

PLOD ESSAY

From the Old Country to Wonthaggi

Emily's eyes scanned the crowd on the wharf below for the colour of her brother's cap and jacket hoping for one last glimpse, one last chance to wave goodbye before the ship sailed. It was the face of the woman standing beside him that she was most desperate to see, the loving eyes of her mother to hold in her memory. She hadn't pushed her way forward, but Emily was

a young mother with a toddler gripped to her hip and those who were taller had let her through. All cut from the same cloth, fashioned from generations of coalmining families, they looked out for each other as they stood together on the deck that cold Liverpool day.

There was a hush on deck as the ship pulled away from the dock, as every woman and man tried to quell the feelings that could so easily overwhelm them. There were quiet sobs but mostly they all just stood there and stared as the stretch of water before them widened and the crowd on the wharf slowly shrunk to a blur and dissolved into grey.

That night Emily curled up close with her little boy and let silent tears roll down her cheeks, pining for her mother and all she was leaving behind, all the while yearning to be in her beloved Jack's arms again.

I'll never know how it really was for my Grandma Emily the day she left England to reunite with my Grandad Jack who'd left around 12 months earlier to find work in Wonthaggi's State Coal Mine. I always

understood that Grandad left with his uncle in 1925 and that Grandma said, 'I'm not coming until you've found a roof overhead for me and the bairn'. They had married in July 1924, and their little boy arrived twelve months later. Emily's six-week sea journey almost ended in tragedy when little Jack nearly went overboard, saved only by the harness he was wearing and the quick thinking of a crew member.

Grandma never talked about the first night she arrived in Wonthaggi, but after she passed away, I discovered a short story called *The Last Washing Day* by Heather Tobias based on Grandma's recollections. She wrote my Grandmother's words:

THE STARS WHICH SHINE
OVER AUSTRALIA
THE LAND OF
OPPORTUNITY

THE
"SOUTHERN CROSS"

THE CALL OF THE STARS TO BRITISH MEN & WOMEN

- 1 MEN FOR THE LAND
- 2 WOMEN FOR THE HOME
- 3 EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEED
- 4 GOOD WAGES
- 5 PLENTY OF OPPORTUNITY

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION APPLY TO ANY EMPLOYMENT EXCHANGE
OR TO THE DIRECTOR OF MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT.
AUSTRALIA HOUSE, STRAND, W.C.2.

‘We arrived in July. I can still see his face; shining eyes, tousled hair, him trying to settle it. Pride bursting his buttons when he saw his son. It was raining when we reached Wonthaggi.

“I promise you I have a house,” he told me quietly.

‘We had to walk nearly a mile in the mud and slush; heads bent against a cold wind that drove hail before it. We finally reached a timber cottage and closed the door against the night.

‘I stared in disbelief. In the kitchen was a table and some wooden crates for chairs. A hessian mat lay before the stove. Our bed was a mattress on the floor, but he smiled with pride at the cot filled with soft, woollen blankets. All I could do was scream at him, “And you brought me across the world for this!? I want to go home!” I always loved him for his understanding that night.’

Heather asked: Did you ever go home, Em?

‘No, I could never bear the thought of leaving m’ mam for a second time.’

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People travelled thousands of miles across the oceans to work in the State Coal Mine at Wonthaggi. They came from England, Scotland and northern and southern Italy. Some of the earliest to arrive came from other parts of Victoria where they’d been working in gold mines and other coal mines. But what drove these men and women to leave all they knew behind in the Old Country and come all this way? What traditions and values did they bring with them? And how did they shape the

kind of town Wonthaggi became?

My grandparents were from Ashington, a coalmining town several miles north of Newcastle in Northumberland, north-east England, one of the largest coalmining areas in Britain, where boys expected to leave school to work in the mines and in turn, girls expected to marry them. Those were close-knit communities where everyone knew each other, shared the same understandings about life, similar hopes and fears and many, like Grandma, grew up in the colliery village. Emily was born and raised at 20 Wood Row, Cramlington Colliery in one of the rows of tiny terrace houses built by the colliery owners to house the miners. Amenities were basic and the lanes at the back of the houses had communal toilets which served the families of both streets. A co-operative store gave mining families some independence, as members could purchase goods at low prices and share in any profits.

