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The gold rushes of the 1850s

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The 1850s gold rushes in eastern Australia occurred in a post-invasion landscape. Aboriginal people had so recently been in possession of the lands on which gold was discovered that contemporaries quite naturally compared the new invaders' mode of living to that of the Indigenous inhabitants. A reporter sent to Australia's first significant gold rush at Ophir in New South Wales in 1851 noted that 'the whole settlement has the appearance of a vast aboriginal camp'.¹ An observer of the Ballarat diggings in Victoria in 1856 wrote that 'a solitary tree here and there, and prostrate trunks lying about, proclaimed the recent nature of the invasion of the haunts of the wildman by the gold-seekers'.² The gold rushes were, among other things, an extraordinarily effective invasion: it is difficult to think of anything else that would have populated the newly taken land so rapidly, with such numbers, so heedless of what lay in their way.

Discoveries and rushes

It was Edward Hargraves, returning in January 1851 from the California gold rush to New South Wales, who most single-mindedly tried to provoke a gold rush in Australia. With a small group of men he found gold in a creek near Bathurst in February 1851. Leaving the others to dig, Hargraves returned to Sydney; by April his party had four ounces of gold. He notified the New South Wales government of his find, and gave the *Sydney Morning Herald* the story. Soon newspapers were reporting the effects of the news: a *Herald* correspondent found the 'gold mania' in Bathurst 'still more violent than in Sydney' and speculated that there must be gold in 'unlimited

¹ *Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, 31 May 1851.

² 'The Past and Present of Ballaarat', (*Sydney*) *Empire*, 21 October 1856.

quantities, if such gold fields are scattered over such an extent of country as is reported'.³

Hargraves was feted and rewarded as first discoverer of gold, but his real achievement was in publicity. The *London Times* noted that, in addressing himself 'to the public instead of the Government', he had brought the discovery to the attention of the world.⁴ Hargraves freely admitted that his public relations skills were greater than his geological acumen or mining expertise, and that his 'only intention' was 'to make the discovery and rely upon the Government and the country for my reward'.⁵ In fact, Australian gold had been both discovered and predicted many times before 1851: the New South Wales government surveyor James McBrien reported a discovery in 1823; the zoologist John Lhotsky located gold in the Monaro region in 1834; Count Paul Strzelecki reported his 1839 find to New South Wales governor Sir George Gipps; the Rev. W.B. Clarke, a geologist, also reported a discovery in 1844 and from 1847 attempted to draw public attention to the existence of gold.⁶ In London, the geologist, Sir Roderick Murchison, studied these reports and Strzelecki's specimens. In 1846 he not only predicted, on the basis of geological similarities with the Urals in Russia, that there would be gold in the Australian Great Dividing Range, but also urged the emigration of unemployed Cornish miners to look for it.⁷ Years of acrimony between Murchison and Clarke followed, a classic contest between an imperial expert (who had never been to Australia) and a colonial informant with his own claims to expertise. Murchison's career prospered from the success of his prediction. He became the acknowledged imperial authority on gold; his followers, however, also absorbed his erroneous prediction that Australian gold lay mainly near the surface and diminished at depth.⁸ Clarke had studied geology at Cambridge, but lacked access to academic outlets and published much of his work in Sydney newspapers. Considering these competing claims to priority, the nineteenth-century historian George Rusden concluded diplomatically

3 Edward Hammond Hargraves, *Australia and Its Goldfields* (London: H. Ingram and Co., 1855), ch. 4; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 May 1851.

4 Geoffrey Blainey, 'The Gold Rushes: The Year of Decision', *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand*, 10, 38 (1962): 129–32; *The Times*, 16 January 1854.

5 Simpson Davison, *The Gold Deposits in Australia* (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1861), p. 294.

6 'William Branwhite Clarke', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 3, pp. 420–2.

7 Davison, *The Gold Deposits in Australia*, pp. 271–2.

8 Robert A. Stafford, 'The Long Arm of London: Sir Roderick Murchison and Imperial Science in Australia', in R.W. Home (ed.), *Australian Science in the Making* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 74–6.

that stumblers upon gold were as entitled to credit as speculators about its likely existence.⁹

The first gold rushes in New South Wales were north and west of Bathurst, over the Blue Mountains from Sydney. Soon, a committee was offering a reward for finding gold in Victoria. Successive discoveries were announced in 1851, at Anderson's Creek near Melbourne, then in central Victoria – at Clunes, and then more significantly at Buninyong and Ballarat, which became the first major Victorian goldfield, and at Bendigo. Governor La Trobe wrote to a friend in early 1852 that 'the whole of my colony more or less seems to be larded with gold'.¹⁰ Victoria did indeed contain great riches: between 1851 and 1860 it would produce 20 million fine ounces of gold to New South Wales' 2 million.¹¹

A gold discovery was a necessary but not sufficient condition for a gold rush. The gold rushes of the 1850s were international in scale, made possible by modern communication, such as the telegraphs and newspapers that spread the word of new discoveries and the faster, safer and cheaper sailing ships of that decade; and manufactured goods, such as the transported wooden and tin houses that provided quickly assembled accommodation in the instant cities of Victoria.¹² More fundamentally, the mid-century gold rushes were made possible by a modern ethos that regarded uprooting oneself from home and undertaking a long and hazardous journey in pursuit of uncertain wealth as not only possible but desirable. We know this ethos was controversial because many contemporary commentators registered doubts about it, warning that nothing good could come from abandoning settled lives and responsibilities to search for randomly distributed gold. 'Gold hunting is not, *per se*, a desirable occupation', Melbourne lawyer Thomas à Beckett explained: 'its success is not dependent upon moral worth, and it has a tendency to destroy rather than promote the observance of those rules of conduct which, while they contribute to worldly welfare, elevate the individual who practises them, and promote social happiness'.¹³

