La Trobeana

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FRONT COVER
Thomas Woolner, 1825-1892, sculptor
Charles Joseph La Trobe
1853, diam, 24.0cm. Bronze portrait medallion showing the left profile of Charles Joseph La Trobe. Signature and date incised in bronze 1.1.: T. Woolner. Sc. 1853:/M
La Trobe, Charles Joseph, 1801-1875. Accessioned 1894
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.

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Introduction

From the President

The discovery of gold in Australia had an almost instant impact on the colonial societies where it was found, especially in Victoria. For the small remote Victorian colonial government and its bureaucracy in 1851 it must have been a bit like being told you have six months to prepare for the Melbourne Olympics and build the infrastructure.

Once word of the immense wealth of the gold fields reached Europe miners flocked to Victoria. The port of Melbourne was packed with ships and with immigrants trying to find their way to the goldfields. It is interesting to reflect on Melbourne before and after the gold rushes. If you examine Robert Hoddle's original 1839 plans for Melbourne that were made in the first years of La Trobe's administration there is still remnant tea-tree on the banks of the Yarra and some bush land remains on Flag Staff Hill. South of the Yarra was swamp land with no development. There are a few houses but no really substantial buildings.

However, if you look at photos of Melbourne a little over twenty years later in 1862 after the discovery of gold Melbourne is quite a sophisticated city with numerous buildings. Parliament commands the top of Bourke Street and Old Treasury Building stands sentinel over Collins Street. There are churches, hotels, theatres and commercial buildings. The city is a hub of activity. All of this development was achieved despite the huge shortage of labourers caused by workers deserting to the gold fields to find their fortunes. La Trobe's vision to have a well ordered city surrounded by beautiful parks and gardens had enabled the city to develop and prosper.

The immense wealth that gold bought to Victoria meant Melbourne was able to afford to build many beautiful buildings that still remain and enhance the city today.

I would like to thank the members for their support during our tenth anniversary year activities. I would also like to thank our various generous sponsors. John Drury and Dianne Reilly have organised some outstanding events that have provided us with an insight into the life and times of La Trobe and his family. This edition of The La Trobe Journal will add to that body of knowledge and enhance our appreciation of life in that rapidly changing society.

I wish you all a Merry Christmas.

Diane Gardiner

Hon. President La Trobe Society

'Duties of No Ordinary Difficulty'[1]: La Trobe's Goldfields Management

Dr Dianne Reilly

Dianne Reilly is the Honorary Secretary of the La Trobe Society. She has written extensively about Charles Joseph La Trobe and his times.

No sooner had the advance news of separation from New South Wales been received in Port Phillip on 11 November 1850, and the bridge over the Yarra River officially opened on 15 November of that same year, than the single most revolutionary and momentous event in the history of the colony occurred. Gold in enormous quantities was discovered!

Gold had been found in Port Phillip as early as 1849. In a letter to his friend Ronald Campbell Gunn in Tasmania, La Trobe described this first significant discovery:

> You ask me what is the truth about the Port Phillip gold. Simply this – that specimens of gold ore, nearly in a pure state – overlaying or mixed with fragments of quartz of great beauty, have been brought into Melbourne and disposed of to one or two individuals by a shepherd, and I think there can be no doubt whereon the precise locality may be, that they were picked up on or near the surface, in one of the lower ranges between the Malden (sic) Hills and the Pyrenees, which in common with a large portion of the interior of the district, are composed of sandstone and quartz. The principal specimen I have examined, about 14oz in weight, gave me the impression of the ore in a fused state, having carried the quartz fragments along with it, or, having been dropped upon them.[2]

La Trobe was interested in the mineral at that time solely from a geological point of view. He did not consider that the discovery of gold would necessarily be an influence for good in his young community. This misgiving was borne out with the gold rush to Bathurst

in New South Wales in May 1851 when there was a sudden exodus of the population in Melbourne to the gold diggings in the north. The result was that business slumped, the prices of commodities soared, and there was every appearance of a dramatic economic downturn in the newly created colony of Victoria. A group of concerned Melburnians formed a 'Gold Discovery Committee' on 9 June 1851 and offered a 'reward for the discovery of a profitable gold mine within two hundred miles of Melbourne'.[3]

home in Britain, in Europe and in the United States. La Trobe was faced with responsibility for a suddenly expanded population which, in the twelve years he had been in the colony, had increased from 11,738 in 1841 to 77,345 in 1851, and was to rise to a massive 236,776 by 1854.[6]

At the very time that Port Phillip Bay was constantly full of sailing ships bringing new residents in the form of gold-seekers to the colony, La Trobe was attempting to form his first Legislative Council. Victoria had been


VICTORIA.

GOLD LICENSE.

Gold License, 1853
Glass Plate Slide
La Trobe Picture Collection,
State Library of Victoria,
H41033/19

There was a flurry of activity in response to the challenge, with a number of miners claiming the prize. Gold was discovered in several places almost simultaneously, with William Campbell having found specimens of gold-bearing quartz near Clunes prior to June 1851, Louis-Jean Michel locating the precious metal at Anderson's Creek (Warrandyte) early in July, James Esmond also finding alluvial gold in the Clunes district later in July 1851, and Thomas Hiscock discovering gold at Buninyong near Ballarat in August of that same year. The actual winner was a matter of some contemporary dispute, the committee eventually awarding one thousand pounds to each of these contenders.[4] These finds led to the Ballarat discoveries later in the month, followed by the Mount Alexander and Bendigo rushes in September and December of that year respectively.[5] Now, instead of evacuating Melbourne for New South Wales, the prospectors moved from one goldfield to another in Victoria, seeking instantaneous fortunes. Not only had the local population become itinerant, but there was a massive influx of immigration as the great wealth of the colony became known at

granted the form of government in force in New South Wales, Van Diemen's Land and South Australia, with the passing of the Australian Colonies Government Act in 1850. La Trobe, as Lieutenant-Governor, was to undertake the role of chief executive, to be advised by an Executive Council of four members appointed by the Crown. These were Captain William Lonsdale as Colonial Secretary, Charles Ebden as Auditor-General, William Stawell as Attorney-General, and Redmond Barry as Solicitor-General. These were men on whom he could rely. They came from educated and cultured backgrounds not dissimilar from his own, and they were of the same class in society. He was of the opinion that those colonists from whom the proposed Legislative Council was to be nominated, and whose advice he was required to take, were not of a sufficiently high calibre for such influential roles. Although five 'non-official' members, squatters and business men, were nominated to the Council in 1852, they changed so frequently as not to be a particular support to the Lieutenant Governor, thus bearing out his prediction of their value.

