

# LAST STAND AT NYMBOIDA



A **STUDY GUIDE** BY ROBERT LEWIS



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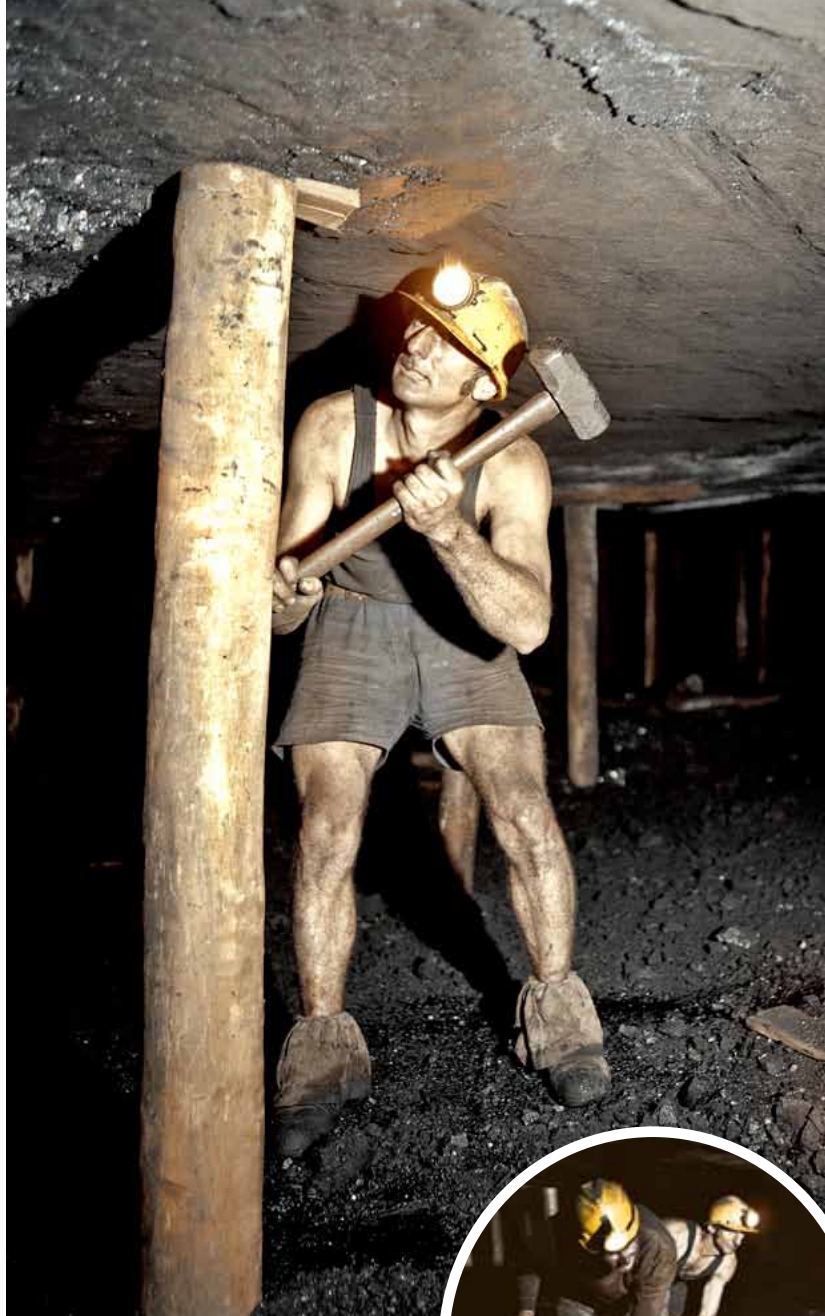
*Last Stand At Nymboida* (Jeff Bird, 2010, 56 minutes) is the remarkable story of the historic 'work-in' and takeover of the Nymboida Colliery by a group of underground mineworkers who refused to accept the sack and the loss of their entitlements when their employer declared bankruptcy in February 1975.

The announcement of bankruptcy was devastating for the mineworkers. Unemployment in the NSW northern district area of Grafton, where the mine was situated, was among the highest in Australia. In addition, the mineworkers faced the loss of severance pay, annual leave and other entitlements.

Their refusal to accept the sack and the subsequent work-in led to a series of negotiations involving the Miners' Federation (union), the Joint Coal Board and the conservative NSW government of the day, which finally resulted in ownership of the mine being handed over to the Miners' Federation, in return for the debts owed by the operating company being discharged.

The Nymboida mine was run by the union and the workers through a company, Union Coal Mining Pty Ltd, for the next four and a half years, with all employees retaining their jobs. The mine finally closed in August 1979 when its sole market, the Koolkhan Power Station, was decommissioned.