- 9 G.W. Rusden, *History of Australia* (Melbourne: George Robertson, 1883), vol. 2, p. 602.
 10 To John Murray, 16 January 1852, in C.J. La Trobe, 'Letters from the Colony', *La Trobe Journal*, 71 (2003): 135.
 11 Rodney Maddock and Ian McLean, 'Supply-Side Shocks: The Case of Australian Gold', *Journal of Economic History*, 44, 4 (1984): 1050–1.
 12 James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 310 argues the opposite case – that the gold rushes depended mainly on pre-industrial technology and animal power. On prefabricated houses, see Miles Lewis, 'The Diagnosis of Prefabricated Buildings', *Australian Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 3 (1985): 56–69.
 13 'The Gold Mania', *Illustrated Australian Magazine*, 2 (1851): 377.

The Times in London editorialised that the moral and intellectual effects of the gold discoveries were likely to be ‘repulsive and disheartening’ because brute strength would now be honoured and rewarded more than ‘trained skill or practiced intellect’.¹⁴ In Victoria, Governor La Trobe reported in December 1851 that the presence of gold, ‘requiring but little or no labour to collect’, had acted ‘completely to disorganize the whole structure of society’.¹⁵

Historical writing has often normalised the 1850s gold rushes as events, as though it were obviously thought reasonable and understandable at the time that so many men would abandon their life on one side of the world for a speculative and arduous pursuit on the other. It was, however, not a natural acquisitive instinct that led so many to rush after gold, but a particular way of thinking about the balance between individual wealth and community. Many contemporaries were indeed alarmed at the rushing after wealth at the expense of all that made it meaningful – family, community, social order – and at the congregation of so many men with fewer women on the goldfields.¹⁶

Governing

As with other nineteenth-century settlement booms (such as land booms), gold rushes were defined and made possible by government regulation – in the case of the Australian gold rushes of the 1850s, by the specific licensing provisions that opened up the goldfields to masses of individual miners. Historians have sometimes written as if the gold seekers were an almost unstoppable force, inevitably overwhelming attempts to regulate and control them. In 1850 however, an historically minded observer would have known of several historical precedents that appeared to demonstrate that government intervention could halt or limit gold digging, as well as determine its mode and manner. The 1690s Brazilian gold rush had drawn thousands in search of alluvial gold but the mines were subject over time to several taxing and regulatory measures, including a requirement for the payment of a fifth of the proceeds of gold mining to the Portuguese crown, limits on the number of slaves that could be imported to work the mines, and a poll tax on

¹⁴ *The Times*, 1 May 1852.

¹⁵ La Trobe to Grey, 3 December 1851, *Correspondence Relative to the Recent Discovery of Gold in Australia* (London: HMSO, 1852), p. 51.

¹⁶ See David Goodman, *Gold Seeking: Victoria and California in the 1850s* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994).

slave labour in the mines.¹⁷ In Russia, the gold discoveries in the Urals in the 1740s did not at first lead to a gold rush because the state asserted a monopoly on gold production; it was only after 1812, when Russians gained the right to search for gold and silver in return for a royalty to the state bank, that private gold production overtook the state's.¹⁸ In 1795 in County Wicklow, Ireland, miners who had already extracted £10,000 of gold were dispersed by militia, so the state could take over the mining.¹⁹

This historical record, familiar to at least some of the educated classes in the colonies, suggested that government intervention and regulation of gold rushes was the historical norm. Governor La Trobe learned of the 1828 Georgia gold rush (in which the state had initially claimed a monopoly of gold production) during his American travels in the early 1830s. He skirted around the gold district, commenting disdainfully that 'five thousand people were already collected, grasping and quarrelling, and it is probable that more gold will be sown than reaped'.²⁰ In Victoria, La Trobe held the same sceptical views about unregulated rushes; he responded to an incipient gold rush at Amherst in central Victoria in 1848 by sending the native police to disperse the gold seekers.

There has been continuing debate about whether governors in New South Wales attempted to suppress news of gold discoveries because they feared the consequences of gold in a penal society. Clarke famously reported that the governor of New South Wales, Gipps, had told him to 'Put it away, Mr Clarke, or we shall all have our throats cut'. Geoffrey Blainey has questioned whether Gipps actually uttered those words, and whether convicts and gold were really thought to be incompatible, arguing that there was 'no practical reason why convicts could not have worked the first gold mines in this continent'.²¹ Much earlier gold mining had indeed been carried out by unfree labourers – Russian serfs, Brazilian, Colombian and American slaves – for the enrichment of others. It is only from a post-Californian perspective that Weston Bate's contention that gold was a 'democratic mineral' seems

17 C.R. Boxer, *The Golden Age of Brazil, 1695–1750: Growing Pains of a Colonial Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), pp. 44–6; W.P. Morrell, *The Gold Rushes* (London: A. & C. Black, 1940), p. 27.

18 'Gold Mines in Russia', *Bankers Magazine*, 1 (1847): 206–7.

19 Timothy Alborn, 'An Irish El Dorado: Recovering Gold in County Wicklow', *Journal of British Studies*, 50, 2 (2011): 359–80.

20 C.J. Latrobe, *The Rambler in North America: 1832–1833* (London: R.B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1835), vol. 2, p. 72.

