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The forgotten women of Eureka

Posted on 02 November 2013 at 10:00 am by Luke O'Neill

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Clare Wright: “Many of these women were the strength through a lot of the hard times and were very keen about their rights.”

A new book by writer and historian Clare Wright looks into why the women of the Eureka Stockade have been smudged from the history books – and it shines a fresh light on the fascinating lives of several Irish-Australian women, writes **Luke O'Neill**.

The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka shifts the focus from the usual suspects of the Stockade – Carboni, Lalor and Co – to reveal that the women of Eureka were central to the events leading up to and during the 1854 rebellion.

Dr Wright has spent years trawling through primary sources to gain a different perspective on the events in Ballarat more than 150 years ago.

The women were survivors and they were determined to forge a new life in a new world, Dr Wright says.

“Many of these women were the strength through a lot of the hard times and were very keen about their rights, were literate and really saw this as an opportunity to be able to have a form of social mobility and a way of giving vent to their entrepreneurial strength that was denied to them in the old country through one reason or another – whether that was because of class or because of gender or because of sectarianism,” Dr Wright said.

“They weren’t able to rise beyond the conditions that they were born into. Well, there was this opportunity in Victoria to write their futures anew, and they grasped that opportunity – the women as much as the men, if not more so.”

We learn about Catherine Bentley, a Sligo woman whose husband was the Eureka Hotel’s proprietor, James Bentley. The couple were tried, with two others, over the death of James Scobie outside their hotel.



Anastasia Hayes – no Irish Australian ingenue. (Pic: Record Office Victoria, courtesy of State of Victoria)

Catherine was found not guilty of manslaughter, but her husband and his co-accused were jailed.

Redmond Barry, the Cork-born judge who would later sentence Ned Kelly to hang, presided over the case.

Catherine had her liberty, but her wealth and privilege had evaporated. The Bentleys' hotel was burnt down in the Ballarat upheaval. Catherine spent a lifetime seeking government restitution for the damage, but tragedy befell her at every turn.

Her land was eventually sold, James emerged from prison a broken man and two of her three children died – one from diphtheria and another before her eyes after being hit by a horse cart.

“Catherine kept trying to claim compensation for the burning down of her hotel. She was really very alive to, and aware of, her rights and she believed the hotel had been under police protection,” Dr Wright says.

“So I found her a fascinating character because we tend to associate Eureka with miners fighting for their rights, but here was a woman who was not a miner. She in fact had occupied a privileged position on the goldfield, and yet she also fought for her rights.”

Other fascinating characters Dr Wright investigates include Clara Seekamp, a Dublin-born Anglican who worked as an actress and later laid claim to the honour of being Australia's first female newspaper editor, and Anastasia Hayes, a Kilkenny-born woman who Dr Wright says may have been involved in the creation of an Australian icon – the Eureka flag.

The story of Hayes, Bentley and Seekamp shines a new light on the role of Irishwomen in an Australian foundation story, and it is Dr Wright's hope her book will bring them back into the memory of Eureka.

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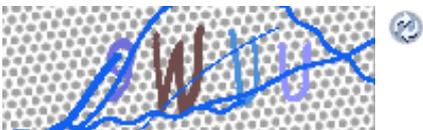
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