

CLEARING OUT THE COUNTRY: COAL BEFORE COMMUNITIES, PROFITS BEFORE PEOPLE

A talk by author **SHARYN MUNRO**



This is the text of a dinner talk given by Sharyn Munro on the evening of Tuesday, 20th March, 2012, at Roth's Wine Bar in Mudgee as part of 'Mudgee Mining: the wHole Story' people's conference and rally. In it, Sharyn talks about her new book, 'Rich Land, Wasteland' and - in particular - the chapter 'Clearing out the Country', which deals very directly with the impacts on people and communities of mining development in the Mudgee region.

Good evening all. The last time I spoke in Mudgee was in 2009, at your library, about my other books, which were very different from this one – they had more humour for a start – but they did weave in my concerns about this issue and allow me to speak about it.

I said then, 'Sadly, I see your future in the Hunter's present. This is not just an environmental issue, but a community one.' I could have quoted Bryce Courtenay: 'It's not about being a greenie, it's about not being stupid!'

You already had the Mudgee and Rylstone environment groups, with the Running Stream Water Users battling their specific threat, but since then new groups have had to form in the face of new threats, like the Bylong Valley Protection Alliance and the Lue Action Group, and groups have arisen to generally alert their communities– like MWCAN about the craziness of the Cobbora mine, and the Merriwa Healthy Environment group with CSG, amongst other issues. And here I must say that while my book focuses on coal and gas, it is the principle I want to uphold, of people and the planet before profit – or at the very least equal, not last as is the case now! – relevant to all mining and drilling, such as Lue's silver mine threat.

The spectacularly inappropriate–for–mining Bylong Valley has won much publicity through their small group, and will gain more, since their Vice –President Stuart Andrews, his wife Megan, their sons Hamish and Lachlan tolerated me pushing them round the paddocks and

photographing them for the cover of my book. Tonight is the first time I can publicly talk about the book.

It's called 'Rich Land, Wasteland – how coal is killing Australia' – and to me, the values of family, farming traditions and the natural beauty of the setting of the Andrews' Tarwyn Park property summed up much of what the Rich Land means. Riches are the things that people and society treasure, be they personal health and wellbeing, attachment to place, a sustainable clean food and water supply, or the preservation of irreplaceable natural environments – like the Drip!



Sharyn Munro's new book, 'Rich Land, Wasteland', featuring the Andrews family from 'Tarwyn Park' in Bylong on the cover

Coming from the Hunter, I know too well what the Wasteland part is like.

As for riches... when I went to WA's Margaret River in late August 2010 they were just beginning to come to grips with what had hit them, the unthinkable prospect of a coalmine in their clean green and gourmet region.

Hearing I was over at Collie, WA's coal central (now all foreign–owned by the way, Indian, and

Chinese, Yanzhou as at Moolarben) local MR resident and TV chef Ian Parmenter asked me to come down and give a talk about what I'd seen and what they could expect. I said to them: don't trust the process, stick together and be prepared for a long fight

I wrote my hour-long talk sitting in a donga in Collie caravan park, and came up with this little parable that I want to share with you:

Indulge me for a moment and imagine a land where all the tables are state-owned, a valuable and finite resource because nobody knows how to make tables anymore. Ludicrously, the government of this land allows powerful people to take the nation's tables away so long as they slip them a tip for doing so.

Along comes a big collector and exporter of tables. He has seen from the government inventory that he could make a big profit from a particular table, because there's high demand for this sort. It's listed as in current full use, yet 'I want that one' he says to the government. 'OK,' they reply, 'but try to do as little damage as you can in getting it'. They don't even suggest it'd be better if he chose an empty table. Mustn't upset him; he gives them a lot of tips.

'No worries,' he says, 'I'm a responsible collector of tables - zero harm is my policy' (but he means to himself, not ricking his back or even breaking a nail if he can help it). He ticks all the boxes on the agreement, which conclude that 'it is unlikely there will be any significant impacts'.

The table-owner's great-great-grandfather built it from a local cedar tree that he felled; generations of the family have fed and fought and laughed and lived around this table. They only hear about the sale because a neighbour rings to say he saw an article in the paper - the collector is already boasting of his acquisition - and is it true?

