

# THE LIGHTS ON THE TIPPLE ARE GOING OUT

**FIGHTING ECONOMIC RUIN IN A  
CANADIAN COALFIELD COMMUNITY**

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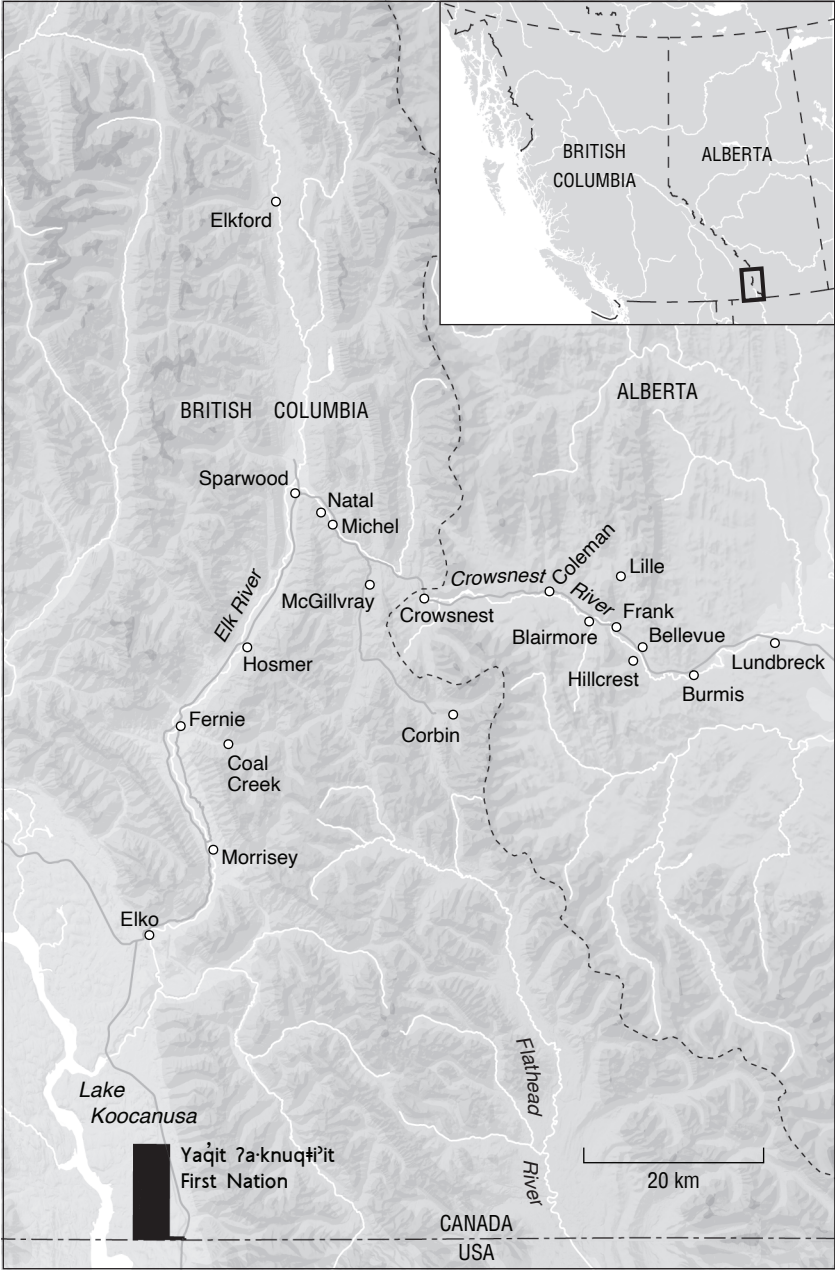
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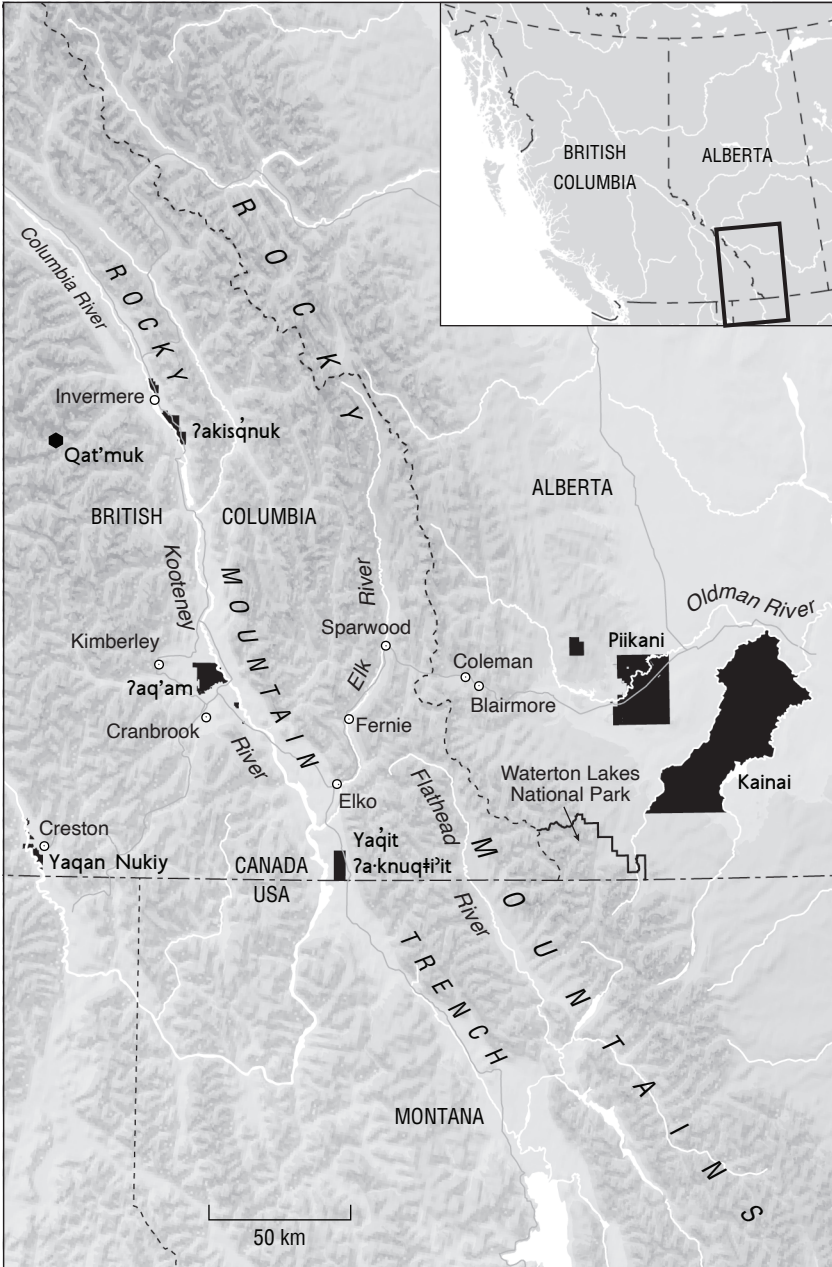
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MAP 0.1 Elk Valley and Crowsnest Pass. | Cartography by Eric Leinberger.



