

TWELVE Diggers

California and Australia are two cases which were not provided for in the Manifesto: creation of great new markets out of nothing. They must still be put into it.

Engels to Marx, 21 August 1852

The title, *The Rush That Never Ended*, that Geoffrey Blainey gave to his account of mining remains an excellent summation of this vital aspect of Australian history. But Blainey did not explore the wider implications of his title to the extent he did later with the *Tyranny of Distance*. He was so fascinated with mining techniques that he was unable to spare time for the social and political consequences of his theme. Where he did comment, his observations were apposite:

Gold had a magnetism which the welfare state has dulled. To win gold was the only honest chance millions of people had of bettering themselves, of gaining independence, of storing money for old age or sickness, of teaching their children to read and write. The 1840s had been a decade of revolution and misery and famine in Europe, and now across the globe was a gigantic lottery in which all had a chance and the strong-armed labourer the highest chance. Gold was the magic formula in an age without football pools or state lotteries or social services.

In August 1851, Engels had given a wider context:

It is to be hoped that the Australian gold-shit will not hold up the

commercial crisis. However, it momentarily creates a new, mainly fictitious market and raises the price of wool, since the flocks of sheep are being neglected. Apart from this, it's a very fine business. Steamers round the world will be in full swing in six months, and our prophecies about the supremacy of the Pacific are being realised even more rapidly than we could expect. During this occasion the English will be thrown out, too, and the United States of depicted murderers, burglars, ravishers and pickpockets will furnish the world with an astonishing example of what a State of concealed blackguards can do in the way of miracles. They will beat California hollow. While in California at least it is the blackguards who are being lynched, in Australia one will lynch the *bonnetes gens*, and Carlyle will see his aristocracy of rogues established in full glory.

This chapter explores some of the social and political effects of these rushes. First, it will be necessary to catalogue the more important strikes that made mining so important that by 1900 mining towns contained one-eighth of Australian's male work force.

To restrict the Golden Age to the 1850s would, as Blainey showed, be a mistake. True, those were the years of discovery when the first rush of excitement caused gentlemen to froth at the mouth, ladies to faint and children to throw somersaults. If the succeeding decades did not produce as much gold for as many people, they none the less still held out the promise of sudden fortune. Their effect on social consciousness was immense. The rushes sustained the belief that advancement was possible, that the small man could make good, that capitalism was incompatible with independence. And so the hopeful made pilgrimages, if only of the mind, to New Zealand in 1861, Young and Forbes in 1862, Gympie in 1867, Ravenswood in 1868, Charters Towers and Etheridge in 1872, Palmer River and Hodgkinson in 1873, Mt Morgan in 1882 and Croydon in 1886, and to a hundred and one other Ophirs. Even those who stayed at home were able to participate by playing the stock market. Share-buying was not the preserve of the

well-to-do. Indeed, because of the employees' intimate knowledge of the mines, they made the first killing.

When times were tough, as in the 1890s and 1930s, gold came to the rescue. In the 1890s at least £1 million a year was sent from West Australia to Victoria to support 8000 families. The multiplier effect of this spending cushioned the intensity of the depression in and around mining towns such as Ballarat. The importance of these transfers should not be overlooked in any account of the retarded growth of the labour movement in Victoria.

The search for gold was one of the mainsprings of Australian imperialism in the Pacific. The rushes to New Zealand, which started in the 1860s, were followed by ones to New Guinea from the 1870s. The most important find was in Fiji in the 1930s. The Fiji gold mines were developed by a syndicate which included John Wren, Frank Packer and sometime Labor leader Ted Theodore. The capital for the project came from a series of share transactions in the Sydney newspaper world, which eventually gave rise to another of gold's contributions to Australian culture, *The Women's Weekly*.

Hard times in the 1930s produced a fresh stimulus to Australia's domestic gold output which rose from £2 million to £16 million within the decade. In the first half of the 1930s, gold production in the Mandated Territories of Papua and New Guinea grew from almost nothing to be worth more than £2 million in 1935. This upsurge led to a reawakening of copper and silver-lead-zinc mines as far apart as Tennant Creek and Rosebery. Lasseter became the folk-hero of these latter-day diggers, numbered in their thousands. In Victoria, the government gave a tent, mining tools, a prospector's guide and a free rail-pass to each of 16 000 unemployed. The depression also resulted in a doubling of the price of gold, so this 'barbarous relic' regained its fascination.

Blainey pointed out that 'all but a few of Australia's main metal fields were opened during, or soon after, recessions'

because such capital as was available was freed from other sources of investment, and for the simple reason that there were lots of people anxiously looking for available ore bodies.

As suggested in the two quotations from Engels, the gold discoveries had implications other than those connected with the domestic economies of Australasia. The gold rushes to California and Australia helped capitalism out of the chronic slackness of the 1840s by setting up a demand for a wide variety of products. Blainey followed Engels:

The voyage from Europe to the goldfields was so popular and so long that more ships were needed for the traffic, and ship-building yards in Boston and Glasgow and Tyneside prospered. The wages they paid revived trade in their own vicinity; the timber and hemp and iron they imported as raw materials spread prosperity to other industries and other countries like a chain letter.