21 Geoffrey Blainey, 'Gold and Governors', *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand*, 9, 36 (1961): 341–2.

plausible.²² W.B. Clarke was still claiming in 1849 that it was ‘only in countries where labour is as cheap as it is with slaves and serfs, that...gold washing pays’; the democratic, international gold rush was being invented just as he uttered that warning, and was not the historical norm before 1848.²³

To most newspaper-reading Australians, there was only one non-Australian gold rush worth talking about after December 1848 and that was the Californian. The transnational scale of the Californian and Australian gold rushes set them apart from previous events – both drew around 100,000 people annually in their peak years.²⁴ Californian experience informed Australian practice in many ways, and was carried in print and by immigrants; as many as 11,000 people may have travelled from Australia to the California gold rushes and perhaps 3,000 Americans came to the Australian goldfields.²⁵ The American journalist Walter Lummis claimed in 1900 that ‘California not only invented the gold rush, but made it contagious’.²⁶ California, however, also served as a point of contrast for the Australian gold rushes, as exaggerated stories of disorder in California fostered a strong desire among colonial elites that any Australian gold rush should be more ‘British’ and orderly.

In California, for a mixture of strategic and legal reasons (including the incomplete transition of the recently conquered province from Mexican to US property law), the decision was made not to license gold mining but to ‘permit all to work freely’.²⁷ Mining law in California encoded rather than dictated local practice; the late-nineteenth century American historian, Charles Shinn, romantically described the resultant communities as ‘mining-camp commonwealths’.²⁸ Australian colonial governments, in contrast, at first attempted highly regulated gold rushes. Under British law, gold and silver belonged to the crown. New South Wales and then Victoria asserted crown ownership of the gold. Both colonies created a licence to ‘dig, search for, and remove’ gold, purchasable for 30 shillings a month by persons who could

22 Weston Bate, *Victorian Gold Rushes* (Melbourne: McPhee-Gribble/Penguin, 1988), p. 40.

23 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 1849.

24 Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, p. 307.

25 Sherman L. Ricards and George M. Blackburn, ‘The Sydney Ducks: A Demographic Analysis’, *Pacific Historical Review*, 42, 1 (1973): 20; Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851–1861* (Melbourne University Press, 1963), p. 76.

26 Charles F. Lummis, ‘The Right Hand of the Continent’, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 100, 596 (1900): 174.

27 Peter Karsten, *Between Law and Custom: ‘High’ and ‘Low’ Legal Cultures in the Lands of the British Diaspora – The United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, 1600–1900* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 38.

28 Charles Howard Shinn, *Mining Camps: A Study in American Frontier Government* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1885), p. 1.

show they were not 'improperly absent from hired service'. The revenue thus raised was to pay for administration of the goldfields – including operating the licensing system, escorting the gold to the treasury, paying the goldfields commissioners, who were responsible for resolving disputes between licensed miners, and generally assisting the maintenance of order, including by provision of magistrates courts, coroners, police (recruited from pensioned-off soldiers originally sent out as convict guards) and by subsidies for the deployment of clergymen and the building of (Church of England, Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist) churches on the goldfields. Government thus involved itself with both order and morality on the goldfields. Victoria passed laws in late 1851 to criminalise gambling and the use of obscene language on the goldfields. Australian gold regulations from the beginning incorporated aspects of Californian practice – such as the priority given to first-comers, and the need to work a claim to retain it – but the ambition to achieve centralised regulation and moral order was far from Californian.²⁹

The licensing of individual mining opened up the goldfields to all comers, regardless of nationality.³⁰ Blainey observed that this decision was 'unexpected and surprising'. The New South Wales governor, FitzRoy, and the colonial secretary, Thomson, were not democrats, harboured no belief that gold belonged to all, and yet became the architects of a system that had those effects.³¹ The small size of the claims allowed – 20 feet (6.1 metres) square on flat land – initially made company mining difficult and helped create a highly mobile population, which moved rapidly from one claim to the next in what the New South Wales geological surveyor, Samuel Stutchbury, was already in 1851 describing as a 'perfect erratic life'.³²

Politics

Licensing allowed for the mining of a public resource for private gain in return for payment of a fee, and this seemed to many a fair public policy. The New South Wales conservative politician, William Charles Wentworth, observed that 'the public at large had a right to expect great benefit from this gold

29 Jeremy Mouat, 'After California: Later Gold Rushes of the Pacific Basin', in Kenneth N. Owens (ed.), *Riches for All: The California Gold Rush and the World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), p. 270.

30 See below, however, on discriminatory financial imposts on Chinese immigrants and miners.

31 Blainey, 'The Gold Rushes: The Year of Decision', pp. 129–39.

32 Stutchbury to Colonial Secretary, 27 October 1851, in *Further Papers Relative to the Recent Discovery of Gold in Australia* (London: HMSO, 1853), p. 3.

discovery, as well as the private individuals who embarked in gold-seeking enterprise'.³³ A Victorian parliamentary select committee affirmed in 1853 that the licensing system was 'the best practical means of...maintaining the fundamental principle on which the rights of property, whether public or private, are founded'.³⁴ The miners themselves, however, soon began to resent the monthly fee because it fell equally on successful and unsuccessful diggers; they argued that it was a tax on labour not on production. As mining slowly shifted from the more easily won surface alluvial gold to deeper underground leads, the monthly licence fee imposed greater hardships; in deep-lead mining, months might pass without significant income. Resentment was increased by the sometimes high-handed and autocratic demeanour of the goldfields officials who, dressed in military-style uniforms, could ask to see licences at any time. Many of the officials were young men with connections in Britain but little colonial experience – 'unfledged aristocrats...useless at home', as Ballarat miners' leader John Basson Humffray described them – and this made the diggers' perception that they were being 'treated like felons and hunted out as kangaroos' all the more galling.³⁵ Non-compliance and protest grew in Victoria. Discontent was fuelled by the circumstance that the miners were taxed but could not, as itinerants, vote for the legislature that taxed them. The memory of the American Revolution and its mobilisation upon the principle of 'no taxation without representation' was still alive. Like the American revolutionaries, the dissident gold miners praised the British constitution and argued that they only sought their rights as Britons. Protests spread on the Bendigo fields, but came to a head in the Eureka rebellion at Ballarat in 1854.