In the midst of such political turmoil, La Trobe had to find some way of dealing with the desertion of Melbourne by tradespeople and most of the police and the labouring population. Even La Trobe's own civil servants left their posts, despite threats that they would never 'be eligible for further employment by the State'.[7] With the increase in population and consequent demands on the infrastructure, La Trobe saw government expenditure becoming unmanageable. Trained as he was by the previous Governor of New South Wales, Sir George Gipps, to operate strictly within budget so as not to alienate the Colonial Office and then suffer the consequences, he readily adopted the licence system already in place on the New South Wales goldfields to bring in revenue. This was a system he grasped as a model for his management of the financial crisis induced by gold in Victoria. Yet, despite this measure, Melbourne was in a deplorable state. It was described by the *Sydney Morning Herald's* correspondent in very unflattering terms:

> I must say that a worse regulated, worse governed, worse drained, worse lighted, worse watered town of note is not on the face of the globe … in no other place are the administrative functions of Government so inefficiently managed; that, in a word, nowhere in the southern hemisphere does chaos reign so triumphant as in Melbourne.[8]

This was precisely what La Trobe had been striving to prevent. The lure of gold was like a beacon that no one could ignore, leaving Melbourne and the government it embodied to fare as best it could.

Another first-hand observer of the effects of the irresistible attraction of the goldfields was the French journalist and photographer, Antoine Fauchery, who, a year later, described the continuing impetus to leave Melbourne:

> The mine! that is the one centre of attraction, the goal of all hopes, the dreamland where the sun rises! … It's the gold-fever; the fever for pure gold, virgin gold, gold hidden in the bowels of the earth; – a fever that is cold and held in check, but which is none the less active, driving all those who are stricken with it to throw up suddenly the most lucrative positions to run away and look for the uncertain. Only being chained to Melbourne by a really imperious material impossibility can stop one from going up to the mines to *try one's luck*.[9]

The discovery of gold created problems which further exposed La Trobe's limitations. The colony had not long recovered from the depression of the 1840s. It was only with the greatest of trouble that he could make any headway in establishing basic services in the centre of population, but there were none – not even roads – in the country districts where gold had been found. As early as 1849, he had signalled in a letter to Gunn his premonitions of the difficulties it was to cause: 'The truth is, the discovery of a good vein of coal would give me more satisfaction'.[10] Two years later, he was to complain that 'never had young governor a stranger role to play or a more extraordinary crisis to meet as best he may'.[11] In three years, the population had trebled to 284,000 by December 1854.[12] For a man like La Trobe, with his profound mistrust of social disorder and democracy, such social instability was intractable and baffling. The gold discoveries were to upset his planned gradual development of the colony along sound religious and moral traditions, and to create unstable conditions for the remaining time La Trobe spent in Australia.

La Trobe issued a proclamation in the *Government Gazette* on 15 August 1851, asserting the rights of the Crown to all minerals discovered in Victoria, whether on private property or not, and stating that any person caught mining without permission would be prosecuted. On 18 August, the details of the licence system were announced. A licence fee of thirty shillings per month would be levied on every gold seeker from 1 September 1851. This was to apply whether or not the digger was successful. Gold Commissioners were to be appointed to enforce the licence system and to defuse any disputes on the goldfields. La Trobe hoped that, by such measures, he would accrue sufficient revenue from the licence fees to allow the necessary services, such as road-building and law enforcement, to proceed while, at the same time, preventing the total dissolution of the civil service in Melbourne.

Although many miners were able to pay the required fee, many more were not, and the resentment they felt was expressed everywhere, including in the newspapers. La Trobe was described by the *Geelong Advertiser* as 'our Victorian Czar',[13] a dictator imposing an unrealistic and impossible tax when no goldfield in 1851 had yet proven its wealth. This

reaction to the difficult situation of maintaining government in a radically changed colony was a desperate measure on La Trobe's part which could only result in deep resentment and lawlessness. Diggers soon devised ingenious ways of avoiding the inspections of the Gold Commissioners. Prior to the establishment of the Gold Commission in December 1851, the Native Police had toured the Buninyong diggings on 19 September[14] to collect licence fees. The immediate result was an angry protest meeting where the miners determined that five shillings per month would be a more appropriate and just licence fee. La Trobe, viewed this democratic assertiveness as a 'slight show of opposition' which 'gave way at once to a general desire to secure licences'.[15] In this instance, La Trobe could only be seen as despotic in the face of the reasoned arguments expressed by the miners against the cost imposed. As other goldfields opened up, the general body of miners felt the injustice and the privation caused by the licence system.

was to apply equally to miners, shop-keepers and others providing services on the goldfields. Few could pay the sum, and most refused to be coerced into paying. With eminent pragmatism, La Trobe decided to remove the increase, leaving the Gold Commissioners to collect the more reasonable original dues.

The Colonial Office supported the licence fee and Sir John Pakington, Secretary of State for the Colonies at that time, suggested to La Trobe the idea of an additional export tax on gold.[18] The Government immediately introduced a bill which was soon thrown out, on the grounds that Victoria's extensive borders could not be policed.[19]

In the meantime, the miners were agitating for better conditions on the goldfields, especially with regard to improved security for themselves and their gold, and better roads and bridges. They also expressed their frustrations at the present system and their desire for

Charles Lyall, d. 1910?, artist
Mounted Police and Diggers, [ca. 1854]
Pencil, pen and ink on cream paper
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H87.63/22