Once the revival took place in the 1860s, capital started to flow in the opposite direction, from Britain to Australia, for the long boom in the Australian economy from 1860 to 1890/93. Eventually, the compliment was returned when an Australian mine, Mt Morgan, provided the capital for British exploitation of Middle Eastern oil.

Higher wages were the first economic consequences of the gold discoveries in 1851. In Victoria's Western District, the shearing rates increased by almost 50 per cent in the first year. By 1854, wages on average had doubled. Yet, as Margaret Kiddie pointed out, 'even at such inflated rates labour was difficult to find while surface gold was still plentiful'. Once it ran out, the labour market was overfull until the early 1860s when the New Zealand rush siphoned off some of the excess. The long boom had commenced.

Even the ending of the early halcyon days could not obliterate their social effects. Expectation of upward mobility had too firm a hold. An English journal in 1852 reported the following interchange as typical of colonial mores:

'My good fellow', said a spruce newcomer to a rough-looking fellow, 'carry this bag, and you shall have a shilling'. The other coolly transferred a quid of tobacco from one cheek to the other, as he placed a cowhide-shod boot on a convenient stone, with the words, 'Here my fine lad, tie my shoe and here's half a crown for you'.

Although all historians have noted the feelings of independence that the goldfields produced in colonial working men, they have not all seen the implications of this attitude for the nature of the labour movement. Some writers have seen this independence as productive of solidarity and mateship. Their logic is hard to follow. Pursuit of wealth was the reason for men being on the goldfields. Claim-jumping was a daily occurrence, for the diggers had to compete with each other for the prize. The gold rushes substantiated the lament by a Sydney stonemason in July 1854:

The historian will seek a cause for the latter phenomenon and find it in that love of gold which has so thoroughly individualised us. There is not that degree of sociability existing amongst us that ought to exist and, until men's minds are cultivated, a high social state of feeling cannot supersede.

By contrast, Labor personalities such as William Lane and W. G. Spence regretted the passing of the golden fifties of self-promotion. In *Workingman's Paradise*, Lane looked back longingly to the time when each man was able to live in 'freedom, justice and democracy' without an employer. *Australia's Awakening* opened with a dirge for the shallow gold leads that had enabled the diggers to avoid wage-slavery.

Not every mine employee was a wage-slave. Some Cornish miners worked in South Australian copper or Victorian gold mines for thirty years on 'tribute', a system by which they were paid a share of the value of the ore they mined. Even when wage-slavery could not be avoided, the wages were usually quite high. At Charters Towers, for instance, wages ranged from £3 10s to £4 a week and never fell below £3. Ac-

cording to Geoffrey Bolton, 'This gave everyone the possibility of becoming a homeowner, and often a surplus for dabbling in investment'. In addition, a little extra could be stored; Blainey suspected it might have been as high as 5 per cent of the total. Queensland's Department of Mines reported that in 1888 'some here [Charters Towers] who were working-men a few years ago are now drawing incomes of over £20 000 a year from the gold mines; others are receiving smaller amounts; and a large number have at least made what in the old land would be considerable competencies'. The success of these few held out hope for the masses.

Sometimes, the effect of a gold rush could be direct in its impact upon the labour movement. In the 1890s, in the Armidale district, the Hillgrove boom brought prosperity and lessened the force of the depression so that the large mining population 'had neither acute grievances nor any strong political interest'.

Universal in its influence was the effect gold had upon the economy and upon social consciousness during the three decades of economic prosperity that preceded the establishment of the Labor parties by unions which had had their outlook formed in those thriving years.

Gold contributed to the consciousness of the labouring class in a number of ways, all of which served to reinforce the belief that there was something to be gained under capitalism, perhaps that most prized of all possessions, economic independence. The direct economic contribution of gold ranged from higher wages to relief in a depression. More important were its mythopoetic properties. Even men who had never seen unmined gold knew that it could be found and was being found by the likes of them. Or, if not gold, then silver or some precious stone. 'Gold' combined with 'Land' to sustain the hopes of aspiring labourers, to hold out to them a chance of escape from wage-slavery. Gold might never offer sufficient to retire, but a man could set up a small business or a selection.

These ideological consequences were as important in subordinating the labour movement as were the prosperity and promises that gold spread.

THIRTEEN Selectors

It is the farmer who 'gives his girls and boys to the big cities to infuse ... red blood into a society that is constantly decadent, and whose only salvation is the virility it draws from the rural section'.

Southern Argus (Wagin), 31 January 1920

To understand the intensity of the desire to possess 'land', it is essential to realise the mythical, indeed religious qualities with which it can be endowed. Fascist propagandists exploited this connection with their emphasis on the soil as the source of life, food and blood. The shift from agriculture to industry devastated those who experienced its worst features in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. The enclosures forced thousands from their land. The Industrial Revolution dragged countless others into factories and towns which were the denial of the independence and sociability associated with rural life. There was a general longing for a return to the status and security of land ownership.

It is in these intangibles as much as in any material reward that the profound power of land rests — a power evident even today although its precise forms have altered. Santamaria's land schemes, demands for decentralisation, and the suburban sprawl remind us of the importance of land in the ideals of the Australian people. Our land-myth flourished upon a tripod of forces: peasant faith in land, utopianism, and an abundance of

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