'Can't be,' they reply, 'our family's always had this table; surely we'd be the first to know? They wouldn't sell this table; I mean it's part of the district's history, not just ours.'

Dismissing the unthinkable, they are about to sit down to lunch. Picture the antique table laden with family heirloom china and glassware, the meal prepared with love and skill, mainly from home-grown produce, the dishes laid on a tablecloth embroidered by their great-grandmother.

There's a knock at the door; the collector has arrived with his removalist crew, brandishing his acquisition papers. The family protest, but he shakes his head, apparently regretfully, walks over to the table and yanks the tablecloth out from under the meal.

He surveys the resulting mess of food, smashed china and glass. 'Oops', he says to the shocked family, 'I assure you that wasn't intended. But look, here's ten dollars for the carpet cleaning.'

The mother bursts into tears; the teenage son raises his fists but is restrained by the father. 'I'm afraid it's all legal, son.'

'But, Dad, it's not right!'

No, it's not right - and it's not smart. What's on top of the tables, whether created by nature or by humans, does have value, and deserves at least equal consideration.

As at Bylong.

Any belief I had in governments looking out for their people was removed by the damage to the Hunter and its inhabitants that I saw developing since the mid '90s, despite constant assurances

of rigorous environmental guidelines for each new and bigger mine. I felt I had to do something, for the sake of the next generation, like my daughter's family who were then living in Singleton.

I began writing letters and going to some coal meetings but really I lived too far away from anywhere and often couldn't afford the fuel. At one forum I met longtime coal battlers and river protectors, Mavis Tersteeg and Jenny Thomson from the Gloucester/Stroud area. When Mavis died in late 2006, still battling, it inspired me to use my only weapon, a way with words, to write and record the following, broadcast as a 'Country Viewpoint' on ABC Radio National's Bush Telegraph program.

In retrospect, that piece was the genesis of this book, so I'll read it to you; I called it

Nowhere's safe anymore

I used to live in a land where battlers were admired, where communities had a say in what happened to them, and where decision-makers who accepted money from interested parties were deemed to have a conflict of interest.

In that land people who chose to live in the country loved it and could expect to live that chosen lifestyle until they died. Maybe their family had been there for generations, or maybe they'd found their 25 acres of paradise, to retire and grow vegetables in peace and quiet, or to bring up kids in a clean and healthy environment, in tune with the natural world. You know, the bush, birds, bees, babbling brooks ... etc.

Because of the wider spaces, bad neighbours were less of a problem, and you weren't at risk from a McMansion or a block of flats being built next door and blocking your sunshine or your view.

But that land of choice no longer exists. Now it

doesn't matter how much you love your farm, your valley, your creek, your village, or your district, nor how many of you agree you don't want it to change... if there's big bucks to be made from what's under the ground - tough!

The mining companies and the government agree it's best for the Economy that you either sell up and let them get on with trashing the whole area, or you stay - and put up with dead dust mountains replacing your green landscape, blasting and trucks passing instead of birdsong and silence, and a red glow at night instead of black velvet and stars. And forget that babbling brook - it'll be history.

Oh, they talk about 'community consultation' and 'environmental guidelines', but they expect most people to just lie down, roll over and be stomped on. Yet sometimes a real battler emerges as a champion of the community, to make them justify the damage they intend. Unfortunately, the NSW government now just changes the law if it looks like that battler might win.

In the once-pristine Gloucester district, home to many babbling brooks, one such battler, Mavis Tersteeg, had been giving them hell for the last eleven years. Mavis co-founded the Johnson's Creek Conservation Committee in 1995. The battle was so demanding that she gave up her Masters Degree to devote all her time to it. She only stopped fighting against the Duralie coalmine on the 1st of November, 2006, when she died from cancer.

I'm ashamed of this land, where people like Mavis are forced to spend so much of their lives battling to have concern for the legacy of future generations prevail over short-term gain for the corporate few.

Mavis deserves a medal - but she'd rather have that victory her community deserves.

Mavis didn't get a medal, and unfortunately that victory is no closer; the Duralie mine has been approved to expand, and despite all efforts, including a court challenge by Amanda Albury's small group, it's still threatening those precious creeks and rivers.



