

Introduction

By the time that gold was officially discovered in Victoria in 1851 the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate (1838-1850) had been disbanded, Aboriginal people had been dispossessed of their land by squatters and sheep, and they were now facing a second invasion – gold seekers from across the globe. When, by the mid 1850s, it became clear that gold was literally strewn across Victoria, the rush to the diggings by a mass of humanity began.

This book dispels four common misconceptions surrounding Aboriginal people on the goldfields of Victoria during the nineteenth century: that most Aboriginal people were attached to sheep stations rather than townships; that those few at mining settlements were on the periphery; that those on the periphery were bewildered spectators; and finally, that Aboriginal experiences on the goldfields were primarily negative. This book reveals that Victorian Aboriginal people demonstrated a great degree of agency, exhibited entrepreneurial spirit and eagerness to participate in gold-mining or related activities and, at times, figured significantly in the gold epoch. Their experiences, like those of non-Indigenous people, were multi-dimensional, from passive presence, active discovery, to shunning the goldfields. There is striking and consistent evidence that Aboriginal people, especially those whose lands were in rich alluvial gold bearing regions, remained in the gold areas, participated in gold mining and interacted with non-Indigenous people in a whole range of hitherto neglected ways, whilst maintaining many of their traditional customs. There is also evidence that Aboriginal people from Tasmania, New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia were present on the Victorian goldfields.

Histories of Aboriginal people and mining

Published in the early 1960s, Geoffrey Blainey's history of Australian mining *The Rush that Never Ended*, is studded with references to Aboriginal people in a number of significant capacities. Yet Blainey neglected to synthesise any broad acknowledgement of their part in the saga of Australian mining. Interestingly, the tendency for writers discussing West Australian, Queensland and Northern Territory goldfields history is to be more inclusive of the Indigenous experience than in Victorian histories where the Aboriginal presence is still predominantly held within frontier violence. Detailed historical studies of specific Aboriginal communities mining and participating in the communal life of goldfields are rare. Indeed, the incorrect attribution of gold discoveries to non-Indigenes, such as the famous 106 pound nugget of gold found by Aboriginal people near the Turon, invariably referred to as simply 'Kerr's Nugget', illustrates how

Aboriginal people have been excised from Australian gold history. Generally, most writers restrict their 'Indigenous participation' lenses to the latter part of the twentieth century and almost exclusively to the northern or arid gold-producing regions of Australia.

An important exception is the collection *Gold: Forgotten Histories and Lost Objects of Australia* (2001) edited by Ian McCalman, Alexander Cook and Andrew Reeves. This work departs from conventional assumptions about gold mining and Aboriginal people, namely that gold created an Aboriginal diaspora as people were forced from their territory. The editors and many of the contributors to this collection argue that while Aboriginal people suffered racial vilification and sustained oppression on the goldfields, this did not prevent their active resistance nor their active engagement with the industry. 'Nowhere do we encounter Indigenes as passive victims of gold', writes McCalman. He cites numerous examples of 'extraordinary sagacity, agile resourcefulness' and the harnessing by shrewd Indigenes of European compulsions. A contributor to this collection, David Goodman, proposes that:

Until we see the vigorous, masculine, democratic politics of the 1850s gold-rush period, with its insistent calls for the land to be distributed amongst 'the people', as part of the same story as the taking of Aboriginal land and the breaking up of Aboriginal families and communities – until we see, that is, that the 'black armband' history of Australia and the history of democratic progress in Australia tell the same story from different perspectives – we will not have fully acknowledged the conflict of historical understandings which reconciliation aspires to resolve.

The inclusion in this book of many firsthand accounts sourced from miner's diaries, letters, reminiscences, newspapers, paintings and sketches enables the reader to see for themselves how important Aboriginal people were to this crucial period of Victorian and Australian history. The richness of the hitherto neglected primary sources – the abundance of evidence of Aboriginal people's presence on the goldfields – is expressed largely via gold miners' voices which reveal that Victorian Aboriginal people played an active and vital part on the goldfields. Their involvement, as seen through the documentary sources, was diverse and included such roles as: police, gold escorts, guides to new goldfields, bark cutters, prostitutes, trackers, posties, child minders, fur merchants, bushrangers, entertainers and prison guards.

We are fortunate that we have sufficient sources to piece together the details of this forgotten history. The importance of Aboriginal people's participation on the goldfields cannot be overstated. Not only has the traditional story of gold (characterised by a mistaken assumption that the 'Aborigines were swept aside') been shown to be untrue, there is now clear evidence that Aboriginal people

were conscious actors and active participants in Australia's economic history, rather than passive spectators, or pawns in another culture's game. The historical record presents a striking picture of Aboriginal people in Victoria demonstrating a desire to relate with and interact with the non-Indigenous miners who had invaded their lands. They learnt the language, speech and manners of the miners and tried to incorporate them into their cultural networks. The records further indicate that Aboriginal people expected to be recompensed for use of their land (via gift-giving and other forms of compensation) and that this was generally not understood by the miners, leading to negative assessments of them by Aboriginal people. Many non-Indigenous perspectives of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal culture, emanating from living in close quarters with each other – especially those revolving around 'begging', 'thieving' and 'nudity' – were also negative. What the records show, however, is that these initially negative appraisals could – and did – change through interaction on the goldfields, enabling miners to 'distinguish the features behind the black mask that had before enveloped them'.

In documenting the history of Aboriginal people's involvement in gold mining in Victoria this book does more than redress an historical error or oversight; it presents a challenging new interpretation of a crucial epoch (and legend making era) in Australian history. After establishing that gold mining occurred on Aboriginal land – a truism that nevertheless bears repeating – this book examines the extent to which Aboriginal people in Victoria came to possess a cultural and economic affinity with gold (ranging from the incorporation of gold into creation stories, seeking gold as independent prospectors, and actively avoiding the social dislocation and environmental degradation that the gold rushes heralded); Aboriginal peoples' perspectives on the work of finding gold and the reasons for their attraction to the goldfields (such as new wealth, new sights, new sounds, and new alliances); and how non-Indigenous people perceived Aboriginal people and their input into the race for gold. Without downplaying the extent of violent conflict that continued to occur between Aboriginal people and the newcomers, without denying the high degree of racial vilification and oppression that Aboriginal people continued to suffer, this book nevertheless documents a significant level of cooperative endeavour that suggests that life on the goldfields may have offered a rare moment of respite from the rigours of colonialism for Aboriginal people.