

The Eureka Tradition

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"It is a truism, perhaps, that the importance of an historical event lies not in what happened but in what later generations believe to have happened."

Prime Minister E. G. Whitlam QC, MP, unveiling the restored Eureka Flag, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, 3rd December, 1973

To some, the Eureka Stockade was the cradle of Australian democracy. Yet there are others who dismiss it as an inconsequential, though perhaps colourful, episode in the life of the Victorian colony which had little or no direct bearing on the development of the nation's democratic institutions. However, both popular sentiment and the weight of the written word over the past 140 years would appear to favour the first point of view. For better or for worse, Eureka has now taken on the aura of being a defining moment in the history of the nation and there are many who would seek to elevate its importance to greater heights in the national consciousness.

Historians have had much to say about the causes of the conflict at Ballarat in the early morning of December 3rd, 1854 and it is not the purpose of this essay to canvas such matters. Of greater interest, I would suggest, are the differing perceptions and competing claims which have been expressed over the years about Eureka and its significance, more particularly at critical moments in the nation's history and through the works of its creative writers and poets. It is these which have conferred upon Eureka its legendary qualities.

Before considering Eureka in the national context, it is illuminating to look at how Ballarat itself has chosen to acknowledge and celebrate the short-lived battle of 1854.

Eureka and Ballarat

Ballarat's civic leaders have over the years tended to be somewhat neglectful in acknowledging the anniversary of Eureka, possibly reflecting a degree of uneasiness in some quarters about the events of 1854. However, even if some of Ballarat's worthy citizens have in the past regarded Eureka as a blot on the local escutcheon, in more recent times both commercial considerations and a widening interest in Ballarat's history and heritage have tended to override any squeamishness about the 1854 uprising. With a renewal of interest in the 1970s in holding annual commemorative activities and, more recently, the success of Sovereign Hill's sound and light version of the Eureka Story, *Blood on the Southern Cross*, Eureka is becoming a highly lucrative tourist drawcard for Ballarat. Perhaps Raffaello Carboni was the first to recognize and exploit this commercial potential when in 1855 he spent the day of the first anniversary at the site of the Stockade selling copies of his then newly published account of the Ballarat disturbances¹. The second anniversary in 1856 was

observed by some 200 people who gathered at the stockade site where they heard an address from one of Lalor's captains, John Lynch, who spoke of the martyrdom of the men who fell victim "in their efforts to resist the oppression and tyranny of the then existing government"². Lynch's oration was followed by a march to the cemetery where garlands were placed on the monument which had been erected over the graves of the miners. It was not until 1879, however, that the nearby graves of the soldiers who fell at Eureka were enclosed by a fence and appropriately honoured by the erection of an obelisk with the inscription acknowledging the soldiers' sacrifice "in brave devotion to duty."

Although the Ballarat East Borough Council had moved in 1869 to create a reserve at the site of the Stockade, it was not until 1884 that a committee was appointed to consider the erection of a permanent Eureka Monument on the reserve³. According to Ballarat historian, Nathan Spielvogel, public opinion was divided on the need for a monument and many citizens "strenuously objected to any monument being erected to commemorate a rebellion against the Crown"⁴. The secretary of the committee took great pains to assure the citizens of Ballarat that there was "no intention to show any disloyalty to Her Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria" as all the committee wished to do was erect a memorial to mark an historic spot "without showing any partisanship to the cause of the diggers"⁵.

Notwithstanding the local opposition, a design was chosen and construction was underway in time for the 30th anniversary in 1884 to be observed by a large gathering at the partly finished monument. Once again the organisers were determined not to offend public opinion and, to prove they were not celebrating a rebellion, ended the proceedings with three cheers for the Queen and a verse of the national anthem⁶. In 1886, the still only partially completed monument was handed over to the care of the Town Council⁷. A freestone plinth was added several years later.

There is much to criticize about the monument. Rising from the reserve like some medieval fortification, the visual impact of the dark pile of basaltic rock and the seemingly inappropriate inclusion of the four 64-pounder guns on the lower level is at once foreboding. In its design it is as heavy-handed as the colonial administration of the goldfields which contributed to the unrest that led to Eureka. In its militaristic symbolism, it appears to come down firmly on the side of authority which was very much under challenge at Eureka. Yet, despite these apparent incongruities, the monument has become a major focus for commemorative activities over the years and a rallying place for political protest across a broad ideological spectrum.

