

Review: Mining and Communities in Northern Canada: History, Politics, Memory

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Arn Keeling and John Sandlos, eds. *Mining and Communities in Northern Canada: History, Politics, and Memory*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2015. 441 pages. ISBN 987-1-55238-806-8

Indigenous communities of northern Canada have been inundated with some of the largest industrial extractive projects in the world. Clearly, these massive projects bring deep conflict, environmental degradation, unequal wealth distribution, and other critical challenges to Indigenous traditional economies and sovereignty. *Mining and Communities* offers a series of detailed case studies that moves beyond simple binaries of pro- versus anti- positions or ones that focus narrowly on boom and bust cycles of the industrial economy. Instead, this collection highlights complex histories of resilience, negotiation, and the ongoing impacts of resource extraction to Indigenous (and, in some cases, non-Indigenous) communities. The book covers much territory. The collection is organized around three themes: “Mining and Memory,” “History, Politics and Mining Policy,” and “Navigating Mine Closure.” Its impressive temporal and spatial scope includes case studies from across Canada, including remote Arctic communities and reaching across the North from Labrador, to Yellowknife, to the Yukon. It also includes analysis of key historic mines, which were “on the leading edge of mineral-led colonialism,” and a wide range of mineral industries—gold, silver, zinc, uranium, and nickel, for example—showing how local contexts shaped these histories and contestations.

This collection emerged from the research project “Abandoned Mines in Northern Canada,” led by historical geographer Arn Keeling and historian John Sandlos at Memorial University. The project concentrates on the impacts and controversies of the extractive industries, paying special attention to the periods following mine closures, when, from a corporate point of view, deposits become exhausted or when the financial costs of extraction outweigh the profits. These “zombie mines,” as editors Keeling and Sandlos calls them (p. 11), continue to haunt communities and landscapes long after they are shut down. (I couldn’t help but wonder if there is a metaphor derived from northern Indigenous contexts or Indigenous cultural traditions that better points to this sentiment). This is a critical contribution of the collection—despite some short-term benefits of employment to local communities, when a mining company packs up and leaves, they also leave behind a suite of problems such as high remediation costs, toxic contamination, environmental degradation, and the collapse of local economies. For example, Hereward Longley’s study on the early years of the Alberta Oil

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Sands shows that there were some local benefits in relation to employment, but very few in relation to the environment. These issues are most striking in Kevin O'Reilly's analysis of the 1999 closure of the gold-producing Giant Mine in Yellowknife and its costly remediation efforts and attempts to manage mind-boggling amounts of arsenic contaminants: O'Reilly describes the storage of poisonous arsenic trioxide in chambers that are the equivalent to seven ten-story buildings (p. 343). This collection makes it clear that these mines continue to negatively impact Indigenous communities long after their closures.

Mining and Communities illustrates how mines also persist through visible markers and intangible signs on the landscape, as well as in people's memories and identities. Importantly, many of the case studies incorporate interviews with local community members with the aim to uncover and amplify personal lived experiences. These interviews, highlighted in the first section on Mining and Memory and permeating the following chapters, shape the book's focus and offer diverse perspectives on how community members engage with resource extraction that shift between critiquing dispossession and environmental degradation and expressing of pride in work history and community-building. One major contribution of this collection is its treatment of these seemingly contradictory impulses—the ability of Indigenous individuals and communities to “accommodate and assimilate mine work, culture, and communities, while simultaneously engaging in a profound critique of mineral-intensive development strategies” (p. 378).

Arn Keeling and Patricia Boulter's interviews with Inuit miners who worked at the Rankin Inlet nickel mine in the 1950s and 1960s illustrate how this labour folded into their Inuit identities. The strategic adoption of mining into Inuit economies, or from “igloo to mineshaft” as research participant Piita Irniq put it, is an integral part of these histories of resilience to colonial incursions. John Sandlos' study of the Pine Point Mine, a lead-zinc operation in the Northwest Territories, draws on powerful community voices. Despite the corporate and state rhetoric of “progress” and “modernization,” community members describe how the mine brought only limited benefits, lack of sustainable jobs, poor housing, and environmental harm. “The mine killed everything around there,” explains research participant George Balsillie (p. 144). With such expressions, local First Nations directly challenged outsider convictions that industrialization brought “modernization” to northern Indigenous communities.

Other chapters draw on oral histories to interrogate the formation of these western narratives of progress. Sarah Gordon compares Dene and western histories of uranium mining in Port Radium and reveals how erasures of Indigenous presence fit into colonial narratives of industrial modernization. In the only work to directly address the gendered impacts of mining, Jane Hammond's oral history of Labrador City shows that, despite women's gains in access to

employment in other areas of Canada, within the mining workforce, they continued to experience marginalization and inequity. Heather Green's oral history project on the lead-zinc producing Polaris mine in Resolute Bay finds an absence of collective memory about the mine. She attributes this historical amnesia to the lack of tangible material heritage at the old mine site and the fact that so few local Inuit were hired there. However, closure also has meant the loss of critical transportation infrastructure, especially planes. This lack of long-term benefits contributed to the community's contemporary disconnection from the mine's history.

Mining and Communities challenges the notion that mines lead linear lives—that they are all characterized by “boom and bust” cycles of production and loss of economic value. This “mining imaginary” suggests the inevitable closure of mines followed by environmental degradation and economic downfall. Instead, these scholars show how mines move through much more complex cycles of impacts, negotiations, and contestations. For example, Scot Midgley's chapter on the 2002 closure of the zinc-producing Nanisivik Mine on Baffin Island, the first mine north of the Arctic Circle when it opened in 1976, shows how this place continues to be a site of contestation and discourses around legitimate forms of scientific knowledge.

Mining and Communities raises key questions about the value of minerals to contemporary society in light of their impacts on community economies and the environment. These case studies ask, who benefits from resource development and what are the responsibilities of citizens to advocate for change and accountability. This book should also be praised as a model of collaborative scholarship and research mobilization. The work was developed through local research partnerships and intensive oral history projects carried out in a number of First Nations communities across the North. The collection includes impressive contributions from a range of researchers, including graduate students, local researchers, and emerging and established scholars. This is a solid compilation that brings Indigenous voices and interests to the forefront and will be of interest to a wide range of researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers.