



Eureka women languish in the dust of the past

SACRIFICES AND SUFFERING IGNORED AMID LEGENDS OF THE GOLD REBELLION

MAREA DONNELLY

he dust and rabble of colonial goldfields was considered no place for decent women, much less a gentlewoman. Yet Irish-born "Harriet", who was paid in gold nuggets for her puddings and pies, wrote home from the diggings: "I almost fear to tell you, I do not wish it to end."

The vagaries of fortune shone less brightly for Sarah Skinner. As the Eureka rebellion simmered in May 1854, she shivered in a flimsy tent at Ballarat, battling a fever as she laboured with her fourth child.

A week later her unnamed baby son died. One week after that Sarah also died, leaving her husband William, 27, to raise their one surviving child.

In the matey heroism of goldfield legends, historian Clare Wright argues women's experiences were sidelined, even ignored, including in the Eureka rebellion of Sunday December 3, 1854. Her book about the Eureka Stockade, *The Forgotten Rebels Of Eureka*, is out this week.

Wright writes that one unidentified woman was killed when 276 police troopers stormed the stockade at 3am,

killing at least 27 miners, and costing the life of four soldiers.

The woman is not listed among the casualties, although Wright quotes the diary of printer Charles Evans, then 26: "One of the coffins trimmed with white ... was the body of a woman who was mercilessly butchered by a mounted trooper while she was pleading for the life of her husband".

Although Eureka rebel Peter Lalor's pledge "to stand truly by each other and fight to defend our rights and liberties" was directed to the miners, the principle applied perhaps most resoundingly to the 4023 women who by 1854 had accompanied 12,660 men to the Ballarat diggings. A witness to the Eureka rebellion wrote decades later of ruffian, rowdy Irish "Tips" at Eureka, a somewhat isolated reef just east of Ballarat. The "old digger" explained Tips regularly jumped claims, using force to repel owners and mounted troopers.

"An old man named Cummins ... marked off a claim in front of his door, which he shepherded. In time this claim looked well, and consequently one morning he found a burly Tip in the hole, who threatened all sorts of terrors if the old man dared resume possession." Appearing "desolate, help came from an unexpected

quarter".

"He had a jolly buxom wife, considerably younger than himself, and she, having a kettle of boiling water handy, rushed to the claim, and poisoning the kettle over the top log, threatened to scald the jumper. Seeing she meant business, and judging that diggers would support her if he retaliated, he cleared out."

Along with the redoubtable Mrs Cummins, women who shaped the Ballarat diggings included doctor's wife Martha Clendinning, who with her sister Sarah Lloyd opened a store selling "best quality" tea, coffee sugar, tobacco, bottled fruits and Cheshire cheeses.

As business prospered, Clendinning decided many Ballarat women were of "a very rough class". A female contemporary noted "most of the wives ... exhibit on their faces the brutal marks of their husbands' fists".

Irish potato famine survivor Anastasia Hayes arrived in Melbourne in 1852 with five children and husband Timothy, who partnered Lalor and Duncan Gilles on the Ballarat diggings. After her sixth child was born in their tent, Hayes began teaching at a Catholic school to help make ends meet.

Described as a goldfields "firebrand", complaining

about how miners were treated, in 1854 she encouraged Timothy to help lead the rebellion. As Ballarat Reform League chairman, he presided over a huge meeting at Bakery Hill on November 29, to plan building the Eureka stockade.

In the large tent that housed Catholic congregations, Anastasia sewed the 4m Eureka flag with Irish-born Anne Duke, then 16 and pregnant with her first child, and pregnant, English-born Anastasia Withers, transported to Tasmania for stealing five shawls before arriving on the goldfields with her husband Samuel.

After the rebellion, when she aided the unanesthetised amputation of Lalor's arm, Anastasia Hayes wrote "I saw many wounded, and I did all in my power to alleviate their sufferings ... Many of the poor fellows were besmeared with blood and writhing in agony."

The Melbourne Argus reported: "The most harrowing and heart-rending scenes amongst the women and children I have witnessed through this dreadful morning. Many innocent persons have suffered."

marea.donnelly@news.com.au

The Forgotten Rebels Of Eureka, by Clare Wright, Text Publishing, \$45, out Wednesday





Anastasia Hayes (main) and Anastasia Withers had active roles in the Eureka rebellion and (above) rebel leader Peter Lalor.