James Scobie, a Scottish digger seeking a late drink at Bentley's Hotel in October 1854, was killed by a blow to the head with a spade. The hotelkeeper, Bentley, was widely suspected of the crime, but was exonerated by corrupt local magistrates. After a subsequent protest meeting, some of the crowd rushed the hotel; it burned down in the confusion. Three men selected from the crowd were charged with the arson, and the diggers' anger grew. Governor Hotham intervened, ordered Bentley's arrest (he was subsequently found guilty of manslaughter), and set up an inquiry that confirmed that corruption existed in the goldfields administration at Ballarat. Meanwhile the

33 Wentworth speech in New South Wales Legislative Council 2 December 1851, in *Correspondence Relative to the Recent Discovery of Gold in Australia* (1852), p. 32.

34 Victoria, *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Gold Fields*, 1 November 1853, p. vi.

35 (Melbourne) *Argus*, 16 November 1854.

Chartist-influenced Ballarat Reform League, formed to defend the arrested men, began calling not just for a reform of the autocratic goldfields' administration, but also for manhood suffrage, abolition of the licence fee, and – in their minds, crucially – the opening up of the colony's land to small farming settlement. On 11 November 1854 a public meeting of 10,000 at Ballarat resolved that 'it is the inalienable right of every citizen to have a voice in making the laws he is called upon to obey – that taxation without representation is tyranny'. The League's charter stated that it would 'endeavour to supersede...Royal prerogative by asserting that of the people, which is the most royal of all prerogatives, as the people are the only legitimate source of all political power'. In a British colony, that was self-consciously revolutionary language. In this tense environment, the symbolism of power and authority was crucial. A diggers' delegation to Hotham on 27 November 'demanded' the release of the three prisoners. Hotham objected to the word, but the delegation stood firm: 'the people...have, in their collective capacity, used that word'.

At a meeting held on 29 November, the rebel Southern Cross flag ('the Australian flag of independence', as Governor Hotham described it in a dispatch) was unfurled and gold licences burned.³⁶ One resolution, acknowledging that 'it would be wholly inconsistent, after refusing to pay a license, to call in a Commissioner for the adjustments of...disputes', set up alternative dispute resolution procedures – a small display of self-governing capacity.³⁷ The next day, Peter Lalor led the rebels to the Eureka field, where they built their stockade. Ballarat was now said to be 'in a state of open and undisguised rebellion'. At 4 a.m. on Sunday, 3 December, when most of those inside the stockade were asleep, troops attacked; about 20 diggers were killed, the military lost five dead and twelve seriously wounded. In early 1855, the Eureka rebels were put on trial in Melbourne, but juries refused to convict, despite Judge Redmond Barry's warning in one case after some thunder claps that 'the eye of heaven' was upon their deliberations.³⁸

A post-Eureka Royal Commission recommended major changes to the regulation of gold mining. The licence fee was replaced with a 'miner's right', costing £1 a year, and an export tax on gold. Most importantly, the miner's right conveyed an entitlement to vote; it also allowed its holder to occupy land for a dwelling, assisting the settling of the gold regions and the

36 Hotham to Grey, 20 December 1854, in *Further Papers Relative to the Discovery of Gold in Australia* (London: HMSO, 1853), p. 63.

37 *Launceston Examiner*, 5 December 1854.

38 (Melbourne) *Argus*, 24 March 1855.

normalising of the population, as miners married and established families. Elected local courts were created on the goldfields to settle disputes and establish local mining rules. A system of leases was introduced to facilitate investment in company mining. From 1858, the local courts were restructured and augmented with mining boards, which until 1914 were responsible for making local regulations. These reforms made a significant step towards local autonomy in mining regulation. They produced a more institutionalised version of Californian practice and represented, Blainey suggested, ‘the high tide of Australian democracy’.³⁹

Eureka was an important turning point, but isolating the moment of rebellion from its context in a broader history of popular political discussion and agitation can distort its significance. What is striking in the record of Eureka is how deeply ingrained and sincere was the attachment to the forms of public meeting and discussion, the delegation, the petition, the remonstrance, the monster meeting and the demand for parliamentary representation, and how reluctantly and briefly they were abandoned.⁴⁰ The goldfields, despite the absorption of most energies in mining, were politically active regions, with their concentrations of people with united interests. They became important seedbeds of liberal and radical politics in colonial Australia; the kind of political mobilisation that facilitated a ready claiming of the voice of ‘the people’ speaking back to power – most importantly, in the movement to open up the lands for small farming settlement.

The political effects of gold rushes have been keenly debated by historians. C.M.H. Clark characterised the gold rush as a ‘levelling flood’ that created a “‘pure democracy” – a society which acknowledged no distinction between man and man’; he portrayed those who worried about gold-rush society, on the other hand, as conservatives ‘who believed society should be like a regiment in the army’.⁴¹ For Clark, as for many historians since, there were only two kinds of people in gold-rush Australia – egalitarians who embraced the new conditions, and conservatives who lamented the loss of stable hierarchy. It is true that from the early rushes in New South Wales, radicals and democrats enthused about the levelling tendencies of the gold rush, seeing in it the possibility of independence from Britain and greater equality of

39 Ralph W. Birrell, *Staking a Claim: Gold and the Development of Victorian Mining Law* (Melbourne University Press, 1998), chs 3–4; Geoffrey Blainey, *The Rush that Never Ended: A History of Australian Mining*, 5th edn (Melbourne University Press, 2003), p. 57.