By then, Nymboida workers had received over \$1.25 million in gross wages, money which, if it had not been for the work-in and takeover, would have been lost to the mineworkers and their families, and to the Grafton community. In addition, all the mineworkers – including five who had retired during the years of the union's operation of the



mine – received their full benefits when the mine closed.

The successful takeover of the mine by the workers also triggered a new chapter in industrial history. Nymboida had proved that a trade union could profitably operate a mine where a private company had failed. This was a lesson not lost on the NSW Wran Labor government. In October 1979 they responded by granting the Miners' Federation a replacement mining lease for a modern coal mine in the rich Upper Hunter Valley region of NSW, which is operated today by United Collieries.

A major outcome of the union's involvement with United was the formation of the Mineworkers Trust, a foundation that has put millions back into communities throughout Australia. *Last Stand At Nymboida* is a remarkable and unique story, and the events it depicts saw the Miners' Federation become the only union in Australian and international history to take control of a mine.

KEY QUESTIONS	ELABORATION
1. What happened?	A brief overview of the situation being investigated
2. When did it happen?	The key period involved
3. Where did it happen?	Location, and the nature of the location if it is relevant
4. How did it happen?	Details of the event, the chronology, the key steps
5. Who was involved in it?	The main individuals and groups involved
6. Why did it happen at this time, in this way, in this place?	The reasons, explanations, causes. This may involve competing explanations. It may also involve a final judgement about the hierarchy of the contributory causes.
7. What main impacts did it have?	What changes occurred as a result of the event?
8. What is the event's significance?	An assessment or judgement of the event
9. How do we know?	A critical assessment of how convincing and complete the historical evidence is.



## CURRICULUM APPLICABILITY

*Last Stand At Nymboida* is an excellent resource for Australian History; specifically, it can be used as a classroom model for students' investigation of a local event.

The process involves students' watching the film and completing the set of key questions above.

When students have done this in class, they can use the same key questions as the basis of their own investigation into a significant event in their own community.

## EXPLORING IDEAS AND ISSUES IN THE FILM

Your task is to complete the summary page (on page 6 of this study guide) using detail from the film *Last Stand at Nymboida*. The set of questions above will help you identify and summarise this appropriate information. This will give you practice in exploring a significant local event, and you will be able to apply this model in your own investigation of an event in your local community.

**A** Locate Nymboida on image 1 (on this page) and indicate where it is on image 2.

From <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/>.

Use this information in your summary of information for key question 3.

**B** What was the key event that occurred at the Nymboida mine that is explored in this film?

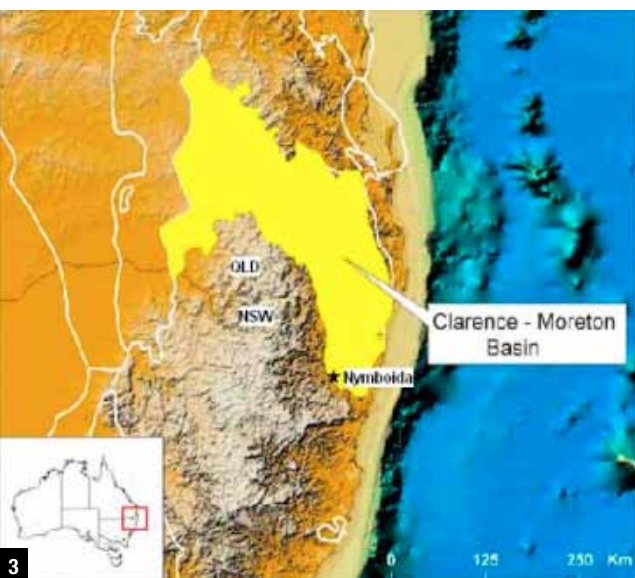
Use this information in your summary of information for key question 1.



**C** When did this event occur? (You will need to give a start-year and a time span.)

Use this information in your summary of information for key question 2.





**D** How was the process of coal mining carried out? How did it compare with other mines of the period? How might this have contributed to the decision to close the mine?

*Use this information in your summary of information for key questions 4 and 6.*

**E** Look at Image 3 (above) showing the Clarence-Moreton Basin and the coal deposits there.

Source: Waratah Coal website, EL 6467 Nymboida, (website currently under construction).

How might the location of Nymboida in the Basin help to explain both the nature of the mining and the reason why the owners decided to shut down the mine?

*Use this information in your summary of information for key questions 3 and 6.*

**F** Why did the coal miners decide to take over the mine themselves? In discussing this answer, consider the role of various individuals and groups, their attitudes and interests, and their skills and experience.

