

## Two Miles of Earth

by Silver Donald Cameron

ISLE MADAME, NS –

“Rap ‘er away!” calls Alex MacDonald, and we laugh as the cage begins its long drop into the depths of the earth. Someone starts a song, and we sing, in four-part harmony:

*Down deep in a coal mine, underneath the ground  
Where a ray of sunshine never can be found...*

Down, down, down. On the surface men are listening to the music fading as we fall.

A coal mine is a maze of rough tunnels branching off into utter darkness. I stumble on railway tracks, blundering behind my comrades into narrower, lower tunnels. A coal-cutter screams, a huge circular saw slicing off the black face of a wall. Wiry little miners shovel coal into midget railway cars. The miners are sooty black; even their faces are relieved only by the flashing white of their eyes and teeth. They dart out from rough alcoves in the wall, grinning, shaking hands. They speak, but I can't understand. This mine is in Tangshan, China. My companions are The Men of the Deeps, Cape Breton's famous coal-miners' chorus. And now, in the depths of the earth, we sing for our Chinese brothers.

*Digging dusty diamonds, all the seasons round,  
Down deep in a coal mine, underneath the ground.*

The year is 1976, and The Men of the Deeps are the first Canadian cultural group to tour mainland China. The singers have all worked underground, and the group is not supposed to include any writers or photographers. So I impersonate a miner, singing first tenor. We travel together for a month, singing five, six, seven times a day -- in factories, agricultural communes, railway stations, even in the streets, on the Great Wall and in Tiananmen Square, not yet cloaked in infamy.

We sing the story of Cape Breton mining, the vast sheet of coal stretching out under Cabot Strait perhaps as far as Newfoundland; my companions have spent their lives working miles out *under* the sea. We sing about the “pluck-me’s,” the company stores which bound the miners in poverty. About kids going to school in midwinter dressed in flour sacks. About the 1925 strike, when miners' families were ridden down by company horsemen and a miner named Bill Davis was shot dead by company thugs. (In the Cape Breton coal towns, June 11 is “Davis Day,” a public holiday.) And about the fighting unions, which ended the worst of the exploitation -- though the families of the 26 miners killed in the privately-owned Westray mine in 1992 might bitterly argue that point.

Coal mining is an ugly industry. Coal is a dirty, polluting fuel, and, as an old Lunenburg doryman said about winter fishing, mining is “a disgustin’ job. A fearful disgustin’ job.” I sat one evening in the Peking Hotel with Art and Aubrey Martell. Outside our window lay the Forbidden City, where Chairman Mao lay dying, but we talked about the bond between the miners and the pit ponies that lived completely in darkness and ultimately went blind.

“In the winters we were just like them,” said Aubrey. “Went out in the dark, worked in the dark, came home in the dark. Didn’t see sunlight for days on end.” Bobby Roper’s head had been crushed in a mine accident, and Murray Graham once clung to the side of a cage when the bottom ripped out of it, spilling his buddies down the shaft to their deaths.

And yet -- like fishermen, firemen, soldiers -- injured miners generally go back to their terrible work. It’s the comradeship, they say. Mining lured immigrants from Poland, Ukraine, Italy, the West Indies, making Cape Breton the most cosmopolitan community in the Maritimes. The mines welded them into brothers. Black or white, Catholic or Protestant, miners will risk their lives for one another. The miners live by what the ancients knew as “manly” virtues -- loyalty, courage, strength, compassion. They do their best and endure their afflictions. “These,” wrote Herodotus, “having done what men could, suffered what men must.”

What is lost in the closure of the Cape Breton mines is not merely an outmoded industry but a heroic and mythic story, with its own social order, its own giants, its own family sorrows, its own culture. These are splendid men, and this is the end of their story. Hear the harmony fading in the soft evening air of Peking, in these lines from Peggy Seeger's *The Springhill Mine Disaster*.

*Eight long days, and some were rescued,  
Leaving the dead to lie alone;  
Through all their lives they dug their graves:  
Two miles of earth for a marking stone,  
Two miles of earth for a marking stone.*

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