

## Class, Gender, and Power in the Mining Communities of the Americas?

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# REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

## Class, Gender, and Power in the Mining Communities of the Americas

Laurie Mercier

*All That Glitters: Class, Conflict, and Community in Cripple Creek.* By Elizabeth Jameson. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998.

*Tracing the Veins: Of Copper, Culture, and Community from Butte to Chuquibambilla.* By Janet L. Finn. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

FROM THE CANADIAN ROCKIES to the Chilean Andes, mining has dominated the economies and lives of many of the people inhabiting the mountainous backbone of the Americas. Although isolated from the main centres of national trade and industry, mining communities shared characteristics with cities rather than the rural areas that surrounded them. They were densely populated, industrial, and their residents worked for wages and sought the mutual associations and pleasures associated with urban life. Some of these communities were rigidly controlled company towns; others alternated independence from and loyalty to the employers who guaranteed or threatened their survival. They experienced booms and busts as companies responded to global market prices, the quality and quantity of ore reserves, and technological demands. Residents endured the harsh climates of high altitudes, difficult and dangerous working conditions, and powerful corporations. Mining has been one of the most exclusively gendered occupations in the hemisphere and, until the 1980s, it has produced some of the feistiest unions.

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Until recent decades, the gap between myth and reality has been wide in portrayals of the history of Canadian and US Rocky Mountain mining. Miners have often symbolized the masculine individualism that many wished the western frontier to embody. Beginning in the 1960s, many historians altered this image of mining to emphasize its late nineteenth-century industrial transformation, which clearly reflected continental trends rather than regional uniqueness. Much like the rest of the western story, mining was dependent on capital, technology, profits, markets, and industrial labour rather than individual wits or strength.<sup>1</sup>

Although these works changed our understanding of the minerals industry, they concentrated on capital developments and labour radicalism. Even local studies focused on capitalists, mining politics, or unions, largely ignoring the social history of the communities in which mining operations were located.<sup>2</sup> This is surprising, since community studies, following on the heels of the tremendously influential works of E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, preoccupied social historians' work in the 1970s and 1980s. A generation of labour historians has demonstrated that culture and community have shaped working-class histories as much as did labour and capital. Though hard-rock mining towns represented the industrial centres of the West, until recently, they have escaped the historical scrutiny that industrial towns of eastern Canada and the eastern US have enjoyed.

In many respects, historians have not known how to deal with mining communities and "camps." The known exhaustibility of the resource, the characteristic single and transient population, and the ramshackle quality of housing, not to mention the paucity of sources, led historians to focus on the industry and its workers rather than the places they resided. This helps explain why women have been absent in mining history much like they were excluded from the major occupation and its unions. But women and men came to western mining centres for the same reason they flocked to industrial areas worldwide: they sought economic

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Duane Smith, *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps: The Urban Frontier* (Lincoln, 1967); Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW* (Chicago, 1969); Richard E. Lingenfelter, *The Hardrock Miners: A History of the Mining Labor Movement in the American West, 1863-1893* (Berkeley, 1974); James E. Fell, *Ores to Metals: The Rocky Mountain Smelting Industry* (Lincoln, 1979); Mark Wyman, *Hard Rock Epic: Western Miners and the Industrial Revolution, 1860-1910* (Berkeley, 1979); Ronald C. Brown, *Hard-Rock Miners: The Intermountain West, 1860-1920* (College Station, 1979); Mike Solski and John Smaller, *Mine Mill: The History of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers in Canada Since 1895* (Ottawa, 1984).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Michael Malone, *The Battle for Butte: Mining Politics on the Northern Frontier, 1864-1906* (Seattle, 1981). Though more of a sociological than historical study, an exception is Rex Lucas, *Minetown, Milltown, Railtown: Life in Canadian Communities of Single Industry* (Toronto, 1971). Exaggerated stories of mining life are present in books such as the Works Projects Administration, *Copper Camp: Stories of the World's Greatest Mining Town, Butte, Montana* (New York, 1943); Malone's single social history chapter unfortunately relies on this folkloric account.

opportunities and to build new lives; and they ached for stable communities. Stability appeared promising as financiers invested substantial sums of capital in the underground mines and smelters of Arizona, Colorado, Montana, Idaho, Utah, and British Columbia. Whether denying or realizing that the resource would not last forever, people created community.

