



Writing women into Eureka history

THE Eureka Stockade has long been considered a defining moment in our national story. It was, after all, the day a bunch of harried miners stood up to their British colonial overlords and demanded a fair go on mining taxes. A stockade was erected and a flag – The Southern Cross – was raised by rebels. The tale of the rebellion has since been elevated into the ranks of Australian folklore, right up there with Gallipoli in terms of historical significance.

But historian Clare Wright sees Eureka somewhat differently.

Clare has spent the past 10 years poring over primary sources to glean the most accurate picture of Eureka and the result – *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* – aims to “right a few wrongs”. One of which is the fact that women played a much larger role in Eureka than the history books allow for.

Not only were women the real financial success stories of the Ballarat goldfields, as Clare discovered, many women and children were also caught up in the stockade, with at least one woman killed in the crossfire and one giving birth under the volley of fire.

“I think there was a lot of shame in the aftermath that women and children could have been caught up in this and the men couldn’t protect them,” says Clare, who is also working on a four-part series to commemorate the centenary of World War I for ABC TV.

“It was not something they necessarily wanted to dwell on.” Clare’s research was kicked off by her first book, *Beyond the Ladies’ Lounge*, which challenged notions of pubs as being historically male domains. It was while she was researching that book that she came across the story of Catherine Bentley, whose tragic life opened up the door to other women’s stories on the goldfields. She discovered the considerable gravitas that some women commanded in mid-1800s Ballarat, such as Sarah Hamner owner of the Adelphi Theatre and local philanthropist who gave eagerly to the Diggers Defence Fund. Then there was the impressive

Clara Seekamp, who took over the editorship of *The Ballarat Times* when her husband was arrested, and wrote fearless editorials about the need for change. Clare’s research also revealed women to be financially astute when it came to making money off the goldfields, taking on roles as tent keepers, boarding house keepers, and actresses.

“They were very often the breadwinners of the household,” she says.

“The goldfields have been seen for too long as an exclusively male place, and we need to widen that picture.”

Men, too, need to be viewed in a much more sophisticated light: these were more than just men who had come out from England in search of their own freedom and slice of land. “Quite a lot of babies were sick and the men’s wives would often die in the goldfields so these were not just men pissed off because they were having to pay these licences, they were husbands and fathers who were watching their wives and children die,” Clare says.

“We have to reshape our concept of the goldfields into a much more domestic space.”

Clare’s research has already had an impact on the way history is viewed. When the recently opened Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka was launched, the plaque for the rebellion was amended to commemorate both women and children.

“That is one of the greatest pleasures of being an historian and one of the most satisfying moments of my career,” Clare says.

“I have always been motivated by a strong sense of justice, and as a historian you feel an obligation to give the full picture of the story.

“I don’t want to say that the Eureka story is bunkum, I think it is an extraordinary story on many levels. But it just needs to be widened to make it more historically accurate.”

– Johanna Leggatt

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The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka
by Clare Wright,
Text Publishing, \$45



