

Robyn Annear, 'Nothing But Gold: The Diggers of 1852' (Melbourne, Text Publishing, 1999), Chapter 1 and Chapter 23.

Chapter 1: *Discovery*

There was no gold in Victoria until somebody discovered it.

True, people had been *finding* gold in the Port Phillip District for years. As early as 1842, James Gumm, a former servant of Melbourne pioneer John Pascoe Fawkner, lived out in the Plenty Ranges and was said to be digging for gold there. They called him 'Gumm the Gold-hunter'. Throughout the 1840s, local gold finds were an open secret between the jewellers of Melbourne and a small band of proto-diggers who conveyed precious consignments to town tied in their handkerchief corners.

The idea of gold discovery in Australia originated, within the first year or so of colonisation, through the cunning of a Port Jackson convict. Using a metal file, he made bogus gold dust of a guinea and a few brass buttons, and scattered it near the lime kilns where he worked. By alerting the authorities to his 'discovery', he hoped to win a pardon as his reward. But no. Astonishment quickly gave way to suspicion, and the lime-burner's ingenuity was rewarded with a dose of confinement and the lash.

Over the next sixty years or so, colonists and visitors with a scientific bent were much given to theorising about the likelihood of native gold in Australia. Surveyors and explorers found isolated specimens, but, at the government's behest, they kept things pretty quiet. Nonetheless, their findings led the eminent British geologist Sir Roderick Murchison to declare that Australia had gold for the finding. An expatriate Cornish miner, writing home in 1849, commended to would-be emigrants the auriferous potential of 'the drift and debris on the flanks of the great north and south chain of Australia' – the Australian Alps. He was confident that 'through the application of Cornish skill such a region should be converted into a British El Dorado'.

Then there were those who could have told you exactly where to find gold, but wouldn't. Pastoralists and squatters knew little of geology, but plenty about the value of land, cheap labour and the established order of things. Gold would threaten all that. So, when a fencer or shepherd came up to the home station with specks of gold and tales of more where they came from, the boss would have none of it. He'd swear them to secrecy and send them back down the paddock with a promise of extra wages or a flea in the ear, depending on his disposition and his servant's demeanour.

Squatters had the law on their side. Gold deposits were (and still are) the property of the Crown. There was no such thing as a mining licence, so that to mine for gold was tantamount to plundering the Queen's cash-box. Needless to say, it was illegal. And, like the squatters, government officials were well aware of the instability that a gold rush might bring in a land chiefly populated by convicts and the servant class.

Early in 1849, a handful of shepherd's gold from Daisy Hill, in the Pyrenees district of central Victoria, found its way to the back room of Charles Brentani, jeweller, of Collins Street. He organised a party to follow the shepherd up-country, but they arrived to find upwards of fifty men – mostly station workers – already on the spot. The Melbourne press ran the story and dozens of townsmen weighed anchor for the 'Gold Mine'. At Daisy Hill the native police turned them back, under orders to break up the rush in the name of the Queen. Those who'd got their in time to sink their shovels were doubly disgruntled: not only were they thwarted by the law, but few, if any, found even a grain of gold. The rush was branded a hoax.

Within a few months, news of the Californian gold rushes gave Australia its first lick of real gold fever. Newspapers carried shipping notices that hollered 'CALIFORNIA! CALIFORNIA!', and plenty of men paid heed – enough to cause unease at the big end of town. Here was a disruption beyond the reach of even the Home government, let alone the native police....

With every letter or newspaper report from California came news of sensational discoveries, of a lifetime's fortune made in a week. Home-bound Australian forty-niners, it's true, mainly brought tales of disappointment; but there were some who were determined that their gold-digging life would not end with their farewell to California. Ostensibly returning empty-handed, they bore home something that would prove as good as gold, and that was experience. Like many of their countrymen, they'd recognised familiar features in the grit and clay of the Californian gold districts. As well as the arts of manipulating a gold pan and knocking together a rocker (or cradle), they'd learnt how to 'read' a landscape for gold.

The gold-bearing country around Sacramento reminded Edward Hargraves of some of his old haunts inland from Sydney. Within a month of his homecoming, he crossed the Blue Mountains in search of gold – and found it near Bathurst, in February 1851. Then, rather than make an outlaw of himself by attempting to keep his gold secret, Hargraves took it to the Colonial Secretary in Sydney, effectively making the government complicit in the discovery. He had chosen his moment well. The colony was suffering an economic slump and had lost a good many men to California. What is more, the British government had, for years, been steadfastly resisting calls from the colonies for an end to convict transportation. It was not hard for Hargraves to convince the NSW government that it had more to gain by legitimising gold mining than by suppressing it.

Victoria at that time was not yet Victoria. It was still – but only just – the Port Phillip District of the Colony of New South Wales. Six months earlier, in August 1850, the British Parliament had passed a bill separating Port Phillip from its parent colony and creating the new colony of Victoria. Now Port Phillip residents were counting the days until July, when the separation would become official and they would at last cease to share a colony with the despised 'Cornstalkers' of the northern metropolis. Just for the moment, though, they were preoccupied with the weather which ignited, on 6 February 1851, in the most ferocious bushfires the colonists had experienced. Hundreds of lives were lost on Black Thursday, and hardly a district remained unscorched.

