

# Women make history

A new book that puts women at the centre of one of our foundation legends shows young women that they, too, can make things happen.

Rachel Power *AEU News*

Until now, a written or pictorial history of the Eureka Stockade would lead you to believe that it was an all-male event.

If women did get a mention, it was to acknowledge their role in sewing the celebrated Eureka flag — a detail acceptable for its domestic connotations, but also “tinged with sexual frisson because they’d allegedly sewn the flags out of their petticoats,” says Clare Wright, historian and author of a new book that gives women their rightful place at the centre of the action.

*The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* reveals women’s involvement in every aspect of the social and political movement that led to the 1854 Eureka uprising in Ballarat, when miners stood up against a brutal English military enforcing crippling licence fees imposed by a corrupt government.

At the time, approximately a third of the population of Ballarat were

women and children — “a far cry from the myth that this was an all-male frontier situation, a Wild West image of the Gold Rush,” says Wright.

“The frustrations that ended up boiling over in those last weeks of 1854 were actually based on a communal sense of grievance. They essentially had a poll tax on their heads and there were no services provided for that and people were living in sheer poverty.

“There was a baby boom in Ballarat at the time and these men were watching their wives die in childbirth in their tents because, as one man said at the inquiry, ‘We didn’t have a blessed sixpence!’”

Wright argues that to leave women and children out of any picture strips history of the “deep and complex” reasons behind why people rebel. “A much deeper level of psychological motivation becomes apparent once you understand that these miners were providing for women and

children, that this was a community of working families, not just a bunch of blokes,” she says.

While all the big names, from Geoffrey Blainey to Manning Clark, have “had a go at Eureka”, says Wright, women were never more than a passing reference in their accounts. “It was all there in many of the same documents that every other historian has looked at. If you go back to the same sources armed with a different set of questions, you will get a different set of answers.”

Not only has her research shown that women were working alongside the male miners as shopkeepers, laundresses, housekeepers and prostitutes — often as the primary breadwinner — it enabled Wright to resurrect some “extraordinary” female characters who were leaders in the movement: names she believes should be as familiar to us as Peter Lalor or Raffaello Carboni.

Among them was theatre manager

and actress, Sarah Hanmer, the defence fund’s most generous benefactor, whose playhouse was used as the movement’s headquarters.

Australia’s first female newspaper editor also “emerged from the flames of Eureka”. When *Ballarat Times* editor Henry Seekamp was thrown in gaol for sedition, his wife Clara took over running the newspaper.

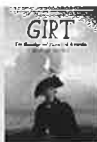
Wright says her revision of Eureka gives teachers the evidence to start making an important Australian story more relevant for the full audience they’re teaching.

“It’s really important for girls to feel like they can make things happen,” says Wright. “And how do you get a sense that you can make things happen in the future if you can’t identify with stories in the past where women have been part of changing the course of history?” ◆

*The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* is published by Text, RRP\$45.

## GIRT

David Hunt  
Penguin  
286pp, RRP\$29.99



*GIRT* is a wry look at the exploratory and colonial antics that led to Australia’s formation as a modern nation. Based around the many unexpectedly colourful characters that sailed to the continent, the book gives insights into their flaws and motivations, trials and tribulations.

A sense of irony is intrinsic to Hunt’s telling of the existence of Aboriginal people in Australia for tens of thousands of years and the subsequent superior view taken of it by white settlers.

His descriptions of characters such as intrepid botanist Joseph Banks (“a lucky bastard”), wool pioneer “John Macarthur (“a complete bastard”) and one-time NSW governor William Bligh (“a bastard to the end”) are enlightening, as is his portrayal of the “crowd favourite”, Governor Macquarie. A book steeped in humour as much as history. ◆ — KN

## THE BUTLER

Dir: Lee Daniels  
Rated MA, 132 mins  
Released October 31



INSPIRED by the life of Eugene Allen, a butler at the White House for eight US presidents over three decades, this film takes us through the life of the fictional Cecil Gaines (Forest Whitaker) from his time as a boy working on a cotton plantation to serving as a White House butler.

Beginning with a brutal crime on the cotton field, the film is a dramatic summary of the history of the black rights movement, from the Freedom Rides to the Black Panthers as seen through the eyes of Gaines and his increasingly radicalised son.

With too much packed in, we get a potted history, but this emotional film is a shocking reminder of how grotesque racism was — complete with lynchings and segregation.

Whitaker is compelling as a man slowly awakening to the black activism of the 60s, and Oprah Winfrey as his often neglected, drunk wife is outstanding. ◆ — CK

## FESTEN

Dir: Thomas Vinterberg  
Rated MA, 105 mins  
Released November 6



WINNER of the Jury Prize at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival, this smash-hit Danish comedy drama is finally available on DVD in Australia.

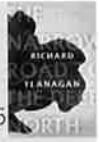
Set over 24-hours in which an extended family has gathered at a country estate to celebrate the 60th birthday of patriarch Helge (Henning Moritzen), it quickly becomes apparent how dysfunctional this family is.

This is confirmed at dinner, to devastating effect, when Helge’s son Christian (Ulrich Thomsen) stands to deliver a toast and instead makes a startling speech accusing Helge of sexually abusing him and his dead twin sister.

Celebrated as the finest example of “Dogme” filmmaking (handheld camera, natural sound and light), *Festen* is a cerebral and cinematic experience. It’s also a gripping look at the transformative power of truth. ◆ — RP

## THE NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH

Richard Flanagan  
Vintage, 480pp, RRP\$32.95



SHAPING up to be an Australian classic, Richard Flanagan’s new novel traces the life of Dorrigo Evans, through his early years in Tasmania, from WWII in the Middle East and as a prisoner of war on the Thai–Burma railway, to his life at home as a celebrated but reluctant war hero.

Married to Ella, a posh Melbourne girl he met while studying to be a surgeon, Dorrigo is haunted by his early, passionate affair with Amy, his uncle’s wife.

A work of visceral poetry that branches out from one day in August 1943, the story builds to a horrific climax as Dorrigo struggles to save his fellow prisoners in the Japanese camp. A man is brutalised for no reason and a love story unfolds. Flanagan’s ability to deconstruct the nature of love as brutally and forensically as war make this a grim but unforgettable masterwork. ◆ — RP