

# Viva Eureka!

ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY YEARS ON, THE TUMULTUOUS EVENTS THAT LED TO THE EUREKA STOCKADE REMAIN DEEPLY ETCHED IN THE HISTORY OF BALLARAT, VIC.

STORY + PHOTOS NATHAN DYER

VAL D'ANGRI REMEMBERS clearly the first time she saw the tattered blue and white flag bearing the Southern Cross. "They rolled it out before me and I sort of knelt down," Val says. "It was a very reverent moment. Then I said out loud: 'We have to save this'."

It was 1973 and the Ballarat art teacher had been called upon to save what was left of the original Eureka Stockade ensign. For decades kept from public view at the Art Gallery of Ballarat, the flag was in desperate need of restoration. Although Val did not know it at the time, her own story was deeply entwined with the flag: her great-great grandmother, Anastasia Withers, was one of three women who reputedly stitched it from a bolt of dress fabric.

Less than three-quarters remained of the original flag that flew above the Eureka diggings on the fateful Sunday morning of December 3, 1854, when a 300-strong force of police and British redcoats swooped to crush a rebellion led by Irish digger Peter Lalor. What remained was tattered and punctuated by hand-cut squares, taken over the years as souvenirs.

During the winter school holidays that year, Val spent two weeks painstakingly stitching the flag back together. "I didn't ask for anything, I was just so pleased to be doing it for Ballarat," she says. Val recalls when the flag finally went back on public display later that year: "It was lovely; it was like looking up at a stained glass window in an old cathedral".

Although the starry banner is famous today, the events of the Eureka rebellion, and those leading up to it, remain relatively unknown to many Australians. But a new museum in Ballarat, recently published books and a year-long program of events celebrating the 160th anniversary last year have reminded many of the rebellion's significance.

Director of the Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka (MADE), Jane Smith, says since opening in May 2013 more than 70,000 people have visited the highly interactive centre. Jane says those numbers have included 1000 school students every month. "If you want people to engage with history and heritage, you've got to find clever and innovative ways to do it," says Jane, standing in the foyer of the \$11 million museum that tells the story of Eureka within the wider context of Australian and world democracy.

Jane says growing interest in the Eureka story is shown in the response MADE has received since putting out a call for missing pieces of the flag. "Last year, when we found a piece of the flag in Queensland that no-one knew about, and when we got it authenticated, we had a media audience of five million in four days and got a story in the *Wall Street Journal*," she says.

The story of Eureka began when gold was discovered at Ballarat in August 1851. Soon after, thousands of eager diggers

flocked from around the world, many from the Californian goldfields, and many more from Britain and Europe. By 1854, more than 45,000 diggers populated the Victorian goldfields. They came from all walks of life and many were highly educated.

One estimate puts the amount of gold escorted from Ballarat to Melbourne in the first five years of the rush at 77 tonnes – worth about \$3.7 billion today. But while many made it rich, either taking the easy pickings of alluvial gold found early on in the rush, or by digging down to the underground leads, many more did not. The average 1850s miner lived a difficult life, crowded in canvas tents sleeping six to eight men. Because of mining activities, access to fresh water was limited. Mine cave-ins were a constant and lethal danger.

