

Mining Museums: the Spoils of Exploitation

Gareth Hoskins visits mining museums in Wales, the USA and South Africa, and argues that industrial heritage sites can conceal or even justify continuing inequality and ecological disaster

‘People are who they are, where they are, and what they are because of what’s under the ground’ was an all too convenient sophistry in the academic field of economic geography. It explained the distinction of wealth in the UK by avoiding altogether any reference to the structural inequalities endemic to industrial capitalism. You might think this kind of geological determinism would be challenged by former mining towns familiar with the social and ecological ruin wrought by an enterprise that concentrated wealth in the hands of so few. And yet, the industrial heritage initiatives that promise regeneration in these towns perversely promote mining as ultimately ennobling and environmentally benign.

When the memories of mining rather than mineral resources become the logic for organising a local economy, we need to ensure that the industrial past on display avoids

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justifying inequality. The designation of mining sites as national heritage, whether mining for copper in Chile, for coal in south Wales, gold in California or diamonds in South Africa, is often celebrated as a validation of working-class struggle and recognition of hardship. Wales is among many nations that link a former era of mining-related economic boom to its collective character and national psyche. Such heritage can, without question, foster social cohesion and community belonging. But there is something else more worrying at play especially when the world's mining memories become officially designated and made visit-able.

In her book *The Lowell Experiment* (2006) anthropologist Cathy Stanton writes about how the former textile town in Massachusetts was transformed into a monument to the Industrial Revolution. She cautions that ‘...far from contributing to any collective questioning of post industrial realities, even the most radical historical interpretations at the park serve[d] to support the underlying logic of economic restructuring in subtle but powerful ways’.

Mining heritage shares this problem in that it tends to craft a seductive chronicle of decline-and-renewal sourced in the redemptive embrace of market-based entrepreneurialism. As visitors to these sites we get enrolled into a narrative of continuing progress; as if our very presence as a tourist, teacher or curious resident is part of the place's climb up the ladder towards advanced post-industrial capitalism. And so despite offering the chance of some economic regeneration, what industrial heritage does, more than anything else, is help to secure our consent to a continuing economic programme of massive disparity and despoliation. It renders mining a practice of the past that we have left behind. It obscures the fact that mining continues apace, sometimes elsewhere, sometimes in close proximity to the very museum that commemorates its passing. It obscures the fact that our own relative economic prosperity (as museum-goers and heritage patrons) is absolutely dependent on mining and the costs of that mining being deferred on to those least able to afford it.

The examples that follow illustrate how two key themes of mining heritage – pride for technological achievement and respect for exploited victims – encourage, for opposing reasons, the same commemorative response: i.e. one that conceals continuities of exploitation and works to prevent a rigorous and activist questioning of our own role in a mining-dependent global industrial development.

Wales's presence on UNESCO's world heritage list came with the nomination, and subsequent acceptance in 2000, of thirteen square miles of bleak mountainous countryside home to more than six thousand residents, which then became packaged as ‘The Blaenavon Industrial Landscape’. Its position on the list alongside the Giza pyramids and Great Wall of China was the result of some expert rhetorical manoeuvres and no small amount of local persuasion. When mooted as an early remedy for pit closures, councillors said ‘they didn't want a load of outsiders gawping through their windows’, residents mocked that it would be cheaper to fill the shafts with ten pence pieces, journalists derided the idea that a ‘Scargill-style Disneyland’ could save the Valleys, and baffled ex-miners asked why they would want to pay to go down the pit when they'd been working there for forty years.

The success of Big Pit, opening as a museum (in 1983) just three years after its closure as a colliery, created a momentum that would lead to widespread recognition and numerous awards and prizes. But the superlative award, and the one that frames both the management philosophy and the visitor experience of the sites and trails throughout the Afon Llywd Valley, is UNESCO's world heritage site status.

