The Australian gold rush

The gold rushes of the nineteenth century and the lives of those who worked the goldfields - known as 'diggers' - are etched into our national folklore.

There is no doubt that the gold rushes had a huge effect on the Australian economy and our development as a nation. It is also true to say that those heady times had a profound impact on the national psyche.

The camaraderie and 'mateship' that developed between diggers on the goldfields is still integral to how we - and others - perceive ourselves as Australians. The diggers' defiance and open disdain of authority during this time is still a dominant theme in any discussion of our history and national identity.

Indeed, mateship and defiance of authority have been central to the way our history has been told. Look at Australia's World War I 'diggers' (named after their goldfield predecessors) at Gallipoli and how they have been portrayed: mates in the trenches with a healthy disrespect for their 'English superiors'.

Even today, nothing evokes more widespread national pride than groups of irreverent Aussie 'blokes' beating the English at cricket, or any other sport for that matter!

It is this early flowering of a national identity that makes any study of the gold rush days so intriguing. It is also true to say that the idealisation of goldfield life excludes or overlooks the squalor, greed, crime, self-interest and racism that were part and parcel of the times.


Nevertheless, one need only look to the poetry of Henry Lawson to see how inextricably linked our history and mythology can be:

The night too quickly passes
And we are growing old,
So let us fill our glasses
And toast the Days of Gold;
When finds of wondrous treasure
Set all the South ablaze,
And you and I were faithful mates
All through the roaring days.
Henry Lawson, The Roaring Days, 1889

The discovery that changed a nation
In 1851, Edward Hargraves discovered a 'grain of gold' in a waterhole near Bathurst.

Hargraves was convinced that the similarity in geological features between Australia and the California goldfields (from where he had just returned) boded well for the search of gold in his homeland. He was proved correct. He named the place 'Ophir', reported his discovery to the authorities, and was appointed a 'Commissioner of Land'. He received a reward of 10,000, plus a life pension.

The discovery marked the beginning of the Australian gold rushes and a radical change in the economic and social fabric of the nation.

**Gold frenzy**

Ophir was home to more than 1000 prospectors just four months after Hargraves discovery. Gold fever gripped the nation and the colonial authorities responded by appointing 'Commissioners of Land' to regulate the diggings and collect licence fees for each 'claim'.

*A complete mental madness appears to have seized almost every member of the community. There has been a universal rush to the diggings.*

Bathurst Free Press

Hargraves could never have dreamt how significant his discovery would be. New South Wales yielded 26.4 tonnes (850,000 ounces) of gold in 1852. This was a mere drop in the ocean compared to the yield from neighbouring Victoria when they joined the rush for gold.

The Victorian authorities, eager to prevent its population from joining the gold frenzy in NSW, offered a reward of 200 for any gold found within 200 miles of Melbourne. In 1851, six months after the New South Wales find, gold was discovered at Ballarat, and a short time later at Bendigo Creek.

**A nation transformed**

In 1852 alone, 370,000 immigrants arrived in Australia and the economy of the nation boomed.

The 'rush' was well and truly on. Victoria contributed more than one third of the world's gold output in the 1850s and in just two years the State's population had grown from 77,000 to 540,000!

The number of new arrivals to Australia was greater than the number of convicts who had landed here in the previous seventy years. The total population trebled from 430,000 in 1851 to 1.7 million in 1871.

The gold bullion that was shipped to London each year brought a huge flow of imports. The goldfield towns also sparked a huge boost in business investment and stimulated the market for local produce. The economy was expanding and thriving.
Because so many people were travelling to and from the goldfields, the 1850s also saw the construction of the first railway and the operation of the first telegraphs.

**The rush to the rest of Australia**

Following the gold rushes of NSW and Victoria, deposits were uncovered throughout the land. Only South Australia failed to produce any gold deposits of significance.

The first discoveries in other States were made in Western Australia in the early 1850s (the rich Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie fields were not found until the 1890s); Queensland in 1853; the Northern Territory in 1865; and Tasmania, at Beaconsfield in 1877.

**Multiculturalism on the goldfields**

Soon after the discovery of the goldfields in Victoria an exodus of unprecedented volume started, bringing to Australia people with a range of skills and professions, unthought of prior to the discovery of gold.

Australia attracted adventurers from all around the world. The majority of these new arrivals were British but also included Americans, French, Italian, German, Polish and Hungarian exiles. The largest foreign contingent on the goldfields was the 40,000 Chinese who made their way to Australia.

In 1861, Chinese immigrants made up 3.3 per cent of the Australian population, the greatest it has ever been. These Chinese were nearly all men (38,337 men and only eleven women!) and most were under contract to Chinese and foreign businessmen. In exchange for their passage money, they worked on the goldfields until their debt was paid off. Most then returned to China. Between 1852 and 1889, there were 40,721 arrivals and 36,049 departures.

**Racism**

There were campaigns to oust the Chinese from the goldfields. The motivation was based on racism and fear of competition for dwindling amounts of easily found gold as the Chinese were known as untiring workers.

**A simmering discontent**

Diggers on the Turon fields, on the Turon River near Bathurst, had grown angry and had threatened to riot if the cost of licensing fees was not reduced. The monthly fee of 30 shillings for each claim was tough to pay in hard times and the claims were only 13.5 square metres on the surface, which made them difficult to work.
The governor of New South Wales, Governor Fitzroy, wisely reduced the fees by two thirds, but stood firm on the way it was collected, so resented by the diggers who called them the police ‘digger hunts’. Police would descend on the goldfields seeking out those diggers who had not paid their fees. Those who hadn’t paid were hauled before magistrates and fined 5 for the first offence. The fine doubled for each subsequent offence.

As the police digger hunts grew more unpopular, the police began using more and more force.

**The Eureka Stockade**

The Eureka Flag was based on the constellation of the Southern Cross. Courtesy of the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery and Australian Museums and Galleries Online.

Between 1851 and 1854 tension was building on the goldfields. Clashes between the miners and the authorities became more frequent with significant discontent brewing over the injustice of the goldfield licensing system and police corruption.

At Ballarat, the tension was rising quickly. The Ballarat Reform League was set up under the leadership of an Irish engineer, Peter Lalor. His fellow rebels were a passionate and colourful bunch, including a Prussian republican, Fredrick Vern; the Italian redshirt, Raffaelo Carboni; and the Scottish Chartist, Tom Kennedy.

In December 1854, 1000 men gathered at Eureka, on the outskirts of Ballarat and unfurled their flag, a white cross and stars on a blue field, to proclaim their oath:

*We swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other, and fight to defend our rights and liberties.*

In a tragic climax to the rising tensions, troops from Melbourne overran the stockade and killed 22 of its defenders.

**Vindication**

Juries in Melbourne refused to convict the rebel leaders who were put on trial for high treason. A Royal Commission condemned the goldfield administration and the miners’ grievances were remedied. Their demands for political representation were also met. Within a year, Peter Lalor - the leader of the rebels - became a member of the Victorian parliament.

**The end of transportation**

The discovery of gold in NSW and Victoria accelerated the abolition of convict transportation to the east coast of Australia, and ultimately to the nation as a whole. By continuing to send convicts to the eastern colonies, it was, in effect, giving free passage to potential gold diggers. And why would the new convict arrivals want to work for a living when a fortune awaited them on the goldfields?
References: