

# The People Rushes

**(This period is usually called The Gold Rushes but the gold didn't rush anywhere)**

— By Doug Bradby, Buninyong Primary School/Ballarat Gold Museum —

*I'm not sure what my students learnt from my 30 years of history teaching but I learnt a few things. I learnt that students like stories. I learnt that students like to discuss, argue and debate. And I learnt that students like to have fun while they are learning. That's it, that's all I learnt.*

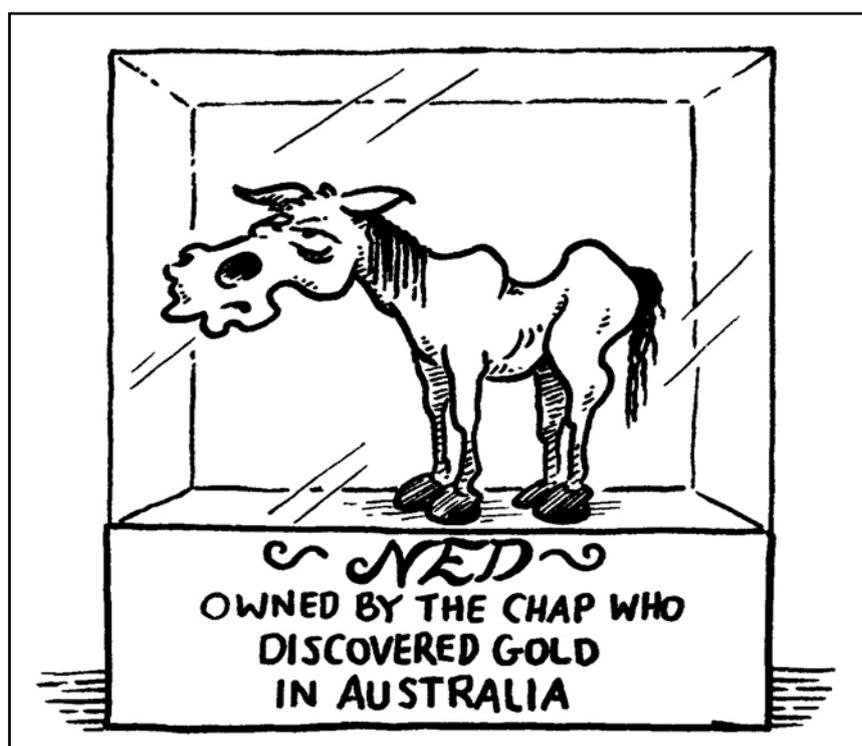
*So I developed a teaching style that was appropriate. My classes laughed and argued their way through the year. And of course we read and researched and wrote, but only to bring the material back for further analysis.*

*However I struggled to find a narrative history that fitted this teaching style, so I wrote it myself. Below is a chapter from my soon-to-be published book, The Seriously Weird History of Australia. It's in the style of John Farman's The Very Bloody History of Britain, a wonderful student version of 1066 and All That by Sellar and Yeatmen.*

*It is meant to be read out loud, slowly, in public and to be challenged word by word. On a good day my class would only get through two paragraphs or questions. And of course they enjoyed the lively cartoons by Carson Ellis, an ex-student of mine who now works and lives in Japan.*

*Tawney said the first thing an historian needs is good boots. In my experience the first thing a history teacher needs is a sense of fun. In conclusion I can only say that to successfully teach history it is very important not to be too earnest.*

In 1851 when Edward Hargraves discovered gold in a creek near Bathurst in New South Wales, he said, 'I shall be a baronet and my old horse will be stuffed, put into a glass case and sent to the British Museum.'<sup>1</sup> Well, was it? Where is dear old Ned? Is he being kept out the back at the British Museum instead of being sent back to the outback?

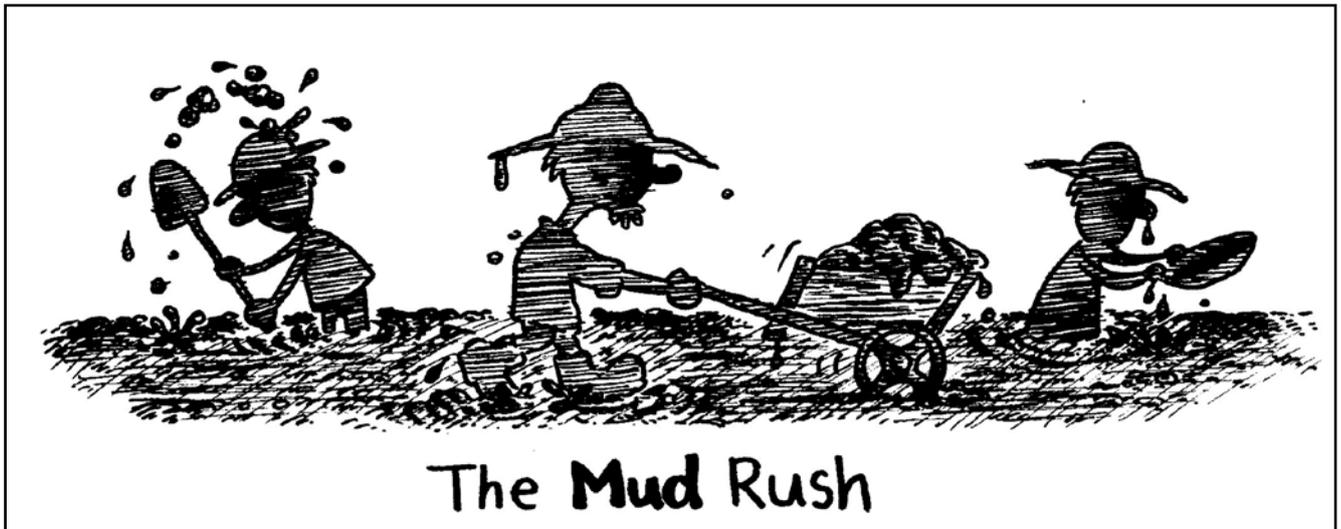


By Carson Ellis.

And why did Hargraves make such a loud noise about the discovery? Why didn't he call the place Poverty Point or Dead Man's Gully or Poor Man's Lead or Misery Creek, something sensible to get rid of everyone else so that he alone could get the gold? The answer is that Hargraves used his pot of gold to go for the jackpot; the 10 000 pound reward from the New South Wales government and a 250-pound per annum pension, plus a presentation to Queen Victoria herself. It worked.

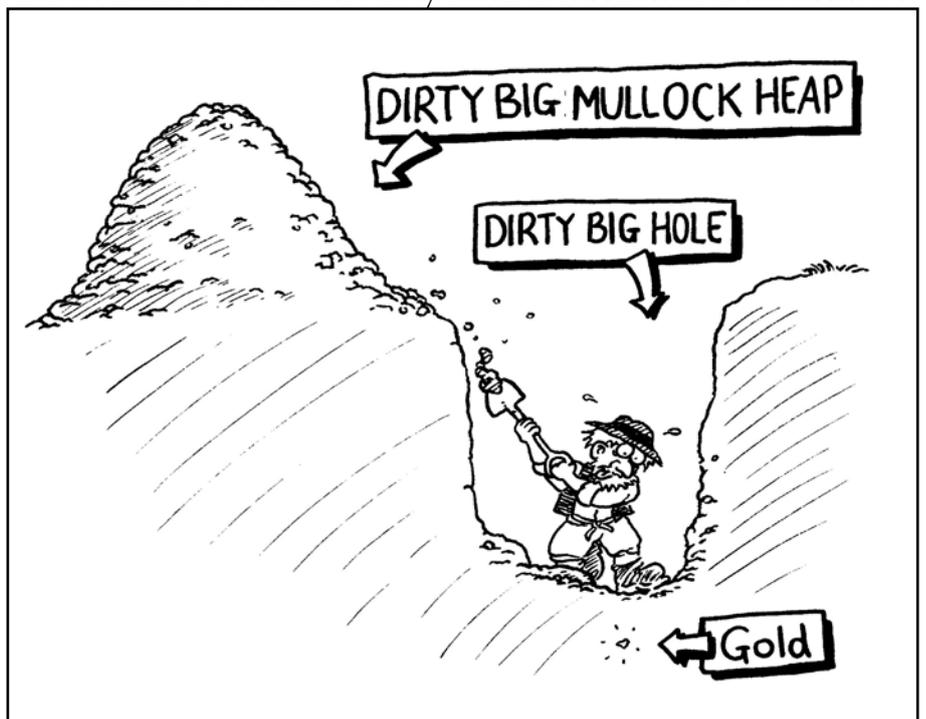
### BALLARAT: FROM RESTING PLACE TO WORKING PLACE

