

Not on Queen Victoria's Birthday - The Story of the Rio Tinto Mines

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Not on Queen Victoria's Birthday - The Story of the Rio Tinto Mines

By David Avery
Collins, London, 412 p., 1974.
Hard Cover £5.50.

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Many histories of mining companies are either slick promotional pieces written by professionals, or rambling, sentimental narratives concocted by well meaning but incompetent amateurs. *Not on Queen Victoria's Birthday* is a delightful exception to this rule. In this book, the long and complex story of the Rio Tinto mines is presented competently and with artistry. Although the book deals mainly with the eighty-one years between 1873 and 1954, when the British company controlled the mines, this period is brought into perspective by several early chapters describing the rediscovery of the mines in 1556, and their up-and-down history prior to purchase by the British group. An interesting appendix on the archeology of Rio Tinto describes the evidence of much earlier mining and smelting by Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans.

Throughout the book, the author consistently interweaves his story with the political, social and economic fabric of Western Europe. He succeeds in bringing home to the reader that the problems of foreign ownership, environmental impact, labour-management confrontation and punitive taxation - far from being peculiar to our own times - plagued the Rio Tinto operation almost constantly during its history.

A principal theme of the book is the complex relationship between the British expatriates of Rio Tinto and the Spanish community. Having been enjoined by Rio Tinto's Chairman to "tell the full story, warts and all", the author delves deeply into the attempts of the two communities to preserve their identities, the fears and apprehensions which they felt, and the occasional eruptions into violence, almost all of which were due to an almost total lack of mutual understanding.

The book is attractively presented on quality paper, well bound and illustrated by many highly appropriate photographs, drawings and political cartoons. With its 412 pages of rather fine print, it is not something that can be skipped through in an evening. However, to the enthusiast in mining history, *Not on Queen Victoria's Birthday* is a classic of its type, which affords a rewarding reading experience.

Future writers of mining company histories could do well to recalibrate their standards by this book, and geological writers in general might also emulate Mr. Avery's style, as exemplified in his beautiful description of the "devastated" countryside around Rio Tinto:

"For the most part the cliffs are coloured a dusty-pink which changes, with the decline of the strong sun and advent of the evening light, into a rich mulberry-red. Embedded in the rock face and relieving the dominant pink with wedges of deep lavender and yellowy-white, speckled leaf-green and gold, are great outcrops of slate and porphyry. Competing with the hills for eminence are high escarpments of black and purple slag and tall, levelled banks of leached pyrites, silver-grey".

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