



Story of Eureka's women

The slaughter by police of miners at the Eureka Stockade wasn't only about men, writes **Grantlee Kieza**

IT was a single line in a long forgotten diary written 150 years earlier that sent the alarm bells ringing in the head of renowned historian Clare Wright.

It was her Eureka moment, if you like.

"One of the coffins," it said, "trimmed with white and followed by a respectable and sorrowing group [contained] the body of a woman who was mercilessly butchered by a mounted trooper while she was pleading for the life of her husband."

That's the way Charles Evans, a young English printer trying to make his fortune in the great lottery of the Victorian gold rush, described just one of the many atrocities against the miners and their families when police and British Redcoats stormed a flimsy fortress on the Eureka Lead at Ballarat 70 miles west of Melbourne.

It occurred as dawn was breaking on Sunday, December 3, 1854 and the massacre at the

Eureka Stockade has been described as the first baptism of fire for Australia as a nation when the first "diggers" fought for a fair go under the first Australian flag.

For two years, since small pieces of precious yellow metal had first been found in the creek beds of Ballarat, thousands of eager hopefuls from around the world had raced there. From the migrant ships moored in Port Phillip Bay, they marched, rode and sometimes waded along the bush road to the goldfields hoping to make their fortunes or at least feed their hungry children.

They were met by an unjust government, a harsh taxation regime and a brutal, corrupt police force and as a result raised their own blue and white Southern Cross flag in opposition to the Union Jack and prepared to resist government forces.

In the carnage that followed police and soldiers officially slaughtered 22 of the

miners but may have killed as many as 60.

In her new book *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*, Clare Wright, a mother of three whose husband has a Southern Cross flag tattooed on his chest, highlights the role women played in a defining moment in Australian history.

She says the brutal murder of the anonymous miner's wife sent her on a 10-year journey researching and writing the book.

"At the time I was working on my previous book about female publicans in Australia," she says, "and researching the incredibly tragic life of Catherine Bentley, who lost the biggest pub in Ballarat when rioting miners burnt it down.

"That was the spark that lit the events around the Eureka Stockade and I came upon the line about the murdered miner's wife in Charles Evans' diary. I thought 'My God, there was a woman killed at Eureka – the story has always

been about the men there'.

"I said 'let's take that as a starting point and find out what the women were doing and why they were in the middle of the Stockade'.

"The historical detective work spread from there."

Beautifully written, her book takes readers on a vivid journey of what life was like for the families of the miners, merchants, prostitutes and police in a landscape that had been totally annihilated by the race to dig up the gold.

She writes of Sarah Hanmer, the young single mother she calls 'the Gina Rinehart of Ballarat' who raised money for the diggers' fighting fund and donated weapons to their cause.

She highlights the extraordinary lives of Clara Seekamp, the first female newspaper editor in Australia, and a driving force behind the miners' rebellion along with fiery mother-of-six Anastasia Hayes.

And she tells the tragic tale



of Catherine Bentley, the heavily pregnant young mum thrown to safety as miners burned down Ballarat's greatest drinking emporium.

In a shifting social dynamic, she says, women shopkeepers and maids were earning more than their husbands digging in the dirt. Her research peers into the most intimate details, the agonies and tragedies of childbirth, of 1850s pharmacies selling breast pumps and of women shaving their pubic hair to fight off lice infestations.

"I wanted to show that

Ballarat was not just an industrial landscape of the rugged male individual, the way it has so often been presented," she says, "but it was a domestic environment and we can start seeing the miners as husbands and fathers. That totally changes their motivation and their psychology – what they were fighting for."

Sometimes she draws a long bow. "When H.R. Nicholls rode into Ballarat at the end of November and felt that the whole place was electric," she writes, "could he

have been reading the hormonal magnetism of the goldfield's 5000 women, a community in heat?"

I'd say it was more like a community bracing for war as hundreds of British Redcoats prepared to cut down the first armed force of multicultural Aussie battlers united under their Australian flag.

Still it's a great story.

Clare Wright will be speaking about her book at Avid Reader in West End on November 12.



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INSIGHT: Clare Wright reveals rare details of the women at the Eureka Stockade; and (below) Anastasia Hayes, who was there