



Miners vs Dunsmuir

Film Summary: A name that is infamous in British Columbia, particularly related to the coal mines on Vancouver Island, this film presents a snapshot of working in Dunsmuir-run coal mines in the 19th century.

Curriculum Application

Social Studies 9

The Essential Question:

What historical factors led to labour unrest in BC's Coal industry in the Laurier period and how did this affect the rise of worker rights in Canada?

Summary of the Lesson Activities

1. Focus questions for the vignette provide a short lesson option. (15 minutes)
2. Reading exercise of supplementary materials
3. Research activities on the lives of 19th Century Coal Miners in BC
4. Focused writing exercise creating a biography to conclude the lesson

Learning Standards

1. To demonstrate an understanding of some of the main causes of labour disputes and unrest in early British Columbia (**cause and consequence**)
2. To demonstrate an understanding of early BC economic history through the BC worker biography project. (**perspective**)
3. Use Social Studies inquiry processes and skills to: ask questions; gather, interpret, and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions.
4. Assess the significance of people, places, events, or developments, and compare varying perspectives on their significance at particular times and places, and from group to group. (**significance**)
5. Assess the justification for competing historical accounts after investigating points of contention, reliability of sources, and adequacy of evidence. (**evidence**)
6. Compare and contrast **continuity and change** for different groups at particular times and places.
7. Make reasoned ethical judgments about actions in the past and present, and determine appropriate ways to remember and respond. (**ethical judgment**)

Materials and Resources Provided

- [Miners vs. Dunsmuirs Episode 1- Working People: A History of Labour in British Columbia](#)
- BC Coal Miner Biography Lesson Plan/Strategy (Document 1)
- A class set of “Robert Dunsmuir Biography” sheets (Document 2)
- A class set of “BC Coal Miner Biography” handouts (Document 3)
- Miners vs Dunsmuirs Source materials (Document 4)

Additional Suggested Materials

- [The Labour Movement in British Columbia 1840-1914](#)
- [Video- Edge of the World: Coal Miner’s Lament](#)
- [DVD-“These were the reasons” The Big Strike 3:48-5:12](#)
- [On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement-Chapter 2](#)
- [Biography – DUNSMUIR, ROBERT – Volume XI \(1881-1890\) – Dictionary of Canadian Biography \(biographi.ca\)](#)
- [Biography – MYERS, SAMUEL H – Volume XI \(1881-1890\) – Dictionary of Canadian Biography](#)

Vignette Questions

1. What were conditions like in the coal mines of British Columbia owned by Robert Dunsmuir?
2. What were the causes of the workers strike against Dunsmuir’s coal mines?
3. What was Dunsmuir’s first response to the workers strike?
4. What role did the government of BC play in the strike?
5. What was the effect of the strike on the coal miners?
6. How did James Dunsmuir differ from his father in dealing with strikes?

Lesson Activities

1. See Document 1 for a more detailed description of this lesson plan to develop a fictional biography of a BC Coal Miner
2. This lesson is designed to be taught in conjunction with a Grade 9 unit on the development of BC and its history in the late Victorian period. Previous teaching on this subject is advised.
3. Hand out the biography handout for Robert Dunsmuir (Doc. 2) and ask the class to read it. After the students have read the handout, the teacher should then play the video vignette “Miners vs. Dunsmuir” for the class, asking them to pay particular attention to the conditions the workers in the mines faced and the reasons they chose to organize unions and strike.
4. Following the video discuss questions such as “Why did the workers strike? What was Dunsmuir’s reaction to the strike? Why do you think many industrialists like Dunsmuir punished workers for unionizing and did their best to destroy unions?”
5. Introduce the Coal Miner’s Biography assignment with the information sheets (doc. 3-5) provided.
6. Provide class time and or additional research time in a library or computer lab

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Credit: Teaching Activities and Lesson Plan developed by John Decaire

Working People: A History of Labour in BC

Lesson: Miners vs. Dunsmuirs

Document 1: BC Coal Miner Biography Lesson Plan/Strategy

This lesson is designed to be taught in conjunction with a grade 9 unit on the development of BC and its history in the late Victorian period. Students should already have some familiarity with the early industries of BC and the reasons behind its decision to join Confederation. It is recommended that the class have read [Working Class History: English Canada | The Canadian Encyclopedia](#) prior to the lesson.