*Use this information in your summary of information for key questions 4, 5 and 6.*

**G** What happened after the workers took over the mine? You will need to consider the events of the period 1975–1979 here.

*Use this information in your summary of information for key questions 1 and 7.*

**H** Would you say that the event was a successful one? Why?

*Use this information in your summary of information for key question 7.*

**I** What would you say were the main impacts or consequences of the event? You may need to look at a variety of aspects – personal, effect on safety procedures, impacts on the coal industry and so on.

*Use this information in your summary of information for key question 7.*

**J** What would you say was the main significance of the event? You may need to consider a variety of scales here – local, regional and national.

*Use this information in your summary of information for key question 8.*

**K** A film is a representation of history – that is, it is somebody's version of the events. The film-maker decides what images to use, how to present them, in what order, with what background sound, and what to keep in and what to leave out and so on. Your knowledge of the event is almost solely based on the information presented in the film, and therefore on this version of the event. The version may be fair and accurate and complete, or it may not. Do you think the film gives you a fair, accurate and complete version of the event? In deciding this, take into account such questions as:

- Did the film present the information fairly and in a balanced way, or was it trying to promote a particular idea, message or value?
- Did the film use expert information?
- Did it present all points of view?





- Were there any major gaps in the information it presented?
- Did the narration determine how you would respond?
- Did the way the film was edited influence your response?
- Did the music influence the way you responded to the film?

The following director's statement may help you decide on your critical evaluation of the film as a representation of history.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In a world where the little guy often gets the short end of the stick, the Nymboida rebellion demonstrates that it is not only possible to fight back, but to fight back and win! Against the odds and hopelessly outgunned, Nymboida is a uniquely Australian story. A bunch of ordinary blokes who dared to take on a company and win control of their own destiny.

At the heart of the Nymboida story is what I think is still the most endearing attribute of the Australian character – mateship. The ability to stand by your mates and fight for what you believe in, no matter what the risk. Added to this is a healthy dose of disrespect for unjust authority and a no nonsense



approach to getting things done. In a fragmented, fast paced and often selfish modern world, it's easy to discount the importance of this most fundamental of Australian values. But it is the lifeblood of the Australian spirit, and I find myself repeatedly drawn to stories in which this noble characteristic is able to express itself.

When I was approached to direct this film by the Executive Producer, Paddy Gorman, I knew that I would be working with someone who shared this enthusiasm for mateship and a respect for the working man and woman. For years, Paddy has dreamed of bringing the little known Nymboida story to the screen, and it is a testament to his vision and tenacity that he has made it happen. From my perspective, it was important that the film

KEY QUESTIONS AND ELABORATION	LOCAL EVENT: THE 'WORK-IN' AT NYMBOIDA
<b>1</b> What happened? A brief overview of the situation being investigated	
<b>2</b> When did it happen? The key period involved	
<b>3</b> Where did it happen? Location, and the nature of the location if it is relevant	
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<b>9</b> How do we know? A critical assessment of how convincing and complete the historical evidence is.	

do justice to his passion for the story. The film also needed to do justice to the remarkable collection of characters that lived the Nymboida experience.

It was Nymboida's characters that fascinated me the most. Hard working, decent people, with a sense of pride and self-respect. A group of people that understood their success would not depend on any one person, but on their collective unity. It was therefore important that a range of characters drive the story. Their strength of character demanded that they be front and centre. The rugged and isolated beauty of the Nymboida landscape is also a key element of the Nymboida story. It bred a hardiness and sense of purpose that was critical to the success of the Nymboida rebellion.

Together with such strong and fascinating local characters, it was important that this film be visually compelling, a vehicle for underscoring the story's raw human emotion and drama. As far as I was concerned, *Last Stand At Nymboida* needed to be told in high definition. The visual style was further enhanced with the selective use of Super16 film, a medium ideally suited to capturing the rich and poetic Nymboida landscape. The

film's cinematographer, Simon Smith, has done a wonderful job in bringing the universal majesty of the Nymboida story to the screen.

– Jeff Bird, Director

*Use this information in your summary of information for key question 9.*

Now that you have 'practised' studying a local event you can use this same approach to investigate a local event in your own community.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

The *Last Stand At Nymboida* website:

<http://www.nymboidadoco.com.au>

Paddy Gorman, '30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Nymboida: The Coal Mine Our Union Ran', *Common Cause* February/March 2005, pp.15–17, <<http://www.cfmeu.com.au>>, accessed 21 October 2010.

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All photographs capture the Nymboida miners and life at the mine between 1974-1979.  
Photographs courtesy Industry and Investment NSW and private collections.



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