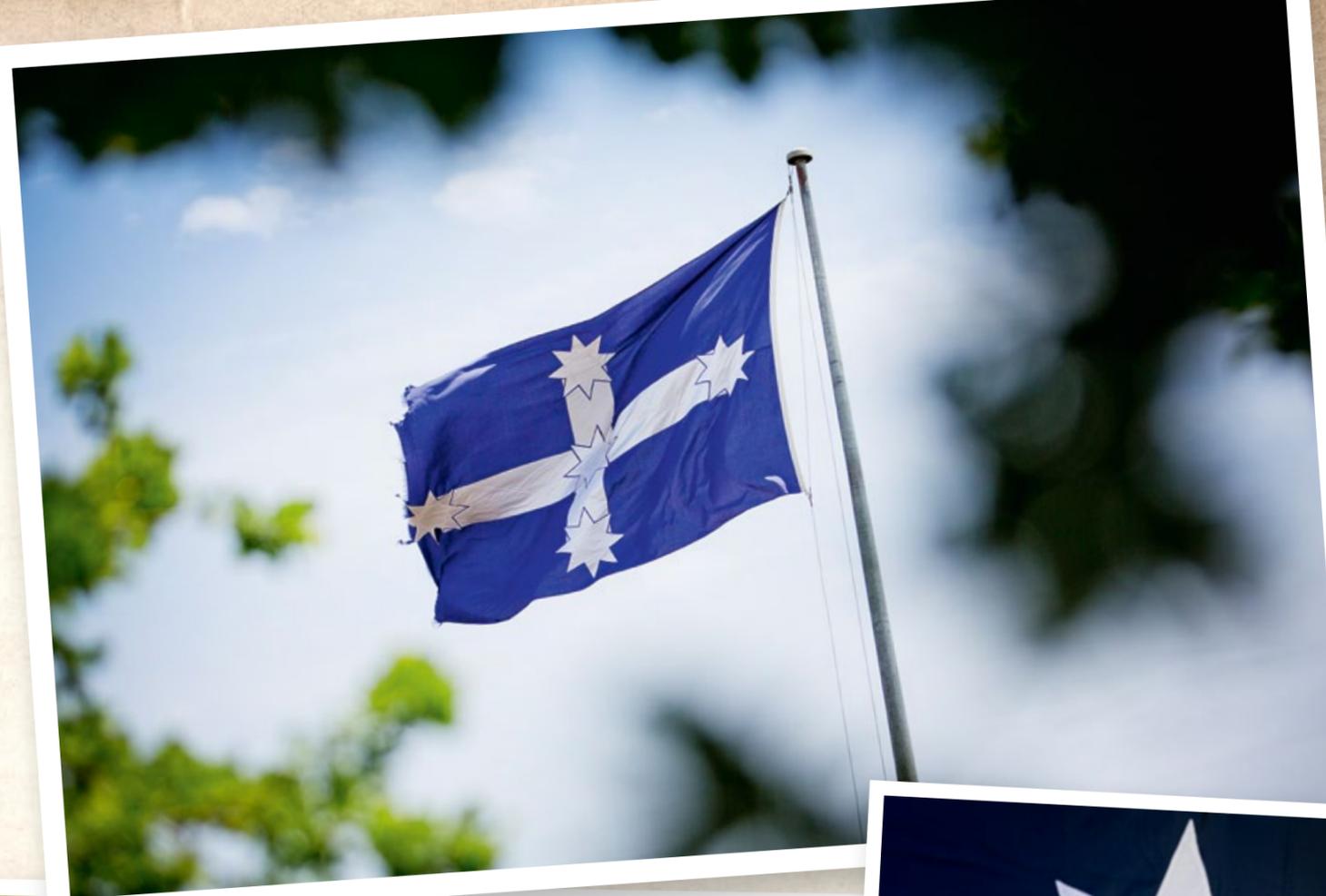
Austrian-born landscape artist Eugene von Guerard described the scene on arrival at Ballarat in a series of diary entries in January 1853: "Ballarat consists of a camp of tents, and some buildings constructed of boards. One building, made of the trunks of trees, constitutes the prison, and is often the temporary abode of bushrangers, and also of diggers who can't – or won't – pay their licence," von Guerard wrote. Another entry describes the multicultural make-up of the digger population: "Yesterday we went to peg our claims at Eureka Hill. Our nearest neighbours are Chinamen, Englishmen and Americans".

On top of poor living conditions, diggers faced government regulations many saw as unfair, the most notorious being the abovementioned miner's licence fee. In 1853, Lieutenant-Governor Charles La Trobe set that fee at £1, ten shillings per month. The fee was the same for those who struck it rich and those who made nothing at all. Unlicensed miners were regularly rounded up by police during random "licence hunts" and faced a fine, hard labour or even imprisonment.

Extremely unpopular on the goldfields, the licence fee was strongly supported by the powerful squattocracy, which had lost much of its workforce to the diggings in central Victoria. Although they themselves paid just £10 per year for their often-vast landholdings, many squatters saw the hefty miner's licence fee as the only way to dissuade farm workers from joining the rush.

For the government of the fledgling colony – annexed from New South Wales in July 1851 – the licence fee was crucial to funding the increasing number of police and services required in the burgeoning towns north of Melbourne. In his book *Eureka, The Unfinished Revolution*, Peter Fitzsimons suggests one estimate at the time put the total taxes paid by squatters in 1851 at £20,000 per year, while licence fee revenue exceeded £500,000.

Tensions mounted throughout 1853 and 1854, with diggers from Ballarat to Bendigo becoming increasingly vocal about



3RD DECEMBER, 1854. WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER. COLLECTION: ART GALLERY OF BALLARAT. PURCHASED BY THE BALLARAT FINE ART GALLERY WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF MANY DONORS, 1996.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A Southern Cross flag flies above Bakery Hill in Ballarat, Vic; flag restorer and former Ballarat art teacher, Val D'Angri, with a hand-stitched replica of the original flag; Charles Doudiet's *Eureka Slaughter*.



**CLOCKWISE: A sign about and statue of one-armed Peter Lalor on Sturt Street, Ballarat; the grave of Scottish digger James Scobie at the Ballarat Old Cemetery; Anton Hasell's sculpture, *Eureka Circle*, in Ballarat's Eureka Stockade Memorial Park; Ballarat educator Robert Allan with the original Eureka flag.**

their discontent. 'Monster meetings' attracted thousands of disgruntled diggers eager to vent their frustration at the alleged injustices. In addition to abolishing, or significantly reducing the licence fee, diggers began demanding the right to vote. At the time, voting rights were restricted to men aged over 21 years of age who were professionals or members of the military or who had property worth more than £1000. Membership of the Legislative Council was restricted to men aged over 30 with assets totalling more than £5000.

