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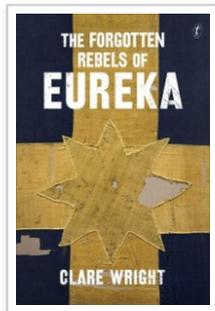
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## BOTTOM UP

BY RACHAEL WEAVER (<http://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/contributors/rachael-weaver/>)

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*The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* by Clare Wright

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The colonial Australian social type of the female digger, or ‘diggeress’ as she was sometimes known, makes a memorable cameo appearance in William Howitt’s 1855 book *Land, Labour and Gold; or, Two Years in Victoria*. After observing the flashy and daredevil behaviour of swarms of successful diggers, who have been terrorising pedestrians with feats of horseback riding in Bourke Street, Melbourne, Howitt notes in passing a digger who marches off ‘followed by his diggeress, a tall, slim young woman, who strode on like a trooper, and appeared on the eve of becoming a mother’.

Though brief, this intriguing snapshot invests the diggeress with a number

of attributes generally ascribed to the 'Australian girl' at the time: her height and figure, her athleticism and stoicism, her unconcern for social convention – and, in this case at least, an ability to carry a late-term pregnancy with casual grace. The figure of the woman on the goldfields – whether fossicker, wife, mother, sly grog seller, storekeeper, actress, business woman, washer woman, fallen woman or landlady – is an undoubted presence in nineteenth century popular fiction by writers such as Mary Fortune, James Skipp Borlase and Benjamin Farjeon. But such women have nonetheless been limited to walk on roles in the field of historical studies.

Clare Wright's *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* is a concentrated study of the five years or so from the discovery of gold at Ballarat in 1851 to the aftermath of the 1854 Eureka Stockade. It also ranges widely across broader colonial and international contexts. It draws comparisons with the Californian goldfields, for example, as well as other historical instances of women becoming politically mobilised: during the French Revolution, in relation to the Chartist Movement in Britain, and so on. Wright seeks to reinstate women to their rightful place in the history books, arguing that conventional accounts of the Eureka Stockade – as a founding legend for Australian democracy – have been blind to the high proportion of women living and working on the Ballarat goldfields in the years immediately leading to the uprising, and that these accounts have neglected the crucial contributions women made as agitators, petitioners, fund raisers and all-round rabble-rousers. 'Women were there,' Wright states in her introduction. 'They mined for gold and much else of economic value besides. They paid taxes. They fought for their rights. And they were killed in the crossfire of a nascent new world order.'

This unvarnished feminist revisionism pays tribute to classic historical works, such as Sheila Rowbotham's study of class and gender *Hidden from History* (1973). In the introduction to a recent reissue of her book *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (1992), Catherine Hall looks back at the movement to recover women's histories that began in Britain in the 1970s:

we wanted not just to put women back into a history from which they had been left out, but to rewrite that history so that proper recognition would be given to ways in which gender, as a key axis of power in society, provides a crucial understanding of how any society is structured and organized.

It is a project close to the heart of *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*, which not only succeeds in bringing women's presence on the Australian goldfields vividly into focus, but also considers the instrumental role they played in transforming power relations within the fluid and often turbulent social and political formations of the goldfields community, which reached boiling point in the Eureka uprising. As Wright reflects: 'Women's presence does not just add colour to the picture; it changes its very outline.'

It is a pity, then, that Wright does not take a little more time to reflect on the wider context for this kind of feminist historical research. Instead, she aligns her book with Henry Reynolds' writing on settlement and frontier conflict. 'Like Henry Reynolds' ground-breaking *Why Weren't We Told?*, which shattered the myth that colonisation was a benign and uncontested process,' she writes, 'this is the first book to retell the Eureka story complete: as it was.'

Although sections of *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* explore the predicaments and survival strategies of the local Wathaurung people as their land was infiltrated by gold-seekers, the comparison between culturally suppressed histories of racial violence and the elision of women's participation in historical events is too complex to gloss over in a single line. Similarly, the suggestion that any retelling can capture history 'complete: as it was' disregards generally accepted understandings of historical narrative as a manufactured and inherently contestable thing. Indeed, at different moments the book explicitly acknowledges the impressionistic qualities of its own accounts – for example, the gun battle in chapter twelve, 'Bloody Sunday'. This kind of simplification also flies in the face of the book's epigraph, a quote from Geoffrey Blainey's *The Tyranny of Distance* (1966), which acknowledges that 'Every history of every country is a mirror of the author's own interests and therefore selective

rather than comprehensive'. And it underplays the multiple voices and the narrative layering that is one of *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka's* many strengths.

