

Victorian mining disasters: Resources

***The Blantyre Explosion*, by Ewan MacColl**

By Clyde's bonny banks as I sadly did wander,
Among the pit-heaps as evening drew nigh.
I spied a fair maiden all dressed in deep mourning,
A weeping and wailing with many a sigh.

I stepped up beside her and thus I addressed her:
"Pray tell me, fair maid of your troubles and pain."
Sobbing and sighing at last she did answer:
"Johnny Murphy, kind sir, was my true lover's name."

"Twenty one years of age, full of youth and good looking,
To work down the mines from High Blantyre he came.
The wedding was fixed, all the guests were invited;
That calm summer evening young Johnny was slain.

"The explosion was heard, all the women and children,
With pale, anxious faces they haste to the mine.
When the truth was made known, the hills rang with their moaning;
Three hundred and ten young miners were slain.

"Now husbands and wives and sweethearts and brothers
That Blantyre explosion they'll never forget;
And all you young miners that hear my sad story,
Shed a tear for the victims who're laid to their rest."

For the tune see <http://www.mysongbook.de/msb/songs/b/blantyre.html>

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Primary sources for the 1877 Blantyre explosion

The Story of the Blantyre Explosion

1 Account by Rev. S. Wright, the Blantyre parish priest

The annals of our parish would certainly not be complete without some allusion to that catastrophe which so recently brought it out of its obscurity into a sad prominence before the whole world.

We mean the Pit Explosion which took place on the morning of the 22nd October 1877.

By it, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye," 218, if not more, men and boys were killed, leaving behind them, to the mercy of God and man, 106 widows, 300 fatherless children, and about 50 other relatives, such as aged parents, who were more or less dependent upon the dead.

What a gloomy morning that October Monday was.... We were dressing at the time. The window of our room looked over against the pits. A sudden flash darted up from the most distant shaft, accompanied by debris and a report not very loud; then arose from the shaft nearest to us a dense volume of smoke, "the blackness of darkness," which spread itself, a terrible funeral pall, over the surrounding plain.

We were soon at the scene of the disaster, whither hundreds of eager and terrified creatures were hurrying, and there for hours we remained, a stricken shepherd amongst a stricken flock.

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2 Report by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Mines

The appearances of the explosion, on the surface, were a blast, accompanied by flame and steam up No. 3 pit, which lasted from one to four minutes; a rush of smoke out of the upcast shaft, and a slight rush of air out of No. 2 pit. Nothing appears to have been observed at the top of No. 1 pit, but it was felt slightly in the workings of that pit and the miners at once ascended.

.... The explosion was felt at a considerable distance, and the smoke which hung around the pits for some minutes was seen by miners and managers in the neighbourhood who at once hastened to the place.

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3 Report in Blantyre local newspaper, 27th October, 1877

Awful Calamity at Blantyre

On Monday morning last by an explosion at Dixon's Collieries, High Blantyre, there occurred a calamity, the appalling nature of which has awakened the sympathies and feelings of not only the locality but the entire nation. Of nearly two hundred and forty men and boys who descended the pit on the morning in question scarce a soul remains to tell the tale, the dreaded fire-damp and no less feared choke-damp having done the work betwixt them.

An eye-witness says the report of the explosion was like the bursting of a boiler, or a salvo of artillery, succeeded by a rumbling noise like that of distant thunder. The report was heard over a wide district of country and gave warning to only too many households of an event which was to prove so disastrous and create so many desolate hearths. The dull rumbling sound heard above ground indicated at once that something was wrong, and if there could have been doubt in the matter it must soon have been dispelled by the tremendous volume of flame which was vomited forth from No. 3 shaft.... Following upon this volume of fire which is said to have carried with it a quantity of coal dust that darkened the air in the vicinity for a few minutes, there came a rumbling noise in the shaft.

.... In a very short time streams of women and children were seen issuing from the "rows" adjacent to the colliery, while from the village of High Blantyre and further off, groups of men and maidens, old women and youths, many but scantily attired, and all with blanched, scared faces, came with hurrying footsteps towards the pits.