

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 Halford, 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.