La Trobe, meanwhile, struggled to provide shelter for immigrants using Melbourne as a resting place before setting out for the diggings. Accommodation was in short supply. 'Canvas-Town', an area to the west of St. Kilda Road, was established as a place where new arrivals could pitch their tents for five shillings a night.[16] Provisions had to be found for them. The rule of law also had to be upheld especially when successful, and often unruly, diggers returned to Melbourne. In addition, the mass exodus from town and country to the goldfields had greatly weakened the pastoral production on which the economy was based. On 1 December 1851, he placed a second notice in the *Government Gazette* which announced an increase of one hundred per cent in the licence fee. Effective from 1 January 1852, it would cost a hopeful digger three pounds per month.[17] The reaction to this announcement was uproar. The new licence

responsible government. In June 1853, an Anti-Gold Licence Association was formed at Bendigo where about 23,000, or nearly half the total number of diggers in the colony were located, gave voice to their many grievances, the central focus being the licence fee which, even at its original cost, all considered to be too stringent. The leaders of the Association were G.E. Thomson, Dr. Jones and 'Captain' Edward Brown. These three drew up a petition which articulated the diggers' grievances, and made a number of demands of the Government, notably a reduction in the licence fee, improved law and order, the right to vote, and the right for miners to buy land. The petition was signed by miners at Bendigo, Ballarat, Castlemaine, McIvor (Heathcote), Mount Alexander, and other diggings and sent to La Trobe. Although it was claimed at the time that 30,000 signatures had been collected, in fact, the petition was signed

by only 5,000.The 1853 Goldfields Petition was thirteen metres long, and was bound in green silk for its presentation to the Lieutenant-Governor. Besides the high cost of the gold licence, miners were protesting about the Gold Commissioners and the severity of their manner of collecting the monthly fee. The historian G.W. Rusden described the force so often employed: 'It was raised like a poll-tax; and it was raised at the point of the sword, or the barrel of a pistol'.[20]

A deputation of miners met La Trobe in his office on 1 August 1853. The meeting was not a success. La Trobe responded defensively and coldly to each of the clauses put forward. He was aloof from them partly because of his own attitude to his position of authority as Lieutenant-Governor, but also because of his fear of the 'mob'. He was the person in command, and by distancing himself from the miners, he maintained his authority. The moment of meeting with the miners could have changed history. Had La Trobe been able to act differently, perhaps the tragedy of Eureka would have been averted. But La Trobe could not put himself in the miners' shoes. He could not feel for them in their struggle for basic acknowledgement and rights. He did not have the force of personality, the experience of what it was like to really struggle to stay alive, nor the ability to place himself on their level – man to man. He believed that authority carried with it rights – of respect, of precedence, of power – but it also bore with it the weight of duty. In his case, he was simply conscious of the responsibilities on his shoulders, and he would address them always in a sober and judicious manner in carrying out his weighty official duty.

La Trobe challenged the description of the licence fee as a tax, arguing that it was simply a charge levied on those diggers who appropriated public property to their own advantage. He justified the thirty shillings per month by pointing out that the expenditure necessary to manage the goldfields and to provide amenities for the miners had to be offset by the raising of revenue in this manner. La Trobe indicated a willingness to put the proposal to the legislature for direct representation of the mining population. He also conceded the request that licences could be paid on a monthly or quarterly basis, at the convenience of the applicant, and he agreed that new arrivals could have fifteen days' grace before a licence became necessary. Of the miners' fourth request to have the ability to purchase small parcels of land for agricultural purposes, La Trobe, referring to proposed land surveys, promised 'that I am doing everything that lies in my power to comply' with this wish.[21] He refused to abide by the request to reduce the fine for not taking out a licence, on the grounds that concessions should not be made to law-breakers, but he agreed with the miners that it was mostly unnecessary for the police to carry arms when enforcing the licence fee.

Unknown artist
Charles Joseph La Trobe [1851]
Engraving
Published in Picturesque Atlas of Australasia (Sydney, Picturesque Atlas Company, 1886-88)

The tone of La Trobe's response was firm and, to a certain extent, conciliatory. However, he concluded his response with a very revealing paragraph which showed a mistrust of the democratic process and his firm belief in the power of authority:

> The deputation informed me that the sole object which they personally had in view in moving in the matter was the public good. I differ from them however in their estimate of the means and machinery by which the public good and social prosperity are to be secured. I am no enemy to free and honest discussion of any subject of public interest … [However] I do not think the public advantage to be promoted by the loose and intemperate popular discussion of questions of importance as they arise or by an agitation which however plausibly defined, may be shewn to be in sober fact questionable or uncalled for.[22]

Again, he was asserting himself as the authority figure. As the Lieutenant-Governor, the figure at the head of government, he believed it to be correct that he had the overview of what would comprise 'the public good.' The deputation left him, disappointed that their principal request for a reduction in the licence fee had been refused point blank. The miners

returned to the mines totally dissatisfied with their interview, and La Trobe, too, was less than pleased with the outcome. He was fearful of anarchy on the goldfields, which was why he presented such a cold and autocratic face to the miners. However, he could also see that the miners had come to him to express their very real problems with the licencing system, and their desires for the future, in a reasoned way. The sensitive side of La Trobe could understand some of the privations which had been expressed to him. He still needed, however, an alternative method of raising the necessary government revenue to keep the colony afloat.

At the opening of the next session of the Victorian Legislative Council on 30 August 1853, La Trobe proposed legislation to totally abolish the licence system, in its place imposing an export duty on gold. In this way, taxation on the precious metal would only be paid according to the actual earnings of a miner. A select committee was set up to consider the matter, but it resolved to maintain the licence fee, deciding when the Goldfields Management Act was proclaimed in November 1853 to introduce a sliding scale of fees from £1 for one month to £8 for twelve months, and giving the franchise only to miners who took out annual licences.[23] Geoffrey Serle described the outcome as 'barefaced trickery, for as things stood almost no one was taking an annual licence as there was no financial incentive to do so'.[24] The licence fee, destined to become one of the major factors leading to events at the Eureka Stockade in 1854 during the governorship of Sir Charles Hotham, was to remain in place, and public opinion on the injustice of it escalated. All this confusion reflected very badly on La Trobe, with the result that he created a bad impression of the administration in the eyes of the colonists, the press and the Colonial Office.

Due to sheer mismanagement on La Trobe's part, two conflicting notices were sent out to the goldfields at the very same time, one advising that miners would not be required to pay a licence fee for the month of September 1853 while the select committee considered the question of abolition of the fee, and a second notice stating that the fee should be paid.[25] The *Geelong Advertiser* described the cause of the disorder: 'Madness is the only plea left … the only charitable construction',[26] while the *Argus* took great delight in torturing La Trobe mercilessly.[27] The London press condemned the unfortunate Lieutenant-Governor in no uncertain terms: The London *Spectator* described his actions as 'an example of vacillation, obstinacy and pliancy, almost unparalleled',[28] while *The Times* proclaimed: 'The Government of Victoria is humbled in the dust before a lawless mob'.[29] There were rumours that the Governor-General, Sir Charles FitzRoy, was planning to arrange La Trobe's recall over his ineptitude.[30]

La Trobe had been made distinctly nervous by the turmoil generated by the discovery of gold. The aftermath engendered in him 'a sense of the gold rushes as dangerous, edgy events with unpredictable outcomes'.[31] He was left virtually alone by the exodus to the mines to undertake the day to day activities of government. There were few civil servants on whom he could rely to issue government advice; the resources needed for the influx of immigrants simply were not available; he had few, if any, advisors to whom he could turn. In fact, it could be said that La Trobe panicked before the mob. He wanted his decisions to be based on thoughtful consideration as evidence to his superiors of his able rule. The time was not there for him to deliberate. He had to make decisions, and these were sometimes the wrong decisions. It is not surprising that the press vilified him, but the criticism was based on an imperfect understanding of his situation. The situation brought out two opposing traits in La Trobe's character: timidity and authoritarianism. He was afraid of making decisions which might be wrong in the eyes of FitzRoy in Sydney, and the Colonial Office in London, and he believed in the authority with which he had been invested. The result was that, with no support, he lost confidence in ever being able to resolve the situation and gave up as the decision-maker.