Like all the other boys they knew, Jack and his brothers and Emily’s brothers left school at 13 to work in the mines starting above ground as labourers then as pony drivers. As they grew stronger the brothers became putters pushing skips of coal from the coal face along rails to the main haulage line. By their early 20s they were hewers, cutting coal from the seam with a pickaxe, often in cramped spaces on hands, knees or belly.

Emily’s father, William was a hewer until he shifted the family to Ashington where he did stonework at Woodburn Colliery, a highly dangerous job involving construction and maintenance of tunnels and rock dusting to prevent coal dust explosions. Jack and his brothers also worked at Woodburn Colliery and in his 30s their father, Henry became a Deputy Overman Underground with responsibility for supervision, safety and production in a section of the mine.

At least 249 men were killed in accidents at Cramlington Colliery and at least 100 men lost their lives at Woodburn Colliery. Emily hated the mine and feared it. The industry had taken her father's life and crippled her brother. The siren was something all the women feared.

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Coalmining communities are known for their solidarity and egalitarian ethos. Miners lived and worked close together. Trusting the skill of fellow workers was critical when every shift posed the danger of death or injury from breaking machinery, tunnel collapse, flooding, poisonous gases or explosions.

Coalminers are also known for their industrial action; stopping work to force colliery owners to improve safety in the pits and demanding equal pay, so those who toiled all day to remove valueless rock were paid as much as those who brought up coal.

Northumberland coalmining families endured many strikes over the generations, the longer ones being the Binding Strike of 1810, the Great Strike of 1831, the Long Strike of 1832 and the Great Strike of 1844. The Miners Federation of Great Britain was formed in 1888 with the aims of a minimum wage, national agreements and nationalisation of the mines. The first national strike in 1912 achieved its goal when after one million men walked out for 37 days, a minimum wage law was passed.

Strike action always brought hardship, and success was never guaranteed. Women worried how they'd put food on the table and while union funds were a help, sticking together and helping each other was vital.

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During World War I, the British government took control of the mining industry but after the collapse of the post-war boom in 1920-21 coal exports declined, outputs fell and unemployment in the mines skyrocketed.

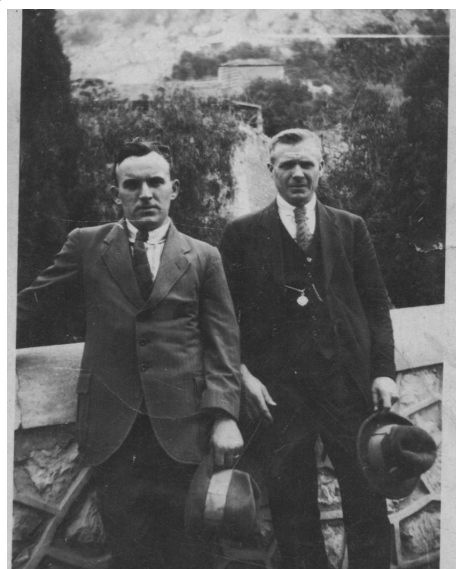
In March 1921 responsibility was handed back to colliery owners who immediately cut wages, as much as 49 percent in the less productive mines. The 1921 Black Friday strike which called for a national pool levy so miners could receive equal pay regardless of a mine's profitability, lasted three months and ended in defeat. Miners returned to work under worse terms with average pay dropping 34 percent in nine months.

By 1925 after Germany started exporting 'free' coal to France and Italy as reparations for the First World War, prices plummeted and colliery owners slashed wages while increasing working hours to maintain profits.

As prospects for coalminers went from bad to worse, the Australian Government was advertising 'assisted passage' for British men and women to migrate to the 'land of opportunity'.

Some of Jack's and Emily's extended family members made the move to Wonthaggi and sent word back to join them. Jack had plenty of time to think about making a move as he walked hunched over for 45 minutes along the narrow tunnel to get to the coal face at Woodburn Colliery. With a wife and child to support and the future looking grim he packed his bag, kissed Emily and their baby boy good-bye and set off to find them a better life.

The coalmining folk who came from the 'Old Country' to Wonthaggi brought generations' old traditions and values to a town still in the making and all those who arrived were beginning new lives. Emily missed the rows of brick houses where neighbours shared gossip at their front doors, and while the houses in Wonthaggi at first seemed so set apart, she was soon holding little Irene on her hip and chatting with her neighbours over the side fence.



Jack and his uncle heading for "land of opportunity" 1925



Emily and Jack

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