

The Soldiers of Eureka

Introduction

On the 3rd of December 1854, just after four o'clock in the morning, 400 soldiers and police launched a military assault on a wooden stockade, behind which around 120 gold miners, most of them heavily armed, were sleeping.¹ Such is the story of the Battle of the Eureka Stockade (sometimes contentiously called the Eureka Rebellion). This twenty-minute battle, one of the most well-known military engagements in Australian history outside the two world wars, became (literally) the stuff legends were made of. The miners, known as diggers in Australian parlance, became righteous heroes, standing firm against unjust tyranny, which was represented by a corrupt police force and blood-thirsty soldiers. However, this legend has become so ubiquitous that we are in danger of losing the truth behind it.

Much is made of the diggers who were killed on that fateful morning, but what is less well known is that seven soldiers also gave their lives in that fight. Within my research, I aim to tell their stories and put them, and the army they served, within the context of their time and place. Victoria during the gold rush years was heaving with new ideas, and there's no reason to believe that the military, for all its conservatism, stood entirely apart from this.

Research Aims

My research aims to present a social history of the British Army in colonial Victoria between 1852 – 1855. The Victorian gold rush brought significant new challenges for the colonial authorities, which they were not prepared for and didn't know how to effectively respond to.² The army's role in responding to these challenges, especially at the Eureka Stockade in 1854, has been examined as part of the general history of the gold rush, but their actions that morning have never been contextualised. My work aims to provide this context, by placing the soldiers and their actions within the social and political realities of the time and place. To do this, I will be using the seven soldiers killed during the Battle of the Eureka Stockade as a case study, to illustrate how these conditions not only affected the lives of the soldiers, but also lead to their deaths.³

Literature Review

Very few events in Victorian history have received so much attention from historians as the gold rush. The period between 1851 – 1861 has arguably generated more books and journal articles (and more tourist dollars!) than any other decade in the state's storied history. Works such as Geoffrey Serle's *The Golden Age* present an overview of the new colony (just recently separated from New South Wales) and its competing economic, social and political interests.

¹ Gregory Blake, *To Pierce the Tyrant's Heart: A Military History of the Battle for the Eureka Stockade: 3 December 1854*, (Loftus, NSW: Australian Military History Publications [in association with the Australian Army History Unit], 2009, xi – xii.

² Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851 – 1861*, 3rd ed. (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press), 1977, 51 – 53.

³ The military casualty report from Eureka lists seven men killed in action or died of wounds. However, Corporal John Neill, from the 40th Regiment at Eureka, claimed in a Letter to the Ballarat Courier from 1872 that there were fourteen soldiers killed in the confrontation. For the purposes of my research, I will be studying those men listed on the casualty report, while acknowledging there may have been others.

A primarily pastoral economy until the discovery of gold in 1851, the subsequent rush saw people from all over the world descend on Victoria in droves, and towns began to spring up in what had previously been open bushland or a pastoralist's run. One of these gold rush towns, perhaps even the most famous, was Ballarat and it is here that my research will be centred. Ballarat's goldfields were some of the richest in the colony, as described by Weston Bate in his *Lucky City: The First Generation at Ballarat* or in W. B. Wither's extraordinary work *History of Ballarat and Some Ballarat Reminiscences*.

But popular as the gold rush and Ballarat itself are, no event from this period has been more studied than the Eureka Stockade itself. Enumerable books and journal articles have been written on this twenty-minute conflict in 1854; movies have been made, songs written, podcasts produced, musicals sung, plays staged, and entire tourism industries built around it. Any type of media that can be produced has been produced on this topic. However, despite the plethora of works and material, including abundant primary source documents, much of what is written about Eureka has only been written from one perspective.

Since 1855, only two full-length works have been published which consider the military perspective at Eureka. Every other work is either a general history of the Eureka Stockade, which features the soldiers but does not consider or contextualise their actions, or has been published to further the view taken by the general public immediately after the stockade, that the diggers of Ballarat were driven to take such rash action because of government mismanagement and police brutality.⁴ In these tellings, the soldiers become nothing more than a faceless mass of anti-digger aggression, vomiting forth from Government Camp to cause harm to the good, hard-working citizens of Ballarat.

This is in spite of the primary evidence which suggests the soldiers, while disliked, were ubiquitous in Ballarat. Gregory Blake, who has written one of the two full-length works on the soldiers at Eureka, makes a point that many of the diggers and soldiers knew each other by name. Some went to church together (especially the Irish, who all attended Father Smyth's chapel on Sundays) and it's likely they came from the same places.⁵ While Blake's work provides some background about the lives of the British Army in colonial Victoria, his focus is on providing a military history of the Eureka Stockade and a tactical analysis of the battle, rather than a social history. The other full-length work considering the soldiers' perspective is *Soldiers Bleed Too* by Neil Smith. Smith uses the diary of Corporal John Neill as the basis for his work, and tells the story of the Eureka Stockade from Neill's perspective, as he considers the actions of himself and his fellow soldiers.⁶

Ultimately, while the actions of the soldiers at Eureka have been well documented, there is little literature that examines who they were as men, or puts them in the context of nineteenth-century colonial Victoria. For the past 169 years, they have been mostly voiceless in the literature; this is something I am hoping to remedy in my own research, and give the soldiers of Eureka an opportunity to speak once again.

⁴ "Defence of the City", *The Argus*, (Melbourne, VIC), 6 December 1854, 7, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/4801363>, accessed 27 September 2023.

⁵ Blake, *To Pierce the Tyrant's Heart*, 69 – 70.

⁶ Neil Smith, *Soldiers Bleed Too: The Redcoats at the Eureka Stockade 1854*. (Gardenvale, VIC: Mostly Unsung Military History Research and Publications), 2004.

Research Significance

As indicated in the literature review, the Victorian gold rushes, the history of Ballarat and the Eureka Stockade itself are all well canvassed topics. The actions of the military *at* Eureka, i.e. as they were storming the Stockade, have been examined, but there are no works which consider the social and political role of the British Army in the colony. There is also a dearth of research on how the gold rush affected military personnel stationed in Victoria, including how the new and sometimes radical ideas that were flourishing in the colony were being received by the army. My work will fill this gap in the history of Eureka by presenting the role of the soldiers and the personnel themselves in the context of their time, rather than just providing a military analysis of the battle.

Research Design

Because my research will be examining events that occurred and people who lived in the Victorian-era, (i.e. 1837 – 1901), I will inevitably have to consider how class and social hierarchy affected them. In theory, the colony of Victoria was built on the same class-based hierarchy from Britain, although there was no hereditary aristocracy, but in practice there was much more social mobility. That being said, groups of wealthy and influential settlers, especially the early pastoralists, tried (with varying degrees of success) to set themselves up as a kind of colonial aristocracy.⁷ However, the distance from Britain and the possibility for anyone to gain wealth on the goldfields (in theory, at least) meant colonists had very little patience with these attempts to import unrepresentative government and rejected the notion there was any need for an Australian aristocracy.⁸ However, not all class-based prejudices were abandoned on the shores of Australia, and the army in particular was a microcosm of the most conservative class hierarchies and prejudices.⁹ To try and examine the lives of the soldiers of the 12th and 40th Regiments of Foot without considering the role that class, hierarchy and rank played would be impossible.

An equally important theory within my research will be that of gender, especially the nineteenth century perception of masculinity, and how that presented itself. In the nineteenth century, masculinity was entwined, like most other ideas, with class but also, deeply, with sex and sexuality.¹⁰ In a strange paradox, rank-and-file soldiers were believed to be incapable of controlling their sexual urges, but were discouraged from pursuing long-term heterosexual relationships and homosexuality was out of the question.¹¹ Marriage, that most Victorian institution, was hard to come by for regular soldiers¹² and was also discouraged by the army due to the expense and social awkwardness of bringing women and children into a

⁷ "The Legislative Council", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, (Sydney, NSW), 17 August 1853, 4 – 5, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/12948130>, accessed 27 September 2023.

⁸ "The Constitution of New South Wales", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, (Sydney, NSW), 16 August 1853, 4 – 5, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/12948089>, accessed 27 September 2023.

⁹ Blake, *To Pierce the Tyrant's Heart*, 61.

¹⁰ John Tosh, "What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain," *History Workshop*, no. 38 (1994): 179-202, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4289324>.

¹¹ Douglas Peers, "Privates Off Parade: Regimenting Sexuality in the Nineteenth-Century Indian Empire," *The International History Review* 20, no. 4 (1998): 823-54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.1998.9640842>.

¹² Blake, *To Pierce the Tyrant's Heart*, 66.

hyper-masculine environment.¹³ This created an army filled with restless men, who were encouraged to display their masculinity through aggressively heterosexuality, yet were discouraged from forming long-term relationships. Homosexual relationships were forbidden, yet it was believed the rank-and-file would resort to sex with their comrades if women were not provided.¹⁴ Regulated prostitution was a favoured course in the army, but the Victorian colonial legislature banned sex work, although (undoubtedly) prostitutes plied their trade around the Victoria Barracks in St. Kilda, and up in Government Camp on the Ballarat goldfields.