Historians of Latin America have stressed the importance of mining labour to national developments, but they, too, have neglected the role of women and communities in shaping that history.<sup>3</sup> June Nash's study of Bolivian tin miners reveals how women, community solidarity, and the work itself created a revolutionary labour force that had a profound effect on the nation. Indian miners retained traditional values and beliefs and resisted the industrial system as they worked in it. Their strong sense of family allowed them to incorporate socialist ideology to insure collective security. Because homes were close to the mine shafts, families shared workplace concerns. Women formed a Housewives' Association to demand better food supplies and to defend the civil rights of their husbands. But in *Salt of the Earth* fashion, male union leaders were not entirely supportive of the women's efforts. Through their commitment to social justice, the tin communities were able to install a supportive, nationalist government, but they were not able to resist global monetary policies and technological changes that squeezed workers and threatened subsistence. Ultimately, a new US-supported military government repressed miners' resistance.<sup>4</sup>

A host of new studies produced in the 1990s have demonstrated that class, gender, ethnic and race relations have significant bearing on the history of the North American West's mining communities and labour movements. Many of these works reflect the larger project of labour historians to probe how a nascent working class dramatically confronted the rising power of industrial capitalism at the turn of the century. Yvette Huggin examines the intersection of racial ideologies with copper mining in Arizona before 1920. Although Mexican, Mexican American, European immigrant, and Anglo American miners faced a common adversary, their racial, ethnic, national, union, community, and skill distinctions burdened a World War I strike effort. Philip Mellinger, on the other hand, explores efforts at ethnic-racial inclusion in the labour struggles of the Southwest. He finds that many Western Federation of Miners and IWW activists worked to end the bifurcated labour force in the early 20th century. David Emmons, in his study of the Butte Irish at the turn of the century, finds that ethnicity overrides class identities among working-class miners. Weaving industrial, labour, and social history, Jeremy Mouat's book on Rossland demonstrates how the mining community's trajectory reflects the incorporation of North America into the global trade network. A few

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Charles Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Columbia* (Stanford, 1986).

<sup>4</sup>June Nash, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us: Dependency and Exploitation in Bolivian Tin Mines* (New York, 1979).

scholars have begun to examine the less dramatic but equally important post-World War I period. Mary Murphy explores urban Butte's cultural life between the two world wars, when the Anaconda Company had effectively eliminated challenges to its hegemony. Murphy examines how working women and men crafted their own leisure-time activities, and how gender shaped this play. Finally, Barbara Kingsolver and Jonathan Rosenblum note the ethnic and intra-class conflicts that colour Phelps Dodge's crushing of mining unionism in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

Two new books by Elizabeth Jameson and Janet Finn make significant contributions to this literature. Though employing different methods and focusing on opposite ends of the 20th century, both probe power relations between employers and workers, employers and community, and men and women. Their focus on gender roles and gender relations significantly shifts and complicates traditional characterizations of the mining world. Gender becomes as central as corporate power in understanding mining community life.

Elizabeth Jameson's study of Cripple Creek, Colorado, focuses on the years between 1894, when the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) won its first big western strike victory, and 1904, when employers crushed another strike effort and workers' power quickly unraveled. The author asks how a decade of union power could so abruptly end. One answer, as labour historians have found in studies of similar conundrums, is the role of the state. Colorado miners won their 1894 strike for an eight-hour day, minimum wage, and recognition of the WFM with the help of Gov. Davis Waite, a sympathetic Populist who intervened to protect miners rather than mine owners. But in 1904, anti-labour Republican Gov. James H. Peabody used the militia to protect strikebreakers and employers' mobs.