On October 7, 1854, young Scottish digger James Scobie was murdered outside Bentley's Eureka Hotel. Although many believed the publican, former convict James Bentley, was responsible for Scobie's death, no-one was convicted of the murder. The miners believed that was because of Bentley's close ties with the local judiciary. Ten days later, Bentley's hotel was burnt to the ground.

By then, the rebellion was becoming unstoppable. It culminated in a meeting of thousands of diggers at Bakery Hill on November 30, 1854, where Irishman Peter Lalor led diggers in swearing their allegiance to each other beneath the newly revealed Southern Cross flag. Lalor, a civil engineer who arrived in Australia in October 1852, had rebellion in his blood, with his father and a brother involved in the independence movement back home.

After the Bakery Hill meeting, Lalor and an estimated 1500 diggers began constructing a fortification at the nearby Eureka Lead. Barricaded behind a ragged stockade of timber and scrap materials, the diggers had a list of demands, including the right to vote and mining-fee reform. The Southern Cross flag fluttered above. Three days later, on the morning of December 3, fewer than 150 remained when the police and soldiers stormed the stockade. The bloody battle that ensued lasted just 20 minutes but resulted in the deaths of more than 20 diggers. Seven soldiers also died.

Peter Lalor later wrote of the battle: "About three o'clock on Sunday morning, the alarm was given that 'the enemy' was

advancing ... On discovering the smallness of our numbers, we would have retreated, but it was then too late, as almost immediately the military poured in one or two volleys of musketry, which was a plain intimation that we must sell our lives as dearly as we could. There were about 70 men possessing guns, 20 with pikes, and 30 with pistols, but many of those men with firearms had no more than one or two rounds of ammunition".

In his official account of the battle, commanding officer of the troops, Captain Thomas, wrote: "At about 150 yards, as we advanced, we were received by rather sharp and well-directed fire from the insurgents, without word or challenge on their part; then, and not till then, I ordered the bugle to sound the 'Commence Firing'..."

The macabre post-battle scene was recorded by 19-year-old school teacher Samuel Lazarus in his diary: "I entered [the stockade] and a ghastly scene lay before me, which it is vain to attempt to describe – My blood crept as I looked upon it. Stretched on the ground in all the horrors of a bloody death lay 18 or 20 lifeless and mutilated bodies – some shot in the face, others literally riddled with wounds..."

News of the rebellion spread around the world. More than 120 diggers were arrested. Thirteen were later charged with high treason. Lalor went into hiding. In early 1855, Melbourne juries, reflecting the feelings of many Victorians who felt they had been driven to act by unfair laws, acquitted all the diggers. The sentiment is reflected in an extract from Henry Lawson's 'The Fight at Eureka Stockade' penned in 1890:

*We were all of us young on the diggings in days when the nation had birth –  
Light-hearted, and careless, and happy, and the flower of all nations on earth;  
But we would have been peaceful an' quiet if the law had but let us alone;  
And the fight – let them call it a riot – was due to no fault of our own.*

Despite the overwhelming military defeat experienced by the Eureka diggers, their demands were eventually met. In the years following, the licence fee was replaced by a more affordable

Miner's Right, which gave the holder the right to vote. Lalor, who lost an arm in the battle, became a member of the Legislative Council in 1855. He remained in politics until 1887.

Today, Ballarat's main thoroughfares, Sturt and Lydiard streets, reflect its golden past, with grand hotels and opulent public buildings prominent throughout. The spirit of Eureka remains central to the town's identity, with walking trails, a nightly sound and light show at the Sovereign Hill tourist park and town signage bringing the story to life. A one-armed statue on Sturt Street bears the inscription: "The Honourable Peter Lalor". The Southern Cross flies above many buildings. At the Ballarat Old Cemetery, the graves of diggers and soldiers killed at Eureka lay in separate memorials. The headstone of James Scobie is there, too.

Jane Smith believes interest in the story will continue to grow. "You can see from the sales of Peter Fitzsimons' book and Clare Wright's book (*The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*), people are fascinated with the story of Eureka," Jane says. "And there's a fantastic lot of stories that have not been told before."

Ballarat educator Robert Allan, who assists with the delivery of the Eureka Education Program to visiting school groups at the Art Gallery of Ballarat, says it is important to understand the broader context of the Eureka conflict. "I explain to students that Eureka wasn't just about a battle or a flag, it was about people and their right to be respected and treated fairly," Robert says. Val D'Angri agrees. "It's a flag of rallying, not a flag of war," says Val, who last year supervised a team of volunteers who hand-sewed a replica of the original flag to commemorate the 160th anniversary.

Although the significance of the rebellion continues to be debated among scholars of Australian democracy – some say the reforms granted to diggers would have occurred without the stockade – the oath sworn by those at Bakery Hill on November 30, 1854 remains a poignant reminder of the Eureka spirit: "We swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other and fight to defend our rights and liberties".