This came about by positioning Blaenavon as the seat of a global Industrial Revolution, as a humble town that was, in fact, the catalyst for an epochal shift in human history prompting a step change in civilization which moved the world from cottage industry to full-scale mass production. The 1999 nomination document submitted to UNESCO for approval presented the landscape as ‘a memorial to a particular phase of human history’, a place that exhibited ‘the

dynamic forces of the Industrial Revolution ... and the continued technological advances [associated with] the conversion from organic to mineral materials'. The strength of this pitch comes from what historian David Nye refers to as a narrative of second creation; a narrative about the human conquest of pure nature; a story not just about progress but about the certainty of automatic progress. It's a way of apprehending industrial heritage demonstrated wonderfully by Joan Didion's writing on the Hoover Dam (1970):

Big industrial things such as this are presented as evidence of mankind's ingenuity, sometimes with the somber flavor of a plaque to those who died during its construction – to emphasize all the more the price that must/should be paid for progress. Big industrial things like this evoke the muscular morality of citizens taming nature, harnessing its power.

The muscular morality of Blaenavon's Soviet style logo - the man, shovel in hand, standing in an elevated position gazing into the sunset – is a perfect encapsulation of that narrative of second creation. It reassures us of our mastery over nature and cultivates consent to a system by which a narrow elite gains so much from widespread economic crisis and ecological degradation.

If we think of Blaenavon instead as a tipping-point in humanity's journey towards catastrophe then the world heritage site might function as a platform to agitate rather than placate. It could become a place that fosters revolutionary politics hosting union organisers and activists against climate change and globalisation. This alternative way of using our mining memories to challenge the political orthodoxy could make explicit Big Pit's connections to a new generation of open cast coal mining around the Neath Valley at Selar, Nant Helen and Margam and Ffos-y-Fran above Merthyr Tydfil where Celtic Energy and consortiums such as Miller Argent retrieve around a million tonnes of coal per year.

These places are part of Blaenavon's ongoing story. Those messages gleaned from Big Pit, for example, speak to current issues in Wales around the persistence of poverty and the rising rate of industrial accidents and work-related deaths. Can we draw connections between the 19th century industrial community of Blaenavon and the contemporary community of Blaenau Gwent where a sense of hopelessness is so prevalent that one in six of the borough's residents is in receipt of prescriptions for anti-depressants? This is an example, powerful as any, of the legacy of a mining boom where the money is so much more mobile than the labour that generated it.

Mining memories of coal in Wales are as selectively organised as the gold mining memories of California and the diamond mining memories of South Africa. The celebration of each steers our attention away from the ecological and social damage that continues long after that formative period of discovery and initial boom.

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California's historic relationship with gold is mythologised of course through its heritage in a very particular pre-industrial rendition of the lone pioneer panning by a creek. The power of this cultural narrative eclipses the much longer-lived industrial history of hydraulic gold mining that used gelatin explosive and nearly four million pounds of mercury which still remains, as a powerful neurotoxin, contaminating the creeks, and streams, or dissolved into the ground. This is why gold-rush hungry tourists at Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park, an industrial heritage site in the hills above Nevada City actually designated to pay homage to 19th Century hydraulic miners, are forced by the rangers to use a

Pro-hydraulic mining campaign poster in Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park.



trough spiked with imported gold leaf and imported gravel to practice their panning. The creek, just yards away, is far too poisonous.

Malakoff Diggins is a mile-long, six-hundred-foot deep pit carved out of the Sierra Nevada by water cannon. The eroded gravel banks are still there and, set against the backdrop of a pine forest, have now become a picturesque 'noble scar', 'one of the state's most precious scenic resources'. Even softened within a representational framework of nature's recovery, this startling evidence of ruin struggles for public funding from

Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park Collection. California State Archives Sacramento.



Hearst Mining Collection of Views by C. E. Watkins, UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library.



officials in the state capital Sacramento, who champion the region's green credentials while supporting the 1850s gold rush story on show in that city's themed market place Old Sacramento.