Jameson contends that it was not just state and employer collaboration that destroyed worker strength. Other power relations shifted during the decade to undermine worker solidarity. By exploring how the daily lives of rank-and-file workers intersected with union politics, she concludes that social relationships — based on class, race, gender, age, religion, and family — influenced worker consciousness and behavior. This approach allows the author to consider how the outcome might have been different, in spite of corporate and state power. But rather

<sup>5</sup> Andrea Yvette Huginnie, "'Strikitos': Race, Class, and Work in the Arizona Copper Industry, 1870-1920," (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1991); Philip J. Mellinger, *Race and Labor in Western Copper: The Fight for Equality, 1896-1918* (Tucson, 1995); David M. Emmons, *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875-1925* (Urbana, 1989); Mary Murphy, *Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, 1914-41* (Urbana, 1997); Jeremy Mouat, *Roaring Days: Rossland's Mines and the History of British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1995); Barbara Kingsolver, *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (Ithaca, 1989); Jonathan D. Rosenblum, *Copper Crucible: How the Arizona Miners' Strike of 1983 Recast Labor-Management Relations in America* (Ithaca, 1998).

than privileging human agency, a weakness in much social history, Jameson tries to fuse how both daily acts and material and social circumstances shape history.

By focusing on daily lives, Jameson discovers that divisions haunted the workforce. Though workers may have identified as a class, they also identified as white men, lodge and ethnic brothers, fathers and husbands, Socialists or Democrats, skilled or unskilled labour. Working people understood their world in different contexts. These multiple identities could influence when, why, and how miners acted to change their lives. Jameson notes that miners could be both radical or reformist, at once seeking limited job security or more visionary social change. Her book makes its most splendid contribution in exploring these complexities of identity and class consciousness.

Unions and the community competed to influence miners' views. Lodges muted class differences as workers and employers mingled; and ritual order gave the illusion of merit, rather than class hierarchy. Labour unions recognized the pull of lodge and ethnic association camaraderie, and replicated social events and services in addition to addressing the common concerns of working men. Unions shaped the public celebrations of Labor Day and Fourth of July by trumpeting working-class rights and criticizing organized capital.

Women comprised 40 per cent of the population in the Cripple Creek District, and Jameson illustrates how their activities significantly shaped local history. During the critical strike of 1904, for example, women used their gender to lead the resistance, knowing that the militia would not physically attack them as they provided relief for strikers and raised bonds for those imprisoned. The author contends that despite women's exclusion from the mines and unions, their lives were more endurable in a labour-run Cripple Creek District than in non-union towns.

Gender defined class relationships as well as relations between men and women. The fact that manhood "was defined by wage work and breadwinning" limited women's economic and social opportunities. (117) Men failed to recognize how women's informal and reproductive labours were both essential to household and mine operator survival. Despite their efforts to challenge individualism and capitalism, working men's aspirations for home and family "paradoxically reinforced the domestic ideals of an individualist age." (139) The working-class domestic ideal also impeded class alliances with unmarried men and prostitutes. Nevertheless, the author finds that union men with homes and families were more likely than their single counterparts to engage in activism. This evidence challenges conclusions posited by many labour historians that workers became more conservative as they became more rooted, and that single workers, who had less to lose, were more militant.

Other scholars have explored anti-Chinese hostility in western mining communities, but Jameson explains how Cripple Creek miners fashioned a "white man's camp" through privileging or excluding different ethnic groups, including

the Chinese. Whiteness and masculinity joined white immigrant and native white miners but ultimately damaged working-class alliances, as workers and managers campaigned for exclusion. Cripple Creek miners racialized, demonized, and excluded Asians, southern and eastern Europeans, and Mexican Americans, but allowed some African Americans to remain in the district. In her effort to demonstrate how race and ethnicity are malleable categories, Jameson may make too much of this apparent tolerance of African Americans. Her evidence suggests that the small African American community endured segregation, discrimination, exclusion, racial epithets, and lynchings because alternatives outside Cripple Creek were no better.