But the richest goldfield was found in August 1851 in a lush valley that the Aborigines called Ballarat – meaning 'a resting place'. Even the President of the Legislative Council, Sir James Palmer, rushed to Ballarat to see if the streets were paved with gold. He must have been very disappointed to find that they were paved with mud. The main road, now called Main Road even though it isn't, had to be planked to make it passable but even that was just passable. The locals called it Corduroy Road.



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The gold was alluvial gold. It was in the creeks, and the diggers, using the latest American technology from the Californian gold rush, gold pans, began to wash the mud but the mud stayed dirty. The gold however was a heavy metal, and soon the miners heard the sound of heavy metal as it collected at the bottom of their gold pans, which, by the way are made of tin and not gold. They dug shafts down to the old bedrock and there they found huge quantities of gold in the gravel of the old buried rivers. In total the miners of Ballarat dug out 37 kilometres of buried rivers, called 'leads,' and found 11 million ounces of gold in the gravel. Gold is currently fetching just over A\$800 an ounce. This was unheard-of wealth for ordinary people but the miners were not ordinary people.



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Due to the absence of the environmental officer that week, month, year, decade

and century the miners proceeded to turn the place into a pretty good imitation of the moon. 'There's gold in them there hills,' said Anon. Person. Correct, but the problem was there was more hill than gold and you had to dig up the lot and sort it into the two categories, gold and not gold, or 'mullock'. The next generation of kids thought mullock was better than gold as the old miners stacked it up into big hills – mullock heaps – which they could slide down on bits of tin. Old car doors on wet pine needles were the best. It should be an Olympic event.

### **WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT, MAXIE?**

I wonder what the Aborigines thought of all this frantic activity. Let's imaginatively reconstruct the scene.

Aboriginal man: Hey what are you doing down there?

Max the Miner: I'm looking for gold, this very precious yellow stuff.

A: Why? Is it nice to eat?

M: Well, no, not directly.

A: Is it a medicine that gives you eternal life or cures ingrown toe nails?

M: Well, no, not exactly.

A: Don't tell me, let me guess. Does it keep you warm? Does it protect you from enemies?

M: Listen, will you? The point is, any time I like I can take this gold to a store and the storekeeper will give me food and clothes and anything I want.

A: Why does the storekeeper give you useful things for something that isn't useful?

M: Because he can take it to the bank and they will look after it for him or give him some paper with the picture of the Queen on it. Now do you understand?!

A: So, you are down that dark, muddy hole working like mad, risking your life so that you can get yellow stuff out so that they can lock it up in a room.

M: Now you have it! That's why I came to Ballarat.

A: Ballarat means 'resting place'. That's what you should do.

M: Not on your nelly. I'm going to work down this hole until I have so much gold I will not have to work down this hole.

A: You are as nutty as a fruit cake. Oh, and by the way, are you going to clean this mess up after you?

M: No. Why? What's the point; no one lives here, do they?

A: I live here!