Well before her husband received the 1853 deputation, Sophie La Trobe wrote to their daughter, Agnes, at school in Neuchâtel, of the personal anxiety the management of the goldfields was causing her husband:

> I suppose he [Papa] tells
> you how much those gold
> discoveries have given him to
> do – how harrassed [sic] and
> worried he feels at times – but
> thank God who keeps him in
> good health and in strength
> of mind & heart. For a week
> towards the end of the year I
> got very anxious about him – he
> had lost his appetite, his sleep,
> in part – and for a week, or a
> fortnight we never saw a smile
> on his face – you know, that is
> not at all like him – but thanks
> be to God – he seems quite
> himself again – and goes to his
> work with courage – though he
> is surrounded by difficulties on
> every side … [32]

William Strutt, 1825–1915, artist
John Noone, fl. 1858–1888, photographer
The First Legislative Council of Victoria, 13th November 1851 [1887]
Wood engraving
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, IAN25/06/87/SUPP/8

Six months later, Sophie was still troubled for Charles Joseph. She, who knew him better than anyone else, could observe the great toll his responsibilities were taking on him. Without Gipps as his mentor and confidant, it would seem that he suffered great stress over the running of the colony:

> Your dear papa is still as busy as ever he can be. His head gets but little rest even in the night, so much he has to think about official business – most of the time of an unpleasant kind – and I see so little of him that sometimes it makes me quite unhappy – and every year I am hoping that if it is God's will, it will be the last of that kind of life in this country and so far from all those who are dear to us.[33]

La Trobe admitted, himself, that he was feeling the tension of his situation. He wrote to his friend, Deas Thomson, Colonial Secretary in far-off Sydney:

> Such constant wear and tear and strain cannot be borne with impunity long – and I feel that I must take the first proper opportunity of asking some relief … on public grounds, I think the time is coming when a change would be advantageous to the community. Both Governor and governed have been exposed to some trial of patience by my long reign.[34]

La Trobe was well aware of his unpopularity with so many of the colonists, his every word and action being criticised by those elected to the Legislative Council, by the press and by the man in the street. A sensitive person, he was conscious of his isolation, and this together with the strain of having a wife now in extremely poor health and a young family to care for, helped him rationalise his plans for the future. Despite his successes in forging a distinct and affluent colony from the bush, and his conviction that he was 'in a position in which God's providence and not my own will and efforts'[35] had placed him, La Trobe submitted his resignation to the Secretary of State in London on 31 December 1852. He wrote:

> I must at length acknowledge that I feel the necessity of seeking to secure, as soon as may be, some breathing time and some degree of complete relaxation from that constant strain upon the mind more than the body, which the weight and character of my public duty, particularly of late, have brought with them.
>
> But beyond this, I think that the time has now arrived when a change in the head of the Executive Government of the Colony would be no disadvantage to the community.[36]

He recognised and regretted that the discovery of gold had marked the end of the steady progress he wished for the community. 'I would to God', he lamented to Deas Thomson, 'that not a grain had ever been found'.[37] Despite some lack of judgement and undoubted miscalculations on his part, aggravated by lack of support from Governor FitzRoy in Sydney and the Colonial Office in London, he had done his best to uphold his office and to manage the colony of Victoria. Geoffrey Serle concluded that, when faced with the appalling difficulties of the times, La Trobe had tried to 'govern chaos on a scale to which there are few or no

Joseph Brady, 1828-1908, artist
Princes Bridge, Melbourne, 1851
Watercolour
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H6112

parallels in British colonial history'.[38] He had, in fact, managed to keep the colony for which he was responsible operating in circumstances 'in which the archangel Gabriel might have been found wanting'.[39]

These were tumultuous times for the colony. It is probably true to say that not even the most experienced of governors could have handled the situation in a Victoria beset by gold-induced havoc any better than had La Trobe. However, he coped the way he did because of his personal characteristics. He was sure of his position in command of the colony, but he was constantly worried about the ramifications of his actions in the eyes of his superiors. He was an organised man who quailed before the chaos of an administration which had lost its bureaucracy. He was conscious of his responsibility for the colony and its residents, but confused when it became evident that gold induced an impetus that was beyond his control. Despite the inundation of Victoria, despite the demands of Governor FitzRoy, despite the requirements of the Colonial Office, or perhaps because of all of these, La Trobe felt alone. He did not have the will to go on.

La Trobe's reception of the goldfields petition in 1853 may well have been the turning point for him and his desire to continue as an officer of the Crown in Victoria. He had never found the administration of the colony easy, due mainly to his personal characteristics. His reserved nature, and his conviction that, by virtue of his office, he was superior to those he had to govern, did not allow him to associate freely with the colonists. The constant battery of the press and criticism from the colonists had worn him down to the point where any confidence he had was shattered. His was not an engaging personality which attracted support, and so many of his decisions were contrary to popular approbation. The management of the goldfields certainly did not reflect well on La Trobe. This phase of his administration was the weakest part of his management of the colony. Turbulent times, and a constantly changing focus for his attention as more and more problems came before him for resolution, eroded any decision-making ability he had remaining, and destabilised his judgment. Added to all this, after thirteen years of creating and juggling the governance and infrastructure, he was exhausted and demoralised. He wrote to the Colonial Secretary in Sydney of his mixed feelings in December 1852:

> I feel that I deserve very different treatment … I look upon the heavy spirits of the year that is soon to close with wonder. I am not afraid but when the day comes that men can strain the gold dust out of their eyes and look upon things calmly, some credit will befall to the place of the Gov. which neither lost its head nor its temper under such circumstances … But on public grounds, I think the time is coming when a change would be advantageous to the community. Both Governor and governed have been exposed to some trial of patience by my long reign.[40]