Labour's strength appeared illusory by June 1904. WFM strikes rocked Colorado mining communities. While industry resisted with the help of the state, Jameson refutes previous characterizations of "labor wars" and "labor violence" to demonstrate how state support allowed employers to refuse to negotiate, incite mob violence to destroy union halls and sympathizers' businesses, and depose elected officials. Employers leaned on sheriffs and the militia to shoot, imprison, or eject from town the strikers. Although the WFM eventually obtained injunctions to curtail these abuses of power, working people lost faith in a movement that could not defend them. Supposed strikers' guilt in initiating the violence was upheld by biased investigations, newspaper reports, and the historical interpretations that accepted uncritically those accounts.

The married, home-owning labour activists who risked everything in order to advance organized labour outside of the mining camps were deported or blacklisted. Unions declined, demonstrating that local efforts could not overcome employer power to attain industrial unionism or socialism. Many mines in the district never reopened, and Cripple Creek residents scattered to other western mining communities. But their experiences and memories undoubtedly continued to shape the history of the West. A handful of people I interviewed in Anaconda, Montana, for example, attributed their class-conscious hatred of corporate power to previous family experiences in Colorado. Those memories fueled a dormant union movement that became revitalized in the 1930s smelter community.

Jameson's prodigious research and attention to the details of community life at the turn of the century make this an important addition to mining history. She pieces together the Colorado miner's world through an exhaustive analysis of the 1900 census, and newspaper, state, and union sources. At the end of *All That Glitters*, the author notes that after the mines closed in the 1960s, elderly residents felt compelled to tell their history. Perhaps because their memories were too faint or because they were too young to recall the period between 1894 and 1904, few of their reminiscences grace these pages. More personal accounts, though perhaps not available, might have enriched Jameson's arguments about the social relationships that shaped working-class responses to employer power.

Oral history sources dominate Janet Finn's study, which compares two communities thousands of miles apart but connected by one copper conglomerate. *Tracing the Veins* represents a bold attempt to understand community change across borders in light of transnational corporate activities. It brings mining history into the late 20th century long past earlier romantic labour struggles to explore how entrenched companies and unions deal with a changing world economy. This book might serve as a model for future studies that attempt to expose and understand the interconnectedness of lives under global capitalism.

Interested in corporate-community relationships, "the cryptic presence of Chile lurking in the shadows of Butte's history" convinced the native Finn to expand her Montana study to learn how Chilean labour and lives under the powerful Anaconda Copper Mining Company might compare. (3) Copper mining and the company shaped these two communities, yet they remained intimate strangers. Like Jameson, Finn finds the complex web of social relationships, as well as corporate power, important to these communities' histories. Finn employs cultural studies, ethnography, and history to trace how the company (and in the case of Chile, how various governments) structured residents' lives, and how in turn people resisted and fashioned their own culture.

While the two communities have different cultural and national contexts, the structural history of company intervention links them. By the 1950s, Chuquibambilla, Chile, replaced Butte as the "greatest mining camp in the world" and as the main resource anchor for the Anaconda Company's far-flung empire. Anaconda entered Chile in the 1920s during a time of democratic reform activity in the country. Nonetheless, the company was able to attain rapprochement with the state as it had in Montana and used the same tactics as it had in Butte to crush labour activism. Popular movements rose to challenge Anaconda hegemony in both Chile and Montana in the 1930s, but the company was able to make minor concessions and recognize unions while maintaining firm control of its operations.

Chilean and US governments repressed communism and labour sympathizers during the cold war, the company invested in recreational facilities in its company towns to compete for worker loyalty, governments granted economic concessions because of world market competition, and labour unions in both places solidified bread-and-butter gains. But the company could not indefinitely control events. At the height of the Vietnam War and copper demand, Chile was moving towards nationalization, and the powerful United Steelworkers of America (USWA) (which had taken over Mine Mill) launched a major strike in 1967 to win industry-wide bargaining.

