
TEACHERS NOTES

by Bernie Howitt



The employees of the BHP steelworks in Newcastle are bracing themselves for Australia's largest industrial shutdown. Many have spent their entire working lives at the plant. With one month to go, they're struggling to come to terms with an uncertain future. Peter is angry — he's lost his marriage as well as his job. Jack is on an emotional rollercoaster as he faces the challenge of setting up his own business. And workshop manager Aubrey, once a militant unionist, is worried about what will happen to the men he calls “his boys”. Meanwhile, the company's spinductor is selling the closure as a “feel good” story. This is the end of an era. Life in Steel City will never be the same.

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER Stefan Moore

PRODUCERS Denise Haslem, Gina Twyble

DIRECTOR/WRITER Catherine Marciniak

SECOND UNIT DIRECTOR Aviva Ziegler

DURATION 55 minutes

YEAR 2000

A FILM AUSTRALIA NATIONAL INTEREST PROGRAM

PRODUCED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION.

SUBJECT AREAS

History Years 10-12; Stage 6 Society and Culture; SOSE Years 10-12; Studies of Society courses focusing on Australian labour, industrial relations history and/or the impact of globalization. Would suit Years 10-12 within these subject/topic areas.

BEFORE WATCHING

This is a study of an older, historical Australia giving way to a modern Australia preparing to play a role in a global marketplace. It catches a clash of values at the workplace, and is quite unique in the way it is able to look both backwards and forwards.

To prepare students, the following issues could be discussed:

- What was the industrial revolution? Why was it regarded as one of the most significant occurrences of modern history?
- What is BHP? Why is it referred to as "The Big Australian"?
- Why has steel been such a valuable product for Australia? Brainstorm as many uses for steel as you can find, then try and categorize the products into lists of old (products with a past) and new (products with a future). Which is the longest list? What does that tell you about the usage of steel?
- What do you understand by the term "community"? How do you define your local community? Discuss the people, places and entities that make your local community identifiable.
- What do you understand by the term "work"? Do you think the concept of "work" is changing? What pressures are causing change?
- Who are the main providers of employment in your local area? How long have they been there? Do they play any role in your local community?

You may also like to discuss this quote, and think about its relevance to what you are about to see:

"They have closed down our banks, our police stations, and now they want to take away our game. We must maintain our rage."

—Sean Garlick, former South Sydney Rugby League captain, addressing a crowd of 80,000 people outside Sydney Town Hall at a "Save the Game" rally for South Sydney and Rugby League on 12 November 2000.

Amongst the crowd were many Newcastle Knights Rugby League Club supporters, who had made the

trip to Sydney. At first glance they may have seemed incongruous in the sea of red and green, but Garlick's comments appeared to strike a responsive chord amongst the football followers who had seen their jobs and their city's livelihood also taken away.

DURING THE FILM

1. Key concepts

There are several concepts that you need to be aware of as you watch "Steel City". These include: *continuity, change, community, persons, time, society* and *culture*. You should look for examples of these concepts throughout the film.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

In simple terms, continuity can be defined as those components of society and culture that remain the same across time. Change refers to the components of society and culture that become different across time. They are vital concepts in understanding the process of history, and give historians a way of discussing historical periods.

As well as recognizing continuities and changes, it is vital to be able to recognize the forces that help shape continuity and change. The skill of historians often lies in their ability to describe why things are happening, rather than simply describing what has happened.

The major theme of "Steel City" is continuity and change. While you watch the film, you should make notes under the following headings:

Continuities/Reasons; Changes/Reasons

In the first column, you should look for examples of things that have remained the same over a period of time. (The steelworks at Newcastle, for example, have been there since 1915.) Add to this the reason/s why they have remained basically the same. (Some of the reasons for the continuity of the Newcastle steelworks could be the quality of the steel, the close proximity of coal and port, reliable workforce.)

In the second column, look for examples of changes taking place. (The closing of the steelworks is the most obvious example.) Add to this the reason/s why those changes are occurring. (Some of the reasons for the closure could include lack of profits, international markets finding cheaper suppliers.)

This process should help you make sense of what you see in "Steel City", and understand its role in supporting your study of History and Society and Culture particularly.

COMMUNITY

This generally refers to the local area, and implies interaction between the residents. It is these "threads" of contact that give meaning to any community. Throughout the film you will see many examples of these "threads" that bind the community together. Note down examples that give the Newcastle/BHP community meaning.

