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Australian History and Society: An Introduction 1788–2000

Section 2: 1851–1900

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1 Part One

1.1 Gold, Immigration and Social Change

Australia is a land rich in minerals. Between 1823 and 1848, as Australia's population slowly increased, more land was explored and settled, and convicts, explorers, bushmen and others began to discover small amounts of gold in western New South Wales. However, for various reasons, these early discoveries did not provoke a gold rush. First, the authorities were afraid of the trouble that a gold rush might cause (for instance, there was the potential for convict riots). Second, and more likely, at that time no one knew much about gold mining. Third, all gold and silver found belonged to the Government – prospectors could not keep the gold they found and could only hope for a reward. Finally, unlike California, in Australia during this time, gold was found only in very small amounts.

When gold was discovered in the Sierra Nevada mountains in 1848, hopeful prospectors rushed to California. News reached Australia in 1849 and, between 1849 and 1850, over six thousand Australian colonists tried their luck on the Californian gold fields. One of these was a 32 year old ex-farmer and publican, Edward Hammond Hargraves, who, on hearing the news, sold his cattle, left his wife in charge of their inn and sailed for California. Although he made no money at the diggings, Hargraves learned a considerable amount about gold mining. He also noticed a resemblance between the gold area of California and certain parts of the inland of New South Wales.

While in California, Hargraves conceived the idea of trying to create a gold rush in New South Wales and persuading the Government to give him a reward. Returning to New South Wales, Hargraves borrowed money and a horse and set out for places where he knew gold had already been found. After stopping at a friend's hotel in Guyong, where he was shown specimens of local gold, Hargraves changed his plans and began prospecting immediately. In a few days, Hargraves managed to accumulate a few specks of gold. He showed his two companions how to make and use a gold cradle and rode back to Sydney.

The Colonial Secretary in Sydney was dismissive of Hargraves' gold specks and did not give him a reward. He was, however, given a horse and instructed to show government geologist Samuel Stutchbury where gold could be found. Instead of following his instructions, Hargraves rode back to Guyong, bought the gold mined by his "pupils", illegally issued them with a licence, and named the area in which they were mining "Ophir" after the biblical city of gold. Hargraves hoped publicity would generate a rush. He gave a public lecture in Bathurst which was excitedly written-up by the local newspaper, and people started to flock to Ophir. Hence the first gold rush in Australia was deliberately organised. By the time Stutchbury reached Ophir, over 300 men were illegally digging the Crown's gold and the Government had a gold rush on its hands. As more and more men arrived, the area being searched

grew wider, and more and more discoveries were made. As one area was mined out, diggers shifted to others. Realising that the discovery of gold would benefit the colonies, the government eventually gave Hargraves £10,000 and other gifts as a reward for his "discoveries".

Figure 1: Diggers on the Way to Bendigo ('sketched on the spot'), 1852, by S.T. Gill, lithograph, National Library of Australia. Source: http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-135671589/view.

On 17 May 1851, the *Bathurst Free Press* provided a description of the excitement that followed the discovery of gold in New South Wales:

> *The discovery of the fact by Mr. Hargraves that the country from the mountain ranges to an indefinite extent into the interior is one immense goldfield has produced a tremendous excitement in the town of Bathurst and the surrounding districts. For several days after our last publication, the business of the town was utterly paralysed. A complete mental madness appears to have seized almost every member of the community, and as a natural consequence there has been a universal rush to the diggins [sic] … Groups of people were to be seen early on Monday morning at every corner of the streets, assembled in solemn conclave, debating both possibilities and impossibilities, and eager to pounce on any human being who was likely to give any information about the diggins. People of all trades, callings and pursuits were quickly transformed into miners, and many a hand which had been trained to kid gloves, or accustomed to wield nothing heavier than the grey goose-quill became nervous to clutch the pick and crow-bar or "rock the cradle" at our infant mines. The blacksmiths of the town could not turn off the picks fast enough, and the manufacture of cradles was the second briskest business of the place. A few left town on Monday equipped for the diggings, but on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday the roads to Summer Hill Creek became alive, literally alive, with new-made miners from every quarter, some armed with picks, other shouldering crow-bars, or shovels and not a few agricultural implements of every variety either hung from the saddle bow or hung*

about the persons … Such is the intensity of the excitement that the people appear almost regardless of their present comfort, and think of nothing but gold.[1]