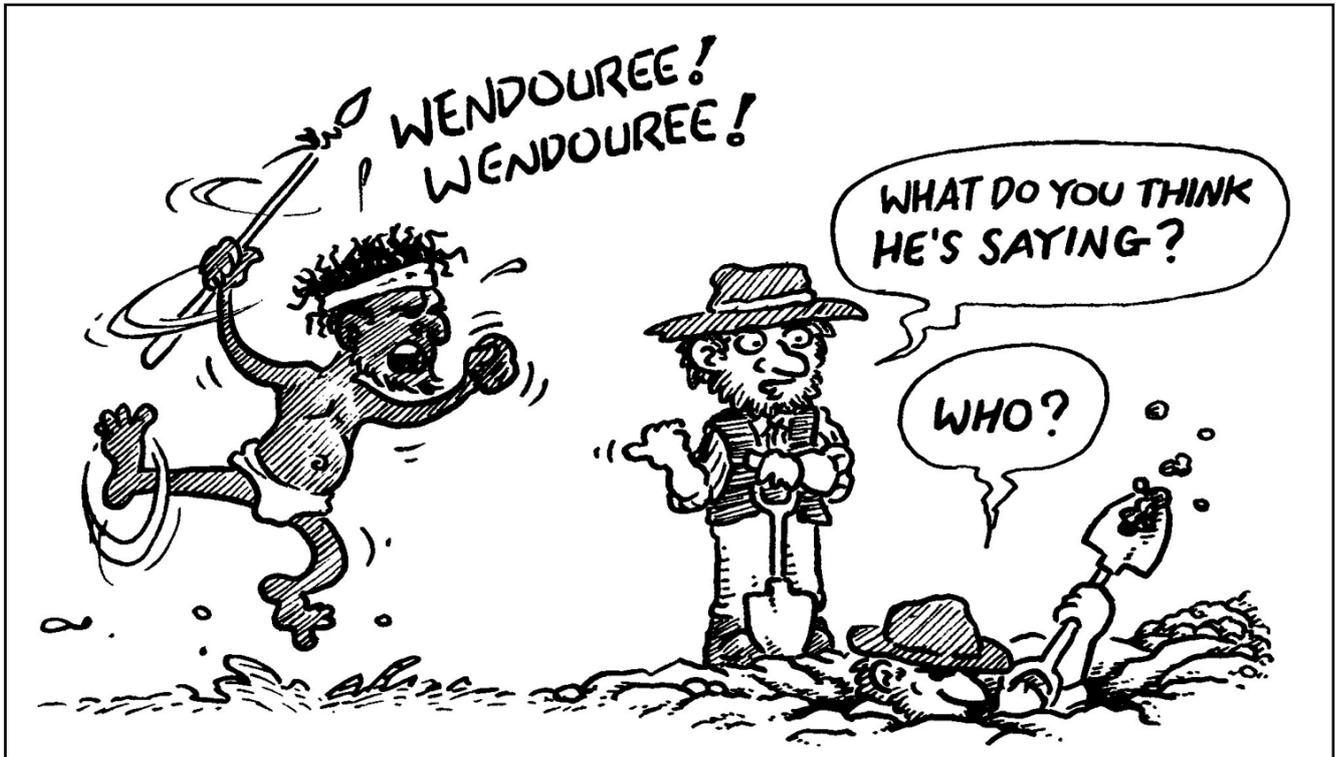
M: I can't see you. (Unfortunately at the time the Europeans were suffering from a bad case of Terra Nullius which means they were colour blind and couldn't see anyone unless they were white so they thought the country was empty and available to be taken over.)