The teacher should give a brief intro to the topic of coal mining on Vancouver Island and the growing demand for coal in the world due to new steam power and coal fueled technologies. The teacher should also mention Robert Dunsmuir, a powerful and wealthy coal mine owner in BC in the late 1800s. Dunsmuir controlled several mines in BC and the workers in these mines worked in very dangerous conditions for little pay, while mine owners like Dunsmuir profited enormously.

Body of the Lesson

Hand out the biography handout for Robert Dunsmuir and ask the class to read it. After the students have read the handout, the teacher should then play the video vignette “Miners vs. Dunsmuir” for the class, asking them to pay particular attention to the conditions the workers in the mines faced and the reasons they chose to organize unions and strike.

Once the video is finished the teacher can solicit some class discussion with the following prompts: “Why did the workers strike? What was Dunsmuir’s reaction to the strike? Why do you think many industrialists like Dunsmuir punished workers for unionizing and did their best to destroy unions?”

The teacher then can hand out the information sheets to the students containing the lesson source material to the students. It’s recommended that the teacher read one or two of the different sources with the class and discuss some of the information about coal mining and BC history that can be gleaned from the sources.

Explain that there is a tendency in history to often document and record the accomplishments and lives of the rich, powerful and influential, but that often the lives of the common person is neglected. It is important, however to understand why regular people did what they did, after all, they compose the majority and have a huge influence on history. To gain a better understanding of this, tell the class, that they will be making a short biography, similar to the Dunsmuir biography handed out earlier, on a fictional coal worker from the 1880s. The teacher will then distribute “BC Coal Miner Biography” handouts, explain the assignment and assign worker names (see BC Coal Miner Biography Criteria). The teacher may wish to require the use of a certain number of primary and secondary sources. Give the students the rest of the class to work on the assignment and assign a due date. It is recommended that out of class time be given to complete assignment as well.

Closure:

Teacher should circulate to assist students with the assignment and answer questions. Before the end of class, the teacher should highlight the importance of being able to use the sources to back up the details of their character’s life story.

Assessment Strategies

Assess and evaluate student understanding based on the level of success in fulfilling the criteria of the assignment and the selection of source material for the biography.

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Lesson: Miners vs. Dunsmuirs

Document 2 Robert Dunsmuir (1825-1889) "The Coal Baron of BC"



Robert Dunsmuir was a Scottish Canadian businessman and entrepreneur noted for his role in the coal mining industry of early British Columbia. Dunsmuir was born in Halfurd, Scotland in 1825 and immigrated to Vancouver Island in 1851.

Coal production was unreliable on Vancouver Island, but there was a big market for it. There was a Royal Navy base located in Esquimalt, which required coal for their steam ships and heating fuel. As well, the growing American port city of San Francisco, was also a growing market for coal. Dunsmuir intended to exploit this market.

Dunsmuir started off in the Colony of Vancouver Island working as a miner for the HBC and over the course of 20 years worked his way up in the local coal mining industry until he was the dominant coal producer in BC, owning his own coal mines in Cumberland, Wellington and Ladysmith. In addition to coal mining, Dunsmuir also was a key figure in the building of the railway on Vancouver Island.

Dunsmuir became famous over the years for two things: increasing coal production to record levels, and getting the most coal out of his work force regardless of the consequences. The Dunsmuir owned coal mines were some of the most dangerous in the world. Between 1873 - 1909 there were eleven explosions in Dunsmuir mines, resulting in hundreds of miner deaths.

Dunsmuir became extremely wealthy as a result of coal mining and other business interests. He built the massive and opulent mansion "Craigdarroch Castle" in Victoria. Craigdarroch had thirty-nine rooms and was over 20,000 square feet in size. Dunsmuir's wealth and position in the community also made him an influential man in local politics. He was elected to the BC Legislature twice and served as a Cabinet minister.

Over the years Dunsmuir had several disputes with his workers and the unions they formed. Low wages and dangerous working conditions were the primary complaints of these workers. Dunsmuir consistently refused to negotiate with unions or address worker concerns. Dunsmuir was known to use strike breakers (hired enforcers) to use physical force and violence to end worker strikes. On different occasions, he also used his influence in government to get the militia and police to force striking workers back to work in his mines.