In the context of existing histories of the Eureka Stockade, too, the book situates itself only in glancing terms. Wright gestures toward the bibliography, which indicates where the best work of a series of Eureka scholars might be found, while the bookshop or the library are firmly signalled as the places to go for an in-depth look at other scholarship in the field. Instead of digging over old ground, *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* offers up 'what you won't find anywhere else' with a kind of exuberant haste that a cynical reader might suspect is partly publisher-driven. Frameworks, analysis and the grim spectre of scholarly thinking are duly clipped and footnoted for fear of driving off the flighty general reader. The rapid-fire analysis is mostly gritty and apposite, but it also impacts on the substance of the book. It runs the risk of making *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* appear history-lite, when it is, in fact, an impressively rigorous work of primary archival research. 'Anxiety, as today's psychiatrists will tell you, can be a symptom of the dissonance between two fundamental states of being,' goes one off-the-cuff comment, 'a clash between inner conception and outer manifestation, or between the idealised and the actual. Could we diagnose a mass emotional decompensation among Victoria's immigrants?'

When the breeziness and expediency is relaxed slightly, and the book pauses to engage with the work of other historians – such as Lucy Chesser on colonial transvestism, or Marion S. Goldman on prostitution – there develops a greater balance between discussion and narrative that is far more involving. *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* is an intensely readable reinterpretation of a well-known historical event with a compelling argument to make. It is history without the boring bits: cinematic in style and epic in scale. The opening chapter, 'A Virgin Country', treks to the diggings along the road from Melbourne, alert to the hardships of the terrain, the contingencies of the weather, the sights and smells that greeted the newcomer, the thrumming of the bush, the unique soundscape of the diggings themselves and, importantly, the perceptual frameworks of the travellers who arrived there. These were informed by factors including

age, class, nationality and personal history. Notable characters, such as recent immigrants and brothers Charles and George Evans, fortune-seeker Henry Mundy, and the journalist and politician Thomas McCombie are picked up along the route. The public opinions and personal confidences they shared in diaries, letters, articles and other commentaries, appear in italicised fragments that are woven into the body of the text. This has the effect of incorporating the linguistic cadences and general quirks and colour of the language of the day seamlessly into Wright's account, which, in turn, feeds off the historical vernacular to produce an engaging and often irreverent writing style. 'As [George Francis] Train breathlessly reported after his arrival in Victoria,' Wright recounts, 'nowhere else in the world did *such a go-aheadative* place exist.'

Wright's narrative voice is itself somewhat breathless. She carries the reader through the intricacies of the Eureka rebellion with a keen sense of drama and suspense, and with an unerring taste for the sensational. This can sometimes become overblown – as, for example, when she speculates about the responses of three Aboriginal women, 'Caroline', 'Old Lady' and 'Queen Rose', to the influx of immigrants: 'What these three Indigenous women thought of the molten flow of white ghosts daily disgorging into their lands is not recorded.' It is worth overlooking the occasional mixed metaphor, however, for the entertainment value of a history that is literally bottom up – not only because its focus is largely on working class and 'ordinary' people and because it engages with first-hand accounts and primary documents, but also because references to bottoms seem to occur quite regularly. The upside-down world of the diggings is more than once described as 'arse-about', while the new caption to John Alexander Gilfillan's 1853 painting of hopeful diggers setting out for the fields is 'Head down, bum up on the road to Ballarat'.

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*The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* is divided into three parts: 'Transitions', 'Transformations' and 'Transgressions', with four chapters in each, plus a conclusion and an epilogue. The early chapters are where we meet the women who become the book's main characters. Some of the most significant include the doctor's wife and storekeeper Martha Clendenning;

Margaret Johnston, the young wife of Assistant Gold Commissioner James Johnston; actress and theatre-manager Sarah Hamner; and Clara Seekamp, who acted as publisher of the *Ballarat Times* in some of the headiest weeks of the rebellion. Central, too, is the poet Ellen Young, whose writings for the Geelong and Ballarat newspapers helped to amalgamate the popular resistance to unfair licensing legislation, the lack of representation for miners in the legislative assembly, and the host of other grievances that led to the clash of December 1854. Without becoming overly regimented or systematic, the book checks in with these personalities along the way, venturing off into other areas of discussion, then returning to use them to articulate the active role women played in Eureka's history.

There is a keen sense of the contagious excitement of the rush for gold flowing through the early parts of the book, as well as a clear picture of the desperation of many of those who were seeking to make their fortunes – whether they were running away from the past or towards a better future. The conditions of hardship in Europe and elsewhere that led to mass goldfields migration are effectively traced. So are the exaggerated promises made by guidebooks for immigrants, migration agents, and newspaper articles, which literally gilded opportunities for wellbeing and success. As Wright points out, those leaving Europe did not abandon their grievances, so the experiences of dissatisfaction and dissent at Eureka had a much longer lineage than those produced by the immediate conditions. She argues that the fate of many hopeful immigrants – progressives, adventurers, fortune hunters and renegades alike – was 'to be forever caught between old world antagonisms and new world expectations'.