'A month after the fires, the census counted 77,000 inhabitants in the soon-to-be colony of Victoria – 23,000 of them in Melbourne, 8,000 in Geelong and the remaining 46,000 scattered sparsely across the blackened rural districts, a good half of them engaged in pastoral occupations. A scheme of assisted emigration from Great Britain to Port Phillip had been operating for almost ten years, but the district still lacked the vitality of a flourishing labour force. 'We have,' lamented the *Argus* at this period, 'a superabundance of the richest land for agricultural purposes, only waiting for what the mother country has too much of – labour.'

So it was that the announcement by the NSW Colonial Secretary on 2 May 1851, that gold had been discovered near Bathurst, was as good (or rather, as bad) as a declaration of war against the embryonic Victoria. 'The flockmasters are in despair!' wailed the press. Sure enough, the Port Phillip District's servant and tradesman classes – shepherds and shopmen, blacksmiths and brewers, and the rest – withdrew their small sums from the banks and headed north in their hundreds. Separation began to look more like amputation, with Victoria the doomed appendage.

After a month of watching his city in panic, Melbourne's mayor called a meeting. The town's leading men all agreed that only a goldfield of its own could save Victoria from annihilation. A Gold Discovery Committee was formed, offering two hundred guineas reward for the discovery of a viable goldfield within two hundred miles of Melbourne. Gold-seeking parties hastened to the old spots, the Plenty Ranges and the Pyrenees, and within days of the reward being posted, claims of discovery were coming thick and fast. Most of the purported discoveries presented to the Gold Discovery Committee were strangled at birth. In its first four weeks, the committee was flat-out exposing shams and dispelling rumours. The newspapers followed events with breathless assiduity, but, as disappointment piled on disappointment, a renewed dread of barrenness hung over the colony-to-be....

Chapter 23: *The Great Adventure*

Why didn't the Eureka Stockade happen in 1852? The incendiary spirit was there, yet the flame didn't catch. Not that year, nor the next. The provocations and outrages of those years heaped up like faggots on a bonfire to which Eureka would put the match. But for now – and just for now – the aggravation was damped down by the exhilarant complacency peculiar to an infant gold colony.

At the end of 1852 there was still enough gold to satisfy most who would chance their luck at the diggings. Just as important, the *adventure* was still enough to sustain them. For 1852 was, above all, the year of The Great Adventure, the one year of Victoria's history in which there was nothing but gold.

W.P. Morrell made this observation of gold rushes the world over: '*Scenes and characters differed from rush to rush, but all had this in common. They were adventures, adventures of the common man...*' La Trobe himself referred to the diggers as 'adventurers' in official correspondence. While it is pleasant to imagine that the governor longed to tear off his epaulettes and join them, he almost certainly used the term in its derogatory sense, to suggest that the diggers were profiting by unscrupulous means.

One of the adventurers, looking back thirty years later, recalled 1852 as 'that feverish period of robust life, that has had no successor'. Another remembered the digger's life as 'a life of freedom, which can almost be *felt*', adding, 'it is a feeling that can only be understood by those who have experienced it'. The artist Eugène von Guérard wrote, years afterwards, that 'those who lived it became nostalgic for it ever after'. The people of the waning gold town of Maryborough were said, at the time of Federation, to be 'living on memories – dreaming perhaps of the events of the 1850s', events which were understood to have 'precipitated Australia into nationhood'.

In 1880, the Castlemaine Pioneers and Old Residents Association was formed, with the aim of recording and promulgating the recollections of the district's remaining gold-rush pioneers. The papers presented by former diggers, now pillars of provincial society, were imbued with all the vigour and clarity of long-since youth, and 'the-best-time-of-my-life' shone out of them. But no matter how respectable the old diggers had become – in fact, the *more* respectable they became – they never lost that bitter taste of bile at the memory of the treatment meted out to them by their oppressors at the Government camp. Thirty or forty years after the last digger hunt, they still all but spat at the malevolent figure of [assistant gold commissioner] Armstrong and revelled in their own scurrilous cries of 'Joe!' Since these men had been born after Waterloo and were far removed from the Crimea, the diggings were the closest they had come to an experience similar to war. As old men, they remembered it with that kind of intensity.

In 1961, a Hungarian journalist visited the Castlemaine home of his late countryman, Ernest Leviny, who had left his homeland for the Victorian diggings more than a hundred years before. Leviny was long dead, but his two youngest daughters – old women themselves – still lived in the family home. Hilda, the younger of the two, asked their visitor, 'Would you like to see the goldfields?', to which he politely acceded. envisaging scenes of industry or at least picturesque ruins. What he saw was a landscape which, to him, was ugly, repetitive and inscrutable. 'The ghost-towns nearby through which we speed,' he wrote, 'are all alike: holes, ditches and hard, yellow earth.' But the Hungarian acknowledged that the Leviny sisters, daughters of a one-time digger, saw something else: 'For Dorothy and Hilda this is the world of childhood magic: they grew up with it, like we with the legends of Rákoski-Szántó of the Törökugrató.' All along that barren route the two old women could make out red-topped tents and the rhythmic thrash of cradles rocked by the adventurers of 1852.