In 1902, the 50th anniversary was marked by a weekend of activities, including a reunion of old diggers who were on the Ballarat goldfields at the time of Eureka. The celebrations commenced on the Saturday with a sports meeting, attended by Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, and a "camp fire concert" in the evening at the Alfred Hall⁸. On Sunday morning, the placing of wreaths at Peter Lalor's statue in Sturt Street was followed by a march to the Eureka Reserve, where 15,000 people had gathered for the commemorative ceremony⁹.

Despite this strong show of public interest, the Melbourne *Leader's* report of the celebrations referred to a "difference of opinion in Ballarat regarding the advisability of celebrating

Eureka"¹⁰. The newspaper said everyone acknowledged that conditions at the time of the uprising "could not be tolerated by free men," however "the line of cleavage occurs at the stage when the Lalor party forsook constitutional means and hastened reforms by resorting to physical force and offering up a vicarious sacrifice"¹¹.

Clearly some sections of the community felt strong reason to remain affronted by the actions of the diggers at Eureka. When the committee organising the 50th anniversary celebrations approached defence force authorities in Melbourne seeking the participation of infantrymen of the 7th Australian Infantry Regiment in the march to the Stockade, the response the committee received should have suggested to its members that 50 years was not long enough for the wounds of battle to be healed. After being told that it was "strictly contrary to regulations for the militia or other forces to take part in the procession," the celebrations committee was admonished for having "acted indiscreetly in making the (request) in view of the circumstances connected with the trouble at the Eureka Stockade"¹².

However, any doubts about the loyalty to King and Country of those who assembled at the Eureka Reserve to commemorate the 50th anniversary or their faith in the democratic process should have been dispelled by the sight of the Union Jack and the Australian Flag flying overhead and the exhortations of the speakers to their audience to seek further change through constitutional means and to eschew violence¹³. Although one speaker did use the occasion to accuse the Legislative Council of being largely to blame for the events of 1854. He went on to say that it "had learned very little from the experience" and today "stood for the Chinese and opposition to the rights of the white man"¹⁴.

Local enthusiasm for commemorating the anniversary of Eureka waxed and waned over subsequent years, although the Eureka Reserve became a popular recreational area due to the efforts of the Eureka Progress Association. Throughout the 1930s, newspaper accounts of the anniversary activities suggest that local anxieties about the propriety of celebrating a "rebellion" had eased. In an address at the 1935 commemoration, the Rev. A.P. Watsford took an even-handed approach. "Each of them (the combatants) sought something that was good. The governor and soldiers had a high sense of duty, and the diggers a desire for liberty and freedom. The failure of each party to see the good in the other caused the clash"¹⁵. In 1937, the Mayor of the city felt confident enough to say that, although he regretted the battle, the anniversary celebrations "emphasised Australia's love of freedom, justice and all that was right"¹⁶. Marking the anniversary in 1938, the Ballarat *Courier's* editorial writer was prepared to go much further. Drawing parallels between Eureka and Gettysburg and taking inspiration from the words of Lincoln, the editorial said the ground at Eureka had been "consecrated by the men who died there when they struggled to make their little world safe for democracy"¹⁷. The writer had no doubts about the outcome of that struggle. The "foundation of (Australian democracy) was laid by the men of Eureka"¹⁸.

In 1954, Eureka's centenary year, there was no obvious reluctance on the part of the people of Ballarat in their enthusiasm for celebrating the occasion. A Centenary Committee, comprising prominent citizens and civic leaders, was formed and assumed responsibility for arranging the December commemoration. This included an oration at the Peter Lalor statue,

a procession, a pageant at Sovereign Hill (well before the present historical part was created), a concert and dance, a dawn service and a pilgrimage to the Eureka graves. There was also a special screening of J. Arthur Rank's 1949 film, *Eureka Stockade*, starring Chips Rafferty as Peter Lalor. Disavowing any possible suggestion of disloyalty to the Crown on the part of the organising committee, this was accompanied by a short film of the recent Royal Tour of Australia.

Suggesting that Eureka had by now attained "respectability," the procession was headed by mounted police, together with servicemen from the Royal Australian Air Force base at Ballarat dressed appropriately in 1850s soldier's uniforms. Contrast this with the hostile reaction of the military 50 years earlier.