**MAP 0.2** Southeastern British Columbia and Southwestern Alberta. | Cartography by Eric Leinberger.

## Introduction

### *Interpretive and Comparative Perspectives on Deindustrialization in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley, 1945–68*

At the end of 1957, Robert Lilley was one of the leading citizens of Fernie, a small city of about 3,000 residents nestled amid the Rocky Mountains of southeastern British Columbia. The veteran coal miner was the elected secretary-treasurer of Local 7310 of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA)<sup>1</sup> and sat as a Fernie alderman, having first been elected to city council in late 1956 after running a campaign for which Local 7310 had covered all expenses.<sup>2</sup> As an officer of his union local, Lilley worked with a former secretary of the local and Fernie's elected provincial representative, Thomas Uphill, to raise working-class demands in the legislature in Victoria, thereby garnering a small provincial profile. For example, in March 1957, Uphill read a letter from Lilley in the legislature that called on the government to continue compensation benefits after the age of eighteen to children whose fathers had died in the mine.<sup>3</sup> Lilley's stature as a union leader was significantly enhanced in November 1957 when the president of the Calgary-based UMWA district that covered all of western Canada (District 18) appointed Lilley to the district's executive board, representing Sub-District 8, which included the two UMWA locals in the Elk Valley (at Fernie and Michel; see [Map 0.1](#)).<sup>4</sup>

Less than six years later, Lilley was featured on the front page of the *Fernie Free Press* one last time. The shocking picture accompanying the lead story of the 4 July 1963 issue is hard to fathom at first, but after reading the caption it is clearly a body covered by a blanket lying in a railway bed under the axle of a train car. The caption reads “the mangled and broken body of former city alderman Bob Lilley is shown above,





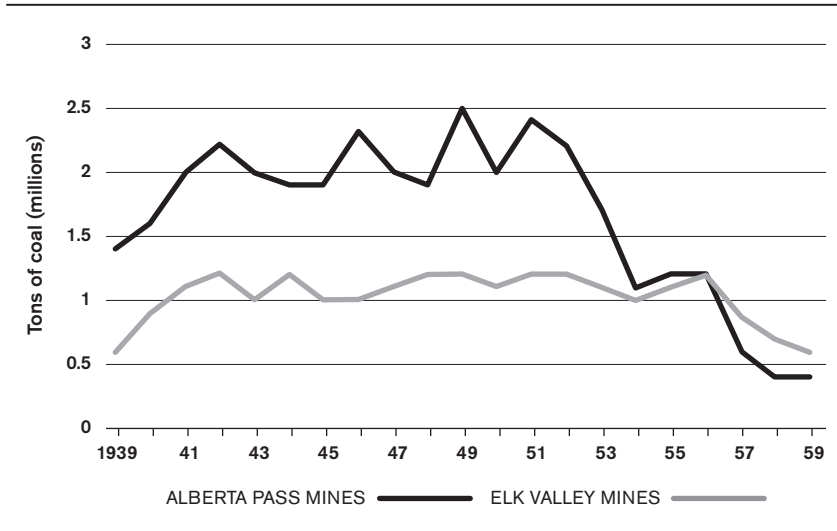
**FIGURE 1.1** Elk River Colliery and incline to No. 9 mine, Coal Creek, British Columbia, 1958. | Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Fernie Museum and Archives, Image 1352 1.

beneath the cars and between the rails of a C.P.R. freight train minutes after he stepped onto the tracks in front of the oncoming locomotive.” His suicide on 28 June 1963 was an event sure to capture the attention of the public: it occurred in the middle of the day near the passenger train station and involved a freight train carrying coal. Robert Lilley clearly had lost the will to live when he strode in front of the locomotive that

day. Nevertheless, as I explain below, in the way that he ended his life, he seemed to be intent on making a final political statement: his suicide symbolized the death of Fernie as a trade union city sustained by the labour of hundreds of unionized underground coal miners. Lilley was among the ex-miners who, abandoned by their former employer and given only meagre assistance by governments and the UMWA, were unable to adjust to a new reality in which coal miners had become “yesterday’s people.”<sup>5</sup>

The mine entrances of Elk River Colliery (see [Figure I.1](#)), where Lilley had worked, were located just six kilometres outside Fernie, up the Coal Creek Valley (see [Map 0.1](#)). The closing of the colliery at the end of January 1958 came as a terrible surprise to everyone in Fernie, with the exception of the top officials of the coal company, Crow’s Nest Pass Coal (CNPC), which had made the momentous decision. Fernie’s citizens perhaps had been lulled to sleep by the fact that, despite the crisis in the western Canadian steam coal industry caused by the decision of the railway companies to rapidly convert their coal-powered steam locomotives to oil burners and to buy new diesel engines, the mines in the Elk Valley had maintained reasonably healthy production levels right through 1956. This was in contrast to the abysmal economic conditions in the Crowsnest Pass in Alberta, where coal production fell by 50 percent between 1952 and 1954 (see [Figure I.2](#)) and where four underground mines were shuttered between 1950 and 1956. Furthermore, the miners in Local 7310 had been disarmed about the possibility of a shutdown by the investments just made by CNPC in developing a new mine at Elk River Colliery – in late October 1957, it was already more than 1,200 feet into the side of the mountain, and a ventilation system and mechanical loaders had been installed.<sup>6</sup>

As secretary-treasurer of Local 7310, Robert Lilley was at the centre of the political struggles over employment rights that ensued after the closure was announced on 15 January 1958. CNPC’s initial plan was to transfer most of Elk River Colliery’s labour force to its operations at Michel, British Columbia, but in order to do so the company would have to lay off the 147 Alberta residents whom it had hired at Michel in recent years. The first story published by the *Fernie Free Press* on the mine

**FIGURE 1.2** Coal production, Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley, 1939–59

Based on data from Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), RG 33/42, vol. 18, file Alberta Bituminous Coal, chart “Alberta Bituminous Coal Production by Colliery and District,” and file British Columbia and Yukon, chart “British Columbia Coal Production by Collieries.”

closure indicated that Lilley was “confident that company seniority would apply in transferring Elk River employees to their new jobs at Michel.” District 18 officials immediately nixed this scheme, however, pointing out that the plan to displace the Alberta residents ran counter to the collective agreement since “Fernie men had no seniority” at Michel Collieries, a position supported a few days later by the Coal Operators’ Association of Western Canada (COAWC).<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, without the authority to remove the 147 Alberta employees, CNPC immediately offered jobs at Michel to relatively few of the Elk River Colliery’s workforce. As a result, overall employment at CNPC’s operations in the Elk Valley declined by 270 people between 1957 and 1958 (995 to 725) and remained at the reduced level in 1959.<sup>8</sup>

The second employment rights case attempted to force CNPC to use seniority when hiring the limited number of Fernie miners that it needed at Michel. This matter quickly went before an independent arbitrator in Calgary. Lilley was one of the four UMWA leaders who argued that both

agreement language and past precedent supported the view that “men with the longest term of service with the company in Elk River Colliery, Fernie, should be given preference of work” when the company was hiring at Michel. However, the arbitrator ruled that CNPC could “hire new men at Michel at its own discretion” since the collective agreement only allowed for the exercise of seniority rights across “mines in the same camp.”<sup>9</sup>

The arbitrator’s decision had a direct impact on Lilley, among the long-serving Fernie miners never hired at Michel Collieries. It also marked the beginning of the unravelling of his leadership role in the UMWA. Within three weeks, Lilley was bounced from the District Executive Board (DEB). The minutes of the next board meeting obliquely recorded the two events that sparked his removal: “President Boyd made an explanation to the Board as to board member Lilley’s activities re the Independent Chairman while in Calgary and also the situation in which he was found in Fernie on our last visit to that district.”<sup>10</sup>

Lilley was not the only Fernie resident to experience a personal crisis in the aftermath of the closure of Elk River Colliery. Another example appeared in the *Fernie Free Press* in early September 1959 after a fifty-four-year-old man was killed after throwing himself in front of a slow-moving Greyhound bus travelling through Fernie. A coroner’s jury ruled the death a suicide after learning that the man was “depressed and reluctant to talk” when seen by a doctor a couple of hours before his death.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Lilley apparently recovered from his crisis and setbacks in the spring of 1958. He carried on as secretary-treasurer of Local 7310, which still had a large membership, albeit mainly of retired and unemployed workers. Furthermore, in an unexpected development, he returned to coal mining in 1960 after the United States Steel Corporation signed a four-year option to buy the unworked coal lands of CNPC for \$10 million, with a further option to buy Michel Collieries for \$7 million. In the summer of 1960, Lilley was one of the handful of miners hired by the company to dig six exploratory tunnels. However, this prospecting work never turned into permanent employment since the United States Steel Corporation terminated its purchase option in late 1962 after running tests on the coking qualities of this coal at its Pennsylvania steel mills.<sup>12</sup>