When Robert Dunsmuir died in 1889 he was the richest man in British Columbia, owning businesses, property and assets totalling 15 million dollars (worth more than 380 million dollars today). Dunsmuir's son, James, took over his business on his death and would eventually become premier of BC.

Dunsmuir remains a controversial figure in BC history. Some credit him as a pioneering industrialist and modernizer of BC's early economy, while others think him a ruthless coal baron and exploiter of his workers.

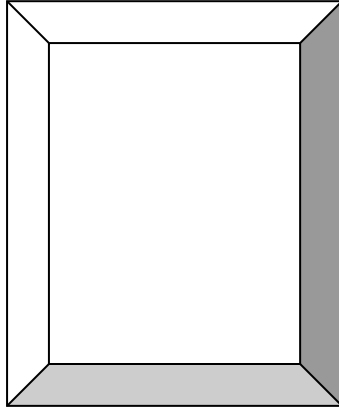
Working People: A History of Labour in BC

Lesson: Miners vs Dunsuirs

Document 3: BC Coal Miner Biography

Name: _____ (*life span*)

Place and date of birth: _____



Background: _____

Life and Work in B.C.

BC Coal Miner Background Information

What were the Push / Pull Factors for Immigration (if an immigrant) or reasons for moving to a coal town (if born in BC or elsewhere in Canada)?

Working People: A History of Labour in BC

What were your sources for this information?

What reasons would your character have for choosing work in the coal mines?

What were your sources for this information?

Life and Work in BC

What reasons would your character have for striking?

What were your sources for this information?

What would life be like for your character after the strike?

What were your sources for this information?

BC Coal Miner Biography Criteria

You will be given a worker name and birth place. Your job will be to compose a fictional biography for this worker. The goal is to make this biography as believable and historically accurate as possible. To do this follow the assignment criteria and use the source material to get your information.

Criteria

- Fill in the name, life span (years), birth date and place of birth.
- Draw a portrait of your worker, or find a believable photograph online to paste in the *portrait* box.
- Write a **Background** story for your character. The background should explain how and why your character came to BC or how and why he moved to a coal town if he was born here (push/pull factors). The background should also explain what job he does and why he chose it. **Use the source material to make sure your background details are historically accurate.**
- Write a **Life and Work in BC** story for your character. This should explain why your coal worker joined the strike. Describe conditions in the mine or a particular incident that made him want to join the strike. This should also describe what happens to your character after the strike. **Use the source material to make sure your life and work details are historically accurate.**
- Fill in the bibliography on the back of the biography. For each section, write down the source you used to get your details for each section.

Worker Names, Places of Birth, Dates of Birth

A. John McPherson	Inverness, Scotland	1841
B. Andy Carhill	Bristol, England	1852
C. Lee Xui	Guangdong Province, China	1845
D. Willie Mackenzie	Nanaimo, BC	1860
E. Richard Vaughn	Sacramento, California	1840

Lesson : Miners vs. Dunsmuirs

Document 4 : Source Materials

Excerpts from the Research Notes of Neil Vokey, Researcher

Miners / Dunsmuirs Story

- Coal was discovered on Northern Vancouver Island in 1835, and the Hudson Bay Company established Fort Rupert in 1849 – importing experienced Scottish coal miners. Robert Dunsmuir was one of those men, immigrating in 1851.
- By 1852, the coalmines at Fort Rupert had ceased production due to poor quality coal, labour unrest, and a hostile native population. HBC moved their coal mining operations to Nanaimo.
- The Vancouver Coal and Land Company eventually bought off HBC's coal assets. Robert Dunsmuir, as a coal entrepreneur, went on to discover and build mining settlements in Wellington (south of Nanaimo) and in the Comox Valley (Cumberland).
- Vancouver Island coal was primarily exported to San Francisco and to the Royal Navy.
- Coal Mining was the Island's largest industry before Forestry. Peak production of the Nanaimo coal fields was 1,400,000 tons in 1922. The last mine in Nanaimo closed in 1968.
- Vancouver Island Coal mines were considered among the most dangerous in the world at the time with a significantly higher death toll average than the rest of the British Empire.
- "Deaths per one thousand persons employed in coal mining: 1.29 for the British Empire, 3.38 for Nova Scotia, 4.15 for British Columbia *"

*1902 World Mining Statistics from Builders of British Columbia by William Bennett

Wellington Coal Mine Strike – 1877

- In July 1876, Dunsmuir unexpectedly lost his shipping contract, meaning the company was over-producing coal. With no unions to instill solidarity, the elder Dunsmuir left the workers no choice but to accept a pay cut – from \$1.20 per ton of coal dug, to \$1.00 per ton
- If the workers did not want large scale layoffs they initially accepted the layoffs. Seventy were laid off, while thirty six continued under the old rate of pay, but by August the primitive delegations of workers had caved to Dunsmuir's pay cut.

