

Bruce Heiser, *Tempting Dame Fortune, A Brief History of the Dee Gold Rush*, Central Queensland, Koro Press, PO Box 360, Annerley, 4103. ISBN: 978-0-646-98585-5 \$28.95 (GST free)

Although the Dee gold rush lasted barely four years from August 1903 in an area under five kilometers, strikes like it kept the rushes from never ending. Slightly to the -southwest of Rockhampton, the Dee was overshadowed physically and financially by the Mt Morgan mines, by then under the control of William Knox D'Arcy who sank much of his returns into the search for oil in Persia, one result being that we once again face the prospect of nuclear strikes.

The widowed Sarah Heiser and four of her children landed in Rockhampton from London in 1884 as bounty migrants. She bought into a drapery and then ran several hotels before her death in 1909. Her eldest child, Sam, arrived with his family in 1889, conducting a succession of businesses but also taking shares in claims on the Stuck Oil gold field where he and his wife, Rose, ran an eponymous hostelry.

Bruce Heiser has produced the best kind of family history, taking sightings from several perspectives to remain even-handed when reporting accusations against his forebears for claim-jumping. Whatever the truth of those matters, he is right to identify anti-Semitism in how the Brisbane *Truth* wrote up the proceedings.

Despite the Eureka rebellion, it is the bush workers following the clip who people the nomad tribes of Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend*. For an article on 'Improvising Nomads' in the *Journal of Australian Colonial History* for the fiftieth anniversary of Ward's classic in 2008, I worked from my research into builders' labourers to track seafarers, shearers and miners as they came and went on construction sites, following 'seasonal work', to wind up by proposing that

... the materials presented above do not pose mutually exclusive determinants, neither nomadism versus neighbourliness, cabinet-making against bush carpentry, not builders' labourers in place of pastoral workers. Analysing other segments of the workforce to enrich our apprehension of the Legend invites researchers to emulate the improvising nomads.

Holding a single occupation across a year was less common than today, with bluey-humpers chopping wood for a feed or digging out cesspits for a fiver and bottle of spirits.

The mobility of these regiments in the reserve army of labour deposited a seam through many Australian lives. My father was born in 1899 at Anakie on the gem fields further west, returning to pick up five rubies in 1916 to have them stolen in a Brisbane boarding house. My maternal

grandfather and his family were unluckier by far when he died at Mt Morgan of black lung in his late thirties.

Nomadism extended to the built environment. Two Heiser hotels were not the only buildings to follow the money from field to field. Moreover, publicans were accused on seeding fields with nuggets to attract custom. Not all goldfields publicans were as loathed as Bentley over Scobie's murder at the Eureka Hotel yet they were not to be trusted. Hence, in the main street of Mt Morgan stands one this country's few monuments to workers, an indifferent statue called 'Running the Cutter'. Before miners sent boys to the pub for ale, they rubbed cheese around the bottoms of the billies to stop the publican leaving too big a head and so got a full measure.

We learn of the motley of people trying their hand, including professional chaps. A miner's widow, aided by her two children, seems to be the only female to work her own claim, though others held shares. There is no sign of a Chinese, not even gardening. The old hands knew to plant cabbages, tomatoes and as soon as they arrived.

Most claims were worked by three or four, for reasons that Blainey lays out, not least for safety. Despite the field's smallness and brevity, the structure of capital versus labour that came with the sinking of deep shafts from Mootna to Bendigo penetrated these gullies. Sam Heiser took hundreds of pounds out of the labour-power he bought. Some wage-slaves set up a branch of the Workers Political Organisation, strengthening Labor's hold on rural electorates.

Lone hands hung about once the Dee rush was over, the likes of Cider Jack, John the Liar, Tom the Bear and Dick the Devil, the latter dying insane. The field witnessed three suicides and one attempt, for which crime the offender was sentenced to one minute's imprisonment. The sole fatality could have been recorded with the opening line of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*: '... a man had been buried alive ...'

Regular floods and poor returns saw the State government at last provide subsidies of five shillings a week and a few tools. The happy few kept mum until their nuggets were safe in Rockhampton and they were back on their claims, armed with Winchesters.

Lassiter's reef in 1930 was not the only glimmer of relief as the second Great Depression hit. At 8 pm on 28 February 1933, Brisbane radio station 4BH presented a thirty-minute feature set to music on 'the famous Dee Rush.'

Neither Dee nor Struck Oil lingers even as a ghost town as does Coolgardie where an extensive cemetery and a two-storey pub draw film crews seeking atmosphere and 'location', and where the streets offer a Post-Modern tourist attraction with photographs as simulacra for the buildings that once stood on those sites.

None of Heiser's settlements is mentioned in the 1992 *The Cambridge Dictionary of Australian Places*, but neither is Bouldercombe, the name by

which Mt Usher appears on maps today. Anyone at work on an equivalent guide to places that used to be, they will be well advised to put it on-line to keep it up to date as mining communities shrivel, and not just because of fly-in and fly-out workforces.

Some 120km inland from the Dee, Utah-Mitsubishi developed Blackwater from 1965 to a population of almost 8,000 by the 1991 census. Driving through in July 2016, we saw a motel complex which never opened, boarded-up shops and union posters demanding equal redundancies for miners and managers. That socio-political landscape hardened by nearly twenty years of drought helps us to understand the appeal of Adani. Earlier this year a State Labor Minister told the ABC that unemployed miners could be 'refitted' before correcting herself to say 're-trained'; they know what she meant and what her kind thinks of them.

*Tempting Dame Fortune* is an appropriately handsome volume with gold lettering embossed on black velveteen binding. The story is retold through detailed captions to thirty-one illustrations and four surveyor's plans. Fourteen pages of notes **enrich** the thirty-seven pages of text. An index would be the very pineapple of perfection.

A quotable instance for everyone working on any aspect of the period: from sport to a first-hand account of learning to puddle. Rich pickings for geographers, who unearth a lot of pay dirt through which labour historians need to sift.

'Colour' refers to the minute particles from panning; 'specks' weigh up to an ounce, while a 'nugget' is anything bigger, with the largest from the Dee being 182 ounces, then valued at £728, from Sam Heiser's claim. His great-grand son mints all three.

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