Lilley maintained his involvement in Local 7310 at least until the final recorded membership meeting in 1961.<sup>13</sup> He also served a second stretch on city council after winning a by-election in May 1959. Unfortunately, his life went into a tailspin in the summer of 1961 after his wife died. Her death led him to resign from city council in the middle of a term and move to Kimberley, where his sister lived. Shortly afterward, the president of District 18 replaced Lilley as Local 7310's secretary-treasurer.<sup>14</sup>

Lilley eventually returned to Fernie during the first part of 1963. At that point, he no longer held any leadership position in the union or municipal government and was bereft of the support of family members in the city. Perhaps abuse of alcohol contributed to his suicide that fateful early summer day; nevertheless, his actions immediately prior to his death required physical coordination, determination, and purpose.

At about 1 p.m. on 28 June 1963, a train consisting of “two diesel units and six cars loaded with coal” was passing through Fernie. The *Fernie Free Press* reported on what transpired: “Gerald Armstrong, diesel engineer of the through freight, told police Lilley was about six railway car lengths away when he was first noticed heading directly into the path of the engine. Armstrong said he blew the whistle, rang the warning bell and applied the brakes, but the man stepped into the way of the oncoming locomotive.” In the same ghoulish spirit as the photo on its front page, the paper added that, “although badly broken and mangled from the pushing and rolling beneath the engines and cars, the body remained untouched by the wheels and no limbs were severed.”<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps Lilley was entirely oblivious of his surroundings when he stepped in front of the train engine, and therefore the fact that it was a coal train was irrelevant to the suicide, as was the fact that it occurred in a central location sure to attract public attention. Alternatively, perhaps there was political meaning in the details of his death. His life's downward spiral had begun with the sudden closure of Elk River Colliery in 1958 and the subsequent decision of the coal company to insist on its right to hire whomever it wanted at its Michel operation, thereby allowing it to sever ties with Fernie coal miners who had, for decade after decade, risked life and limb in the CNPC mines in the Coal Creek Valley. Coal mining and union leadership had been the heart of Lilley's public

life, and that life had been taken from Lilley by corporate fiat. Coal mining had also been the heart of Fernie's existence up to 1958, with the miners' union being of sufficient economic and political power that Fernie was widely seen as a trade union city. Lilley's suicide, if it truly was a public performance, symbolized the death of Fernie as a union city where miners' leaders had significant social stature. Lilley seemingly chose a very public way to die to register his opposition to being "rendered 'invisible'" by the closing of Elk River Colliery.<sup>16</sup>

The coverage in the *Fernie Free Press* of Robert Lilley's death occasioned the following letter to the editor from President Fred Dawson of Local 7310:

I was very much disappointed with the picture you had on the front page of your last week's *Free Press*.

I think Bobby Lilley was entitled to a picture alright, but you could at least have put in a picture of him as a soldier (veteran of six years' service) or as an ex-alderman. Bob was also a good Miners' Union secretary-treasurer over a period of years and he has done a lot of good community work in Fernie.

Many people feel as I do about this. After serving as a good citizen over a number of years the only picture he rated with your paper was a blanket and a pair of box car wheels.

Hoping we do not see any more pictures of this kind, as relatives and friends don't like to see such things.

Joe Weber, who had run the *Fernie Free Press* since 1956 and therefore would have been well aware of Lilley's past leadership roles in the city, answered Dawson's letter by attempting to deflect the criticism: "While we share to some extent Mr. Dawson's views regarding publication of pictures such as appeared in last week's issue on the Lilley death, we did so after all efforts to secure a 'living' picture had failed. City Hall had none, neither had friends who were contacted. Relatives could have supplied a snapshot, but not in time for publication."<sup>17</sup> Of course, if it was disrespectful and in poor taste to publish the picture of Lilley's body, the fact that no alternative picture of Lilley was readily available does not in

any way lessen Weber's culpability. Furthermore, his editorial biases were unwittingly revealed when Weber admitted that his paper did not have on hand a photo of such an important working-class and community leader of the recent past.

The coverage in the *Fernie Free Press* of Lilley's suicide confirmed a marked change in Fernie's political dynamics in the immediate years after the closure of Elk River Colliery in 1958. It is my contention that, if Local 7310 had still been at the height of its powers (with an employed membership of more than 300 and active involvement in local and provincial political affairs), then Editor Weber might well have thought twice about antagonizing such a large mass of engaged readers. Publication of the photo, therefore, was confirmation of the death of Fernie as a trade union city where business elites stepped somewhat gingerly for fear of antagonizing a large, pro-union working class that pursued its interests through a number of local groups and initiatives, not least of which was Local 7310.

#### NOT YOUR EVERYDAY STORY OF MINE CLOSURES AND DEINDUSTRIALIZATION

In their sweeping historical study of the decline of the anthracite (hard coal) mining region of Pennsylvania, Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht stated that "the economic decline of coal-mining communities has been an international phenomenon across the twentieth century."<sup>18</sup> Whether precipitated by a major corporation's decision to switch from a coal-burning technology (as in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley in the 1950s), competition from lower-cost coalfields, competition from alternative fuels such as natural gas, depletion of a particular mine's supply of readily mined coal, or a government's decision to reduce or eliminate subsidies for coal production, the decline of coalfield societies has usually proceeded rapidly, with devastating impacts on miners and their families, local businesses, and the social fabrics of once vibrant localities. Looked at from a broader perspective, closures of coal mines are instances of deindustrialization, understood as the loss of industrial employment and the long-term economic, social, and political conse-

quences of that loss. Deindustrialization has long been a reality, or at least an ever-present worry, of life in primary resource communities.<sup>19</sup> More recently, it has swept through the former industrial heartland of North America as neo-liberal investment and trade policies have resulted in the shift in manufacturing many products, such as clothing and electronics, to the Global South. As a consequence, the eerie pictures of abandoned and crumbling North American factories found in recent books<sup>20</sup> replicate the sense of loss conveyed by images of abandoned surface buildings and equipment at coal mines shut down in the 1930s in Illinois or in the early 1960s in the Crowsnest Pass.<sup>21</sup>

Even the toll of psychological distress and suicide in Fernie after the closure of Elk River Colliery in 1958 is a familiar feature of other stories of deindustrialization. For instance, an early 1990s study of two Yorkshire, England, villages where coal mines had recently closed found that, “with a gradual loss of pride resulting from their inability to find a job, many former miners became isolated from former colleagues and friends ... Such men could not easily relinquish their ‘breadwinner’ status and struggled to cope with the collapse of their authority.”<sup>22</sup> A second study contended that the winding down of coal mining in South Yorkshire transformed “communities characterized by cohesion and collectivity to ones signified by increasing disintegration.”<sup>23</sup> Deindustrialization on a massive scale occurred in Youngstown, Ohio, between 1977 and 1982, when steel mill closures resulted in the loss of 50,000 jobs. The city’s primary community mental health centre “saw a threefold increase in its caseload in the 1980s, with significant increases in depression, child and spouse abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, divorces, and suicide.”<sup>24</sup> In the same vein, Steven High, in his analysis of the emotional impacts of job losses caused by the deindustrialization of manufacturing in North America, noted that “many plant shutdown stories are studded with references to marriage break-up, alcohol abuse, and suicide. Dorothy Fisher’s fifty-nine-year-old husband attempted suicide three times and stopped eating, before dying of a heart attack six weeks after his Detroit plant closed.”<sup>25</sup>