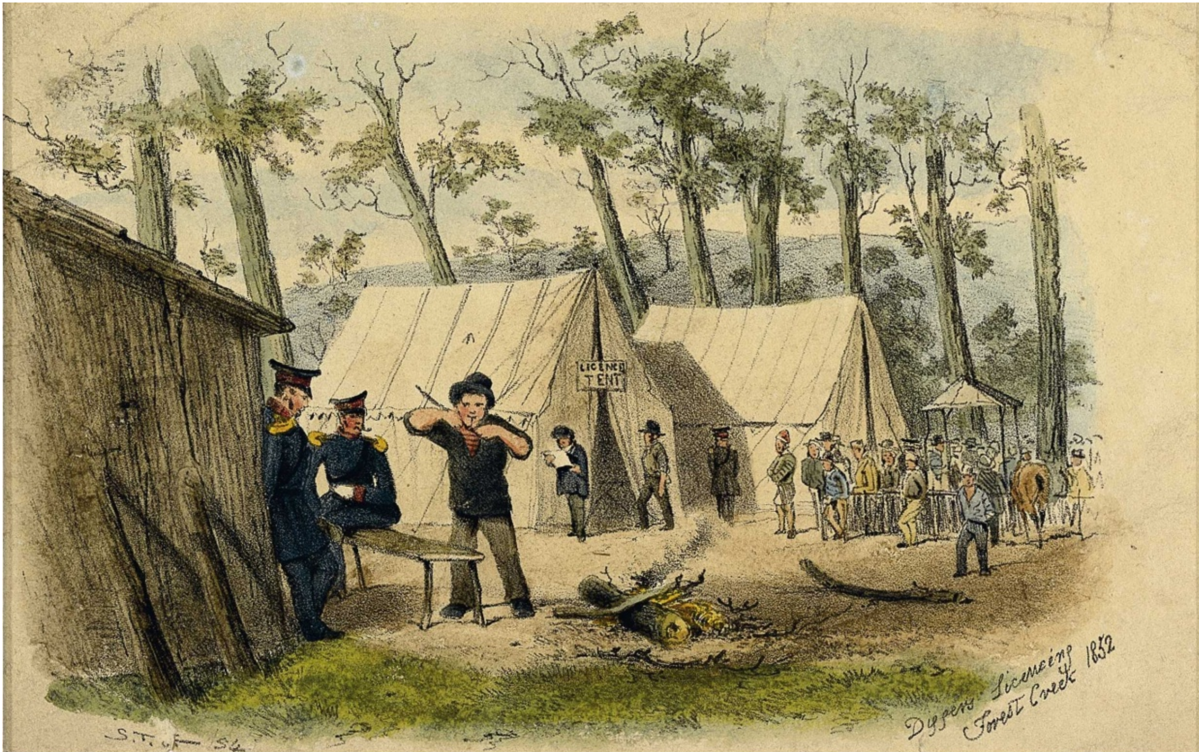

Figure 2: 'Diggers Licensing, Forest Creek 1852', ST Gill, Gold Museum Collection. Source: https://sovereignhilleducation.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/96011502.jpg.

Not having enough soldiers to stop the men digging for gold, the government imposed a license fee of 30 shillings per month which was large enough to discourage people while simultaneously providing revenue to pay for the policing of the goldfields. The licensing of individual mining opened up the gold fields to all comers, regardless of nationality or ethnicity. The small size of the claims – initially 20 feet square on flat land – initially made company mining difficult and helped create a highly mobile mining population which moved rapidly from one claim to another.[2] However, the fee was imposed regardless of whether the digger was finding gold and was thought to be unjustly high and created problems. Gold finds continued throughout the 1850s. The largest goldfields were in Victoria at Ballarat (September 1851), Bendigo and Castlemaine. The Victorian goldfields proved far richer than those in New South Wales and attracted miners from other Australian colonies and overseas.

Modern communications (such as newspapers and telegraphs) and the relatively fast, safe and cheap sailing ships of the 1850s made it possible for the Australian gold rushes to be international in scale. Equally significant was the 'modern ethos that regarded uprooting oneself from home and undertaking a long and hazardous journey in pursuit of uncertain wealth as not only

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1 *Bathurst Free Press*, 17 May 1851.

2 GOODMAN 2013,176.

possible but desirable'.[3] Thousands of people emigrated from Britain and the United States, and ships bringing people to the colonies lost their crews who "jumped ship" and went to the diggings. These emigrants followed in the wake of thousands of colonists who had deserted their town employment or their farm to dig for gold. Therefore, it was not just that the population grew. The one that existed began to move! In 1851 there were 20,000 people on the Victorian gold diggings, and this number dramatically increased to 150,000 by 1858.