Among the many figures mentioned who were emancipated from hardship in Europe, Britain and elsewhere, it might also have been interesting to see more of the literal emancipists: the liberated convicts from Van Diemen's Land who, according to contemporary accounts by writers such as William Howitt and Ellen Clacy (both of whom are cited regularly), flooded into the goldfields around this time. Apart from their predominance being noted as a 'political issue', there is only one intriguing allusion to their number. This is in relation to Sarah Lloyd, who had determined to travel with her husband to the goldfields, despite her husband's 'objection that there were

no decent women there, only a few of the Vandie's wives.' Opening up this convict element of the goldfields population – people who were, no doubt, already thoroughly familiar with harsh conditions and legal injustice – may have added another dimension to the discussion of the social complexity and imminent violence of the scene.

A particularly memorable feature of *The Forgotten Rebels* of Eureka is a visceral account of the immigrant's journey to Australia: the cabin awash with vomit from seasickness, the infestations of vermin and lice, the infectious diseases, the poor quality food and drink, the extremes of temperature, the social disarray as people of various classes, religions and ethnicities found themselves in close proximity. Wright dwells on the painful corporeal details and carnivalesque inversions of the social body alike, offering a convincing account of how this topsy-turvy shipboard scene had a lasting effect on the passengers, who would arrive on the goldfields with any strict ideas about social convention, class hierarchy and traditional gender roles already shaken by the trip. She offers up strange snippets of historical detail worthy of an offbeat costume drama (including the 'unearthly moment' when American immigrant Frances Pierson was 'asked by her dinner companions to carve the dolphin') and she includes some nice points of analysis – of the affective significance of the Southern Cross, for example, which would become so important as an emblem of the revolt. 'Before long,' Wright tells us, 'that simple constellation would come to have tremendous significance for the people of Ballarat, representing just how far their journey had taken them.'

The conditions that met new arrivals when they landed in Melbourne are also elaborated. Immigration caused a population explosion, which created health and sanitation problems. Wright describes the construction of the infamous 'Canvas Town', as well as the journey to the diggings, and the social and material conditions of life there. The breakdown of the division between private and public life brought about by proximate living conditions – with nothing but a flimsy sheet of canvas separating the indoors from the outside – makes the tent city and the goldfields alike perfect locations for uncovering otherwise 'hidden' female histories. Each brings the domestic realm out into plain sight.

Another point of interest is the industry and entrepreneurship of the many women who established stores, grog-shanties and other businesses auxiliary to the project of digging for gold. There is an amusing account of the figure of the *nouveau riche* washer woman, as portrayed by the colonial newspapers, which also makes a larger point about the increased value placed on domestic labour. But the suggestion that the ‘world turned upside down’ of the goldfields was a ‘new world where wives earned more money than their husbands, working women determined the parameters of their employment, and manual skills counted for more in the marriage and labour market than drawing-room refinement’, seems somehow too idealised. So does an emphasis on the diggings as a ‘level playing field’ across different social classes and ethnic groups, though the exploration in subsequent chapters of maternal and infant mortality and domestic violence tempers this, at least in terms of women’s experiences. The gruesome account of Sarah Skinner’s experience of childbirth, medical treatment and subsequent death, once read, is not soon forgotten.

Wright contrasts the deep poverty and hardship that struck many in the freezing winter of 1854 with the popular entertainments, fun and frivolity that nonetheless existed alongside it. She builds absorbing profiles of Governor Charles Hotham and his politically popular wife Jane, as well as the main players and unfortunate victims who were caught up in the path to rebellion. These descriptions and character sketches feed into the book’s denouement, in which the Eureka Hotel is torched, mass protests erupt, licences are destroyed, resistance groups are formed and, of course, the stockade is erected – and destroyed. The final part of *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* provides many points of interest and insight. The class analysis of the rags to riches publicans and the discussion of the tensions running through the government camp are particularly notable. It’s exciting stuff. But there is also a sense that the drama is being forced in order to provide a sensational climax to top off this sensational book. It is bloodthirsty and compelling when it arrives, though for me there is greater momentum in the early chapters, when the book is gathering its cast and material together and introducing its terms.

What we are finally left with in *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* is not just a

detailed and convincing account of women's participation in the Eureka Stockade, its fermentation and aftermath; it is also a wonderful snapshot of the many issues Australian women might have found themselves confronted with during the nineteenth century, including infant mortality, dangerous pregnancies, domestic abuse, the marriage question, suffrage and political representation, rational clothing styles, propriety and social constraint, sexual assault and legal prejudice, labour issues and more. There are moments when one wonders if *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*, which comes in at over 500 pages, might not have been trimmed down a bit. But then, restructuring the way a nationalist myth has been shaped and understood over time can tend to take up a lot of space.

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