Mavis Tersteeg
(Photo: Gloucester Advocate)

When I set out with my tape recorder in 2010 to find out what things were like in other current or planned coal areas nationwide, I was totally unprepared for what I found: the scale of this invasion, the spread and speed of it, the apparently calculated and uniform bloody-mindedness of the corporate attitudes to people, in every aspect of the coal chain, and the consequent shocking toll on people's lives and futures, financially, socially, physically, emotionally and mentally.

The more I learnt, the more overwhelmed I became; there was so much pain out there, and there weren't many gates that I drove out of without tears in my eyes. But my anger increased proportionately and I was determined to tell their stories, to inform ordinary Australians about this national tragedy taking place behind their backs.

Many times I wished I'd never started; family and friends grew fed up - 'don't mention coal!' - as the project dragged on for two years, monopolising my heart and mind and nearly breaking both. And there is another connection to the Mudgee area with my book: I doubt I could have borne the emotional weight of the topic and

enormity of the task without the support of a few special friends who lasted the distance with me, primarily Sue Pridmore from Rylstone way who's here tonight. Thank you Sue.

For while my book deals with all impacts of this runaway coal and CSG rush - like water! - for me the most unpublicised and tragic impact is about the people, the individuals and communities, rural areas and villages that are basically being bullied and conned, held at bay and frustrated by the pretence of a government process of assessment that eventually they all learn is not about deciding if a mining or CSG project should go ahead but how to allow it to go ahead, how to blur glaring objections and negate others - with terms like 'unlikely to have significant impact' and 'endeavour to mitigate impacts'.

Once aware of being under an active coal or gas or other minerals exploration licence, people's lives are changed forever, taken over, on hold and under stress. There are first the years of deciding what to do, to fight or give in, to go or stay, to take the money or not - an effective means of pushing people to the edge of breakdowns and a breaker-upper of relationships and families. And of communities, which Wollar now knows and Bylong is learning; companies are very good at this and I saw it repeated nationally. Disunited we fall.

Once a mine is operating, the physical suffering starts as the impacts of dust and incessant loud noise and/or insidious low frequency noise are felt; throw in sleep deprivation, a company that denies everything and a government process where conditions have more loopholes than legally binding clauses - and people go over the edge or get out, or both, beaten, often broken - and usually broke.

We may not know for a generation just how much health damage is being done to us and our children, and their children, from the air and water pollution from coal mining, coal power generation or coal seam, shale or tight gas drilling- as they are facing in other states.

“...from what I have seen and heard it is only Independents and the Greens who have consistently stood up for (...) the value of resources other than what can be dug or drilled and sold at great profit overseas.”

You've probably heard of the elevated figures in the Hunter and Lithgow of respiratory illnesses, heart attacks, strokes, various cancers and early deaths. These facts aren't disputed but, to the shame of both state and federal governments, they have done no studies as to whether the equally undisputed pollution from these industries, according to the National Pollutant Inventory, is the cause.

They have in the US, and the health costs from coal have been proved to outweigh the income – but apparently that isn't relevant here. Fair enough; I mean, we might have different hearts and lungs downunder.

In the words of the admirable Dr Tuan Au of Singleton – who delivered my daughter's three girls, by the way – ‘If we ignore the problems and we do nothing about them, it's the same as murder’.

A Hunter study is underway now, not by the government departments who ought to take responsibility, but by the University of Sydney's Health and Sustainability Unit, aided by Beyond Zero Emissions; it was announced by the

indomitable Tim Duddy just before the state election at which he stood as an Independent.

Had the Nationals been honest then about how they were going to backflip on 'protecting' agriculture from mining, I think Tim's large vote would have grown large enough to take the seat from them.

For from what I have seen and heard it is only Independents and the Greens who have consistently stood up for what's on the tablecloth – for the value of resources other than what can be dug or drilled and sold at great profit overseas.

In the name of that economic demand, what has been allowed by our so-called leaders to happen just 50kms north of here is nothing short of appalling. You'll see the physical state of things tomorrow on the Misery tour, but it's the tactics that anger me most. I have called that chapter 'Clearing out the country' and it begins

'Clearing out the country is nothing new in Australia. Although the weapons aren't muskets this time, I see some similarities with the poisoned flour and waterholes.'

