



Digging for Eureka's gold

Clare Wright's new history explores the unheralded but crucial role of women in Victoria's most notorious rebellion. writes **Linda Morris**.



The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka by Clare Wright is published by Text, \$45.

Among the 27 civilians shot dead by British troops and police on the Ballarat diggings in 1854 was a woman “mercilessly butchered”, attested one eyewitness, by a mounted trooper while pleading for the life of her husband.

The name of the miner's wife with the white-trimmed coffin was not in the official government lists of the dead and wounded, nor on Peter Lalor's famous list of published heroes. Nor has her name emerged from family lore, says historian Clare Wright, who found there are no inquest files.

Wright's book, *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*, aims to restore women's central role in the Eureka Stockade. It has been a decade in the writing, an immersive project that exhausted the original research grant and has Wright still searching, but confident of one day discovering the name of the lone female casualty.

She came upon the Eureka story after documenting the lives of women publicans and delving into the background of Catherine Bentley, who might be considered Eureka's longest-term victim. Miners burnt down the family hotel, a trigger-point for the later police brutality. Bentley's ancestors are still fighting for compensation.

Wright's male academic colleagues had asked her, “What more could possibly be said about Eureka that hasn't been said before?” It was, she says, “a bit like a red rag to a bull to me”. She found mostly male accounts of women's active participation in the political eruptions at Eureka. “What they

saw was a lot of women doing a lot of interesting shit,” says Wright in a forthright manner that typifies her lively narrative style.

One woman was scalped by a bullet that pierced her bonnet. A third died of her wounds three weeks after government troops and police stormed the stockade. Women were present in large numbers on the goldfields, children trailing at their feet. They were merchants, publicans and washerwomen. They were inside the stockade. Women such as Ellen Young and Clara Seekamp stoked political dissent, and a stage actress, Sarah Hanmer, helped finance the rebels. Women were integral to understanding the psychology of the goldminers.

“It's not so barefaced as saying the diggers fought for their political rights,” Wright says. “That is as banal a reading of what

“History is one rabbit hole after another.”

was going on in 1854 as you can give it. It was about what gold represented in terms of freedom and independence and human dignity – for men to be good providers and to regain the feeling of manly self-regard that they didn't have in the old country and to understand what happened to them over the course of that year, when those expectations were completely thwarted and frustrated.” And, she says, “they were watching their wives die in childbirth in a windblown tent at the arse end of the world and they couldn't do a thing about it”.

Part of history's lure for Wright is the mystery and the puzzling. “My children always accuse me of being a terrible storyteller, because I can never quite finish my story; I'm always going off on a tangent. They are always just saying, ‘Mum, get to the point’. For me that's the great gift of history; it is one rabbit hole after another.”

Channelling her intellectual energies into history compensates for a rootless childhood. From age five, Wright spent school holidays crossing the Pacific Ocean between her divorced American parents, a Harvard-educated father and her Melbourne-based mother and Australian stepfather.

On a rare holiday at home, when friends were heading to the beach with their boyfriends, Wright buried herself in the domed Reading Room of the State Library for a school history assignment. She dates her love of archives to that fortnight.

After high school, Wright lived in Canada for a year. “I actually was trying to decide where I wanted to do university, which side of the planet I wanted to locate myself on and came back at the end of that year more confused than ever. I started first year Arts-Law, hated law, loved history.”

From these peripatetic beginnings, Wright grew to love Australia in a whole different way. “My father's family were Polish Jews who immigrated to America in the 1920s and my mother's family were Scotch Presbyterians. My stepfather's family were Holocaust survivors, so I had this very mixed heritage of Russian, Jewish, Polish, Protestant American.

“Because I had an outsider's perspective, I've always been very drawn to stories that are integral to Australian national identity.”

Wright, 44, has a storyteller's knack, a skill she honed as a researcher for ABC TV and as a TV documentary writer. She wrote and presented *Utopia Girls*, a documentary for the ABC on the women's suffrage movement in Australia, and her four-part documentary series *The War That Changed Us*, about Australia's involvement in World War I will screen on ABC1 in August 2014.

“I'm attracted to these big-ticket history items but rather than perpetuate mythology about them, I go back to the primary sources. If the Hippocratic Oath of a doctor is to do no harm, the oath of an historian is don't make shit up.”





Author: Clare Wright has a lively narrative style. Photo: Ken Irwin