

# rebels

## the legacy of the eureka stockade

A tax revolt that became a brief, brutal battle between police and miners gave rise to an enduring legend of the Australian spirit.

By David Miller

FOR ALMOST A CENTURY in Ballarat, the flag of the Southern Cross, symbol of the Eureka Stockade, was kept out of sight in a cupboard at the town's Fine Art Gallery.

It was not until the early 1970s that the community leaders of Ballarat began to feel comfortable in accepting, and celebrating, that their city's unique place in our history was largely due to a violent battle fought in 1854 on the Eureka diggings.

Today, the flag has been conserved and mounted, having been unveiled by the then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1973, and it now has pride of place in

the Gallery's collection, on permanent display in a shrine-like setting. Visitors are encouraged to pay homage to it and to reflect on its significance.

This is the flag that was first raised on Bakery Hill on November 29, 1854, when several thousand diggers gathered in protest at their unjust treatment at the hands of the colonial administration. They were angry at the steep licence fee they were being charged to prospect, and at the officious way it was being collected, and they swore to stand by each other and fight to defend their rights and liberties. And it is the flag that four days later flew defiantly over the diggers' crudely built stockade at Eureka, only to be torn down and desecrated as 280 troopers and police mounted a surprise attack on the 150 miners gathered in the stockade. About 30 miners and five police died in the brutal skirmish.

A decade or so later, Ballarat had ceased to be a frontier town. The wealth of gold had created a city of grace and stature, and its citizens had taken on an air of respectability. There was by now a degree of uneasiness about Eureka and, in particular, the motives of the diggers in taking up arms against legitimate authority. Many thought that the diggers were malcontents, rebellious in nature and their intentions less than honourable. Nevertheless, a park was



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created and a memorial erected to commemorate the battle. Eureka did have its champions. Perhaps the most famous of these was Mark Twain who, after visiting Ballarat, enthusiastically claimed of Eureka, "It was a revolution — small in size, but great politically; it was a strike for liberty, a struggle for a principle, a stand against injustice and oppression ... It is another instance of a victory won by a lost battle."

## a charter

Those who dismiss Eureka tend to focus on the battle and ignore other important developments on the Ballarat diggings at the time. To brand the Eureka participants as malcontents and troublemakers misses the point entirely.

Many of those who emerged as leaders of the diggers were educated men who had come to the Victorian goldfields from all over the world. They brought with them a well-developed sense of liberty and freedom.

**Eureka veterans at a reunion in 1904, left. Half a century earlier, their anger and frustration at the ruling administration had led them to take up arms.**

They were influenced by Chartism in Britain and the revolutionary movements in Europe. Their aspirations were fundamentally democratic and were given expression through the formation of the Ballarat Reform League at a meeting of 10,000 people on Bakery Hill on November 11, 1854. They sought to pursue their rights peacefully, and developed their own Charter based on the principle that "... it is the inalienable right of every citizen to have a voice in the laws he is called upon to obey — that taxation without representation is tyranny".

The Reform League's Charter, held at the Victorian Public Record Office, is an inspiring document, yet its existence is unknown to most people. It should be acknowledged for its symbolic importance in the development of the Australian democratic ethos.

The Government's response to the Reform League's democratic overtures had been to increase the number of brutal licence hunts on the Ballarat diggings. Those who wished to remain peaceful could no longer control the diggers' anger and frustration. Leaders emerged, such as Peter Lalor, who felt that the miners had no recourse other than to take up arms.

One can claim that Eureka was the birthplace of the Australian spirit: what the diggers wanted was a fair go. One hundred and fifty years on, the battle lost and the victory won at Eureka is worthy of commemoration and celebration. †

*David Miller is the general manager for city and cultural development, City of Ballarat.*

*For a program of events celebrating Eureka's anniversary, see pages 16-17.*



STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA, BALLARAT FINE ART GALLERY

**Left, top to bottom: This Charles Doudiet watercolour shows the burning of Bentley's Eureka Hotel on October 17, 1854; a stereoscopic view of a late nineteenth-century bicyclist visiting the memorial to the stockade; diggers swear allegiance to the Southern Cross flag, which was not on public display until 1973.**



**Above: the Eureka flag was restored and framed in the 1970s, and is now on display in the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery. The flag was donated to the gallery by the King family, descendants of John King, a trooper at the stockade.**



150 years \* ballarat

**Eureka 150th**  
26 November - 5 December 2004

**Eureka... birthplace of the Australian spirit**



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