Mine

Steven Collis

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In 1849 the Hudson's Bay Company began to mine coal on Vancouver Island, where large collieries operated from the 1870s until the mid-twentieth century. Highly prized as a source of power for factories, railways, and oceanic steamers, coal was also used to heat dwellings, generate electricity, provide light (when burned as coal gas), and as a raw material for chemical industries.

Collis's book-length poem represents his homage to mining men and women on Vancouver Island and, notably, to his own forebears. He deploys an eclectic mix of verse and prose in a variety of voices, weaving stray images, snippets of song, explanatory narratives, allusions to literature, a glossary of mining terms, a chronicle-like list of events by date, and transcriptions from written records. His tone is earnest and reflective, at times angry.

Collis is preoccupied by the methodology of constructing memory: "How to remember dismembered histories, memories crushed under the collapse of time?" (20). The physical evidence is vague: "I drive into Wellington where they lived. What remains? Strip mall. Shallow lake. Marsh land" (92). An ancestor's dwelling leaves unclear what it housed in the past: "I do not know what really raged in these now decaying rooms" (102). Collis's forebears did not document their activity: "Generations die quickly, without passing their stories on" (21). Surviving oral accounts only offer "gossip and family hearsay" (92). Nor are the records of the state particularly illuminating: "The civic archives are only hollow reminders of what is missing – the unwritten lives of the poor and history-less" (22). Records, Collis recognizes, are weak surrogates for the lived, experienced past they document: "and I have only inherited words / not who spoke them / not what they may have meant, robbed as I am of context and propinquity" (82). For his purpose this evidence is ultimately inadequate. Consequently, calling on his gifts as a poet, he will "Imagine Ancestors" he "Cannot Know" (86).

Mine is structured in four parts ("Shafts"), each of which penetrates the past differently. In Shaft One, Collis reflects on the art of memory, likening the origins of coal to the genesis of his poem. Shaft Two develops the "story": Aboriginal inhabitants reveal the presence of coal to the European colonizers, immigrant miners arrive after the difficult journey from the United Kingdom, Robert Dunsmuir emerges as regional coal magnate. Shaft Three recounts industrial strife and offers a quartet of individual statements – three based on Émile Zola and characters from his novel *Germinal,* and one on labour organizer Ginger Goodwin. Shaft Four focuses on an account of an accident in a mine and "one man alive and alone in the vast infernal network of the dead" (85).

With what memory of the mine

would Collis leave us? It is bleak: it is a dangerous workplace, rent by murderous explosions. The mine workforce is split by ethnic divisions, "hate and fear hidden behind humour" (41). The mining community is scarred by class divisions and violent strikes. It is a memory replete with images of strikebreakers, the arrival of the militia and evictions from company housing, violence: "the battle / loot / smash" (65), and the desolation of miners' families – "people starve" (64).

Memory is marked as much by what it omits as by what it encompasses. And it is unclear why Collis privileges certain memories over others. Familiar elements of the mining community are unexamined: its vigorous social life and range of leisure activities, miners' pride in their craft and in their families. His account of the Vancouver Island mining communities hesitates to recognize that their residents, on occasion, experienced joy, pride, or satisfaction.

Like other contemporary poetry, this is an uncompromising, demanding book. But, with each reading, it offers fresh insights into the experience of the Vancouver Island mines.