

From Kilmarnock to Concepción: How Hudson's Bay Coal Miners Bound for Vancouver Island Came to Chile

William Culver
SUNY, Plattsburgh
william.culver@plattsburgh.edu

Abstract

On August 4, 1853 the British sailing ship Colinda left London headed for Fort Victoria, Vancouver Island. The Hudson's Bay Company sought to develop coal deposits on the island, expecting to sell coal in San Francisco where prices were high. Native people seemed lacking in the skills and attitudes required to mine coal, so experienced miners from "home" became the solution. The forty miners - contracted in Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, Scotland - never arrived to Fort Victoria; rather they abandoned ship in Valparaíso, Chile following four difficult months at sea, a hard passage through the Straits of Magellan, death of children, hunger, and finally a passenger mutiny. The miners disembarked after their wives refused to sail any further, and promised to stay in Chile, children and all, with or without their husbands. This unexpected increase in the ranks of the skilled coal miners in Chile came just as the production of coal expanded. In the 1850s Chile entered a decades' long domination of the world copper market exporting smelted copper, AKA Chili Bars. These miners contributed to the local coal industry, and to the growing Chilean-Anglo community. This previously forgotten story is drawn from Hudson's Bay archives, and contemporary news accounts.