Contested gender relations were central to community culture in North and South America. The author consistently integrates gender into her analysis of class, company, and community and explores the changing and class-contingent roles for women and men and the multiplicity of these categories. Expectations of men as union miners differ from images of men as managers. Scabs were feminized to



underscore that they were not "manly" enough to be union miners, yet Chilean men adopted feminine dress to escape police repression of a strike. And women's authority changed dependent on family position. Assumptions about Butte men as "irresponsible sons" and women as "vigilant mothers" frustrated miner's wives. The elevation of mothers and sympathy for wayward sons is also reflected in the *marianismo* of Catholic Chile. Chuquicamata women had to endure "rampant infidelity" among their men to the point that the Anaconda Company provided allowances for mothers whose miner husbands violated family obligations. (117) The icon of patient womanhood, the Virgin Mary, became a "fascinating fusion of capitalism and cosmology" when the giant Our Lady of the Rockies was erected in 1985 overlooking Butte. (132) Finn notes the ironies of unemployed male miners and business boosters erecting the statue as Butte's workforce became increasingly feminized in the post-industrial mining economy.

Finn arranges the Butte and Chuquicamata stories and her analyses under four major themes and chapters: crafting the everyday, consumption, trust and betrayal, and reclamation. In crafting the everyday, Finn finds that women in Butte shaped their lives around the three-year cycle of labour contracts; in Chuquicamata, women's lives revolved around waiting in lines at the water pumps and company stores. In the creative chapter entitled "Miner's Consumption," Finn explores the ways in which miners' "consumption" or silicosis and women's roles as consumers shape community life. The physical wasting of miners affected men's and women's lives and union strategies. Women were consumed with worry and surviving husbands' disabilities, strikes, and the harsh high altitude climates of Butte and Chuquicamata. Economic and political change also reflect the metaphor of consumption. The company consumed the popular Columbia Gardens in Butte as it expanded open-pit mining, and the dictatorship consumed communal ties in Chile during its repressive regime.

Since oral interviews play a central role in Finn's analysis of the two communities, first-hand accounts enliven the narrative. Yet the use of oral history is a troubling aspect of the book. Narrators are not listed in the bibliography, despite their centrality, and occasional notes refer to anonymous speakers. Anonymity is critical to the ethnographer's craft, but in a book where "voices" play such an important part of the author's evidence, and where the talk does not appear to require anonymity for protection, the author seems to disempower the very people she wishes to champion. The oral excerpts appear as disembodied voices rather than the passionate and profound words of real people we want to acknowledge.

Finn's analysis is most persuasive when she scrutinizes with her oral sources to explore the complex meanings behind memories. In remembering the 1946 Butte strike, for example, the newspaper image of a piano thrown from a strikebreaker's home dominates the stories that people tell. Finn deftly shows how images crafted by the company press enter people's consciousness and memories of the strike. The

violence of the strike is symbolized by the piano, and the issues behind labour's fury are forgotten.

At other times, however, the author appears to accept at face value the "facts" recalled by her informants. This is particularly true with her analysis of Butte union history. Reflections about how "my family felt forced by the union" to support the 1959 strike, for example, do not consider how interviews conducted in the anti-union 1990s climate may have altered perspectives. (57) Undoubtedly miners' disappointments with union bureaucracy and failures to adequately challenge the company disillusioned many. But, though Finn often acknowledges the contradictions apparent in people's stories, her self-reflective narrative does not often enough recognize how the mine closures, the anti-union climate, and other factors might shape the reminiscences. Other excerpts beg for more probing but are left alone. A Butte miner's wife accepts the company's analysis of its decline, in hindsight reporting that Chilean nationalization in 1970 "was the beginning of the end" for Anaconda. (64) The fact that women in particular have difficulty recalling the order of strikes or their goals reveals how their exclusion from union politics dampened their enthusiasm for what to them appeared as unnecessary hardships. Nonetheless, Finn does not probe the contradictions between women's criticisms of unions and the evidence that they supported strikes in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Anaconda Company crafted its communities by controlling the press, fueling ethnic divisions, tolerating vice, privileging married male workers, and investing in housing and recreation. Because the company tempered discipline with reward, Finn finds that 1990s memories of it were tinged with nostalgia. After decades of political upheaval, Chileans came to remember the "Anaconda years" as more benign. Just as many of her Butte narrators blamed the union rather than the company for their community's decline, so did Finn's Chilean informants blame Chilean governments rather than the gringos they replaced. In retrospect, the people of Butte and Chuquicamata recognized that struggling under the Anaconda Company was better than facing the disintegration of their communities.