Despite the many points of similarity across multiple instances of deindustrialization, there is a pressing need for new, in-depth case studies



of the phenomenon. At an analytical level, this is because of the complexity of deindustrialization: “Deindustrialization as an ongoing process of capitalism reveals itself in various iterations and elicits disparate responses in different contexts.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, at the level of human interest, every closing of a mine, mill, or factory is deeply meaningful to those who lived through the hard times and struggles and to those with some sort of personal connection to the place and its inhabitants. For the current residents of the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley, and to the much larger diaspora living across western Canada and farther afield, the wave of underground mine closures in the years after the Second World War is of interest because it is such a significant element of many families’ histories and resulted in deep and lasting changes throughout the region. As a researcher, I am similarly invested in the intrinsic features of this case through my immersion in documentary sources and interviews. I cannot help but write about these years of economic and social crisis without feeling a sense of responsibility to the coal miners and their families whose lives were turned upside down by the mine closures and who did their best to carry on and rebuild their lives. Nevertheless, this case study of deindustrialization also has multiple layers of sociological and political significance, and my goal in this book is to demonstrate that significance to readers who might not be able to find the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley on a map let alone have any personal connection to the area.

The focus of my research is captured in the book’s subtitle: *Fighting Economic Ruin in a Canadian Coalfield Community*. I study the actions of groups that tried to keep mining alive in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley, analyzing the successes and failures of different policy proposals, business initiatives, and political campaigns. I also study the actions of local business owners and different levels of government that strove to develop new economic foundations for the region. The “economic ruin” studied in this book is not restricted to what happens when there is no work for people; I also consider the “ruin” that results from low pay and few benefits, unsafe and unhealthy working environments, and the polluting of residential communities with coal dust, smoke, and sludge.

As an example of deindustrialization, what happened in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley between 1945 and 1968 is distinctive and noteworthy

for four main reasons. The first noteworthy element is that, coming out of the Second World War, the worker movement was exceptionally strong, anchored by five UMWA union locals; a number of working-class ethnocultural organizations; a long tradition of success in electing labour representatives to municipal councils, school boards, and even the BC legislature (where Thomas Uphill had been the Fernie District representative since 1920); and a left-internationalist commitment to solidarity with other worker movements that defied the stultifying nationalist ideology of the Cold War. Therefore, this case study allows us to interrogate the efficacy of the decisions made by labour leaders in the face of the crisis, assess the power of a strong worker movement to shape the course of events, and determine how that movement itself was changed as the economic crisis rapidly progressed. I address a number of specific questions. Why were there no contentious, collective protests in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley similar to the underground occupation and subsequent hunger strike waged by coal miners in Decazeville, France, in 1961–62 in response to a plan to end all underground coal mining in the region?<sup>27</sup> Was there a backlash against the new immigrants recruited to work in the region’s mines in the 1950s as production was cut back and as many veteran coal miners left the area in search of more stable employment or retired? As the economic crisis deepened throughout the 1950s and extended into the 1960s, how did the thinking and policy proposals of working-class leaders change? Which elements of the worker movement’s “infrastructure of dissent”<sup>28</sup> attenuated during the crisis, and which elements persisted despite the hard times? Was internal union democracy negatively affected by the crisis and, if so, why? How did the “diverse connections and relations”<sup>29</sup> of the worker movement change between 1945 and 1968, in terms of both the networks internal to the region and the more far-reaching networks that connected Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley miners and their organizations to workers elsewhere? How did the logic of working-class political action change – did the movement become more conservative and parochial during this crisis, an outcome that David Harvey suggests is inevitable whenever mines or factories are threatened by closure?<sup>30</sup>

The second noteworthy dimension of this case is the widespread

support for the Communist Party of Canada (CPC, known as the Labor-Progressive Party [LPP] between 1943 and 1959) in the region. In the early 1930s, the town of Blairmore on the Alberta side of the Crowsnest Pass gained national notoriety because of its election of a pro-communist town council,<sup>31</sup> and Blairmore readily fits the category of a “Little Moscow,” like the towns sprinkled across Western Europe in the interwar years.<sup>32</sup> At the end of the Second World War, the Labor-Progressive Party had more electoral support than any other political party in the region; indeed, this was one of the few locales in Canada where support for the party exceeded that of its rival socialist party, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF).

This study will show that the period of shrinking coal production and mine closures in the region occurred just after the Labor-Progressive Party rapidly started to lose its activist base because of Cold War pressures. Nevertheless, the party continued to play a role in the politics of deindustrialization until 1962. In tracing the fight against mine closures and economic ruin, I consider LPP contributions and contemplate how that fight might have been different if the party had maintained a robust capacity for political activism throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s.

Although the story of communist decline in this coalfield overlaps with and influences the larger story of the struggles over deindustrialization, it is significant in its own right, and I therefore analyze it in a separate chapter. The economic crisis in the steam coal industry aggravated the LPP political crisis, which in turn affected the capacity of the worker movement to respond to the economic crisis in creative and militant ways. This intertwining of crises provides a distinctive cast to the fight against mine closures.

The third noteworthy aspect of this deindustrialization is that it did not end with the total economic ruin of the region (an outcome that many residents and commentators feared in the late 1950s and early 1960s). Indeed, the story that I tell ends in 1968 with the sale of Michel Collieries and the coal-mining rights on surrounding land to the giant American firm Kaiser Steel. That company would invest \$127.5 million in the late 1960s and early 1970s to develop a massive strip mine on a mountain ridge high above the historic mining villages of Natal and Michel after

signing a long-term contract to sell metallurgical coal to Japanese steel companies.<sup>33</sup> This strip mine continues to produce metallurgical coal for the international market today, and it is one of the five strip mines that operated in southeastern British Columbia in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the closure of underground coal mines in the 1950s and early 1960s was followed by a reindustrialization in coal starting in the late 1960s, albeit with a much more capital-intensive process of production.

A twist to the reindustrialization of the region is that, although the only surviving coal company in the Alberta Pass, Coleman Collieries, signed a long-term contract with Japanese steelmakers at about the same time as Kaiser Steel, and developed new underground and strip mines to fulfill that contract, it eventually found itself unable to compete with the massive mountaintop-removal strip mines built just across the continental divide. Hence, Coleman Collieries ceased mining coal in 1980 and stopped processing thermal coal from its refuse (slack) piles in 1983.<sup>35</sup> Between 1983 and the time of writing (early 2023), the Alberta side of the Crowsnest Pass has been frozen in a no-mines/deindustrialized state, whereas the BC side of the region has seen the production of hundreds of millions of tons of coal. Hence, this is an unusual case of deindustrialization because, whereas one part of the original coalfield has endured an economic malaise for decades, the other part has enjoyed a robust revival that has erased memories of the economic depression of the 1950s and early 1960s.

The fourth noteworthy element of this case involves the contrasting responses from the three major governments to the declining coal industry and mine closures: the Alberta government adopted a *laissez-faire*, “let-the-market-decide” approach to the crisis, whereas the federal and BC governments supported the coal industry in different ways for a number of years. This study will detail how each of the three governments approached the mid-twentieth-century coal crisis as well as the end results of their respective approaches. This historical analysis has contemporary relevance since the proper response of governments to economic crises and major business failures is an ongoing matter of policy debate. A key question that I investigate here is why did Alberta’s Social

Credit government refuse to introduce production subsidies or transportation subventions for the Crowsnest Pass coal industry in the 1950s and 1960s? Specifically, was Alvin Finkel correct to assert that Premier Ernest Manning sought to dismantle a worker movement that had been a thorn in the side of the Social Credit government since the late 1930s,<sup>36</sup> or was the Manning government's commitment to free-market orthodoxy so deep that subsidies for a struggling industry were anathema?

