

[2008-1-29] Mr Pip and the story of RTZ

A career in metals, 29 years so far, is time enough to ponder some of the moral conflicts associated with this industry.

Are we - the beneficiaries of hauling resources from God's earth - doomed always to be exploiters? Will there ever be a way to share equitably the benefits of the riches below the surface?

The headline on the front cover of MB's new-look edition on Jan 7th 2008 gave such pause for thought.

"Rebels attack Xstrata's \$1.9 bln Tampakan copper-gold project"
'Guerrillas oppose the "destructive operations of big foreign miners"'

It could have been a headline from a 1988 edition of MB, not 2008. For that was the year when rebels finally forced the closure of Bougainville, RTZ's copper-gold mine in the South Pacific, bringing to an end 17 years of mining. The indigenous fishing communities finally banished the miners that had been responsible for poisoning the rivers with toxic tailings, destroying the ecosystem and taking along numerous lives in the process.

Those bad days should be long over shouldn't they? And yet almost anywhere you find a mine in a third world country, you will see the same battles being fought; in the Philippines, in Ecuador, in Brazil, in Africa.

One of the short-listed books for this year's Man-Booker Prize, Lloyd Jones's Mr Pip, tells the story of the last white man on the island of Bougainville who, with the civil war all around, gathers together the children of one village to create a makeshift school and begins to teach with the single teaching aid of a battered copy of Dickens' Great Expectations. The other instrument at his command is the villagers' collective memory and, as the children sit spellbound by the world of 19th century England, parents are invited into the class to talk of things they have learnt in life.

Any reader of Metal Bulletin will recognize the landscape we are in. The unpopularity of mining imposed on rural communities. The government-paid mercenaries sent from other regions to quell locals, the local communities robbed of their young men who disappear to fight the outsiders, the reprisals and violence in paradise. Here is one paragraph from Mr Pip.

"Just before Christmas, two more babies died of malaria. We buried them and marked their graves with white shells and stones carried up from the beach. All night we listened to the mothers wailing.

Their grief turned our thoughts back to a conflict few of us kids properly understood. We knew about river pollution, and the terrible effect of the copper tailings after heavy rain. Fisherman spoke of a reddish stain that pushed out far beyond the reef into open sea. You only had to hate that to hate the mine."

As we who make money from metals know only too well, the world needs copper and other metals all too badly. But at the end of the book you will ask yourself only one question about a subject we all know a lot about – price. And you will ask whether the price of mining, in too many cases, is not too high?

Published 29 Jan 2008, Metal Bulletin