A. I wish you would wendouree! (an aboriginal word for 'clear off' – this is true).

M. Wendouree. Nice word. I think we will call the local lake 'Lake Wendouree'.

A. Wendouree! Wendouree! Wendouree!

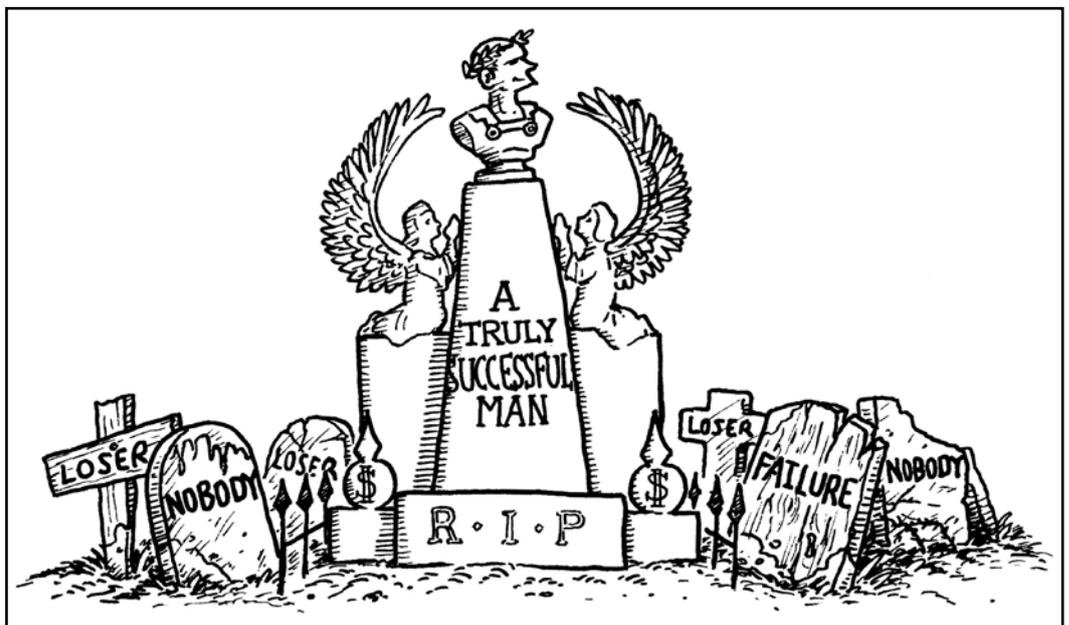
But the miners didn't. They just kept on digging up the yellow bits from the dark holes and transporting them to dark rooms. In Ballarat this weird activity went on for 70 years.



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## A GOLDEN HARMONY

They were wonderful times however. No-one jumped your claim, unless of course you were not there to guard it. No-one stole your gold if you didn't have any. No-one sold you a dud claim unless they could get away with it. One wealthy squatter who owned a gold mine decided, on the advice of his mine manager, to sell his gold-less gold mine, only to find that the manager then started work for the new owners and suddenly the mine produced large quantities of gold. A ten-year court case virtually ruined the squatter, who went back to Scotland in disgust. The winner stayed on the gold fields and ended up with the



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biggest and most elaborate house in town and the biggest and most elaborate grave in the cemetery. What a prize!

It was of course Australia's first multi-cultural society, 120 years before anyone had invented a label for a multi-cultural society. So, the English, Irish, Chinese, German and American miners all lived and worked happily together. Oh, apart from the massacre at Lambing Flat and the fights with the 'Tipperary boys' and the incident at.....Yes, well, enough of that. Just one more story: the Chinese had their own funeral services and they would leave food for the departed person's trip to wherever at the graveside altar. Once the Chinese mourners departed from the departed, the hungry locals sneaked in and stole the food. Cheap eats, Ballarat-style. At least that is what an old bloke told me.

