



# Eureka moment

Women get the starring roles in a meticulously researched history of the Ballarat goldfields.

Review by  
Anne Beggs-Sunter

At the launch of Clare Wright's book at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka, Barry Jones, OAM, gave a mini-lecture on the writing of Australian history, highlighting the way in which both the Aboriginal people and women were excluded from our white settlement history until recent decades. He reflected on the strange fact that while women were left out of colonial history, the new Commonwealth of Australia was one of the first governments in the world to give women the right to vote, and to stand for parliament. How do we explain this paradox?

Wright attempts to answer the question in this big book about the women of Eureka. The author follows in a tradition that began with Laurel Johnson's trail-blazing *Women of Eureka* (1995). This was followed by Dorothy Wickham's *Women of the Diggings: Ballarat 1854* (2009). Both of Ballarat's universities have initiated important historical research on women on the goldfields, and much credit must go to Professor Shurlee Swain, from the Australian Catholic University, for encouraging this work, which Wright used.

While Wright has nothing new to add about the political analysis of Eureka, she probes the link between "the politics of sexuality" and "the sexuality of politics". She

presents a cast of leading ladies – writers, actresses, publicans and teachers, some of whom have been barely noticed before this book. Prime among these is the actress Sarah Hanmer, who established one of Ballarat's first theatres, the Adelphi, and actively supported the diggers' cause. She played an important role after the Eureka Stockade in helping the young American James McGill escape from Ballarat by dressing him in female attire.

The author's forensic research has brought this interesting character to life and prominence. How fitting that one of the illustrations in the book is the interior of the Adelphi Theatre in 1854, showing Mrs Hanmer.

Another woman given star billing is Catherine Bentley, the wife of the hotelier James Bentley, whose establishment, the Eureka Hotel, was burnt to the ground by an angry crowd after the Bentleys were implicated in the death of a young digger. Catherine suffered from the odium heaped upon her husband, but Wright wins our sympathy for a mother whose life was destroyed by the burning of her hotel and her husband's imprisonment.

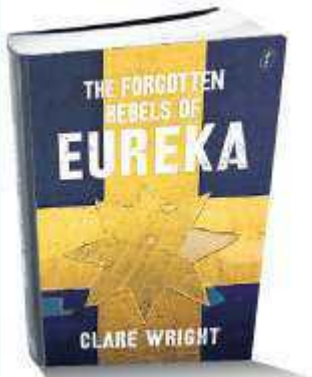
Wright evokes the goldfields era vividly through her racy language, making the 1850s easily accessible to today's readers. Perhaps the language is too racy and too idiomatic of 2013, as in the following example, describing lucky diggers in town on a spree: "What better way for a young man to prove to his peers that he had thrived and prospered than to show off a trophy bride? Saturday

night in Collins Street, Melbourne circa 1854 was like a weekly Brownlow Medal count: a spectacle of tarts-up horseflesh arrayed in celebration of virility."

Wright infuses her writing with intimate female images. She evokes vividly the experience of childbirth and caring for children on the goldfields, problems of hygiene and disease, and the perils of a wife losing her husband and breadwinner through imprisonment or death. She goes so far as to put forward a new explanation for the high rate of desertion of the stockade on the night before the battle. She suggests that because it was the night of the full moon, a night associated with female fertility, husbands returned to the pleasures of the marital bed. She writes that the "electric atmosphere" digger H. R. Nicholls described as pervading Ballarat was caused "by the hormonal magnetism of the goldfield's five thousand women, a community in heat". Readers can decide what they make of this explanation.

She also brings a new interpretation to the thorny question of the design and making of the Eureka flag. Unsurprisingly, she espouses the story of women making the flag, but for the first time she names Eliza Darcy, who would soon become Mrs Patrick Howard, wife of one of the stockaders. Against the prevailing written evidence, she suggests Patrick Howard designed





## History

### **THE FORGOTTEN REBELS OF EUREKA**

Clare Wright

Text, 512pp, \$45

the flag, and it was sewn by a group of women using the big tent-chapel of St Alipius as their workroom. The only evidence for this is family memories. My own research into the Eureka flag has revealed family memories are often unreliable, with frequent attempts to inflate the role an ancestor played in historical events. Unless there is contemporary documentary evidence, these claims are impossible to verify.