A great injustice has been – is being – perpetrated upon the people who lived in those villages and their rural surroundings. And no, it wasn't 'prime agricultural land' – but it was their homes and their chosen rural lifestyles and they were 'cleared out' of them by mining; in effect conned or intimidated or impacted beyond endurance by the juggernauts that had moved into the area and would eventually be all that existed. Between Moorlaben and Wilpinjong, giant machines are already the dominant signs of life, not people and animals; it is on its way to a Wasteland straddled by Transgrid towers.

This is an industrial invasion by foreign business powers: Peabody at Wilpinjong is the Big

American, 100%; Yancoal/Yanzhou own 80% of Moorlaben, with the rest Korean and Japanese; Xstrata at Ulan is a Swiss-based multi-national giant.

I didn't talk to them; I wanted to give voice to the battlers and here I wish to thank those locals who shared their stories with me and thus with Australia: Meg and John Kattau and Cathy Pattullo from Cumbo, Bev Smiles, Bruce Marshall and Lance and Kate Batey from Wollar, Susan Symons and Grayson Tuck-Lee and Julia and Colin Imrie from Ulan. I already knew Rob & Lisa Carroll's story.



Bruce Marshall
(Photo: Mudgee Guardian)

The Wilpinjong mine emptied the whole Cumbo Valley, whose inhabitants were driven mad for several years with both audible and ILFN noise, to the point of begging to be bought out and just having to take what was offered, yet on paper, officially, the mine had no noise problem.

Previous owners Excel had assured locals that Cumbo would have no adverse impacts from the proposed mine, and anyway these people were just over the line on the map for the 1km buffer zone. We all know noise and dust don't cross lines.

Wollar village was promised great advantages from the mine – growth and progress, if not gold pavements. Under a systematic community-fracturing campaign, most of the villagers believed it; now there's hardly any left to regret that. Nearly every promise publicly made by Excel has subsequently been broken. As Wilpinjong expanded it was plain Wollar would be unliveable

and it was finally announced that the mine would want the lot.

Bruce Marshall's T shirt said it all: 'Official Wollar villager – Endangered species'. It is now clear that this status is moving to 'extinct'. Like Ulan, which 20 years ago was a real village with a village life; now it's just a mine holding.

Coal before communities.

Peabody say they consider Australia a premier location for coal mine development and investment. I'll bet they do, with our government saying, 'Come, take our land, our water, our villages, do as you please!' That's what you call a 'safe investment environment'. Being the world's largest private sector coal company, you'd think they could afford to do the right thing by the poor Aussies damaged and displaced on behalf of their US shareholders.

As ex-Cumbo resident Meg Kattau said, 'When you consider the money the companies must get, why do they need to destroy people's existence?'

Meg and her husband John, amongst others, suffered shocking impacts from ILFN. John was rushed to hospital several times – and even on to Sydney – with inexplicable and very serious heart crises. I have to talk about this because it continues to be dismissed, ignored or denied by industry and government alike. Yet in every diesel machinery run open cut mining region in Australia, when I mentioned the symptoms as reported to me around Cumbo and Wollar – waking around two am, head buzzing, unable to stop it or get away from it, feeling like you were going crazy, irregular heartbeat, low pulse rate, confusion, loss of balance, nausea – as if on cue, the response would be 'Funny you should say that...'

Lance and Kate Batey also suffered from ILFN and Lance and John Kattau did research into it, since the mine was virtually saying it must be in everyone's head and anyway didn't exist. These lower frequencies persist for much further than audible noise, are not blocked by barriers like hills or walls and in fact are worse inside a house than out; they are felt more than heard, so no good putting a pillow over your head or blocking your ears.

“The World Health Organization acknowledges low frequency noise as a very real environmental issue and it is a recognised cause of cardiovascular problems.”

This health impact - not only from diesel machinery - for example airport workers - is so well-known in Europe it has a name; the Hum with a capital 'H'. The World Health Organization acknowledges low frequency noise as a very real environmental issue and it is a recognised cause of cardiovascular problems.

For environmental noise monitoring, it's normal here to use the sound level A-weighting rather than the C-weighting that takes ILFN into account far more. The W.H.O. says that where 'prominent low frequency components are present', the C-weighting should be used, because such components 'may increase considerably the adverse effects on health' and the evidence is 'sufficiently strong to warrant immediate concern.'

