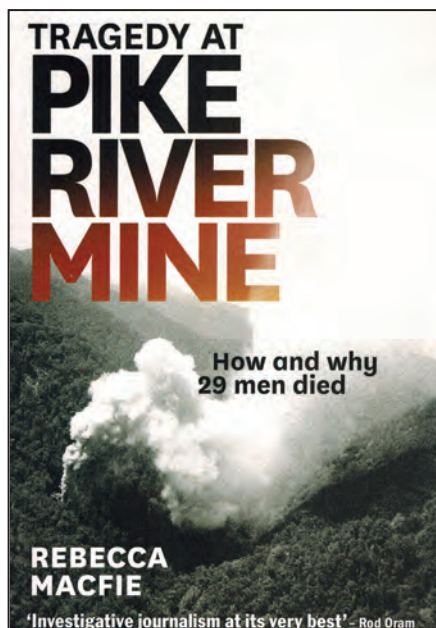


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## Vital role of journalism underlined

***Tragedy at Pike River Mine: How and Why 29 Men Died***, by Rebecca Macfie. Wellington: AWA Press, 2013, 224 pp. ISBN 9781877551901

JOURNALIST Rebecca Macfie felt the emotional shock waves of the Pike River Mine disaster in 2010. She was researching the background of the mining company for a weekly news magazine article to explain to readers how the accident that killed 29 men had happened when she was captivated by the story. Her research soon turned up information from which she ‘formed the view that the disaster was not an ‘accident’, but rather a corporate failure of the worst order’ (p. 2). Macfie was thus galvanised into action to write a book that would make the Pike story understandable to a wide audience including the families, friends and colleagues of those who died, for New



Zealanders and as an object lesson for business and government leaders.

The result is a compelling narrative which weaves information from dozens of interviews with the evidence and findings of the formal investigations of a Royal Commission of inquiry into the disaster and two court cases as well as information from documents obtained through confidential sources. The book is thoroughly footnoted. Photographs and maps of the mine, people involved and diagrams of the mine and ventilation shaft are a welcome adjunct to the text.

The book opens with a prologue describing the deadly explosion and

recounts the desperate efforts of two miners to stagger from the mine. Then follows the list of the names of those who died in the worst New Zealand mine disaster since 1914.

Macfie has used her finance reporting skills to forensically trace the discovery of the unusual Pike River coal resource high in the Paparoa Range on New Zealand's West Coast. She tracks it through the years of development of the resource from mapping, sampling, core drilling, financing, government approvals and eventually to mining.

Knowing the ultimate outcome, the author has structured the book chronologically, building tension as the multiple failings of individuals and companies mesh into a juggernaut that is bound to fail. Her investigations reveal that years before the deadly explosion, geologists such as Dr Jane Newman knew not only of the difficulty of mining the resource but also some of the shortcomings of the New Zealand Oil and Gas company that had the licence to develop it.

Time and again, experts appear on the scene and the reader's hope rises that poor individual, corporate and government decisions will be righted, only to be dashed as the mine's executives choose the pursuit of financial gain at the expense of worker safety.

Macfie's contribution to long form journalism is timely and important. At a time when the role of journalists is in question and editorial budgets are being squeezed, this book underlines the vital role of journalism as a recorder of history as it happens and as a watchdog not only of government but also of business that is vital for public well-being.

The book also pinpoints the danger of the current trend for public relations spin to replace dispassionate news reports. In this instance, more thorough news reporting might have called the mining company to account earlier, focused the efforts of mine regulators, and averted the disaster. This volume is a must-read for student reporters, finance journalists and general reporters, providing a welcome injection of stoicism to investigate.

Shortcomings are few. However, for this reader, the drama of the explosion and the reader's connection with those who died could have been built more securely in the prologue, thus providing a firmer foundation for the lengthy investigation that follows. *Tragedy at Pike River Mine* is a readable and solemn cautionary tale for corporate decision-makers, for governments eager to support business ventures in the hope of realising revenue for the public purse and for investors and workers.