Despite maintaining the rule of law in tumultuous times, La Trobe concluded that his period of effectiveness in Victoria had come to an end. In September 1853, a few months before his departure from Melbourne, he wrote to his brother:

I have … had a very anxious time of it with my goldfields population, have had to get over from Van Diemen's Land more military strength … Let me work as I will, my successor will have plenty to do. I have been fully up to my work so far but not without the feeling that under the strain I could not keep it up long without giving in.[40]

This, no doubt, was the low ebb of his administration which, despite its severe failings especially on the goldfields and in dealings with the Indigenous population, had had its successes too. As the citation for the Order of the Bath awarded to him in 1858 read rather grudgingly:

With regard to his administration of the Government of Victoria, if it was not marked by any very brilliant results, he carried the colony through unprecedented difficulties with safety and laid the way for future success.[41]

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1 Duke of Newcastle, Secretary of State for the Colonies, to Herman Merivale, Permanent Under-Secretary of State, 23 March 1853, CO 309/9, 86284, No. 183, Public Record Office, Kew.

2 MS Q641. La Trobe to Ronald Campbell Gunn, 2 March 1849, Ronald Campbell Gunn Papers, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

3 Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age* (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1963), 9-10. The Committee comprised many who would exert great influence over future public affairs in Melbourne. McCombie listed them in his History of the Colony of Victoria as 'Messrs. Nicholson, Westgarth, Hodgson, Russel, McCombie, O'Shanassy, Greeves, Fawkner, Grice, Davis, Hood, Bell, Hart, Heales, and Gumbiner'.

4 Henry Gyles Turner, *A History of the Colony of Victoria*, (Melbourne, Longmans Green, 1904),2-5.

5 Serle, The Golden Age, 23.

6 Wray Vamplew, *Australians; Historical Statistics*, (Sydney, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, 1987), 26.

7 Turner, *A History of the Colony of Victoria*, I, 343.

8 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 November 1852, 8.

9 Antoine Fauchery, *Letters from a Miner in Australia*, translated by A.R. Chisholm (Melbourne, Georgian House, 1965), 33.

10 MS Q641. Charles Joseph La Trobe to Ronald Campbell Gunn, 2 March 1849, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

11 Ibid., 6 February 1852.

12 AGL Shaw, *A History of the Port Phillip District*, (Melbourne, The Miegunyah Press, 1996), 249.

13 *Geelong Advertiser*, 26 August 1851. Quoted in Serle, The Golden Age, 20.

14 Serle, *The Golden Age*, 20.

15 CO 309/9. La Trobe to Pakington, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 10 October 1851. Public Record Office, Kew.

16 Tony Dingle, *The Victorians: Settling*, (Sydney, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, 1984), 53.

17 Thomas McCombie, *The History of the Colony of Victoria*, (Melbourne, Sands and Kenny, 1858), 221.

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Charles La Trobe and the Modern World: Making sense of the gold rush

By Professor Richard Broome

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Victorian Modernity

We can never know what Charles La Trobe understood about his world for we have knowledge and perspectives that he did not share; we know how the story unfolded which was opaque to him; and we also seek to obscure the ambiguities of the moment in the quest for a clear, lineal historical narrative that for us makes sense of the past.[1] Thus when La Trobe arrived in Port Phillip in October 1839 his first account to his immediate superior Sir George Gipps was of his enthusiastic welcome in both its gravity and its gaiety, and of his desire soon 'to have a quiet life'.[2] His subsequent letters told of the strong Melbourne land sales and of violence on the frontier. We know, of course, that controversy later emerged over his own purchase when the citizens of Melbourne did not bid against him in his quest for a block; and that subsequent sales became more frenzied as speculators swooped. We also know that the racial violence on the frontier emerged into a significant loss of life that some have recently termed genocide. So much of what we know was obscure to La Trobe.

Charles La Trobe did not see, as we see, that he came to a colony that unlike early Sydney was born modern. The infant sheep walk which he began to administer looked rudimentary and traditional with its bark huts, few institutions and rough dressed men – and in a sense it was – but it was also part of a new economic system

tied to a novel means of production. The wool from the backs of Port Phillip's sheep was produced and managed under global financial arrangements and transported across the world to be woven into fabric in Lancashire's woollen mills run on modern industrial lines and work practices. In short, Port Phillip was tied to what we now know as the factory system. La Trobe worked in a world that was becoming modern in other ways based as it was increasingly on the global mobility of people seeking refuge or new economic opportunities at a time when the free movement of people was becoming the norm. No passports, visas or immigration restrictions then existed, and quarantine and migrant reception in Port Phillip only came in response to crises.

1851. Most of this human deluge into a colony of just 76,000 in 1850 came in the first half of the decade, especially the years 1852-53. La Trobe did not then know, but in the golden decade 584,000 people arrived by sea into Victoria, most coming through Melbourne, while tens of thousands more travelled overland. Beds could not be had in Melbourne by 1852 as people doubled up with strangers and spilled into a canvas town at Emerald Hill (South Melbourne). The population was symbolic of human movements in the new global world, being young and culturally diverse. Melbourne and the goldfields in particular became strongly multicultural, transforming the English, Irish and Scottish origins of the Port Phillip population.

S.T. Gill, 1818-1880, artist
J.Tingle, engraver
Government Camp, Creswick's Creek, [1857]
Steel engraving
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, 30328102131660/12

In 1851, La Trobe confronted a rapidly changing situation of which he was then only partially aware. Firstly, he faced the administrative challenges of the Separation of Port Phillip from New South Wales, and almost immediately afterwards a golden madness descended. But these things only unfolded to his understanding over months. The financial and demographic processes of a global world of the 1840s accelerated with the discovery of gold, first in California in 1849 and then in Australia in 1851. A nascent mineral boom that had begun in South Australia's copper fields was transformed by gold, known to us but not to La Trobe, in Geoffrey Blainey's words, as 'a rush that never ended'. Gold was not only a mineral of traditional allure, but since the Bank Charter Act (1844) it was the substance of the full gold standard for Bank of England's currency – harbinger of a new era in world currencies. Sleepy pastoral Melbourne became a new world city in 1851, being jolted out of its pastoral foundations and enlivened by a global network of capital, transport and people fuelled by gold.

