

ANZ LitLovers LitBlog

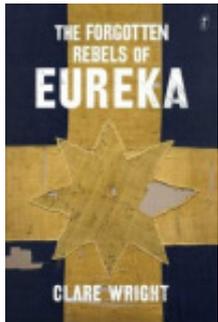
For lovers of Australian and New Zealand literary fiction; Ambassador for Australian literature

Posted by: **Lisa Hill** | March 3, 2014

The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka, by Clare Wright

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1 Votes



<http://anzlitlovers.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/the-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka.jpg>

Cultural warning: Aboriginal readers are advised that this review contains the names of a deceased person.

Whenever I see a reference to 'The Forgotten', my antennae are on alert: there are always so many demands on our attention now, so why should we remember these particular *Forgotten*? Have they been forgotten because, however interesting they might have been as individuals, they weren't really very important in the great scheme of things, or was there some systemic (or sinister) reason why their stories have been overlooked (or suppressed)? Do these Forgotten in fact have some significance that demands that their story be resurrected?

However, this was not a question that I was expecting to confront when I took on reading *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* by Clare Wright. Even though Australian history is comparatively young, there are groups of people whose contribution to the historical record has been marginalised, and their stories should be told. There are plenty of PhDs in this field, and some of these become books for a general readership. Wright's book, emerging from her research, is about the women involved in the Eureka Stockade of 1854, and it's an important work that aims to set the male-only record straight. It's written in a reader-friendly, chatty style, and although it's thoroughly referenced with endnotes, it wears its scholarship lightly. The problem for me was

that not all of it seemed to warrant my attention.

(<http://anzlitlovers.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/the-lone-protestor.jpg>) In this respect, *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* reminded me of the story of A.M.

Fernando, an indigenous man who in the interwar period took his protest about the treatment of Australian Aborigines to Europe. Fiona Paisley's *The Lone*

Protestor: A M Fernando in Australia and Europe

([http://www.fishpond.com.au/product_info.php?](http://www.fishpond.com.au/product_info.php?ref=2614&id=9781922059055&affiliate_banner_id=1)

[ref=2614&id=9781922059055&affiliate_banner_id=1](http://www.fishpond.com.au/product_info.php?ref=2614&id=9781922059055&affiliate_banner_id=1)) brings this forgotten hero to long overdue attention, and I am hopeful that there will soon be a children's

picture book about him so that my students hear his inspiring story in palatable form. Fernando matters because he was an activist and he symbolises the refusal to be an indigenous victim, so often the prevailing image of Aborigines in this period. But alas, I found *The Lone Protestor* rather heavy-going and didn't finish it before it was due back at the library – which is why it isn't

reviewed here at ANZ LitLovers, only somewhat apologetically at [GoodReads](http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/659030301)

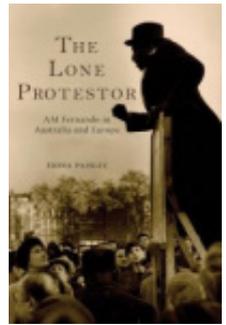
(<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/659030301>). (For a comprehensive review, the one that inspired me to find the book myself, see Yvonne Perkin's review at [Stumbling Through the Past](http://stumblingpast.wordpress.com/2013/01/31/glimpses-of-an-extraordinary-life/) (<http://stumblingpast.wordpress.com/2013/01/31/glimpses-of-an-extraordinary-life/>)).

The Lone Protestor encapsulates for me the dilemma: wanting to know the story, but not the degree of detail.

The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka has similar significance to *The Lone Protestor*: it tells the forgotten story of women on the Victorian Gold Fields and the role they played in the uprising that led to democratic reforms in the colonial period of our state. It puts paid to the myth that the goldfields were a boozy male-only domain; it changes the Eureka dynamic with its irrefutable assertion that the tent cities were 'a heterogeneous and largely orderly community of 'working families' intent on building a new life of freedom and independence' (p. xii). The book is much livelier than *The Lone Protestor* but it's still very long at 512 pages, and that's a pity. Because in less detailed form it would be a book that a general readership would really enjoy, and secondary students would love Wright's chatty style, if only there were not so much of it. It has taken me forever to read it, and I suspect that many will bring it home from the library only to return it unfinished.

There are lots of interesting women in this history: there was the activist Ellen Young who used poetry as her medium, and Clara Seekamp who in a first for publishing took over as editor of the Ballarat Times when her husband was arrested. Riches-to-rags Catherine Bentley ran the Eureka Hotel with her husband, but after the riot in which it was burnt to the ground, was left destitute when James was gaoled for the murder of Scobie. Most interesting of all was that the single biggest donor to the Diggers Defence Fund was the diva Sarah Hanmer who ran the Adelphi Theatre and ran benefit concerts for the cause, right under the noses of the authorities. These are women of significance who deserve to have their place in history acknowledged.

However, there were times when I felt like taking a red pen to the pages. For example, I was interested to learn that the ubiquitous online petition that generally has no value other than to make its signatories feel validated, has antecedents as a genuine form of participatory democracy. In the 19th century it was, Wright tells us, 'a direct link between people and their leaders' and it also 'performed an adhesive function, rallying support for local issues that gave a sense of belonging to a moral,



political or geographic community' (p. 234) It meant something then, when 5000 petitioners signed the Bendigo Goldfields Petition protesting against the licence fee in 1853. I'm not convinced that it meant anything much that two 'hardy' women signed it, and I'm even less convinced by the claim that *'with their husbands down a shaft, diggers' wives probably did much of the footwork to collect signatures'*. (p. 235) Such a claim implies that it was women who had time to do this during the day, when the probability was, based on Wright's own picture of women on the goldfields, that they were flat-out in the drudgery of housework and minding the children born every other year and sometimes, as breadwinners for the family, running a small business as well. Ok, I'm not an historian, and Wright is, but my bet is that those signatures were collected in the grog shops where men gathered after hours (because they could), while the women were isolated at home at night, doing the washing-up, the darning, and trying to get the kids to sleep (because they had to).

