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The Forgotten Rebels Of Eureka

By [Justin Shaw](#)

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The Eureka Stockade runs a close second to Gallipoli in Australian nation-building mythology. And, just like the failed, pointless Dardanelles campaign of 1915, events in Ballarat at the end of 1854 were initially pushed to the side of our collective consciousness, until the wounds had healed enough for the mythologising to begin.

But the point of a myth is just that: it is a myth. A selective remembering, smoothed and sanitised to serve a purpose, to teach a lesson, to bring meaning. Facts are massaged, with the comfort of distance, to fit with our idea of what and who we are, or would like to be. In Eureka's case (as with Gallipoli), the facts have been interpreted to fit the legend – mateship, larrikinism, anti-authority, brave men (always men) building a new, brave Nation.

With her new book *The Forgotten Rebels Of Eureka*, historian Dr Clare Wright has taken a huge step towards a more truthful examination of the Stockade and its players.

The Stockade was built for many more reasons than miners burning their licences and thumbing their nose at authority. The horror of that fifteen-minute massacre (and it *was* a massacre, not a riot, nor an uprising) was inevitable, not just because of the grievances that led to the mass burning of licenses, but because of social upheaval, both here and overseas.

Class distinctions, so entrenched in the home countries, disappeared on the goldfields, where an accountant from London just as neck-deep in muck and at the mercy of corrupt police as the illiterate Irishman on the claim ten feet away.

Modern misconceptions of life in the Victorian goldfields is based more on the American Wild West than the actuality; and women barely exist in the history we've been taught up until now, but the demographics tell a different story – over a third of the population of Ballarat and other goldfields were women and children. Their untold stories are the basis for Wright's new book.

"It was an ad for breast pumps that got me started"

Wright tells me that, in researching her PhD on female publicans (which became *Beyond The Ladies' Lounge*), she came across this seemingly inconsequential item in an archived newspaper, one that proved that there were huge numbers of women on the goldfields (breast pumps weren't the convenience item they are today – women who were still lactating after losing a baby were in

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The Forgotten Rebels Of Eureka

The Eureka Stockade runs a close second to Gallipoli in Australian nation-

real danger of dying from mastitis).

In 1850 there was one registered birth in Ballarat. In 1855, there were seven hundred and fifty-six, then the next year more than twelve hundred. While the population was exploding through immigration, the birth rate was, well, exploding too. The people of Ballarat were overwhelmingly young, and shagging like nobody's business – which was indeed the case, being half a world away from interfering extended family and nosy neighbours.

Many women came to the colonies with their husbands, but just as many arrived single, looking, as were their male counterparts, for opportunities not available to them in the stratified societies of nineteenth century Europe.

The shortage of unmarried women led to bidding wars for not just their hands in marriage, but for their service – wealthy squatters' wives despaired at the impudence of young women interviewing *them* as to their suitability as a domestic employer, instead of the other way around, then setting their own wages and terms!

Many women didn't bother with either of these standard life choices, choosing instead to take advantage of the wide range of entrepreneurial opportunities offered by the unique Goldfields society.

Everything was getting turned upside down, shaken and remade, but not in the way that the Goldfields dream had been sold around the world.

The plan of scooping up gold by the armful and returning home a rich, independent man didn't eventuate for the vast majority of diggers. Back-breaking work down a filthy, dangerous hole usually yielded little or no return; women had less chance of a big strike, but were far more likely to find a steady income. With most able-bodied men following their dreams into the mud, there were still supplies to be traded, laundry to be done, midwifery to be performed, bread to be baked, theatres to run, and grog to be sold.

The truth of the matter is that most women were breadwinners – not just taking in a bit of pin-money, but providing for their husbands and children. Such was the case for Martha Clendinning, whose husband George "allowed" her to run a shop with her sister as a means to keep busy but, until he finally gave up on gold and returned to medical practice, was entirely dependent on the income her "folly" provided.

The Clendinnings were rare on the goldfields, only in that George had an extremely in-demand profession to fall back on and was thus able to right the gender reversal (and therefore humiliation) implicit in being financially dependent on his wife.

The desperation that led to Eureka was, in a large part, driven by the failure of the goldfields to provide financial reward for male endeavours.

I asked Wright why it was that Eureka was never mentioned in the years immediately after the event: surely the survivors of the massacre would want to commemorate their fallen comrades and remind everyone of the depredations of the authorities from whom they'd been trying to defend themselves?

No, it was shame. When you think about it, these men had in so many cases been embarrassed, humiliated by their dependence on their wives for an income; the massacre showed that not only could they not provide for their families, they couldn't even protect them.

It had been a very literate, very polite, very female protest movement from the start – it was mostly the women getting petitions together and writing begging letters to the Governor (Hotham), organising benefit concerts and so on.

And so, when enough time had passed, the mythologising began: our proud, independent,

building mythology. And, just like the failed, pointless Dardanelles campaign...



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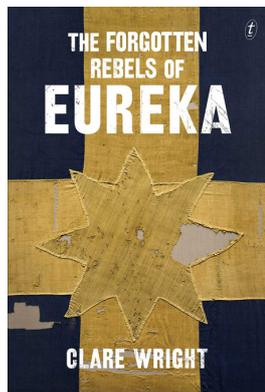
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overwhelmingly masculine view of ourselves meant that the story of the diggers could not accommodate women's role as providers, protectors and organisers. So, despite all the evidence, they were written out of the histories, allowed only the (appropriately feminine) part of the story, the sewing of the Eureka Flag. While it is true that women sewed the flag, even this vital part of the story was tweaked by the additional information (since examined and found to be almost certainly not the case) that the silk of the flag came from ladies' undergarments - a little bit saucy, a touch of frippery, a little reminder that women were ornamental, light entertainment for the serious, busy, *important* menfolk.

The Forgotten Rebels Of Eureka stands well as a researched history of the Eureka Massacre and its lead-up, but Wright is trying to do more than simply correct the accepted history and our understanding of it.

Until now, much reading of history has been like so much film and television: the men drive the action, make the decisions and perform the heroic deeds, while the women are invisible or little more than ornaments.

What this book does is lay down a new way for women (and girls, when the Young Adult version is released next year) to view *themselves*, and for all of us to understand our past through truth rather than reliance on myth.



The Forgotten Rebels Of Eureka is released today (23rd October) on paper and electronically through Text Publishing. [Get your copy here.](#)

Dr Clare Wright, PhD, is a historian, author and broadcaster.

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JUSTIN SHAW

When he's not shouting obscenities at the television or innocent bystanders, Justin eats curry using his glasses as a spoon. He is also Deputy Editor of The King's Tribune.

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