By 1954, the Ballarat *Courier* appeared to no longer support the newspaper's earlier claim that the men of Eureka had laid the foundation of democracy in Australia. Instead it now suggested that "Eureka's dramatic episodic values rather than the lingering political aura and dubious authenticity of its democratic genesis (would) probably dominate the minds of many attending the (Centenary celebrations)"¹⁹. However, the authors of the Centenary Committee's commemorative booklet held a much loftier view, preferring to see in Eureka "an affirmation of Australian mateship and of Australian hatred of tyrannies of whatever kind"²⁰. For them, Eureka's importance was as "a focal point for a proper national sentiment and pride in a country which (had) few heroic legends"²¹.

Today, Ballarat is decidedly more sanguine about Eureka than it was at the turn of the century. While debate may rage over the precise location of the site of the stockade, the present day citizens of Ballarat are several generations removed from those for whom Eureka was a living memory. The passing of time appears to have healed wounds. The Stockader's flag, the Southern Cross, is now proudly displayed in the city's Fine Art Gallery and moves are underway to establish a new memorial to Eureka at Ballarat which is more in keeping with its perceived significance to the nation.

Eureka and the Nation

Over the past 140 years various groups, mostly on the left of the political spectrum, have claimed themselves to be the rightful inheritors of the Eureka tradition. This has been particularly so at times of trial for the nation such as during the Great Strikes of the 1890s, the Depression of the 1930s and the Labor Party split in the 1950s. It is hardly surprising that the early members of the labour movement, which incidentally was emerging in Australia at the time of Eureka, should seek inspiration in the stand taken by the diggers at Ballarat. After all, they could identify strongly with the cause and modus operandi of the diggers: strength through unity in the struggle against economic and political injustice. But it is not just the labour movement which has sought inspiration from the Eureka story. Because it was a story with a rich mix of colourful characters and political persuasions - Irish patriots, foreign republicans, British loyalists, revolutionaries and Chartists, Catholic priests and those, very likely in the majority, who held no particular political views - it was fertile ground for almost any group seeking inspiration and affirmation in challenging the prevailing economic or political order of the day. It therefore seems inevitable that often

when groups of people have gathered in protest, they have done so under the Eureka Flag.

It was also inevitable that there would be calls for December 3rd to become Australia's national day and perhaps one of the earliest was in 1888. The centenary of British settlement of Australia prompted an outpouring of anti-imperialist sentiment in the Sydney Bulletin's Centennial Oration. To the Bulletin, January 26th was the "anniversary of a loathsome tyranny," whereas December 3rd, "the day that Australia set her teeth in the face of the British Lion," was "the day we ought to celebrate"²².

By the 1890s the labour movement had firmly staked its claim to the Eureka tradition. In a period of widespread industrial unrest throughout the Australian colonies, when it appeared that the economic order was under serious threat, the striking shearers at Barcaldine in Queensland flew the Eureka Flag "as a gesture of defiance of the police and the government of the day"²³. This action inspired Henry Lawson to write *Freedom on the Wallaby* in which he spoke of the need to "fly a rebel flag" and warned that

They needn't say the fault is ours
If blood should stain the wattle. ²⁴

Like the diggers at Eureka, the strikers of the 1890s suffered defeat in their struggles. But in defeat, the labour movement turned to the political process to seek redress for its grievances and pursue its economic and social aims. This contributed to the formation of the Labor Party.

While the labour movement may have sought inspiration from Eureka, the Sydney Bulletin in 1904 was opining that a great opportunity was lost 50 years earlier at Ballarat. "It was an opportunity that will never occur again. For there were people full of democratic fervour, tens of thousands strong, against a paralysed plutocracy supported by an army of less than 1000 men"²⁵. Regrettably for the Bulletin, "All but the few who faced the soldiers funk'd the issue at the psychological moment"²⁶. Although the Bulletin conceded that Eureka had secured a footing for democracy in Victoria, "it was a poor, small, apologetic footing, and it never came to be much more"²⁷.

As Australia emerged from the Depression of the 1930s, the Labor Party was organising annual pilgrimages to Ballarat to commemorate Eureka's anniversary. The gatherings held at the Eureka graves and at the Reserve were great occasions for colourful speech-making and, with an eye to the next election, speakers also used the opportunity to urge a vote for labour candidates. One speaker in 1936 even suggested that the very presence of a conservative member for Ballarat nullified "the ideals for which the diggers fought in 1854"²⁸. At the 1938 gathering, another speaker accused the government and financial institutions of the day of "manacled the people in almost the same degree" as were the miners in 1854 ²⁹.