Gold rush Melbourne soon bustled, indeed it burst at the seams, from an influx of gold seekers who began to arrive by the end of

Many arrived in Melbourne in an ultra modern way. The first of the clipper ships run by the White Star and Black Ball Lines, which pioneered the shorter more southerly Great Circle route, disembarked expectant diggers in record time in 1852. The clippers were advertised in Britain with much hyperbole. Despite the boosting, they represented both the grace and the triumph of modern navigation. Indeed, speed of communication was one of the hallmarks of modernity and was attractive to impatient diggers anxious to get their share of the imagined golden pile. Clipper passengers, however, were sometimes less enamoured of the much vaunted speed after being terrified and frozen when ploughing through heavy southern seas. The *Marco Polo* crossed from Liverpool to Melbourne in 68 days and by 1854 the *James Baines* lowered the record to just 63 days. Slower but more reliable steam vessels were also beginning to connect the metropolis of empire and its colonies.

Melbourne became a remarkable town, aided by the planning of Robert Hoddle, who with much prescience and later, in consultation with La Trobe, laid the grid pattern and wide streets of what soon became a modern

commercial city. The town was marked by other elements of modernity. The Railway Age had transformed Britain and other parts of Europe from the 1840s by moving goods and skills about, creating economic winners and losers, and setting some people in motion as they sought to escape competition from faceless distant producers. Melbourne was touched not only by those seeking better opportunities, but by the same transport revolution as well. The government made rail reservations to the north, west and to the Bay after 1852, and a railway materialised with the opening of the Melbourne-Sandridge (Port Melbourne) line in 1854. In that year, the Yarra and especially Hobson's Bay sheltered hundreds of vessels from distant ports, whose movements were cleared from a Customs House on its northern banks below the western market.

A remarkable 1856 panorama by Nathaniel Whittock of Hoddle and La Trobe's Melbourne from south of the Yarra, revealed an orderly grid pattern spread out over a gentle slope to the north. The Yarra's northern bank was lined with at least six wharves and large sheds, with many ships at anchor nearby, which tied Melbourne to the wider world. Two large paddle steamers plied the Yarra. The Sandridge rail line is clearly visible traversing the river and conveying a train majestically under a full head of steam. Clippers, steel and steam symbolised Melbourne's modernity. The scene was much the same two years earlier in 1854 – the year on 6 May that La Trobe departed for home, symbolically on the ship the *Golden Age*. A promise of greatness beckoned this town fringed still by paddocks and cattle, and Charles La Trobe might have vaguely glimpsed that as he gazed on Melbourne receding from his view. Indeed, we know that this year of his leaving – 1854 – was a significant one. It gave a start to some great Melbourne institutions of the modern world of knowledge and communication, all of which still thrive almost sixteen decades later: *The Age* newspaper, The University of Melbourne, and the State Library of Victoria.

However, La Trobe did comprehend some of the social, economic and ecological revolution that unfolded before his eyes in the tumultuous years during his tenure in office. The social revolution began during the Port Phillip years as British workers jostled with their masters in an industrial struggle more to their advantage than at Home, as they now acted within an economy continually beset by labour shortages. Higher wages than at Home were the result, making this a 'bellyful' place for working people. Even the Masters and Servants Act had less purchase than in England where masters ruled without question and woe betide any servant who left service without a reference. The pastoral frontier of Port Phillip thus bred an egalitarian spirit and high labour mobility. This was accelerated by the gold rushes, where muscle was king and who you were counted for little. Gold rush society assumed the name of a topsy turvey society. This was famously characterised by S. T. Gill who drew spirited newly-rich diggers with their badly dressed brides, riding in fine carriages, their legs over the sideboard in a swagger and champagne bottle and glasses in hand thrust skyward. In this society Jack was as good as his master, or becoming so.

This was a shocking revolution to some. Rev. J. D. Merewether who arrived on an immigrant ship in 1852 fretted about the 'confusion, selfishness, license, and subversion of all respect for worth, talent and education. Brawn and muscle are now the aristocracy'. He pronounced this new spirit as 'the French revolution without the guillotine'.[3] This conservative view looked to fashion Victoria in the image of a vanishing rural England, where agricultural life provide stable tenant families, living in tranquillity, and in the shadow of the power of the church steeple and the manor house. Alluvial gold mining was seen by comparison as a shiftless existence of males living in barbaric conditions, ungoverned by law and morality and grovelling in muddy creeks chasing illusions. *London Punch* captured this view in July 1852 reproducing two cartoons side by side, one showing an 'English gold field' of ripened grain and neatly dressed children playing on a stile with a village nestled behind. The 'gold field in the 'diggings' showed bedraggled diggers living in hovels by a creek, several struggling in a knife fight to the death, while others looked on moronically or waved bottles in a drunken stupor.

To others, gold was liberating, a progressive evolution of the common man. Rev. Dunmore Lang the radical Presbyterian cleric from Sydney wrote a book entitled *Freedom and Independence in the Gold Lands of Australia* (1857), in which he predicted a wonderful future from colonial progress as a republic founded on gold. The progressive/radical view of gold rush Victoria – the view of most of the diggers – was energised by three elements of the British cultural baggage, infused also by radical thinking from land-starved Irish and political refugees from the 1848 revolutions in Europe.

Sources of Victorian Progressivism

The first of these wellsprings of progressivism was the tradition of the 'rights of Englishmen'. This ancient set of rights upheld the English against tyranny. There was to be

no standing army and no police force that could be used against the people, who had the right to assemble and protest against tyranny. For individuals there was the right to the sanctuary of one's home against the world, and the right of *habeas corpus* – that is the right not to be held without charge and trial. Every person also had the right to petition the monarch about an injustice.[4] These ancient rights had been reaffirmed in the popular mind during the working class struggles that emerged in the 1820s – especially at 'Peterloo', the dreadful firing upon a crowd of peaceful protesters in 1823 at St Peter's Fields, Manchester.

The second source of progressive/radical ideas in the immigrant cultural baggage stemmed from English Chartism. The Chartist movement emerged in the late 1830s bent on implementing a People's Charter drawn up by working men in 1838. It set out six principles for democracy (for men but not women) by means of universal male suffrage, a secret ballot, no property qualifications for the franchise, equal-sized electorates, annual parliaments and payment of members. The movement failed in Britain in 1848 when Parliament, presented with a monster petition of two million signatures demanding the Charter be implemented, responded with little enthusiasm and no action. The Chartists failed to push onto direct action (unlike some radicals in European states) and the movement dissipated.

