gardens, and had access to the shores of Port Stephens, the Myall Lakes and Lake Macquarie where they and their families could camp self-sufficiently for extended periods, they could not be starved into submission like their urban cousins in Britain. Capital did not have the power to discipline Labour completely to its needs in this still pastoral world.

The New Social History has shown us the importance in working-class histories of studying all aspects of the cultures involved, not only their work but also their leisure, and the relationship between the two. Non-elite cultures such as those of the miners now are recognized not simply as sites of oppression but also sometimes as sites of resistance, agency and even the power to change history.\footnote{Gregory J. Dehler, Review of Edmund Ruffin, Nature’s Management: Writings on Landscape and Reform, 1822-1859, ed. Jack Temple Kirby (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2000), in H-Environment (June, 2003).} The mining culture considered in this essay, however, took shape and form within the framing circumstances of a specific natural environment around Lake Macquarie and the Hunter Valley. It reminds us, as Kay Anderson says in her reconsideration of Griffith Taylor’s geographical writings of the 1920s and ‘30s, how the emphasis on ‘the complicities of human and non-human agency in the making of the world’s geographies’ resonates again today for Human Geography, when questions of social nature and environment are firmly back on the intellectual agenda.\footnote{Kay Anderson, ‘Griffith Taylor Lecture, Geographical Society of New South Wales, 2004: Australia and the “State of Nature/Native”’, Australian Geographer, 36, 3 (November 2005), 268.}

The days when the residents of Lake Macquarie might welcome a proposal for a new mining venture with open arms are long gone. The growth of open-cut mining has so radically altered the industry’s relation to the natural environment, and at the same time to the social environment, that the communities that it helped create it now threatens with dissolution. In this there is an implicit warning for historians, not to over-emphasise or mythologise the agency of miners, for there was always a counter-force, as indicated by the demise of traditions of industrial pastoral and transhumance that the employers’ decision to exploit the mines all year round brought with it.

At the opening of this essay we made passing mention of the ‘Black’ Atlantic. There has been recently a lot of discussion on the difference between Indian Ocean

and Atlantic colonial cultures (in the histories of Capetown, for instance). Our own argument suggests, on the other hand, an interesting development of difference between Atlantic and Pacific sensibilities. Raymond Williams discusses in The Country and the City (1973) how the slave trade and the exploitation of subjugated natives in the colonies generated the idea of England as ‘home’ and sustained the pastoral myths of country-house life. In England, however, industrial society also assigned ‘savagery’ to the lower rungs of labour, and miners were seen as the hardest of working-class primitives. James Blackwood (aka ‘The Amateur Casual’), author of In Strange Company: Being the Experiences of a Roving Correspondent (1874), describes the miners of England’s Black Country, for instance, as having minds deadened and brutalized by ‘constant slavery,’ and he expresses the hope that the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals might be willing to sanction the training of ‘a tribe of small and intelligent monkeys’ to spare the men from the worst of the work. In the discourse of industrialised labour ‘savagery’ is a word that is assigned often to the rapacious greed and exploitation of certain mining companies. But primitivism is also the style that industrial society often assigns to the miners themselves, as a way of aestheticising and emptying labour of its grim realities. In Australia, on the other hand, as can be seen with D.H. Lawrence, and other English commentators, the industrial primitive confounded British expectations. The ability of miners to escape their industrial environment and holiday in Arcadian surroundings by the lake or sea was not what working-class life should be about. It is not Brighton or Blackpool that provides the model for the Australian miners’ experience, nor even the uplands of Europe, but the Mediterranean of sunshine and luxury, which some British visitors deeply resented. Not only that, it was an example of an independent working-class which at any time of industrial conflict could decamp and live a life a self-sustained comfort in lake-side camping areas.

It is surprising that we have still so little social history of underground coal mining in Australia, the dominant forms of its historical record being industrial, economic and corporate. And it is surprising also that so little has been written about the lacustrine littoral, by which means the miners of Lake Macquarie and the Hunter developed a rich cultural repertoire of adaptation and resistance, and through which they expressed their own authentic affiliations and solidarities, much as Williams sees the subaltern doing in India, Africa and the West Indies. The miners’ holiday, as we participated in and/or observed it on the shores of Lake Macquarie in the 1950s, was a behavioural practice not easily contained by management; through it workers gained agency, a capacity for resistance directly related to the social bonds they forged in work and welded in leisure.

41 Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (St. Albans: Paladin, 1975).