The Labor Party was not the only political party which sought to appropriate the Eureka tradition. The General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1944 considered that Eureka "was a decisive factor in the establishment of the self-governing principle in Australia and

the development of that democracy of which we are proud today"³⁰. He believed that Eureka was "the forerunner and cleared the way for the development of (the) Labour Movement, which guards the freedom of our people." However, in 1946 the then Leader of the Opposition, R. G. Menzies, pointed out what he saw as the difference between the activities of the Communists and the struggle at Eureka. "The Eureka Revolution was an earnest attempt at democratic government. The Communists are out for their own brand of dictatorship and are very much anti-government"³¹.

At the time of Eureka's Centenary in 1954, a fierce ideological battle was being fought in Australia for control of the labour movement, a battle in which both the Communist Party and the Catholic Church were key participants. It was against this background that the Communist Party's newspaper, *The Tribune*, and the Catholic Church's Melbourne newspaper, *The Advocate*, published special Eureka Centenary supplements.

In his contribution to *The Tribune* supplement³², historian R. D. Walshe said Eureka was "immensely progressive in accelerating the establishment of capitalist-parliamentary democracy in place of previous autocracy." However "power was not yet in the people's hands." He said the centenary of Eureka found Australia "beset with difficulties," whereas a "third of the world had (now) passed over to Socialism, where power is permanently in the people's hands." For Walshe, Eureka was only the beginning of the struggle. "In the course of defending the Eureka freedoms, and standing by our democratic history and traditions, the Australian people will complete the unfinished struggle of Eureka Stockade by defeating reactionary monopoly capitalism and attaining the higher stage of democracy - Socialism."

In *The Advocate*³³, Rev. Father James Murtagh, who was a member of the Melbourne Eureka Centenary Committee, attacked the Communists for "constantly (endeavouring) to make Eureka their own" and for naming their youth organisation "the Eureka Youth League." Father Murtagh said the Communist interpretation of Eureka as a class struggle between capital and labour was "clearly a travesty of history." Rather, he believed Eureka should be seen as "a symbol of the struggle for just conditions of labour, control by the people of their own destinies and popular responsible government."

The tensions within the labour movement at the time were very much to the fore in *The Advocate's* report³⁴ of the Eureka Centenary Mass which was celebrated in St. Patrick's Cathedral at Ballarat on December 3rd, 1954. Preaching the occasional sermon, Rev. Father McNerney of Creswick said that Australia once again had need of the heroism displayed by the diggers at Eureka. He said the nation was "again threatened by tyranny ... a tyranny that (had) already subjected thirteen nations and enslaved 700 million people." It was a tyranny "inspired by the fiery sons of Marx." Father McNerney urged his listeners to "take pride in the part Catholics played in the struggle at Eureka." He said that "these defenders of liberty had at least some advantages over the Catholics who fight today in the Cold War for freedom." In 1854 "there was no clever enemy to split the defenders' ranks and name Peter Lalor and his companions as dark agents of a sinister Catholic Action."

Over the two decades after 1970, Eureka and its flag became increasingly captive to groups outside mainstream Australian politics, including racist and neo-fascist groups. By 1975, the flag had come to be most strongly identified as the symbol of the Australian Independence

Movement. It was members of this Maoist-influenced, university campus-based organisation who were commonly seen waving Eureka Flags at the mass rallies and demonstrations held that year in protest against the dismissal of the Whitlam Government.

The perceived misuse of the flag prompted a committee of concerned Australians in 1980 to come to its defence in a full page advertisement in the *National Times*³⁵. The sentiments expressed in the advertisement were that the flag symbolised the aspirations of Australians for a more just and humane society; that it remained a common symbol of the unity of Australians old and new in their struggle to make the country free, independent and tolerant and that it was the private property of no one group. Rather it was the common property of all Australians who fought to develop the best aspects of the diverse cultural and political traditions which had contributed to the Australian ethic. While in Ballarat in 1992, the Governor-General, Bill Hayden, noted³⁶ that the flag had "lost much of its fashionable appeal because of its appropriation by the B.L.F., then more recently by the rather extremist National Front and lately by sections of the Republican Movement." He suggested that "its pedigree (was) getting rather confused" and that "perhaps Middle Australia might consider what might be done to restore the purity of its bloodlines."