The nineteenth century British Army cannot be studied seriously without applying gender theory and masculinity. Masculinity was built into the army's core structure, so it will be essential to apply this lens within my own research. Also relevant will be the social perspective of masculinity, especially in the colony and on the goldfields. While the army saw itself as the ultimate guardian of British masculinity, colonial masculinity favoured independence and pride,¹⁵ which were anathema to the army. Given the highly controlled and rigid structures of rank and hierarchy with the military, obedience and submission (generally seen as feminine traits at this time) were far more desirable in soldier, at least from the perspective of his officers. This clash of values may not have had a direct impact on the action at Eureka, but it was certainly part of the social world occupied by the military on the goldfields, and will be something I'll have to take into account in my work.

Applying these lenses to my work will help provide the missing insight into the social and political world occupied by the soldiers, and will assist to contextualise their actions at Eureka. To gain insight into the world of the Victorian goldrush, especially the goldfields of Ballarat in 1854, when the Battle of the Eureka Stockade took place, I will be making use primarily of personal documents, such as diaries and letters, and also newspaper reports from the time. While only one known soldier kept a diary, Corporal John Neill of the 40th Regiment, many senior military men in Ballarat and Melbourne wrote letters and despatches, including Captain Charles Pasley (Royal Engineers), Captain John Thomas (40th Regiment), Lieutenant Governor Charles La Trobe (Victorian government) and Lieutenant Governor Charles Hotham (Victorian government), which contain valuable insight into the official view of the situation at Ballarat.

When analysing these documents, what is not recorded is just as important as what is written down. For example, La Trobe's terse reply to the famous Bendigo Petition,¹⁶ which requested an end to the licence fee and police brutality across all the goldfields, in which he denies police brutality is occurring is telling. The upheaval of the gold rush had caused serious problems for the administration, including the resignation of most of the Victorian police force, so La Trobe had been forced to hire ex-convicts and other violent men on extraordinarily high wages.¹⁷ If he acted against the police brutality, he would have been admitting to a restless population that he did not have control of the situation, and could not

¹³ Peers, "Privates Off Parade."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Serle, *The Golden Age*, 336 – 341.

¹⁶ "Petition requesting the abolition of the licence fee", 1853, MS 12440, State Library of Victoria, accessed September 24, 2023, <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/245918>.

¹⁷ Serle, *The Golden Age*, 51 – 53.

be expected to react to any further crises that might arise. This would have been political suicide, so by denying it was happening, he could return his focus to those tasks he felt were more important to the long-term wellbeing of the colony.

Cross-referencing documents with other primary sources will also be an important part of my method, as well as looking to secondary sources for further insight into Eureka, the British Army, and the Victorian gold rushes. By combining these techniques, I will be able to build a clear sense of colonial Victoria, and the army's place within it, as well as clearly present the factors, social, political and economic, that led to the Eureka Stockade and the deaths of the seven soldiers as a result.¹⁸

I believe that this research will lead to a more balanced view of why military action was taken at Eureka; if nothing else, it will present an alternative viewpoint of this defining moment in Victorian history. Because the events occurred so long ago, any ethical considerations in this work are limited; I am very aware that I am speaking for the dead, so need to be able to back up any assertions or speculation. They cannot answer back or correct me, so I have to take this seriously. As for completing within the specified time, I am confident that I will have the final thesis finished and ready for submission as required in 2024.

Conclusion

The overall goal of my research is to present the story of the Eureka Stockade as a military engagement of its time. Much of the literature focuses on the idea of a massacre, but by examining the soldiers as products of their time and place, the myth begins to give way to the history. Eureka was still a bloody fight, in which many people needlessly lost their lives, but the role of the soldier in this conflict was not just that of mindless government attack dog. He was a complex human being, imbued with the values of his time, who deserves to be remembered as a person within this story. No one is perfect, least of all the nineteenth century soldier, but, as Gregory Blake so admirably puts it, “to tell the human story [of Eureka], we must above all let that story tell itself.”¹⁹ I hope that my research will help to do exactly that.

¹⁸ There were, of course, other deaths at Eureka besides these seven men. Conservative estimates of the digger and civilian death toll are around 30, but more recent research done by the Eureka Centre suggests a more accurate estimate would be between 50 – 60. Some sources even suggest it could be as high as 100.

¹⁹ Blake, *To Pierce the Tyrant's Heart*, xv.

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