## MINE THAT GOLD

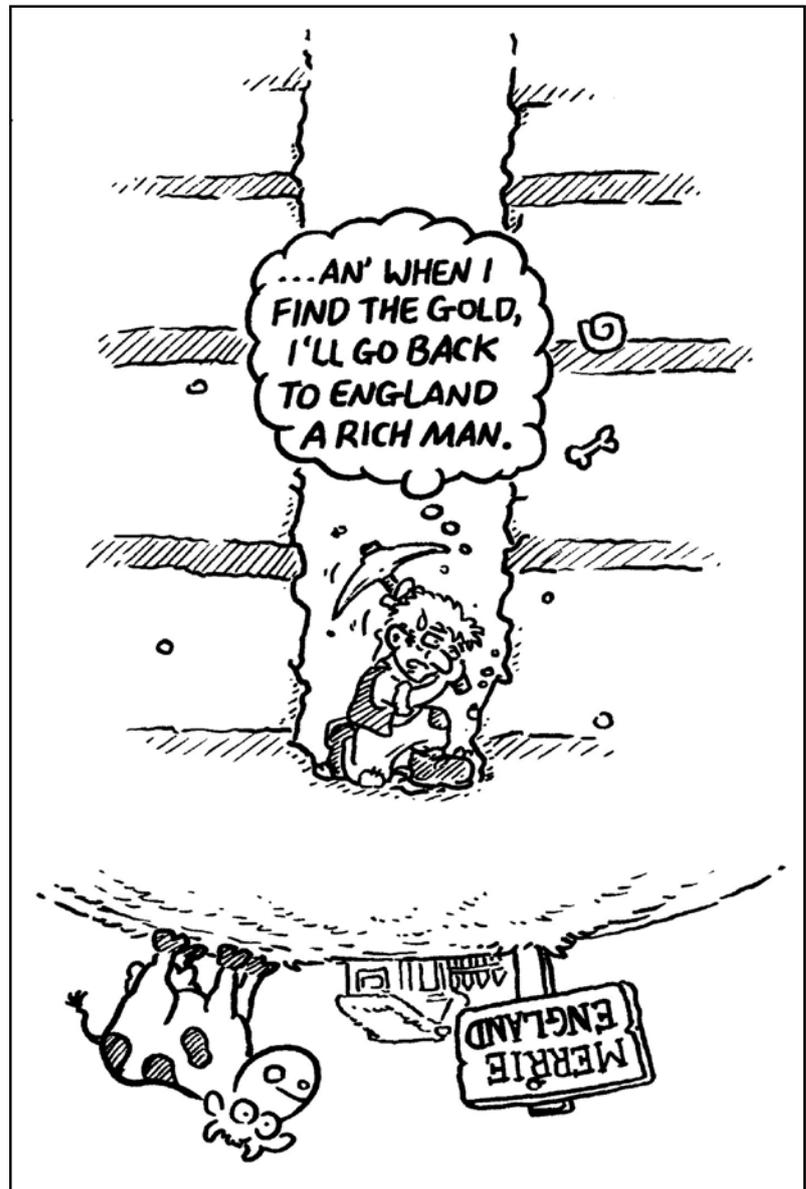
However, credit where credit is due. They did work very, very hard. They had to, really – it took so long to get all the gold. Some of the buried rivers went under solid basalt or blue stone, magma which had flowed out of volcanoes and set solid. The story of 'The Band of Hope and Albion' mine deserves retelling. In 1858 120 men begin to dig through the rock. At 30 metres they struck an underground lake and nearly drowned. They blasted on for another five years when they broke into a sea of sand and again they nearly drowned; then more rock, then another lake. After seven years they finally got through 120 metres of solid rock.

So, was it worth it? Yes, it was the richest mine in all the world at that time. Six tons of gold was taken out of shaft number nine alone (there were 11 shafts.) The mine employed 1000 men and worked 80 kilometres of tunnels called 'drives'. That's further than most Sunday drives, even today. They certainly could not be called a band of no-hopers, the miners who worked at the Band of Hope.

What happened to all that money? Here is a clue. By 1880 Ballarat had 500 hotels. Although, to be fair, they also built a beautiful city for 40 000 people with churches, parks, gardens, shops, a huge town hall, 20 superbly built schools and an art gallery. They even had enough gold left over for the ceiling of the wonderful Parliament in Melbourne. The building is wonderful, anyway.

## DEATH AND TAXES AT BALLARAT

How did the government of the day, which was also the government of the night, react to all these developments? First of all they tried to hush it up, but as that proved impossible they then tried to make the miners pay up, but they ended up mucking it up. In Victoria the government was really the



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Governor Charles Joseph Latrobe (hence the police were called Joes even if that wasn't their name), who occasionally sought advice from his social and financial equals, the squatters who were the wealthy land users, but not land owners, in the colony.



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The squatters didn't like the diggers as they tended to do their digging where the squatters wanted to squat, particularly along the precious creeks. The miners for their part wanted the government to get out of the way and let them get on with the digging. Not for long however; soon they wanted a range of government services such as roads and protection from bushrangers. They wanted the best services but the lowest taxes: a problem which governments have solved by promising both things and delivering neither.