Bill Hayden offered at Ballarat a more sober assessment of the significance of Eureka³⁷, suggesting he "rather felt that the Eureka Stockade was the first great tax revolt in Australian history - and in reflecting this concern it was more middle-class in its outlook than anything else." For a former Labor leader to espouse such a view would have been heretical to many of his predecessors. However the organisers of the so-called "Small Business Rebellion" held at the Eureka Reserve at Ballarat in March 1991³⁸ to protest against "unfair taxes and government harassment," and which attracted some 6000 people from across Western Victoria, would probably have been at one with the Governor-General's interpretation.

Conclusion

Eureka has also attracted the attention of commentators from beyond our shores. A century ago, Mark Twain visited Australia and said 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 was the Barons and John, over again; it was Hampden and Ship-Money; it was Concord and Lexington; small beginnings, all of them, but all of them great in political results, all of them epoch-making. It is another instance of a victory won by a lost battle"³⁹. Contrast this with the comment on Eureka made by the British historian and writer, Paul Johnson, after visiting Australia in 1993: "It is a reflection of Australia's happy and largely uneventful history that this picturesque but trivial episode, which would have gone unrecorded in the history of less fortunate lands, has to be raised to the status of a major event"⁴⁰. These two very differing assessments suggest that even those who are far removed from the political life of this nation cannot reach any consensus about Eureka and its significance.

Gough Whitlam's observation⁴¹ that "it is a truism, perhaps, that the importance of an his-

torical event lies not in what happened but in what later generations believe to have happened" is certainly relevant to any discussion about Eureka and its significance in Australian history. While historians may argue about the causes of the uprising at Ballarat in 1854 or the extent to which it influenced the development of our democratic institutions, the popular view that Eureka advanced the cause of liberty in Australia is, I would suggest, the one most likely to prevail. It now remains to be seen, as we approach the centenary of Federation and debate the future of our links with the Monarchy, to what extent the potent symbolism of Eureka will be used to enliven that debate and give inspiration to the nation.

Notes

1. W.B. Withers, *History of Ballarat*, Queensberry Hill Press, Melbourne, Facsimile Edition, 1980, p. 153
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 157
4. *The Courier*, Ballarat, 3rd December, 1931
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Withers, *op.cit.* p. 157
8. *The Leader*, Melbourne, 10th December, 1904
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. *The Age*, Melbourne, 3rd December, 1904
13. *The Leader*, *op.cit.*
14. Ibid.
15. *The Courier*, Ballarat, 2nd December, 1935
16. Ibid., 6th December, 1937
17. Ibid., 3rd December, 1938
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 4th December, 1954
20. *Eureka 1854-1954*, The Eureka Centenary Committee, Ballarat, 1954
21. Ibid.
22. *The Bulletin*, "A Centennial Oration," 21st January, 1888, in Ian Turner (Ed), *The Australian Dream*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1968, pp. 226-234
23. R.D. Walshe, "The Significance of Eureka in Australian History," in *Historical Studies: Eureka Centenary Supplement*, University of Melbourne, 1954
24. Henry Lawson, "Freedom on the Wallaby," *The Worker*, Brisbane, 16th May, 1891

25. *The Bulletin*, Sydney, 1st December, 1904
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. *Labour Call*, Melbourne, 17th December, 1936
29. *The Courier*, Ballarat, 5th December, 1938
30. *The Tribune*, Sydney, 1st December, 1954
31. *The Sun*, Melbourne, 17th July, 1946
32. *The Tribune*, op.cit.
33. *The Advocate*, Melbourne, 2nd December, 1954
34. Ibid.
35. *The National Times*, Sydney, March 30th to April 5th, 1980
36. The Hon. Bill Hayden, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, Address on the occasion of launch of "Massacre at Eureka: The Untold Story" by Bob O'Brien, Ballarat, 28th November, 1992
37. Ibid.
38. *The Courier*, Ballarat, 15th March, 1991
39. Extract from Mark Twain, *Following the Equator - A Journey Around the World*, New York, 1897. See R.D. Walshe, "The Significance of Eureka in Australian History," op.cit. p. 79
40. *The Age*, Melbourne, 4th October, 1993
41. Speech by the Prime Minister, the Hon. E.G. Whitlam at Ballarat, 3rd December, 1973. Reprinted in *Eureka: Saga of Australian History*, Department of Immigration, Canberra