Instead of proud examples of technological change, might we think of Malakoff Diggins and The Blaenavon Industrial landscape as sites of environmental conscience? These sites of industrial-related ecological infamy (New York's Love Canal, Bhopal's Union Carbide factory, Brofiscin Quarry near Llantrisant) might be less celebrated but they could help deter us from excessive environmental exploitation in the future. And yet, for all their potential to serve as ecological warnings, these kinds of places are repeatedly repackaged to obscure, disguise and encourage a misrecognition. In the Ukraine, for example, the licensed company Orange Tours offers trips around an extant nuclear facility for \$160 dollars per person. Tour2chernobyl.com presents the results of state-sponsored

irresponsibility with all the seriousness of a fairground ghost train: ‘You will NOT see zombies, three head horses and other monsters. You WILL see something even scarier, evidence of the world largest technogenic catastrophe and face its magnetic emptiness. Freaky and strange feeling that you won’t ever forget.’

The mining memories of diamonds in South Africa reflect a similar steering away of industrial heritage from critical politics. Diamond-mining history percolates out from the city of Kimberley in the Northern Cape along ‘The Diamond Route’, a tourist-wildlife-conservation-cultural heritage network sponsored by De Beers and their company’s ecology division.

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It is the Big Hole, however – a 250 metre hand-dug circular pit – that became the centre of operations for De Beers Consolidated Mines Limited in 1889; that prompted Britain’s colonial extension in to the African interior; that created the wealth, institutions and infrastructures underpinning modern South Africa; that established, through the compound system, an industrial labour force and race-based system of class relations that ultimately developed into the apartheid regime formulated through the Group Areas Act – legislation that obtained Royal Assent in June 1950.

At the very edge of the pit is the Big Hole Experience, a 7.7 million-dollar museum, retail, hotel and conference complex funded by De Beers as a world-class tourism facility promising sustainable heritage jobs for those no longer required in what’s left of the now automated local mining operations. With its diamond display housed in a high security vault, the museum

doubles as public relations campaign for the diamond industry in general and its owners in particular, which is no small surprise given that the museum’s format draws inspiration from a visit by a De Beers team to the World of Coca Cola in Atlanta Georgia. The main display at the Big Hole features a timeline entwining the development of the diamond industry with the development of the nation of South Africa itself.

Just a few miles away from the museum, on the outskirts of town, dozens of illegal miners work by hand with picks and shovels and sieves searching for stones left behind on De Beers – owned ‘floors’ of Kimberlite – the diamond ore excavated years before but held back from processing to maintain prices in the market. In contrast to the story of continuing progress and advancing development celebrated in the Big Hole, it’s clear on these floors that industrialisation is not available to all; that far from linear progress, processes of de-industrialisation, even de-modernisation, are an everyday experience for many.

Prospecting permits are impossible to obtain for those without money or the right kind of connections. Individual mining by hand along patches of low-grade ore is now tolerated except when diggers come across a particularly good section of Kimberlite which is when ‘they [De Beers] come with the bulldozer to fill it with trash and building rubble... sometimes they come with helicopter, horses, take your tools, and when they take your tools it’s like they cut off your hands...’

If people are what they are, where they are, and who they are because of what is under the ground, we need to remember that the social and environmental costs of those mines end up a long way from the people they enrich. We need to use our mining memories then less as feeble regeneration opportunities to lure in visitors with ego-flattering statements about our pivotal role in state, national, or world history.

We need to retool industrial heritage, which means thinking critically about implied advance through and recovery from the industrial era. Retooling industrial heritage means making

Menu for the Humbug Day Fundraiser, North Bloomfield, Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park



Illegal miners on the outskirts of Kimberley.

connections with the histories of mining and the poverties it still creates. Becoming more aware of those narratives of conquest and progress that underpin the presentation of the industrial past will rob them of their power to persuade us that we are all equally part of the chronicle of a post-industrial recovery.