PERSONS

This is the term used in some syllabuses to describe individuals. It allows you to focus on the role and aspirations of individuals. Question 2 below will allow you to focus directly on the role of specific persons.

TIME

This is the way we choose to measure past, present and future. "Steel City" covers the past and present very effectively. It only hints at possible futures. What do you think is the likely future of Newcastle and some of the persons shown in the film?

SOCIETY

This term can be taken to broadly refer to the networks and institutions that group people together in a sense of commonality. To what extent were the BHP steelworks at Newcastle a society? What links drew the people there together?

CULTURE

Refers to the common values and beliefs of a society. What do you think the common values and beliefs of the workers at the steelworks were? Did they differ from management? Can you refer to a "BHP culture"?

2. Key participants

Make notes on each of the following participants during the film, so that you will have sufficient material to complete follow-up activities:

- Peter McGuinness – 38, the youngest of the steel workers featured
- Jack Thompson – 51, a veteran of the steelworks, working there since he was fourteen
- Aubrey Brooks – worked his way up from militant unionist to middle management at the steelworks
- Joan Marchant and Rhonda Commons – the canteen ladies at the steelworks

- Paul Gallimore – one of the managers charged with supervising high production targets at the steelworks
- Greg Cameron – the public relations manager for BHP in Newcastle.

AFTER WATCHING

"Steel City" is about people as well as a company. It is a reminder that history is concerned with the human story as well as great events and discoveries.

Think about the role of each of the participants in "Steel City". What impact has the closing of the steelworks had on them? What contribution had they made to BHP, to Newcastle and to Australia during their working lives at the steelworks?

"Steel City" is a valuable historical document, and will help historians of the future to study the impact of the closure of the steelworks. They will also use other sources such as newspapers and TV footage from the time. These are all valuable primary sources.

Do you think it is fair to describe the closure of the BHP steelworks at Newcastle as "the end of the industrial revolution in Australia"?

How would you describe the effect the closure of the steelworks had on the community of Newcastle? What examples would you choose to support your description? Do you think anything can replace the steelworks in Newcastle's life?

"I feel a sense of worth working." – Peter McGuinness during "Steel City".

How does the viewing of "Steel City" help you understand the changing concept of "work"? What is the personal impact on people like Peter McGuinness of the trend towards part time rather than full time employment?

Throughout "Steel City" the participants speak about missing the people at the steelworks. How important are our interactions with people in our day-to-day working lives? What would you miss most if your school was closed down in the same way the steelworks were closed?

During "Steel City", one of the workers asks, "It's always been about profits, but how much profit is enough?" What are the arguments for and against companies putting "profits before people"? Is there a role for a "people first" approach in the modern world of economic rationalism and the global marketplace? Does this debate have a place in contemporary society?

FOLLOW-UP RESEARCH

What has happened to BHP since the closure of the Newcastle steelworks in 1999?

In February 2001, the NSW government announced its support for the creation of a steel mill in Newcastle, costing \$2.8 billion. Work was planned to commence on the building of the works in 2002, with three years being allocated for construction. How is the new Austeel plan progressing?

FURTHER LINKS

To discover more about BHP, the company's official website can be found at:

<http://www.bhpbilliton.com/>

Their steel-making division is located at:

www.bluescopesteel.com.au

For an alternative view of the closure of the BHP steelworks, try the World Socialist website:

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/oct1999/bhp-o08.shtml>

This will lead you directly to an article on the Newcastle closure.

An interesting article on the need to preserve industrial heritage and the diverse nature of what actually constitutes industrial heritage by Dr Nancy Cushing of the University of Newcastle is located at:

<https://www.awu.net.au/company/bhp>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bernie Howitt is Head Teacher, History, at Narara Valley High School. He is the editor of the History Teachers' Association of NSW News Sheet and a regular contributor to History and Society and Culture publications. He is the author of "Rock Through History" and "My Generation" and is co-writer of a textbook for the NSW Stage 6 Society and Culture syllabus.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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National Film and Sound Archive of Australia
Sales and Distribution | PO Box 397 Pyrmont
NSW 2009

T +61 2 8202 0144 | F +61 2 8202 0101

E: sales@nfsa.gov.au

www.nfsa.gov.au