Finn's narrative is at times sketchy on historical detail and chronology. Strikes appear and disappear, leaving the reader to wonder about causality and why workers ever voted to strike since the reminiscences that describe them are either critical of the unions or claim that company victory was inevitable. A clearer understanding of the Mine Mill/USWA struggle might have helped Finn question some of her interviewer responses. Although she claims that the Butte Miner's Union was at odds with Mine Mill in the 1950s, the local consistently voted to remain with the left-tainted international union despite repeated USWA raids.

But Finn would contest the possibility of explaining the communities' histories through historical details. She repeatedly questions the scholar's ability to reconstruct the past given the inevitable selectivity of evidence. One might argue that her impressionistic approach reflects and highlights the contradictions embedded in workers' consciousness. In the end, her method of relying on stories and her own

reflections on fieldwork create a sense of the fears and struggles that permeated the lives of mining families in both countries.

The depletion of copper reserves ultimately ended community hopes for solidarity and economic security. Butte and Chuquicamata symbolized the changes industrial communities worldwide experienced in the late 20th century. The exhaustion of rich ore sources under Butte brought the city's decline, and in 1986, when reduced mining resumed after a three-year closure, the one-time "Gibraltar of unionism" became non-union. From 1973 to 1989 the Pinochet dictatorship ended labour militance in Chile, and though copper miners helped topple the regime, the economic crisis in copper and the loss of thousands of jobs ended Chilean hopes to reconstruct their community. Women's traditions as family and community caretakers survive into this new era as women's groups in both communities search for economic alternatives and deal with the traumas of state and domestic violence.

The historiography of mining communities reveals a tumultuous past. Booms and busts, company control and repression, intraunion and intraclass struggles, and harsh living and working conditions dominate descriptions. Cripple Creek, Butte, and Chuquicamata mirror the dramatic and mundane events that have shaped the history of mining in the Americas.

These works not only "add women" to what has heretofore been a masculine story, but they explore the complexities of gender formation and sustenance. Both studies reveal how gender categories became more destabilized during times of crisis. Cripple Creek women became critical to strike efforts at the turn of the century, as did their counterparts in Butte and Chuquicamata in the mid- and late-twentieth century. Across time and space, women encountered men's ambivalence or resistance to their militance. Women voiced their reluctant support of strikes while they wished goals had been to improve living conditions rather than wages. Men's intransigence and dedication to rigid gender identifications severely limited working-class possibilities to collectively challenge corporate power.

Mining families faced formidable odds in fashioning their own communities. In fact, the enormous power of mining corporations, their historic ability to align governments behind their interests, and the isolation of most mining centers have challenged the most determined workers. The stories of Cripple Creek, Butte, and Chuquicamata mining families do not end in victory, and their communities barely survive. Their histories seem to underscore the inevitability of loss and decline given corporate power and the world commodities market.

Yet both authors find in these communities efforts to adapt to, reshape, and resist the restrictions on working people's lives. Colorado miners embraced a larger struggle for smelterworkers outside their area, and thousands of men and women marched miles through the desert to protest the Pinochet dictatorship. Jameson and Finn recognize the importance of these historical moments and how communities have transcended differences and boundaries to advance the interests of all working

people. While many on the left today criticize identity politics for impeding a larger class solidarity, these two books acknowledge the reality of the divisions among working people. Rather than denying these conflicted social relationships, Finn and Jameson believe that only through understanding differences can the working class envision alternatives and forge alliances that can challenge the new world economic order.

*All That Glitters* and *Tracing the Veins* underscore how important the case study remains for understanding how larger events play out in people's lives and how people's actions have influenced the reactions of capital and the state. Communities, regardless of how fleeting their futures may appear, matter to people who believe in belonging to a place. The determination of people to persist in their declining resource-based communities attests to the power of place, the importance of human relationships, and a desire to resist capital's insistence on mobility.

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