Working People: A History of Labour in BC

- At exactly this time in August, 1876, James Dunsmuir was appointed superintendent of Wellington Mine by his father Robert. Workers were now more determined than ever to get the pay they deserved, but by November of that year suspicions began to arise that the scales were measuring the coal carts inaccurately. After months of denial, and the firing of one employee who insisted the scales were rigged, James finally had the scales properly inspected. It was found that the plates began to press against each other when anything over 400 lbs. was placed on it. To settle the controversy, Robert Dunsmuir told the workers to put in a claim for how much they thought was owed to them. This did not settle it – to many miners, this sounded more like a hand-outs than honest pay. The miners met, and decided to insist Dunsmuir re-instate the old wage. Dunsmuir refused and on February 5, 1877, one hundred miners went on strike.
- From the beginning to the end of the strike, Robert Dunsmuir issued a number of public statements denouncing the miners' actions, and private letters to politician in Victoria demanding the province force the strike come to an end, insinuating the peaceful strikers were threatening the peace.
- One such letter was drafted and signed with two other parties – John Bryden of the Vancouver Coal and Land Company, who was married to Dunsmuir's daughter Elizabeth, and Capt. Warner Spalding, who was Nanaimo's magistrate, but also the legal representative of a major investor in Dunsmuir Diggle Ltd.

Excerpts from the Research Notes of Neil Vokey, Researcher

Living Conditions of Miners and their Families

- While the Vancouver Coal and Land Company's (VCLC) mines were as dangerous as Dunsmuir's, their management style contrasted his greatly:
- In the wake of two major mining accidents, the VCLC let miners' widows and their families have free housing and food for as long as needed, whereas Dunsmuir would be known to evict families almost immediately following workplace deaths.
- -The town site of Nanaimo was divided into private properties for miners to buy, with the VCLC donating parkland, etc. giving its workers vested interest in the community. Dunsmuir followed HBC's model of company stores and housing, offering primitive condition (no running water), with little to no alternatives in the isolated communities.
- -The VCLC brought in experienced miners from Britain who would be unlikely to affect the status quo, and officially recognized workers' unions by the 1890's. Dunsmuir brought inexperienced, and often non-English speaking labour (largely from Asia), who would work for lower wages.

Working People: A History of Labour in BC

Could the mine explosions have been prevented?

- High concentrations of methane gas, compressed and trapped underground when coal is formed, were responsible for many explosions and deaths in the coalmines. The explosions could have been prevented through better-designed ventilation systems in the shafts. Gassy mines were commonly referred to as 'firedamp'. Although smoking was forbidden (grounds for dismissal), the miners' lamps often sparked fires and explosions.
- Some mines were endangered by 'blackdamp' – a mixture nitrogen, carbon dioxide and water vapour and limited oxygen.
- Cave-ins from weak timber structures, fires, broken equipment such as rope, all contributed to worker injuries and deaths in the mines – all of them preventable, if management had exercised caution.
- [Speaking of an explosion]: "One of the bodies they brought up was a Chinaman, all he had on was a pair of shoes. It just blew the clothes right off him."
- "It was more carelessness than anything else that would cause a mine disaster,"
- "I always say it was the conditions that formed the union. The men wouldn't have been so anxious to join a union if the conditions were better."

Jim Weir, former coal miner (Cumberland), in an interview with Susan Mayse, 1986.



Figure 1 A-04422 Workers home around Nanaimo Harbour 1860's
Image A-04422 courtesy of Royal BC Museum



Figure 2 A-02123 Dunsmuir Family home; Craigdarroch Castle Victoria BC
Image A-02123 courtesy of Royal BC Museum



Figure 3 B-07609 Aftermath of explosion of powder shed Cumberland 1908-NIS
Image B-07609 courtesy of Royal BC Museum

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