40 David Goodman, ‘Eureka and Democracy’, in Alan Mayne (ed.), *Eureka: Reappraising an Australian Legend* (Perth: Network Books, 2006), p. 110.

41 C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia. Volume 4, The Earth Abideth for Ever, 1851–1888* (Melbourne University Press, 1978), pp. 4–7.

opportunity.⁴² But it was not only conservatives who worried about the social effects of gold. Many Victorian radicals in the 1850s saw gold mining as only a means to the end of land acquisition – it was the rights-bearing, voting, land-owning small farmer whose life they celebrated, not the transient alluvial miner.⁴³ Gold also hastened the transition to self-government. The British Colonial Secretary, Sir John Pakington, acknowledged in 1852 that the ‘extraordinary discoveries of gold’ had brought ‘new and unforeseen’ political and social conditions to the colonies, warranting the granting of a more complete self-government, including control of the process of sale of crown lands.⁴⁴

Effects

The gold rushes brought economic disruption in the short term. The competition from gold seeking increased the price of labour and everything else. Some miners made more money than they would have at their ordinary occupations, but many did not; all had their earnings rapidly eroded by the high prices. Some persisted with digging for months and years, but many did not. Rewards for first-comers were high. Tony Dingle estimates the average annual income for Victorian gold miners at £390 in 1852, but dropping to £240 the following year and £148 the year after.⁴⁵ The rewards for arriving early meant that this was an information economy. Rumours might convey valuable information; newspapers were lively, plentiful and often highly regarded sources of information; scientific knowledge was scarcer but also circulated in various forms.

The gold rushes provoked short-term concern about the food supply and temporarily disrupted the pastoral industry. Gold replaced wool as Australia’s leading export in the 1850s, and it was not until 1871 that wool again caught up. The population increase and elevated prices for food gave pastoralists an incentive to shift for a time to meat rather than wool production. In the longer term, however, as the Sydney *Empire* reflected in 1858, pastoralists

42 Paul A. Pickering, ‘“The Finger of God”: Gold’s Impact on New South Wales’, in Iain McCalman, Alexander Cook and Andrew Reeves (eds), *Gold: Forgotten Histories and Lost Objects of Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 38–9.

43 See Goodman, *Gold Seeking*, pp. 38–42.

44 Pakington to FitzRoy, 15 December 1852, in *Further Papers Relative to the Alterations in the Constitutions of the Australian Colonies* (London: HMSO, 1853), p. 44.

45 Tony Dingle, *The Victorians: Settling* (Sydney: Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, 1984), p. 49.

realised that their industry 'instead of being injured or destroyed by the gold discovery, has, above all others, been benefited and enriched by it', as the value of land and livestock again increased, the price of labour fell, and the increased population settled down.⁴⁶

After the initial disorganisation, gold stimulated economic growth, preparing the way for the long economic boom of 1860–90. Largely because of gold, the settler population of Australia increased from 437,000 in 1851 to 1,152,000 in 1861; the population of Victoria grew almost 100,000 between 1851 and 1852, and Melbourne became the largest city in the Australian colonies. The 1850s was the only decade of the nineteenth century in which as many Britons emigrated to Australasia as to the United States.⁴⁷ Economic historians conclude that it was the population increase, even more than the gold itself, which was the gold rushes' greatest contribution to Australian economic growth over the following decades. The extra people needed food, housing, manufactured goods, as well as infrastructure and services, so the gold immigration had 'multiplier effects' on other sectors of the economy.⁴⁸ Government as a supplier of administrative services was affected in the short term by inflation and high wages – the police force in particular found it difficult to retain recruits in the early 1850s – but soon there was a surplus of qualified applicants again as disappointed men seeking a regular income returned from the diggings. Unlike much twentieth-century mining, profits were to a large extent invested locally, assisting the unusual (for Australia) rise in non-metropolitan urban infrastructure in Victorian goldfields cities such as Bendigo and Ballarat.⁴⁹ The gold boom in New South Wales and Victoria temporarily debilitated the neighbouring colonies – in 1852 the male population of South Australia fell 3 per cent and that of Tasmania 17 per cent – but in the longer run provided them, too, with new markets.⁵⁰ As gold seekers married and formed families, there was a gradual normalising of the demographic imbalance in the gold regions. By the end of the 1850s, gold mining was becoming regularised and proletarianised, as more miners worked for a wage for local companies engaged in deep-lead mining.

46 (Sydney) *Empire*, 8 July 1858.

47 Gary B. Magee and Andrew S. Thompson, *Empire and Globalization: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c. 1850–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 69.

48 W.A. Sinclair, *The Process of Economic Development in Australia* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1976), pp. 89–92.