The idea of Chartism, however, became the progressive inspiration for a generation that infused the minds of many gold rush immigrants. It became, as Robin Gollan once wrote in his classic *Radical and Working Class Politics* (1960), 'the great negation'. This meant most gold rush immigrants believed that the Australian colonies should never be unjust and class-ridden like Britain and that democracy was no wild thing, but something that would, in due course, emerge in the new world. This idea infused the diggers' protests over the inordinate gold licence fee at Bendigo in the Red Ribbon movement in 1853 and those who protested more forcefully at Eureka in December 1854 just after La Trobe had arrived Home. The proof of the widespread support for progressive ideas was evident in the way juries quickly dismissed the treason charges against the Eureka rebels in 1855 and conveyed them triumphantly through the streets of Melbourne.

The third source of progressive (rather than radical) ideas present in the minds of most gold rush immigrants was the ethic of self-improvement. This ethic became widely shared in nineteenth century Britain among the middling classes and especially after the failure of Chartism and class-based action, as well as among the upper ranks of the working classes. It was a product of both Enlightenment thinking that education could transform the individual and the world and of the Evangelical movement that believed a new form of Protestant Christianity could have a similar transformative outcome. The individual could be remade by their own right decisions and by embracing autodidactic techniques. Self-improvement was expressed in myriad ways that the historian Trygve Tholfsen argued created a network of institutions across Britain by the mid-nineteenth century.[5] The earliest of these were Mechanics' Institutes which from the 1820s provided lectures for the working men of the new industrial Britain. They soon spread to the colonies, one being formed in Melbourne in 1839, the first of many such institutes across Victoria. Friendly societies of all descriptions – the Oddfellows, Rechabites, Foresters, Manchester Unity and more – flourished in Britain and were transplanted to the colonies, along with Masonic societies and other fraternal bodies. They all expressed the principles of 'right' behaviour and the power of individualism.

If they were anything at all, immigrants were individuals, and ambitious ones at that, fuelled by self-improvement ideas and a willingness to uproot from kith and kin for a better chance at life. Geoffrey Serle argued gold rush immigrants were the most exceptional of Victoria's immigrants, being better educated, more individualistic, more religious, more prepared to pay their way to get to the colonies and driven by the need to succeed.[6] However, those who came before the gold rushes were also stimulated by similar ideas as revealed in the five days of celebration in November 1850 when news arrived of Separation from New South Wales to take effect in July 1851. Charles La Trobe, escorted by the military and the Port Phillip Native Police, paraded in a celebratory procession across Princes Bridge. Before him marched all the social groups of Port Phillip society, including: school groups, artisan societies, the Masons, the Independent Oddfellows, the Rechabites, the Father Mathew Total Temperance Society, other temperance bodies – indeed all of the key self-help societies of Victorian Britain, which flourished in the colony. However, after Chartism's demise, the gold rush immigrants had a heightened sense of the 'great negation', that is, to resist tyranny and make Victorian into a better world.

The gold rush experience accelerated the progressive forces that were present in the cultural baggage of many immigrants. As Charles Gavan Duffy, an Irish patriot and later Victorian Premier, wrote home in 1856: 'we are

making a new and better America. All is growth and progress and sense of life…you propose work and it is done…a sort of experience that belongs only to new countries'.[7] Indeed, most immigrants were touched by this 'get ahead' experience, either having tried their hand at digging or taking a trade – retailing, light industry or transport – that brought them in contact with diggers and the diggings. Gold digging was a levelling experience as well. Most remarked that the diggers all looked like the great unwashed, whether they were formerly gentlemen or navvies. Most assumed a digger's attire and sported beards and hats. Muscle and experience was king and not one's breeding or background. Those did best who could work the hardest – and had luck. Some disliked this levelling, but R. Caldwell in 1855 wrote:

> the honest independence of these fellows, I confess, I liked exceedingly…with their long beards and rough exterior, and sometimes with fowling pieces over their shoulders, they looked rather threatening…I am of the opinion that, taking into account the very heterogeneous character of the population of the gold fields, the diggers are a well-behaved, sober, industrious class of men, and that they form most desirable pioneers of civilization in a new country like Australia.[8]

Samuel Thomas Gill, 1818–1880, artist.
On Bendigo Creek
Engraving.
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H141901/2

Four Victorian Popular Visions

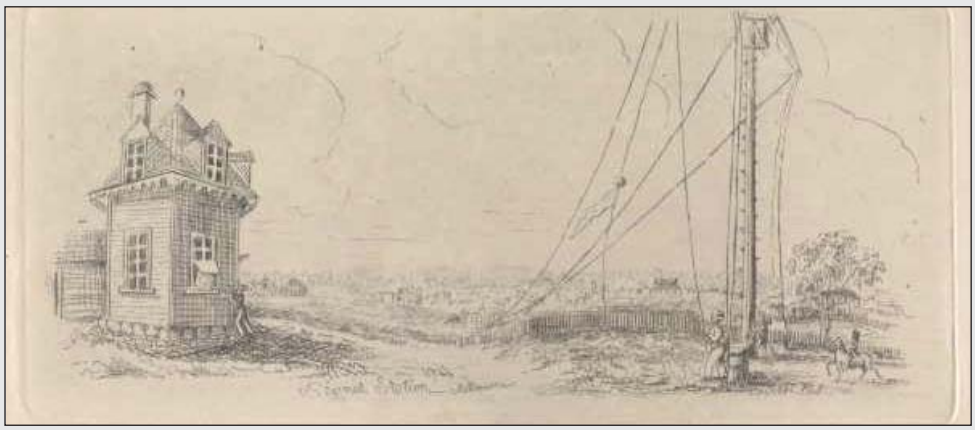
So, while Charles La Trobe was packing in early May 1854 for Home with some degree of satisfaction, he left a society on the verge of foment into rapid modernity. A constitution was already in the making that would quickly be transformed by progressive forces from below. Victoria would soon to be transformed by four popular visions that were already incipient at the time of La Trobe's departure. These were: that the colonists of Victoria would be free of the old tyrannies; that they would be independent of oppressive masters; that they would have a better life than at Home; and that they would hold dual loyalties to Home and their new land.