#### A CONTEXT FOR INTERPRETATION: RESISTING MINE CLOSURES AND ECONOMIC RUIN IN OTHER COALFIELDS

In this book, I investigate the fight against mine closures and economic ruin in a single coalfield. Although I provide a great deal of historical detail, my research logic is interpretive rather than descriptive; indeed, my goals are to highlight the noteworthy sociological and political dimensions of this historical case and to answer the attendant research questions. I make no attempt to systematically compare this single case to other cases, either to identify common features across the numerous fights against mine closures or to understand the factors that explain the diversity of outcomes of those fights.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, in sorting through what occurred in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley and coming to interpretive conclusions, I have been influenced by a number of studies from around the world of how the residents of coalfield societies grappled with production cuts and mine closures. I concur with historian Stefan Berger that “only comparisons can help us to establish whether there were alternatives to the processes and developments which characterised the history of any one specific industrial region.”<sup>38</sup>

In this section, I highlight five other coalfields that experienced de-industrialization, for the events in each have raised issues and caused me to question and dig deeper into what transpired in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley between 1945 and 1968. Two of the comparative cases parallel the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley in experiencing mine closures in the 1950s and 1960s but then rebounding in the late 1960s and 1970s with new sales of metallurgical coal to Japanese steelmakers. These coalfields are in Alabama and the Australian state of Queensland. In Alabama,

the number of coal miners fell from 22,000 in 1945 to 7,800 in 1960. In the coal towns in the Birmingham District in the 1950s, historian Robert Woodrum asserted, “many residents had to choose between remaining and living in dire poverty or leaving the region altogether. While UMWA members who remained underground enjoyed high wages and benefits, miners who lost jobs were transformed into a coalfield underclass ... By the mid-1950s, thousands of people who were physically able simply gave up and left the region.”<sup>39</sup>

An important aspect of deindustrialization in the Alabama coalfield is that African American miners had a much higher rate of job loss than white miners. Woodrum argued that the UMWA bears considerable responsibility for this development. For one thing, the union “deferred to custom” and allowed companies to hire and promote only whites to operate underground coal-cutting machines while allowing strip mine operators to hire only whites to operate heavy equipment. Indeed, the UMWA in Alabama had a seniority system restricted to job classifications, meaning that long-seniority African American members who had manually mined coal had no rights to move into the new classifications created by the mechanization of production.<sup>40</sup> The racist hiring and laying off practices facilitated by the UMWA in Alabama in the 1950s provoke two lines of inquiry. First, were the exclusions of Indigenous people, Japanese Canadians, and Chinese Canadians from mine employment in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley in the years after the Second World War facilitated by union locals that “deferred to custom” in mine hiring practices instead of standing up for the civil rights of racialized groups subjected to discrimination? Second, to what extent was the typical miner in the 1950s and 1960s operating with a conventional Anglo-Canadian identity rather than a European-cosmopolitan identity that would have facilitated a more progressive and internationalist outlook?

In the Alabama coalfield, the first long-term contract to supply metallurgical coal to Japanese steelmakers was signed by Drummond Coal in the late 1960s,<sup>41</sup> around the same time as Kaiser Steel signed its long-term contract to ship Elk Valley coal to Japan. A parallel process of reindustrialization took place in the Queensland coalfield in Australia in the mid-to late 1960s, spearheaded by a joint venture between the American firm

Utah Construction and the Japanese corporation Mitsubishi that developed a number of open-pit mines along with a new port facility and rail transport system.<sup>42</sup>

New open-pit mines in Queensland ended more than a decade of de-industrialization. At its peak in 1954, employment in the underground coal industry in Queensland was 3,700; by 1967, however, it had decreased to 1,500.<sup>43</sup> The historical underground coal industry in Queensland paralleled that in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley in the important role of communists in union leadership. Yet, unlike in the Crowsnest Pass region, communists continued to play an important role in the Queensland Collieries Employees Union into the 1960s and led an ambitious political program against underground mine closures that included “stay-down” occupations of mines slated for closure and the organization of labour-community coalitions to fight deindustrialization.<sup>44</sup> This divergence forces me to reassess the staying power of the worker and socialist movements as the coal crisis roiled the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley.

The third comparison is the Panther Valley, Pennsylvania, located at the northern edge of Appalachia. During the first half of the twentieth century, the built environment of the Panther Valley somewhat resembled that of the Crowsnest Pass: a series of mining villages and towns strung out close to one another along the valley floor, each located near a mine opening or coal breaker.<sup>45</sup> The fight against mine closures and economic ruin was drawn out since the decline in anthracite production in Pennsylvania began just after the First World War and continued for the entire century; by 1990, production was a mere 3.4 percent of that in 1917.<sup>46</sup>

During the successive decades of deepening coal deindustrialization, many schemes were hatched to build alternative economic foundations. Therefore, this case is particularly useful as a comparison when considering the parallel schemes for economic renewal in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley in the 1950s and 1960s. Small-business owners and chambers of commerce headed the efforts to reindustrialize the Panther Valley, although the working class was sometimes mobilized in support. Nevertheless, the low pay, lack of union representation, and insecurity of the jobs at newly recruited firms became key elements of a counternarrative among Panther Valley workers “that reveals the resentment that

built up over decades of industrial development efforts that did little to stop economic decline.”<sup>47</sup> In their daily lives, workers experienced how the sacrifice of worker and community rights was part of the bargain in recruiting new industries.

The struggle against mine closures came to a head in the Panther Valley in 1954 when Lehigh Coal and Navigation (LCN) shut down all its mines and breakers to put pressure on the UMWA and its six union locals in the valley to agree to a rationalization plan that aimed to eliminate 1,000 jobs. Tamaqua Local 1571 rejected the LCN plan, however, and called for equal sharing of the available work, a system that had been practised in the 1930s. After the Tamaqua local set up picket lines to prevent a return to work on the company’s terms, Lehigh Coal and Navigation closed all of its mining operations, although it later leased some of its coal facilities to two new companies that operated for the balance of the 1950s. One of the new companies was even bankrolled by the UMWA to the sum of \$5 million, although it too closed in 1960 because the markets for anthracite continued to shrink.<sup>48</sup> These events inspired three questions when thinking about my research. First, why did nothing like the Tamaqua local’s militancy emerge in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley in the 1950s? Second, how did political differences among UMWA locals become manifest, and did these differences ever adversely affect the fight against mine closures? Third, did the UMWA’s Washington leaders offer assistance to mining families in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley that approached the \$5 million investment made by the union in the Panther Valley?

The final two cases are European, the first being the Aubin coal basin in south-central France, usually referred to by the name of its major town, Decazeville. The three comparative cases already introduced had privately owned coal mines (although prior to 1963 there were a few state-owned mines in Queensland<sup>49</sup>). In comparison, the mines in Decazeville had been nationalized immediately after the Second World War,<sup>50</sup> and this meant that the fight against mine closures and economic ruin focused on the central government and state bureaucrats to a much greater extent than in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley, where three privately owned coal companies remained in business throughout the



years of decline in the 1950s. This contrast raises two questions. Did nationalization of the mines change the economic and political reasoning behind the decisions to close them? Were the workers in the state-owned mines in Decazeville accorded greater rights and better treatment than the workers in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley and, if so, why?

Throughout the 1950s, capital was invested in new heavy machinery for the open-pit mines in Decazeville, but the underground mines were not modernized, thus causing coal from those mines to become increasingly uncompetitive. During these years, the Socialist Party parliamentary deputy from Decazeville, Paul Ramadier, fought for the establishment of a new steel plant in the area but also encouraged unemployed workers to migrate to other parts of France.<sup>51</sup> Tellingly, he clashed with the French Communist Party over its proposal to modernize an early-twentieth-century fertilizer factory because it was a major consumer of locally produced coke. “We are dying at Decazeville,” argued Ramadier, “because we want to cling with a death grip to old machines and old methods.”<sup>52</sup> Understanding this policy conflict in Decazeville will help us to appreciate the logic behind how different groups thought the crisis in the coal industry in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley could be overcome.