49 Geoffrey Blainey, 'The Momentous Gold Rushes', *Australian Economic History Review*, 50, 2 (2010): 211.

50 Maddock and McLean, 'Supply-Side Shocks', pp. 1051–2.

The skills of the gold immigrants of the 1850s also assisted economic growth; indeed, the 'quality' of the gold migration has been a favourite theme of historians since the early twentieth century. T.A. Coghlan in 1918 thought a large majority of the gold immigrants had been 'brave, adventurous and resourceful', in contrast to the convict era when 'the inflow of population consisted mainly of degenerates'.⁵¹ In 1932 G.V. Portus reported that the gold immigrants had been citizens of a 'new kind', 'eager for self-government'.⁵² Geoffrey Serle's authoritative 1963 study of *The Golden Age* also emphasised the 'high quality' of the gold immigrants, observing that they were 'magnificent economic material with educational qualifications and professional and industrial skills superior to any other group of migrants to Australia, at least in the nineteenth century'.⁵³ Recent social history research has to some extent borne out these claims. Robert Tyler found, for example, that 40 per cent of English and Scottish immigrants to Ballarat had a father who was a skilled tradesman; in Bendigo in 1861, 17.3 per cent of miners were from Cornwall, and were quite likely to have brought personal or familial mining skills with them.⁵⁴ The gold immigrants were mainly British. The 1861 Victorian census showed that despite the apparent cosmopolitanism of gold-rush society, only about 7 per cent of the colony's population had been born outside Australia or Britain. The rushes did mix people from all parts of the British Isles together, reducing over time the significance, as well as the visibility and audibility, of regional and social differences.⁵⁵ But the celebrated egalitarianism of the diggings created a community with clearly defined boundaries.

Chinese miners came in considerable numbers from Guangdong and Fujian provinces in southern China. By the end of 1855 there were about 20,000 Chinese on the Victorian diggings, a fifth of the miners there; by 1861 there were almost 13,000 Chinese on the New South Wales goldfields, a quarter of the population there. Some of the Chinese had come under an 1848

51 T.A. Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia: From the First Settlement in 1788 to the Establishment of the Commonwealth in 1901* (Oxford University Press, 1918), vol. 2, p. 875.

52 G.V. Portus, *Australia Since 1606: A History for Young Australians* (Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 135.

53 Serle, *The Golden Age*, p. 47.

54 R.L. Tyler, 'A Handful of Interesting and Exemplary People from a Country Called Wales, Identity and Culture Maintenance: The Welsh in Ballarat and Sebastopol in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century', PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2000, p. 42, cited in Charles Fahey, 'Peopling The Victorian Goldfields: From Boom To Bust, 1851-1901', *Australian Economic History Review*, 50, 2 (2010): 154.

55 Eric Richards, *Britannia's Children: Emigration from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland since 1600* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), p. 127.

scheme as indentured labourers for pastoralists; a few had paid their own way from China; many more came on 'credit ticket' schemes sponsored by merchants in China or the Australian colonies who advanced their fare, which they then repaid with interest as they worked on the goldfields in groups under a supervising headman; most came directly from China but some had also sought gold in California.⁵⁶

The capacity of the Chinese to work in large cooperative or directed groups gave them an advantage in alluvial mining over other miners.⁵⁷ The 1855 Victorian Gold Fields Inquiry Commission concluded, however, that the presence of so many Chinese would tend to 'demoralise colonial society by the low scale of domestic comfort, by an incurable habit of gaming, and other vicious tendencies and by the examples of degrading and absurd superstition'.⁵⁸ Victoria imposed a £10 entry tax on Chinese immigrants in 1855 (repealed in 1865) and a limitation on the number each ship could bring to the colony. As a result, many Chinese men walked overland to Victoria from the closest South Australian port at Robe (until that colony also imposed a landing tax in 1857, repealed in 1861) or from New South Wales (which introduced a tax in 1861, repealed in 1867).⁵⁹ The 1855 Victorian Act also sought to confine Chinese diggers to segregated camps under official Protectors, and to charge them a £1 annual protection fee for the privilege (repealed 1859).⁶⁰ These discriminatory taxes and often repressive 'protection' measures were significant governmental actions, but overt hostility to the Chinese came more significantly from European miners themselves. Because they defined the Chinese as racial outsiders to the colonial population, European diggers resented the gold the Chinese were taking, the water they were using, and

56 Ann Curthoys, "'Men of all Nations, except Chinamen": Europeans and Chinese on the Goldfields of New South Wales', in McCalman et al. (eds.) *Gold*, pp. 104–7; John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007), pp. 61–9.

57 Barry McGowan, 'The Economics and Organisation of Chinese Mining in Colonial Australia', *Australian Economic History Review*, 45, 2 (2005): 124; Anna Kyi, "'The most determined, sustained diggers' resistance campaign": Chinese Protests against the Victorian Government's Anti-Chinese Legislation, 1855–1862', *Provenance*, 8 (2009): 35–49.

58 In William Westgarth, *The Colony of Victoria: Its History, Commerce and Gold Mining; Its Social and Political Institutions down to the end of 1863* (London: Sampson Low, Son and Marston, 1864), p. 220.

59 Arthur Reginald Butterworth, 'The Immigration of Coloured Races into British Colonies', *Journal of the Society of Comparative Legislation*, 2 (1897): 337–8. Each of these colonies reinstated Chinese immigration restriction measures in 1881.

60 Kathryn Cronin, *Colonial Casualties: Chinese in Early Victoria* (Melbourne University Press, 1982), ch. 5.

their hard-working and organised approach to gold seeking.⁶¹ Anti-Chinese uprisings occurred at the Buckland field in Victoria, where 750 tents were destroyed and the gold of Chinese miners was stolen on 4 July 1856, and at Lambing Flat in New South Wales, where Chinese miners were expelled twice in 1860 by organised European miners, despite a military presence and government insistence that all diggers were entitled to British justice and the protection of the law.