There are other feminist speculations that draw a very long bow. Robyn Annear is quite right, IMO, to label as 'kooky' Wright's explanation for the desertion of so many of the stockaders on the night of the clash. Hormones and a full moon, I kid you not. I think Annear is right about the missing 'firm evidence' for some of her other assertions too. (See Annear's [review at The Monthly](http://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2013/november/1383224400/robyn-annear/clare-wright-s-forgotten-rebels-eureka) (<http://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2013/november/1383224400/robyn-annear/clare-wright-s-forgotten-rebels-eureka>.)

Yvonne Perkins at [Stumbling through the Past](http://stumblingpast.wordpress.com/2013/11/25/review-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka/)

(<http://stumblingpast.wordpress.com/2013/11/25/review-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka/>) is generally very positive about the book's strengths but had a couple of reservations about Wright using family history as evidence without explaining what her criteria for inclusion were, and seemed more than doubtful about the desertion from the stockade theory. The more I think about this, the more I think this exotic theory is an attention-getting device for the book, which makes me a bit resistant to giving it more air.

Another of my historian friends, [Janine Rizzetti of The Resident Judge of Port Phillip](http://residentjudge.wordpress.com/2014/02/05/the-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka-by-clare-wright/) (<http://residentjudge.wordpress.com/2014/02/05/the-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka-by-clare-wright/>), comments on Wright's odd speculations too, and also points out something I hadn't realised: it's a *particularly visual work, staged and narrated much as a lengthy documentary might be*. It's this pop-hist-doco style that accounts for some of the authorial 'cliff-hanger' comments:

Peacemaker or firebrand? Sarah Hanmer kept everyone guessing. Sometimes it pays to have one foot in both camps, adroitly straddling the line. (p. 403, where it is followed by an asterisk, and then a complete change of scene).

[Alison Bartlett at The Guardian](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/31/the-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka-by-clare-wright-book-review) (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/31/the-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka-by-clare-wright-book-review>) makes a salient point about this history: it's a social history of Eureka, diminishing the significance of the massacre in favour of bringing the milieu alive. While I like the picture Wright paints of the social conditions on the goldfields, her decision to focus on what's missing from the prevailing narrative means that one has to read elsewhere *as well* in order to correct the distortion that arises from putting women 'front and centre' in this book. That makes for a lot of reading.

Author: Clare Wright

Title: *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*

Publisher: Text Publishing, 2013

ISBN: 9781922147370

Source: Review copy courtesy of Text Publishing

Availability

Fishpond: [The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka \(http://www.fishpond.com.au/product_info.php?ref=2614&id=9781922147370&affiliate_banner_id=1\)](http://www.fishpond.com.au/product_info.php?ref=2614&id=9781922147370&affiliate_banner_id=1)

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Your review of this book puts me in mind of Javier Marías's criticism of efforts to sandpaper back the rougher and politically incorrect edges off Spanish high school history syllabuses so as to modernise and bring content in line with contemporary standards and tastes. I think it was Amis who said "you do not have a right not to be offended". It's a thin line between writing history, which inevitably involves invention, and inventing a version of history to satisfy one's sense of righteousness!

This is Troy from GRs, by the way. I'm expanding in blog-land, or trying at least.

By: [mantalini](#) on March 5, 2014
at 2:20 am

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Hola, Troy! Estoy contento de ver que usted está aquí:) Por favor dé mis saludos a Anna... From what little I know of Spanish history, I reckon it would be a nightmare trying to write a history syllabus, and as for teaching it, well, the mind boggles. Imagine having in the same class grandchildren of Franco's forces and their opponents in the civil war, and trying

to explain the causes and consequences of it...

By: **Lisa Hill** on March 5, 2014
at 6:32 pm

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My! What good Spanish you have. ¡Muy bien!

By: **mantalini** on March 5, 2014
at 9:18 pm

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Gracias! (with a 'th')
sigh Can't do an upside-down exclamation mark on my keyboard...

By: **Lisa Hill** on March 5, 2014
at 9:26 pm

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And likewise, say hooray to Tim from us. Hope all is well with you both.

By: [mantalini](#) on March 5, 2014
at 9:20 pm

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This review is very interesting Lisa. I was glad that Wright did not talk about the massacre as it has been covered ad nauseum, but you are right about this being problematic. It limits this book to readers who have some familiarity with this part of Australian history, ie those who attended primary school in Australia.

By: [perkinsy](#) on March 7, 2014
at 8:04 am

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LOL Yvonne, the kids only hear the bare bones of the Eureka story in primary school. I couldn't tell you now where it was that I read about the political and symbolic significance of the massacre, similar in impact to the mass suicide of the Balinese royal family in the C19th which embarrassed the Dutch into some long overdue reforms, but it was when I was an adult, not at school.

By: [Lisa Hill](#) on March 7, 2014
at 11:59 pm

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[...] Read Lisa Hill's review on her blog, ANZ LitLovers LitBlog. [...]

By: **Review: Forgotten Rebels of Eureka | Stumbling Through the Past** on March 30, 2014 at 3:06 pm

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