That was a decade ago and yet, most conveniently for coalmines, the A-weighting continues to be the norm in Australia. Why don't their conditions insist otherwise?

In the corporate mining and state planning world, ignoring a problem seems the preferred solution.

ILFN struck me like a silent and invisible weapon of destruction, zapping residents as they tried to sleep, making especially the elderly dangerously ill. In other parts of Cumbo they had extreme audible noise day and night; all had the added torture of sleep deprivation. Add to that the offensive denial that there was a problem, so the mine wouldn't buy them out, and nobody else would; after a few years of it the victims were willing to take a reluctantly and way-too-belatedly offered pittance to just get out of there. Or be carried out, as John Kattau said.

How is that treating people with any respect and why are our laws so loose and so unmonitored and unenforced as to allow it? Why is one moneymaking industry allowed to do such things when no others can?



Lance Batey
(Photo: from Stuart O'Rourke's documentary, "NSW Coal Rush")

They could at least be ordered to operate only in daylight hours - but then the mine would make less money.

Profit before people.

The 100% Asian-owned Moolarben, we now know, also own the precious Drip and Corner Gorges. What sort of government allowed that?!

The same one that allowed this mine to start up 400m from Susan and Grayson's owner-built

home in a once-rural and much-appreciated environment, smother it with dust and noise and yet, because they are in the acquisition lease category, where the mine will buy them out if they request, as Grayson said, 'This means we have no rights; the mine says they don't have to reduce noise or anything. The way they see it is that we have a choice to be bought out and go away or we sit here and put up with them.'



Corner Gorge, Goulburn River
(Photo: Julia Imrie)

Ulan, Wollar, Cumbo – the story is being repeated all over Australia.

I know the march of CSG is rightly worrying and stressing folk in many areas – but let us not forget what King Coal is doing on a massive scale, usually in less populated areas so less to make such a fuss.

We need a halt to both while Senate enquiries happen that will be mandated to be acted on; the CSG one recommended there be a moratorium while more investigations took place. As if Julia would be allowed to do that; look what happened to Kev.

But otherwise we are just digging ourselves deeper into a legacy of generational illhealth in a post-boom wasteland.

I don't know if the participants in the conference up the road believe what they say in public about social licence and commitment to best practice etc, but from what I've seen and heard, none of it has anything to do with the reality of what happens.

Corporate coal and government departments like Planning create a parallel paper world between them; like a minuet in a mental asylum they hold hands, pose phony questions and give phony answers, nod and smile at each other and move on to the next equally fake dance with the community or landholders to be trashed.

Susan Symons offered a perfect example of a common ploy, the s(p)in of omission, as she told me how, 'When we first got the EIS for Moolarben, we turned to the cultural and community impacts. We thought it would list all impacts, like on the [Ulan] school, sites to be preserved, etc. But all it said was that if we don't have this mine, all that income won't be going into the state coffers and the community will suffer. There was no local impact whatsoever mentioned.'

“Corporate coal and government departments like Planning create a parallel paper world between them; like a minuet in a mental asylum they hold hands, pose phony questions and give phony answers...”

And this is what you will keep being told; why Mudgee must have more mines, and as it grows more dependent on them, the community will certainly suffer.

Knowing that what you do or say is next to useless is why so many landowners and caring citizens are being driven to civil disobedience, to blockade, to lock the gate to avoid any of the legalised trespass and looting even beginning.

And it is why once conservative people are joining forces with once-shunned 'greenies'. We are all

fighting for the same things: sanity and a sustainable future instead of this short term mindless offering up of our country and our people to whatever big business needs to make the most billions.

By the end of 2010 I came home with the feeling that the worm was turning, when once-conservative folk were beginning to rebel; like establishment farmer and septuagenarian George Clift thumping the camp table at the Caroona blockade as he said we had to take democracy back for the people, out of the hands of big money.

“Knowing that what you do or say is next to useless is why so many landowners and caring citizens are being driven to civil disobedience, to blockade, to lock the gate...”

It's hard enough for people to give up all they or their ancestors have achieved and valued for a supposedly common good project like a freeway – or as coal used to be – 'to keep the lights on' – but for just another business, mainly benefiting its foreign owners...!! As Lance Batey said, 'you have to go cap in hand to private companies to establish any rights and the only right in the end is to be bought out. That stinks!'