On all sides, the Chinese issue was understood to have international as well as colonial dimensions. The British-imposed 'unequal treaties' after 1842 opened Chinese ports to trade and allowed foreigners to live and work in parts of China. At least some colonists saw a need for reciprocity: the American merchant George Francis Train argued that limiting Chinese immigration to Victoria would be 'contrary to the spirit of the age, opposed to the interests of this colony and opposed to the treaty with China'.⁶² Recent work has emphasised the political sophistication of the Chinese diggers, their appeals as settlers to British justice, Christian values and democratic equality in campaigns against discriminatory taxes, their use of tax evasion as a means of resisting what they perceived as unjust discrimination, and the cosmopolitanism of the colonial Chinese leaders.⁶³ When the Victorian government proposed an additional £12 annual residence tax on Chinese miners in 1857, public protest meetings were held. In Castlemaine, Chinese spokesman Pon-Sa contested the idea that the proposed Victorian imposts on Chinese immigration paralleled earlier trade restrictions on the British in China; those restrictions he argued had been enacted only 'because they took in opium which was a bad thing for Chinamen'.⁶⁴

Contemporary pessimists about the effects of the gold rush often cited its destructive and once-only character, always understood in invidious contrast to agriculture. The environmental effects of the gold rushes were significant and enduring.⁶⁵ Although the size of each claim was small, the number

61 Curthoys, "Men of all Nations, except Chinamen", pp. 108–10; Goodman, *Gold Seeking*, pp. 21–3.

62 (Melbourne) *Argus*, 24 April 1855.

63 Kyi, "The most determined, sustained diggers' resistance campaign"; Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the Question of Racial Equality* (Melbourne University Press, 2008), ch. 1; Mae M. Ngai, 'Chinese Miners, Headmen, and Protectors on the Victorian Goldfields, 1853–1863', *Australian Historical Studies*, 42, 1 (2011): 24.

64 (Melbourne) *Argus*, 7 August 1857; Ngai, 'Chinese Miners, Headmen, and Protectors', pp. 21–2.

65 Don Garden, 'Catalyst or Cataclysm? Gold Mining and the Environment', *Victorian Historical Journal*, 72, 1–2 (2001): 28–44.

of diggers who arrived, worked and left in a hurry meant that considerable environmental transformation was effected in a short time. In the first phase of alluvial mining, rivers were diverted from their courses, ground dug up and then abandoned, trees cut down to provide timber for fires, shelter and lining shafts, and animals hunted for food. The diggers, the literary traveller William Howitt noted, had 'two special propensities, those of firing guns and felling trees'.⁶⁶ Horse-drawn puddling machines accelerated the production of sludge, muddying waterways and increasing the likelihood of flooding. In the next phase of deep-lead mining from the later 1850s, there were different environmental effects – larger heaps of discarded dirt, the need for greater amounts of timber and water, the creation of miles of water races and channels, and the residue of chemicals. Mercury was widely used in the process of extracting gold from quartz and the contamination remained in waterways 150 years later; one study estimated that 900 tonnes of mercury had been released on the Bendigo goldfields.⁶⁷ The technique of hydraulic mining – the use of large, pressurised water hoses to wash away the topsoil – was introduced in the 1880s from California and the Urals, angering farmers who saw rivers silted and degraded and potentially good agricultural land destroyed.⁶⁸

This environmental damage, and the human tide of alluvial gold seekers, produced a settler invasion that was even more rapid and intense than the earlier pastoral invasion. The pastoral industry was not labour-intensive; it destroyed the food supplies of Aboriginal people, but did not lead to a frenetic and unplanned peopling of the hills and valleys. Contemporary observers clearly perceived the detrimental effects of the gold rushes on the Aboriginal population; they dwelt in particular on the detrimental effects of the introduction of alcohol. Gold also brought some new economic opportunities for Aboriginal people, who in the short term replaced European workers (in particular, shepherds) who had fled to the gold fields. The Protector of Aborigines in South Australia reported in 1852 that there were now 'upwards of 200,000 sheep in the charge of native shepherds'.⁶⁹ Digging for desirable

66 William Howitt, *Land, Labour, and Gold: Or, Two Years in Victoria* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1855), p. 176.

67 R.C. Churchill, C.E. Meathrel and P.J. Suter, 'A Retrospective Assessment of Gold Mining in the Reedy Creek Sub-catchment, Northeast Victoria, Australia: Residual Mercury Contamination 100 Years Later', *Environmental Pollution*, 132, 2 (2004): 355–63; B.M. Bycroft et al., 'Mercury Contamination of the Lerderderg River', *Environmental Pollution*, 28 (1982): 136.

68 Barry McGowan, 'Mullock Heaps and Tailing Mounds: Environmental Effects of Alluvial Goldmining', in McCalman et al. (eds.), *Gold*, pp. 88–9.

69 *South Australian Register*, 26 June 1852.

minerals – including greenstone, kaolin, ochres, basalt – was a traditional activity in Aboriginal society, and there is some evidence that Aboriginal people knew of and valued gold. In the gold-rush years, they alerted Europeans to gold, guided them towards it for pay, and sometimes dug it themselves.⁷⁰ There was a market for Aboriginal guides, even to established goldfields, which were not always easy to find in the absence of marked roads.⁷¹ Aboriginal people understandably objected, sometimes eloquently, to paying for a license fee to dig on land that had so recently been all theirs.⁷²

Nation

When William Charles Wentworth predicted in 1851 that gold ‘must in a very few years precipitate us from a colony into a nation’, he sounded a theme that has remained a favourite with historians ever since.⁷³ Nineteenth and earlier twentieth-century Australian historians liked the idea of the gold rushes as a rebirth of the nation, diluting or supplanting the earlier convict origins. Their interest in the quality of the gold migration also referred to the willingness to self-organise and take risks to improve life prospects. Gold seeking, they hypothesised, selected out a group with the self-governing, self-motivating qualities needed for nation building, and ‘men with a far wider and more advanced liberalism’, as Australia’s second prime minister, Alfred Deakin, put it in 1912.⁷⁴ This gold rush as rebirth of the nation theme invoked a kind of Victorian exceptionalism, which dwelt on the gold-rush era rise to dominance of that colony over New South Wales, and clearly demarcated Victoria’s free-settler, gold-era population and institutions from the convict origins of New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania. Serle, career historian of Victoria, argued that the gold rush represented a ‘fundamental change’ from the direction set during the earlier decades of pastoral industry domination, because of Victoria’s ‘peopling by migrants with a more modern and progressive outlook’.⁷⁵ In reaction, other historians

70 David [Fred] Cahir, ‘Finders not Keepers: Aboriginal People on the Goldfields of Victoria’, in Mayne (ed.), *Eureka*, p. 145.