The fairest tax would have been an export tax, which would only have taxed those who found gold; so obviously they didn't do that. For some unknown reason the squatters were against taxing the wealthy and they blocked such a tax in the Legislative Council. The government opted for a licence tax and every one had to obtain one before they started to dig. Miners had to pay up front before they could front up. As for enforcement, the 'Joes' had licence hunts, although the miners noted that they were really person hunts. The rest is history. Well, of course it is, what a ridiculous thing to say.

## AUSTRALIA'S OWN LITTLE RIOT/REBELLION/REVOLT/REVOLUTION

The miners, under their leaders John Basson Humffray and Peter Lalor, soon organized the Ballarat Reform League to protest. Latrobe did the right thing and took early retirement, leaving the next poor devil, Governor Hotham, to deal with it. Humffray believed in rational debate and discussion, so he obviously got nowhere and didn't get a statue in the main street, though he did get the longest and crookedest street in Ballarat named after him. This was unfair as well because Humffray was neither long nor crooked. He did get threatened by the physical force men who said they would hang him in the gum tree at the front of his tent if he refused to join them at the stockade. He refused.

The physical force men such as Kennedy believed that 'moral persuasion is all a lot of humbug, nothing convinces like a lick in the lug.'<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately for the miners at the Eureka Stockade, some of the soldiers had the same belief.

So, here we had a recipe for disaster. The recipe is: mix 20 000 aggrieved miners with a few dozen arrogant officials, add a dash of government stupidity, and there you have it. You do need to stir well, and there were enough stirrers to do the job. The result was The Eureka Stockade, a short but bloody encounter that left 28 dead. Was it a gallant fight for freedom or a drunken brawl that got out of hand? Was it the birthplace of Australian democracy or just the death place of 28 men? The argument over both the causes and consequences of Eureka is still smoldering and every now and again the embers flare up again. At least it is now relegated to the status of paper warfare. The debate is still going on 150 years later. Join it.

## A NEW ERA OR A NEW ERROR?

Did the gold rushes fundamentally change Australian society? Most historians say they were a catalyst (ask your science teacher) for changes that were already occurring. After Eureka, the Licence Fee was replaced with a Miners Right which was not only an eighth the price of the old licence; it also gave the holder the right to vote. The miners and the gold rushes did help to speed up the arrival and the extent of democracy.

In most societies up to that time the 'golden rule' applied – no, not the Christian one about 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' – the rule that says those who have the gold make the rules. Up until 1850 the squatters had the wealth, the 'gold' so to speak, and so they made the rules. After 1860 the miners had the gold and even more importantly they had the numbers and the vote and a new era of democratic government began. The hope was that democracy was a new era and not a new error.

## THINKING ABOUT THE GOLD RUSHES

Discuss these questions with students:

1. Why didn't Ballarat become a ghost town when the gold petered out?
2. Were the miners heroes or villains or....?
3. Was Maxie right? Is gold really valuable or was the gold rush a pointless activity?
4. Does the Eureka Stockade prove that violence achieves nothing or that violence often has good results? Who was right – Humffray, Lalor or Governor Hotham? Who would you have supported? Some women hid the trousers of their husbands so that they couldn't take part in the battle. Did they do the right thing?
5. Would you have taken your children to the goldfields?
6. A new mine has disturbed old workings in which lie the bodies of four miners killed in an accident in 1861. Should the new mine be closed?
7. Give five reasons why a shrewd, intelligent miner would have made friends with the local Aborigines.
8. Make a list of sayings which refer to the old weights, measurements and money. E.g. 'there's not an ounce of truth in it'. (Key words: pound, miles, inch, foot, ton, quid, brass razoo, penny, farthing). Find a minimum of 10 sayings.
9. Which is the most beautiful building in your city? Which is the ugliest?
10. Imagine the miners and soldiers had been buried in a common grave. Write the inscription.
11. Invent five misleading names for your goldfield.
12. What's makes the better evidence – an old timer's story or an official government document?

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Bill Peach, *Peach's Gold*, ABC, 1983.
- 2 G. Serle, 'The Causes of Eureka', *Historical Studies, Eureka Supplement*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1954, pp. 15-24.