In 1960, the state-owned coal company, Les Charbonnages de France, proposed closing all underground coal mines in Decazeville while preserving some open-pit production capacity. This plan was realized by 1966, at which time a labour force of over 2,500 had been reduced to fewer than 500.<sup>53</sup> This program of closures occasioned highly contentious protests by workers and widespread regional political support, as seen in the mass resignation of 307 mayors, road blockades by peasant farmers, and a general strike on 26 January 1962. Such opposition won significant concessions from the government, including the extension of partial pension benefits to miners aged fifty to fifty-five who lost their jobs.<sup>54</sup> The militancy of workers and their allies in Decazeville, like the militancy of the UMWA’s Tamaqua local in the Panther Valley and of the Queensland Collieries Employees Union, raises the question of why such militancy never emerged in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley. Follow-up counterfactual questions are: Would worker militancy along the lines of an underground occupation of a mine have gained similar

levels of sympathy and active support in western Canada as observed in south-central France in 1962? Would contentious protest actions have had any hope of changing the course of events in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley?

The final comparison is the Rhondda in Wales, encompassing the large coalfield society that populated the side-by-side mountain valleys, Rhondda Fawr (large) and Rhondda Fach (small).<sup>55</sup> The distance from the point where the two valleys intersect, and the nearby port city of Cardiff, is only twenty-five kilometres. The Rhondda therefore had a geographic advantage in efforts to attract and keep replacement industries as mines closed – a distinctive contrast to the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley, where economic recruitment efforts were limited by geographic isolation.

The Rhondda was a densely populated coalfield, particularly during and just after the First World War because of the wartime expansion of production for the British navy. In 1921, the population of the two valleys was an extraordinary 163,000. As in the Panther Valley, the Rhondda experienced a prolonged, although irregular, trajectory of coal deindustrialization from 1920 to the end of the twentieth century.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the Rhondda is another coalfield society in which the communist movement was very strong during the interwar years<sup>57</sup> and therefore serves as an instructive contrast when mapping the strength of the communist movement in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley prior to the onset of the Cold War.

Both because the Rhondda has been thoroughly studied by social scientists and because it has inspired a rich body of fiction that brings to light often hidden dimensions of life in coalfield societies, it has been especially influential in guiding my research. Indeed, two important themes owe their elaboration to work connected to the Rhondda coalfield. The first theme involves gender, a subject often taken for granted and therefore hidden from view in the documentary record of the 1950s and 1960s. In a comparison of South Wales with two other European regions with radical twentieth-century histories, Emilia in Italy and Provence in France, Philip Cooke argued, “the most notable feature shared in common by the three supposedly radical regions which I have examined is

the ubiquity of patriarchy and the generally reactionary character of gender relations within them.”<sup>58</sup> Stefan Berger arrived at a similar understanding when comparing the South Wales and Ruhr coalfield societies, noting that women were rarely present in the public sphere in either region, including in recreation and associational life. “Working-class cultures in the Ruhr and South Wales were heavily male dominated,” concluded Berger, “and the ideology of ‘separate spheres’ was strongly entrenched in both areas.”<sup>59</sup>

Working-class women’s disadvantaged status in the Rhondda and other mining valleys in South Wales was indicated by a “death rate among women [that] lay far above that for men (as a result of frequent births, attempted abortions, or simply never getting a rest from the heavy burdens of housekeeping).”<sup>60</sup> This is an extraordinary statistic given the high fatality rate of underground miners. Rhys Davies grew up in the Rhondda and captured the drudgery, stress, relentlessness, and anonymity of the labour of a miner’s wife in the short story “Nightgown.”<sup>61</sup> The protagonist in the story, a fittingly nameless wife, works from dawn until well into the evening to look after the needs of her husband, Walt, and five sons, all underground coal miners. She literally dies from overwork and is able to gain a measure of dignity and individuality only in death – she is buried in a silk nightgown that she had managed to pay for by surreptitiously squeezing a few coins out of each week’s household budget over the course of a year.

Women in the Rhondda might also be faced with physical violence by men, as represented in two other works of fiction. The novel *Flame and Slag*, set between the late 1950s and 1967, alludes to the routine character of violence against women in this coalfield society.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, a second short story by Rhys Davies depicts the sexual assault of a wife by her miner husband. The intensity of the violence in this story is shocking, although like most violence against women in coalfield societies it was totally hidden from public view.<sup>63</sup>

These reflections on women’s subordination in the Rhondda inspire a number of questions about gender relations in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley. How did women’s experiences change during the era of

underground mine closures? As more married women joined the labour force in the 1960s, was there any backlash? What is known about the extent of the violence against women during these years? To what extent were women relegated to the margins of the worker movement? Is this historical movement a flawed exemplar for worker movements of the present and future because it was so male dominated?

The second theme inspired by my reading on the Rhondda is the connection between a cosmopolitan working-class culture and the left-internationalist politics of a worker movement. A newspaper story on the Rhondda in 1897, after a period of rapid expansion of coal production and employment, opined that “we are very much of the belief that every nation under the sun ... has its representatives in one of the Rhonddas. If there is any virtue in a mixture of blood, the future Rhonddaite will, verily, be a fine specimen of humanity, perfectly cosmopolitan in his composition and world wide in his aspirations.”<sup>64</sup> More than a century later, Stefan Berger argued that a cosmopolitan working-class culture emerged in South Wales, where “a comparatively unproblematic integration of ‘foreigners’ took place.”<sup>65</sup> However, another important part of social life in the Rhondda was a pre-existing Welsh culture and a politicized Welsh identity. Therefore, the cosmopolitan working-class culture of the Rhondda was articulated with a Welsh culture of struggle and celebration that stretched many centuries into the pre-industrial past.

According to Stephen Knight, Rhys Davies believed “that the best of the modern Welsh political resistance ... in some way goes back to a native Welsh tradition that has been expressed in poetry and music, but has also, crucially, been resistant to the invaders of this anciently self-conscious region.”<sup>66</sup> This implies that “modern strikers are linked back to the Welsh who resisted English military invasions, rather than connecting their attitudes with those of other workers of the modern world.”<sup>67</sup>

The partial Welshness of the Rhondda was an inescapable part of daily life, given the widespread use of the Welsh language, the popularity of traditional Welsh cultural forms, and the agitation of the Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, beginning in 1925. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams grew up in Wales in the 1920s and 1930s. He argued

that native Welsh traditions were recurrently invoked in the consciousness of the residents of coalfield societies in South Wales by the distinctive geography of the valleys. Although coal mining created an “almost invariably dark, smoke-ridden, huddled” atmosphere in which residents lived on the valley floors, they had merely to look up to see a “profoundly different yet immediately accessible landscape of open hills and the sky above them.” Those “open hills” frequently revealed grazing sheep. This pastoral life, according to Williams, “is a shape which manifests not only a consciousness of history but [also] a consciousness of alternatives, and then, in a modern form, a consciousness of aspirations and possibilities.”<sup>68</sup>

To the extent that Davies and Williams are correct, the worker movement in the Rhondda had nationalist roots that made it different from the worker movement in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley, where a cosmopolitan working-class society had to find its way in a settler-colonial context that misrepresented or ignored Indigenous history. Indeed, by the time that settlers flooded into the region, first to build a new branch line for the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in 1897–98 and then to work in the booming coal-mining industry that followed, the Indigenous inhabitants had been relegated to reserves (shown in relationship to the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley on [Map 0.2](#)), legally circumscribed by the Indian Act of 1876, and subjected to intrusive, demeaning, and sometimes abusive treatment by many government officials and Christian missionaries. The colonial subordination of the Ktunaxa in southeastern British Columbia and two Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) nations, the Piikani and Kainai, in southwestern Alberta persisted with little relief well into the twentieth century and explains why Indigenous peoples are largely absent from the events analyzed in this book. However, recent rulings by Canadian courts and determined political struggles by Indigenous groups and their allies have advanced a decolonizing process that is a vital element of Canadian politics in the twenty-first century; this includes initiatives in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley to envision and build sustainable economic alternatives to a metallurgical coal industry whose lifespan will be truncated by innovations in steelmaking stimulated by the climate emergency. I further sketch the

colonial context of this history in the next section. I return to present-day decolonization initiatives in the concluding chapter.