Generally, this history is based on impeccable research. Wright has trawled through every relevant archive and library, unearthing some previously unused documents, and bringing a new reading to others. She makes a strong case for the active and public role played by some women in demanding justice and fair treatment on the goldfields.

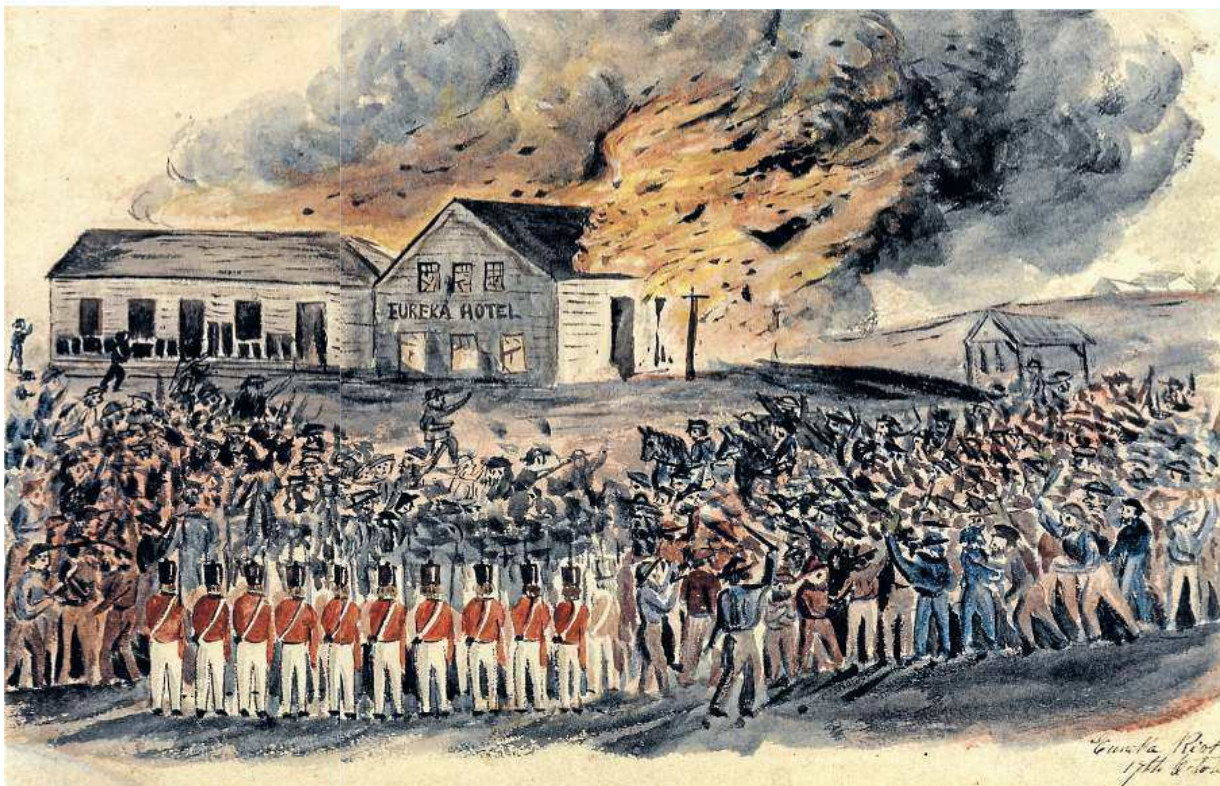
I found few errors. One that did slip through was the description of the administrative camp in Ballarat being bordered by Lydiard, Mair, Camp and Grenville streets. Everyone in Ballarat knows Sturt Street,

not Grenville Street, defined the camp. And Eugene von Guerard's painting *Old Ballarat as it was in the summer of 1853* is not a historical sham, because the artist based it faithfully on a detailed pencil sketch that he made in 1853. Both the painting and the sketch are in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ballarat. These are minor quibbles.

The book makes a strong case for the forgotten rebels of Eureka, and it brings to life the experiences of so many young immigrants to Australia in the 1850s. It has been handsomely produced, with illustrations, detailed references and index, making it an excellent addition to libraries.

Women, in particular, will enjoy this refreshing new look at Eureka, which champions the female role in the development of Australian democracy.

Anne Beggs-Sunter lectures in Australian history at the University of Ballarat.



Goldfields riot: Canadian artist and digger Charles Doudiet's depiction of the Eureka rebellion. Image: Art Gallery of Ballarat