Lieutenant-Colonel GC Mundy (who was in Sydney at the time) recalled:

> *No words can describe the excitement occasioned in all classes of society by the announcement. Those in whose hands the reins of government were held, had no precedent to guide them in their new predicament. The masters and employers of labour, of all ranks, from the lordly squatter of the distant interior, with his battalion of dependents, to the small tradesman of the townships, with his single assistant, trembled at the idea of their deserting for the diggings. The Government officers and other functionaries living on fixed salaries – the mere consumers of produce … shuddered at the prospect of raised prices on articles of subsistence. … Sydney assumed an entirely new aspect. The shop fronts put on quite new faces. Wares suited to the wants and tastes of general purchasers were thrust ignominiously out of sight, and articles of outfit for goldmining only were displayed. Blue and red serge suits, California hats, leathern belts, "real gold-digging gloves", mining boots, blankets white and scarlet, became the show-goods in the fashionable streets. … The conversation of the Sydneyites had resolved itself into one exclusive subject: "Are you going to the diggings? Have you been? Have you seen anyone from the mines? Have you seen the lump of gold? Have your servants run yet? My coachman is off!"*
>
> *…Nothing, indeed, can have a more levelling effect on society than the power of digging gold, for it can be done, for a time, at least, without any capital but that of health and strength; and the man inured to toil, however ignorant, is on more than equal terms with the educated and refined in a pursuit involving so much personal hardship.*[4]

The attraction of gold lured adventurers – primarily single men – from all over the world. Most were British but Europeans – in particular Polish, Hungarian, German, French and Italians (who had been inspired and disappointed by the 1848 revolutions) – and gun wielding Americans arrived in droves. However, the largest group of gold-seeking foreigners to come to Australia were people who had been driven out of their villages in Southern China by war and famine. The 1854 census recorded 2,300 Chinese in Victoria in April 1854, 10,000 in April 1855 and 17,000 adult male Chinese in June 1855.[5] Their capacity to work in large co-operative or di-

3 Ibid., 172.

4 MUNDY 1852, 305–9. For the German translation see GERSTÄCKER 1856.

5 CROWLEY 1980, 310.

rected groups gave the Chinese an advantage over other miners.[6] In an effort to keep the Chinese out of Victoria, in June 1855 the newly formed colonial government imposed a hefty landing tax of £10 per head and limited the number of Chinese on board each vessel to one person for every 10 tonnes of goods. As entry to neighbouring colonies remained unrestricted, Chinese migrants disembarked at the South Australian port of Robe and trekked overland for 500 miles (a journey of three weeks) to the Victorian gold fields. By 1858 there were an estimated 42,000 Chinese in Victoria.

A Flood of Celestial Light pouring in upon the Diggings.

Figure 3: Melbourne Punch, 1857, Museum Victoria. Source: https://prov.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/inline-images/Celestial%20Light.jpg.

After prospector Denis Regan discovered gold in New South Wales at a place called Lambing Flat in 1860, Chinese miners flocked there in their thousands. While Americans tended to be unpopular in the early days, as Australians returned home with unfavourable tales from the Californian gold-fields, and while many colonists of English descent disliked the Irish miners, the worst prejudice was reserved for the Chinese. Their different appearance, dress and habits drew accusations of criminal and immoral behavior; moreover the manner in which the Chinese worked the gold fields and the competition they provided caused resentment. At this time the Chinese out-numbered European miners in New South Wales by three to two. The Chinese became infamous among other miners for their hard work, usually for lower wages, and their rivalry for new claims. While the European diggers were not much interested in small earnings, the Chinese were content to work for small rewards. Europeans would begin a digging, work for a short time, become dissatisfied if no significant reward was to be found, and move on to a new locality. The Chinese would move onto the abandoned dig-

6 GOODMAN 2013, 183.

ging. Within a few weeks the European would again be dissatisfied and return to his original digging only to find the Chinese miner enjoying great rewards.

The "dirty and filthy" Chinese were accused of taking up more ground than they were entitled to and spoiling the water. European miners believed the opium dens which some Chinese established to be sinful. In 1857, P. Just offered a description of Chinese miners:

> *They presented a curious appearance to European eyes when seen on the road; – their singular-looking garments hanging loosely upon them – slippers turned up at the toes – umbrella-like hats of basket work – and long bamboo on their shoulders, from each end of which were suspended their goods and chattels, consisting of tent, blanket, rice-bags, tin dishes, and, in some instances, a gold washing cradle. Marching … in Indian file, they presented the appearance exactly of the figures on an old tea-chest: so little do these people attend to changes of fashion in the cut and shape of the garments. The first detachment created a laugh at their uncouth and grotesque appearance – their peculiar features, and cunning dexterity. Soon fresh cargoes were landed, and took their way to the gold fields, where their presence was undesired and detested. The miners complained of their filthy habits, and of the destruction of the water – at all times a valuable commodity in the interior, especially in the summer time. But while those occupied in the most valuable branch of Colonial industry both disliked and dreaded – not feared – these Mongol strangers, another class – rice and opium merchants – merely saw in them so many customers for the article in which they dealt, overlooking, in the desire for instant gain, the future consequences of this undesirable immigration. Those who had the real welfare of the Colony at heart, wished that some means might be taken to prevent such an influx of this people; while, on the other hand, those who could only look upon them as so many customers for certain commodities, hailed the arrival of each lot of the Tartar horde with evident delight, and deprecated any attempt being made to exclude them.*[7]

[7] JUST 1859, 205.