This brings us to the final set of research questions, developed from contrasting the anti-imperialist nationalism that coexisted with the development of a coalfield society in South Wales to the oppressive settler colonialism that framed the coalfield society created in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley. Was left internationalism as strong a political current in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley as in the Rhondda? To what extent did the left-internationalist tendencies in each worker movement grow out of a cosmopolitanism that formed by necessity because of diverse streams of labour recruitment into the coal mines? How was left politics in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley ultimately different from that in the Rhondda on account of the nationalist cultural elements and a common sense of national injustice found in the Rhondda versus settlers' obliviousness of the rich Indigenous history of the Canadian region?

#### KTUNAXA, PIIKANI, AND KAINAI

Map 0.2 locates the four reserves of the Ktunaxa in southeastern British Columbia and the reserves of the Kainai and Piikani in southwestern Alberta in relation to the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley. David Thompson's journal entries from the early 1800s indicate that Ktunaxa regularly crossed the continental divide to hunt bison on the prairies, and Piikani were frequently encountered as far west as the Rocky Mountain Trench that separates the more westerly Purcell Mountains from the Rockies; hence, the traditional territories of both the Ktunaxa and Niitsitapi include the Crowsnest Pass and adjoining Elk Valley, one of the easier routes through the mountains.<sup>69</sup> The Ktunaxa never signed a treaty with Canadian authorities, explicitly refused to cede their traditional territory, and were coerced into moving onto the three reserves located in the Rocky Mountain Trench in the late 1880s under military threat by the Royal North West Mounted Police, D Division, headed by Sam Steele.<sup>70</sup> Kainai and Piikani leaders were among the signatories to Treaty 7 in 1877; based upon the testimony of Niitsitapi elders in the twentieth century, those leaders understood it to be a peace treaty rather

than capitulation to the Canadian state.<sup>71</sup> In 1996, Walter Hildebrandt concluded that,

by accommodating the newcomers, the Aboriginal people hoped to work out an arrangement to share the land so that both sides could benefit from living side by side. They could not have known that the newcomers expected more than a commitment to share the land, that in fact they wanted to take what they could, even if it meant disregarding the treaties.<sup>72</sup>

Hence, despite signing Treaty 7, the Kainai and Piikani, like the Ktunaxa, did not agree to being left out of decisions on future uses of their ancestral territories, but this is exactly what happened during development of the coal-mining industry in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley. Their “right to benefit from their land[s] and decide how their lands should be used or not used” is enduring.<sup>73</sup>

Traditionally, the Ktunaxa, Piikani, and Kainai lived in kin-ordered societies involving subsistence production for use.<sup>74</sup> Over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their lives were progressively disrupted as first mercantile capitalists and then industrial capitalists targeted the natural resources in their territories as sources of wealth, and the colonial settlement of the continent gained irresistible momentum. Beginning with smallpox epidemics in the latter half of the 1700s, recurring outbreaks of deadly infectious diseases resulted in distressing episodes of high mortality. Furthermore, securing the main sources of subsistence – bison on the prairies, fish and game in the mountains – became more difficult after the mid-1800s, culminating in the virtual disappearance of the bison in 1879 and the deaths by starvation of many Niitsitapi over the next few years.<sup>75</sup> In addition, after American merchants opened trading posts in southwestern Alberta, the alcohol that they bartered for bison hides profoundly disrupted the social cohesion of the Niitsitapi. “The early 1870s were years of alcohol, fear and bloodshed,” noted Hugh Dempsey in his biography of Kainai Chief Red Crow.<sup>76</sup> On the other side of the Rockies, the Ktunaxa had to contend with a wave of 400 fortune seekers in 1864

after the discovery of gold in the Wild Horse River near present-day Cranbrook. “Ktunaxa people remember what happened when the first settlers came and what came after,” Sean MacPherson wrote in his recent master’s thesis. “They remember a people hungry for gold and land who fought, stole, burned homes and in some cases, murdered Ktunaxa people.”<sup>77</sup> Matters came to a head in 1887 when twenty-five armed Ktunaxa led by Chief Isadore freed a Ktunaxa man from jail because they believed that he had been unjustly arrested for the murder of a settler. This precipitated intervention by the Royal North West Mounted Police, which in turn led to the Ktunaxa’s pressured move to reserves.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, at the end of the nineteenth century, the Ktunaxa “were left with modest tracts of poor land that were insufficient to sustain the horses and cattle they had owned in 1884,”<sup>79</sup> whereas most of the land and resources in their traditional territory was controlled by the government, corporations, or new settlers. The same catastrophe had befallen the Piikani and Kainai.

As historian John Lutz has noted, prior to the influx of settler-colonists into British Columbia that followed completion of the first transcontinental railway in 1885, it was Indigenous labour “that allowed the rapid creation of an economic base, from the fur trade, to coal mining, sawmilling, and salmon canning.” Thereafter, however, Indigenous people were “washed out of the capitalist economy”; indeed, “as the supply of white labour grew, ‘white preference’ pushed Aboriginal People out of the skilled and semi-skilled jobs, and they were increasingly confined by racialized European beliefs, which held that ‘Indians’ were barely suitable for menial work.”<sup>80</sup> This racist logic of “white preference” ruled out Ktunaxa, Piikani, and Kainai from consideration for permanent jobs in the new coal mines in the Elk Valley and Crowsnest Pass at the turn of the century. Furthermore, even the two reserves on [Map 0.2](#) closest to the coal seams in the Crowsnest Pass region are sufficiently distant that Piikani or Yaqit ?a·knuqti’it men could not be mobilized readily in the case of a temporary labour shortage at the mines.

During the decades that followed the devastating changes at the end of the nineteenth century, the Ktunaxa, Piikani, and Kainai struggled to



preserve their cultures while developing what Lutz calls a “moditional” economy that combined available seasonal wage labour, business ventures such as cattle ranching and freighting, subsistence hunting and gathering, and government support.<sup>81</sup> The moditional economy of the Kainai in the late 1800s and early 1900s included a number of successful business ventures, as documented by historian Keith Regular.<sup>82</sup> However, bad faith by government officials hindered Kainai economic progress, and this was recognized in 2019 and 2021 when the Kainai secured two \$150 million settlements for government mismanagement of their cattle and failure to supply the cattle promised in Treaty 7.<sup>83</sup>

Moving ahead to the middle of the twentieth century, a study of the Kootenay Indian Agency found that only thirty-three Ktunaxa held conventional full-time employment as farm operators, farm workers, loggers, or sawmill workers. Rather, most survived in a moditional economy that included small-scale agriculture, subsistence hunting and fishing (“game is particularly plentiful and easily available to Indians here, and they rely upon it for food far more than do Indians in most other agencies”), transfer payments from different levels of the Canadian state as well as Ktunaxa band councils, winter employment on reserve land harvesting Christmas trees or logging, handicraft production for commercial sale, and seasonal migration of entire families to the United States to harvest fruit. Harvesting fruit was “almost the sole source of employment and cash income” for most Ktunaxa. Furthermore, the band councils raised money by leasing reserve land to neighbouring agriculturalists for grazing.<sup>84</sup>

The ingenuity, adaptability, and diverse skills required to make this moditional economy function are admirable. The authors of the study emphasized the negative, however, stating that “unemployment, or underemployment, is proportionately more prevalent in Kootenay than in any other agency.” They blamed Ktunaxa work habits and unwillingness to travel for work for this situation<sup>85</sup> instead of highlighting the significant constraints, including poor reserve land and persistent racist stereotyping, that blocked Ktunaxa from getting ahead in white-dominated markets (e.g., the labour market for coal workers in Elk Valley) and be full participants in white-dominated social settings. Ktunaxa elders inter-

viewed by Sean MacPherson remembered the everyday racism that they experienced in Cranbrook in the mid-twentieth century. One recalled that the only place that her family could get served a meal was at a Chinese restaurant – and then only behind a curtain at the back of the establishment.<sup>86</sup> In sum, during the period 1945–68 investigated in this book, there were still impermeable colonial barriers to Ktunaxa, Piikani, and Kainai participation in the coal industry in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley, either as wage labourers or as First Nations with abiding interests in the future of their traditional territories.