71 Fred Cahir, “‘Are You off to the Diggings?’ Aboriginal Guiding to and on the Goldfields”, *La Trobe Journal*, 85 (2010): 22–36.

72 David [Fred] Cahir and Ian Clark, “‘Why should they pay money to the Queen?’ Aboriginal Miners and Land Claims”, *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, 10, 1 (2008): 115–28.

73 See the discussion of the use of the quotation in Pickering, “‘The Finger of God’”, p. 38.

74 Deakin to Lionel Curtis, 13 March 1912, quoted in Stuart Macintyre, *A Colonial Liberalism: The Lost World of Three Victorian Visionaries* (Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 17.

75 Serle, *The Golden Age*, p. 380.

emphasised instead the continuities between the gold era and the pastoral and convict past. I.D. McNaughtan argued influentially in 1955 that the gold era did not divert the course of Australian development from 'the broad lines laid down before 1851'.⁷⁶ Russel Ward's nationalist account of *The Australian Legend* (1958) also argued that gold merely reinforced the egalitarian values and practices that had already developed among itinerant white male workers on the pastoral frontier.⁷⁷ The convict/free settler contrast can, however, be overstated. Not only did the Port Phillip District in the 1840s receive 1,700 holders of 'conditional pardons' from the Pentonville model prison in London, it also by the 1850s housed many former and escaped convicts from other colonies. The contemporary historian, William Westgarth, observed in 1855 that during the first years of the gold rush, 'the convict population of Tasmania literally swarmed into the colony'. Recent research confirms this intercolonial population movement. James Boyce observes that former Tasmanian convicts 'made up the overwhelming majority of the founding fathers of Melbourne'.⁷⁸ The conflict between the normalisers who emphasised the continuity of gold-rush society with existing colonial settlement, and those who viewed gold as a new beginning for Australian society, was a key twentieth-century historiographical debate; dogmatic insistence on one perspective at the expense of the other will clearly distort the history.

As Victoria settled into the more stable but less spectacular era of company mining, the centre of gold-rushing activity moved on, as Blainey noted, in an anti-clockwise direction around the continent.⁷⁹ There were further New South Wales rushes in the early 1860s. Queensland's first gold rush was in 1867 and significant finds followed at Charters Towers (which became for a time Australia's most productive field) and then in the 1870s further north at the Palmer River fields behind Cooktown, and in the Northern Territory. There were rushes in Western Australia in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions in the 1880s, and in the Murchison region and then at Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie – the richest field of all – in the 1890s. Gold was discovered at Mount Lyell in Tasmania in the 1880s. Australian gold production continued

76 I.D. McNaughtan, 'Colonial Liberalism, 1851–1892', in Gordon Greenwood (ed.), *Australia: A Social and Political History* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1955), p. 99.

77 Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Oxford University Press, 1958), ch. 5.

78 Ernest Scott and Herbert Burton, *A Short History of Australia* (Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 196–8; Westgarth, *The Colony of Victoria*, p. 199; James Bradley et al., 'Research Note: The Founders and Survivors Project', *History of the Family*, 15, 4 (2010): 475; James Boyce, 1835: *The Founding of Melbourne and the Conquest of Australia* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2011), pp. 210–11.

79 Blainey, *The Rush that Never Ended*, p. 96.

at high levels through the century: in the 1860s averaging 2 million fine ounces a year, in the 1870s almost 1.5 million, and in the 1880s above 1 million, until Western Australia and Queensland lifted production to over 3 million ounces a year by the end of the century.⁸⁰ Outside Australia but in the region, gold was discovered in New Zealand in the 1850s and 60s, in New Guinea in the 1920s and Fiji in the 1930s. In each of these later rushes, the experience and memory of the 1850s Australian rushes was evident – in the administrative and legal models invented in New South Wales and Victoria, in transmitted mining expertise and lore, in understanding of the cycle of gold-rush history. ‘All the world knows’, observed Anthony Trollope in 1875, ‘that Australia has been made what she is very much by her gold mines’ – indeed, perhaps only Brazil had its national history so shaped by a mineral rush event.⁸¹

The individualist, democratic, international gold rushes of the 1850s were events specific to their time. Later gold discoveries were more quickly exploited by capital-intensive, often internationally financed companies; that was part of the reason that nostalgia for the freedom and independence of individual gold seeking had emerged so strongly in Australia by the 1890s. The consequences of the 1850s rushes for Indigenous people were seldom well remembered. That late-nineteenth century invention – the questing, heroic, romantic male gold seeker, who was an egalitarian yet nation-building individual – was to become an increasingly important figure in later Australian memory.

80 Maddock and Ian McLean, ‘Supply-Side Shocks’, p. 1051.

81 Anthony Trollope, *The Tireless Traveler: Twenty Letters to the Liverpool Mercury* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941), p. 99. The California rush was a major regional event, but rapidly dwarfed in the national history by slavery and the Civil War.