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Women had their Eureka moment too

BABETTE SMITH THE AUSTRALIAN FEBRUARY 22, 2014 12:00AM



Gold diggers, Bendigo July 1st, 1852 By ST Gill. Picture: State Library of Victoria. Source: Supplied

CLARE Wright’s *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* demonstrates once again the value of taking a different perspective on a well-known event. Wright’s “forgotten rebels” are women, and it is not too much to claim that a female point of view transforms our understanding of the Victorian goldfields generally and Ballarat in particular.

As Wright suggests, “By examining the lives of women on both sides of the Stockade, we can begin to build an intricate portrait of the Ballarat goldfields in 1854.” She asks: “Who knew that stores on the diggings sold breast pumps to ease the pain of lactation? Or that dances and balls provided paid childcare so that babies didn’t need to be left in tents when their mothers went out for the night?”

The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka makes plain that when you look for evidence of women’s presence, it is abundant.

Women died at Eureka although their deaths have been unremarked. Miner Charles Evans, who kept a diary, witnessed the burial of one on what Wright describes as “that shell-shocked Monday morning”. He wrote: ‘A number of poor, brave fellows who fell in yesterday’s cowardly massacre were buried ... One of the coffins trimmed with white and followed by a respectable and sorrowing group was the body of a woman who was mercilessly butchered by a mounted trooper while she was pleading for the life of her husband.’ Without Evans, we would not know of her death. Wright’s research establishes that it was not recorded anywhere else; not on the government’s list or on Peter

Lalor's "List of Heroes". There are no inquest files. No newspaper reports. The dead woman has no place on the monument at Old Ballarat Cemetery.

The death of a second woman was revealed by the presence of a descendant at the Eureka centenary in 1954. The Argus newspaper noted that one of the attendees, Mr L. Moyle, had "travelled from distant Upwey in order to honour his grandmother, Mrs Catherine Smith, who was shot in the side at Eureka and died three weeks later from her wounds".

If these two, then how many more? And how many wounded?

Wright found the words of an anonymous woman, identifying herself as a Female of '54, who disputed the assertion in 1884 of one of the established heroes, JB Humffray, that no one was shot on the Monday. "I for one was wounded on that night, and by the soldiers too," she wrote. A bullet had grazed her head and "completely carried away hair and skin from the crown to the forehead ... Had the moon not clouded at the moment that it did, I should not have been here to tell you this."

A fascinating collection of women from ladies to prostitutes are the focus of Wright's research. She picks up some on their voyage to Australia and convincingly argues that the discomfort and close quarters of the journey had a liberating effect on attitudes, clothing and behaviour, which prepared them for life on the goldfields. As she puts it, "High teas and calling cards were a subtle form of foot-binding for many 19th-century British woman."

Martha Clendinning was one middle-class woman who made the transition to a colonial way of life. When her husband, a doctor, declared he would become a gold digger, she insisted she was coming too. Her intention to open a store was greeted "with peals of laughter". She persevered nevertheless.

Shrewdly, Martha and her sister abandoned their genteel clothes and dressed down to meet the goldfields culture, "hoping that we should not be distinguished as 'ladies'. We intended to pass as merely respectable women of business". Reading her market with equal shrewdness, she stocked the store at Ballarat with everything a digger and his wife could possibly want. She sold eggs to mothers of sick children, met the constant requests from women for clothing materials, then became the first to supply baby clothes. She prospered.

And she was not alone in recognising the retail opportunity. Of about 200 storekeepers on the goldfields, two-thirds were women.

Undoubtedly, a masculine shadow has obscured the activities of women on the goldfields. We've all heard of Henry Seekamp, the young American, notorious for being horsewhipped by Lola Montez but seriously famous as the firebrand editor of The Ballarat Times, which did much to propel the diggers towards rebellion. How many know that his rhetoric was matched by his regular contributor Ellen Young? According to Wright, her poetry "introduced a new element into public discourse about the diggings. A sense of grievance. An air of affront. A polarising of the forces of good and evil through the positioning of heroes against villains".

The torching of Bentley's hotel gains a fresh dimension from consideration of James Bentley's wife, Catherine. Her husband, who was held responsible for the death of the drunken digger Scobie, is rarely portrayed sympathetically. No scholar has yet penetrated to the man behind the ex-convict "Vandemonian" stereotype. In her quest to imagine his wife, however, Wright comes close and we empathise with the tragedy that overcame them both.

Perhaps one day a scholar will tackle the question of convicts at Eureka. It doesn't even occur to Wright that she may have found a female one when she quotes magistrate John D'Ewes about "Mother Jamieson", who had run the hotel at Buninyong since 1845. According to D'Ewes she was "an extraordinary specimen of a Scotch landlady, whose colonial independence of character (except when she took a liking) always verged upon insolence, and very often abuse; woe to the mistaken individual who tried to oppose her when in these moods as he had little chance of either food or lodging at her hands".

As Wright points out, for too long Eureka has been a masculine myth. Women's presence has never been fully explored. Indeed, their absence has been assumed. Her work fills an enormous gap. Furthermore, *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* supports her claim that women's presence does not just add colour to the picture, it changes its very outline.

The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka

By Clare Wright

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