#### CHAPTER PREVIEWS

After the Second World War, the coal industry in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley boomed for a few years, with production cresting in 1949. [Chapter 1](#) sets the stage for the story of mine closures that begins in the early 1950s; it sketches changes in the coal industry between 1945 and 1949 and the push of workers and their organizations for economic advancement and a louder political voice.

The first wave of the crisis caused by the CPR decision to phase out coal-powered steam engines for locomotion hit in 1953 and 1954; in just two years, production at the Alberta coal mines in the Crowsnest Pass fell by 50 percent. [Chapter 2](#) first describes the contours of life in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley in the early 1950s and how the coal companies restructured their operations in anticipation of declining orders for railway steam coal. It then investigates how the operators, different levels of government, UMWA locals, and District 18 responded to the crisis in 1953–54. The central question addressed is why was the workers' fight against this wave of production cutbacks and mine closures not more energetic and militant?

The second wave of the crisis was more brutal than the first, and there was a widespread fear that the once vibrant communities in the region would become ghost towns. [Chapter 3](#), covering events between 1957 and 1962, documents the economic devastation caused by the end of CPR purchases of steam coal and analyzes the logic and efficacy of the responses of various groups. It focuses on how the worker movement,

weakened and divided, lost its sense of political mission and on how local business and political elites mobilized growth coalitions to see whether new industries and public institutions could be established to replace some of the lost economic activity.

By 1962, the deindustrialization crisis that had been ongoing for about a decade had resulted in a massive loss of jobs, economic output, and population in the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley. That year marked the end of the road for the Communist Party of Canada as a significant force in the region's political life after the two local labour/political leaders most closely associated with the party died: former MLA Thomas Uphill (a party sympathizer) and Michel Local 7292 secretary-treasurer Sam English (an election candidate in 1953). The bulk of [Chapter 4](#) analyzes the three stages of the ruin of the party between 1946 and 1962 and how it was intertwined with struggles over deindustrialization.

[Chapter 5](#) examines how various initiatives to rebuild the economic base of the region and avoid economic ruin panned out between 1963 and 1968. It concentrates on the most successful of these initiatives: a Phillips Cables factory just west of Coleman that began manufacturing wire and cable in 1966 and the push of Coleman Collieries and CNPC to develop new mines and lower production costs in order to convince their Japanese customers to commit to long-term contracts. The chapter analyzes the unequal distribution of harms and benefits resulting from expanding economic activity, concentrating on the workplace. One consequence of pell-mell growth in the mining industry was the coal dust explosion in the brand new Balmer North mine at Michel Collieries on 3 April 1967 that killed fifteen miners and seriously injured ten others.

The first part of [Chapter 6](#) continues the story of the disparities in the costs of economic growth between 1963 and 1968, examining how the drive to increase the production of metallurgical coal created significant environmental hazards, particularly for people living close to coal production facilities. The problems of pollution were particularly dire in Natal and Michel because CNPC prioritized business expansion and diversification ahead of environmental stewardship and human well-being. Faced with an intolerable situation, the residents agreed to an urban renewal plan that promised to relocate everyone to Sparwood. A delay in

implementing this plan and increased pollution, however, caused great suffering and anxiety. By 1967, a community environmental justice movement had taken shape and managed to reinstate the plan for a move to Sparwood, although the delay plus a renegeing on promises by the BC government meant that half of the residents of Natal and Michel ended up moving elsewhere. The second part of [Chapter 6](#) turns to political dimensions of the fight against economic ruin. It identifies political limitations in the Fernie Chamber of Commerce's efforts to promote economic growth and how workplace and community struggles centred on the costs of growth contributed to provincial NDP electoral wins on either side of the provincial boundary in 1966.

This case study of deindustrialization, covering a span of just over two decades in the middle of the twentieth century, is guided by the numerous sociological and political questions posed earlier in this introduction. I return to these questions in the conclusion, organizing my discussion under three headings: "The Worker Movement," "The State," and "Left Politics." I conclude the study by collating the lessons from this fight against mine closures and economic ruin with lessons from other struggles against deindustrialization and the inspiring campaign by the Haida Nation in recent decades to assert Aboriginal title to and significant control over its traditional territory on the Haida Gwaii archipelago. The Haida example could well become a template for efforts to build sustainable, rural, regional economies throughout Canada since First Nations such as the Ktunaxa, Piikani, and Kainai can be expected to likewise assert Aboriginal title and strive to fully participate in decisions on the futures of their traditional territories. Building reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settlers in twenty-first-century Canada will entail complex and contentious decisions on the use of natural resources and the place of corporate capitalist resource companies in economies designed for long-term sustainability.

In a curious twist, the lessons from the fight against mine closures and economic ruin detailed in this book are likely to be relevant to the immediate future of the Crowsnest Pass and Elk Valley since another round of deindustrialization has appeared on the horizon. One source of the looming crisis will be the adoption of technologies such as self-driving

trucks that will significantly reduce the number of jobs at the strip mines on mountain ridges. More importantly, the climate crisis and the drive to lower the emission of carbon dioxide from the manufacture of steel have inspired technological innovations that seem to be certain to render obsolete the traditional coal-dependent, integrated blast furnace/basic oxygen furnace method of producing steel from iron ore.<sup>87</sup> In just a few years, some steel plants, such as ArcelorMittal Dofasco in Hamilton, Ontario, will transition from coal and coke to natural gas and electricity as feedstocks.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, over the next two to three decades, it is anticipated that many steel plants will adopt a nearly emission-free process of production: iron ore will be directly reduced using green hydrogen (manufactured using renewable energy to electrolyze water), and electric arc furnaces will be powered by green electricity. As decarbonized technologies for steelmaking spread, the demand for metallurgical coal will fade, and coal mines will close.<sup>89</sup>

“The lights on the tippie are going out” was the memorable warning issued by Alberta Cabinet Minister Gordon Taylor in 1960.<sup>90</sup> Tipples – the above-ground, multistorey structures where coal is sorted, cleaned, and loaded onto railway cars – are the visually striking, noisy, and dust-producing markers of an operating mine. A dark and quiet tippie is a sign of a mine in trouble. In 1960, Taylor, like his Social Credit colleagues in the government of Premier Ernest Manning, blamed the federal government for not doing more “to assure a larger market in Canada for Canadian coal” and thereby keeping the lights lit on at least a few tipples. This book shows that saving a coalfield society from economic ruin in the 1960s required a much more innovative mix of policies than that envisioned by a Manning government interested more in scoring political points than in nurturing regional economic opportunities. Even more inventive policies will be needed in the twenty-first century as the decarbonization of steel production in Asia shrinks the demand, little by little, for coal from the Elk Valley, and efforts to create a new, sustainable, regional economy must engage with the Ktunaxa, Piikani, and Kainai while charting a path of decolonization.

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