If the government won't do the right thing by its people and change those lax and biased laws to put these industries back in their boxes, to be restricted and to genuinely behave responsibly – then we the people have to band together to demand it, and dig our toes in until they do – behind our Esky and tent blockades if need be.

Caroona showed the way with coal, Tara did it with CSG; by the end of 2010 Lockthegate was formed and in 2011 it was all snowballing– from Lockthegate going national, to legal challenges

as Hunter Environment Lobby has done with Ulan, and blockades as at Spring Ridge, Gloucester, and Kerry in Qld.

Our government is permitting a great wrong– those who are being hurt now, to those will suffer from the direct impacts of new and expanded projects, to those will suffer in the future from the lack of water and arable land for food . And they include town and city dwellers.

People power is about the only thing in our hands – since the system has taken reason and right and forward thinking out of the process.

Without exclusion of areas like Bylong, without transparency of process, without due respect for people's rights and values and without genuine attention to highly likely and usually predictable impacts on water and air – nothing will change. Our governments are not leaders, but followers, of what the real powers with the bottomless pockets want or will tolerate.

To the victims with whom I have spoken, Australia is no longer associated with 'a fair go', but with 'fair game' for those with lots of money and little social conscience.



*Sign on Bylong Valley Way
(Photo: Craig Shaw)*

I do believe that not only must this mining and drilling frenzy be brought under control, but that we – you and me and others elsewhere like us – will make that happen.

I hope my book will help swell those numbers and we now have a film documentary, called *Bimblebox*, to help too. Paola Cassoni has been

the force behind this film by Mike O'Connell, which I recently saw in Byron Bay at the premiere. It is not only about Bimblebox, the Queensland nature reserve that Clive Palmer wants to dig up for his China First mine, but is an overview of coal and CSG impacts in Australia.

Paola hopes it will soon be on DVD and become as widely seen as *Gasland*. When unaware people see a tough farmer or two weeping, and a few giant opencut spoil heaps up close, they begin to get the idea.

We aim to work together, publicising book and film, to use these tools we have fashioned to shock Australians into action, to start them bombarding their government representatives at all levels with their concerns.

Thank you for coming and being part of this move towards sanity and balance in Mudgee's future and elsewhere. I feel a connection with Mudgee as I have relatives here, the Leonards/O'Briens, and have visited often; I really liked Mudgee, 'the nest in the hills'.

The mines may as yet be out of sight of town, but 50k is the same distance as between Singleton and Muswellbrook and they readily share their pollution. Please don't be Nimbies about this, for trust me, once modern mining begins to blow out the way it is on all sides of here, it will creep and dominate and every approach to Mudgee will be through minescapes. Not scenic. And the ill-conceived Cobbora project simply must not go ahead, for so many reasons, as MWCAN can tell you.

I'll end with a quote from the book:

But the change has already started and will become more obvious as demographics change and the streets and shops fill with the mine uniforms and utes of workers here only for the

work roster and the pay, with no commitment to this community. As the heavy equipment and worker traffic increases. If Cobbora goes ahead, as the coal trains rumble through the heart of the town, shaking and cracking its beautiful heritage brick buildings, like the elegant railway station, and powdering the town with coal dust. As the air in the 'nest' fills with fine dust particulates as more land is dug up and exposed to the winds. As the asthma rates climb and the numbers of tourists drop. As the quality and safety of the famous Mudgee 'brands', their honey, their regional wines, begin to be questioned, and then tarnished. Mudgee will then know it's the loser and, as usual, King Coal will have won.

And as for your Council, while to be congratulated for backing a moratorium on Bylong, for demanding more mine funding for roads etc and expressing concern about the lack of future planning and about ILFN...

They don't get it enough; they can't have Mudgee for wine and tourism — and coal. By still not wanting to restrict coal, already out of balance from what is on the books, they are sacrificing the region to coal. They need to visit the coal-Hunter again, and imagine that for Mudgee.

Thank you.

Photograph of Sharyn from Page 1 by Scott Hawkins, courtesy of *Notebook* magazine.

To read more about Sharyn's book – or to order online – go to richlandwasteland.com.

You can also read Sharyn's excellent blog at sharynmunro.com.