The first vision to be free of old world tyrannies was aided by the fateful decision to raise revenue from a licence to dig gold rather that a customs excise on gold exports. This decision pitted an ill-educated and ill-trained goldfields police force against diggers who were often well-educated and has a sense of their ancient rights. Trouble soon arose as diggers with ill-luck still had to pay a hefty monthly licence and hunts for those without a licence became the sport of the police. Protests against the licence arose at Bendigo while La Trobe was still in charge and strong antagonisms emerged between diggers and the police. The forces that exploded at Eureka in December 1854 were incipient in the preceding year and the resentments were directed at a traditional enemy of the English people – that of 'old corruption'. The declaration at Bakery Hill on the eve of the Eureka uprising, expressed resentment at bad and tyrannical government and pleaded with Queen Victoria to ensure fair and just government – or the diggers would be forced to act. It was, in short, a plea for good government. When it did not come, the Victorian populace ensured democracy was in process by the end of the decade. However, it did not fully materialise until the end of the century when the Victorian Upper House was reformed and women gained the franchise.

The second immigrant vision was to be independent, in the nineteenth century meaning of the term – to be free of wage-slavery and the tyranny of a master. This could be achieved in the new world by gaining access to land and becoming a yeoman farmer. Indeed, land was the great magnet for nineteenth-century immigrants who travelled to the new world colonies in Australasia and the Pacific, southern Africa and the Americas. This aspiration was emerging in Port Philip at the time of La Trobe's arrival with the beginning of assisted immigration. However,

Not squatters rich or mines of gold,
Can make Australia flourish;
But horny hands the plough that hold,
Its surest wealth can nourish [9]

The land issue was not resolved in any way by the time of La Trobe's departure, but radical views were emerging. In 1855, Peter Papineau a Bendigo digger published a pamphlet 'Homesteads for the People and Manhood Suffrage' which urged opening up the land to create a yeomanry 'worthy to be the fathers



Henry Gilbert Jones, ca. 1804-1888, artist
Signal Station, [Flagstaff Hill], Melbourne, [1934]
Print etching
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H15274

in the eastern Australian colonies raising sheep for wool evolved as the successful economic staple due to its high weight-to-value ratio and its environmental suitability. This meant that most of the useable land that was wrested from Aboriginal hands was transformed into large pastoral leaseholds held by squatters. About a thousand pastoralist/squatters held much of the sheep country in south-eastern Australia at this time. La Trobe saved some of the land for future use by gazetting extensive town, water, timber, Aboriginal and public reserves on the eve of the gold rushes to the disquiet of pastoralists, but squatters still controlled vast tracts under lease.

By 1852, cashed-up diggers were seeking land and the government opened some land adjoining the gold fields for auction. The prices at auction were high and the amount of land offered modest. As more diggers arrived and sought a life after gold digging, a strong yearning for land emerged. These feelings were expressed by Charles Thatcher in several popular ballads about the land that he published in 1855 and, perhaps, sang a little earlier. One, 'Unlock the Lands', promised land for all as the panacea for the colony's problems. One verse went:

of a nation of MEN'.[10] These ideas led to the Victorian Land League's Convention of 1857, at which radical ideas were expressed for selection of 640 acres before survey to be paid off in instalments to allow 'horny hands' to purchase small farms. These demands foreshadowed the Nicholson and other land acts that opened parts of Victoria to successful closer settlement from the 1860s.

The third progressive immigrant vision that was accelerated by the gold rushes was the vision of a better life. This was manifest most dramatically in the eight-hour-day movement that was initiated in 1856 by stonemasons working at the University of Melbourne site. The colonial weather had much to do with the decision to refuse to work the ten-hour day of the Homeland and push for eight hours of work in a more enervating climate. But James Galloway, one of the movement's leaders, also remarked that: 'we have come 16,000 miles to better our condition, and not to act the mere part of machinery; and it is neither right nor just that we should cross the trackless regions of immensity between us and our fatherland, to be rewarded with excessive toil, a bare existence,

and [a] premature grave'.[11] The push for shorter working hours was part of the immigrants' aspiration for colonies to be a brave new world, more than enough to justify their great sacrifice of uprooting. The slogan of the eight hour day coined by Dr Embling MLC became 'eight hours work, eight hours rest, eight hours recreation'. Recreation was connected to self-improvement and respectability. The leaders of the movement pledged that working men would not idle away their recreation time in public houses and immoral pursuits, but put it to productive use through creating improving works at their new Trades Hall. Mr Eves, President of the Trades Hall Committee stated at the opening of the first Trades Hall building in May 1859 that a library would be erected there and music concerts hosted 'very different form those at public houses. Music exercised a softening and refining influence on the human condition'.[12]

The fourth vision held by the majority of immigrants was to settle in this new land successfully, but not to forget their homeland. They sought to become Victorian, but to remain

J. Tingle, engraver
Sandridge William's Town, from Railway Pier, [1857]
Engraving
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H30328102131660/30

English, Scottish or Irish. La Trobe, no doubt, sensed that among those who fought so long for separation from New South Wales. They not only wanted autonomy as Port Phillippians but had a sense that they were different – and superior- to convict New South Wales. As the colony of Victoria emerged in 1851 and experienced one of the greatest mineral rushes in history, colonists sensed they were making history with their golden wealth and felt a strong sense of pride. As one Melbourne newspaper editorial asked in November 1856: 'Why should there not be a loyalty to this land …why should we ever continue to cast longing, lingering looks towards the old country, at the other side of the globe, as if that alone were home to us'.[13] One only has to look at the splendid Parliament House opened in late 1856 to appreciate the sense of self that colonists developed in these heady years. But there was no great surge for republicanism in this decade or after – even during the Eureka uprising – and the colonists remained desperately loyal to Britain throughout the century and beyond. A dual loyalty emerged, for the population had a sense of being Victorian Britons, an identity that emerged later, as W. K. Hancock described in his precocious history *Australia* (1930), as a sense of being 'independent Australian Britons'.

Implicitly, being Victorian Britons or Australian Britons, implied defining themselves as being white. Racial thinking emerged on the eve of La Trobe's departure as the arrival of Chinese diggers caused resentments in 1854 at Bendigo. By 1855 there were 17,000 Chinese in Victoria and by 1857-8 the number reached 40,000 or twenty per cent of the digger population. Diggers of European descent believed Victoria was a British colony and thus white, and therefore they had the right to exclude those deemed non-white. They thought them inferior 'rice eating men' who could not be self-governing like 'beef eating [European/British] men'.[14] By 1855 a hefty £10 discriminatory landing tax was place on all Chinese entrants into the colony, equal to over six month's gold digging licences. A protectorate system was established which confined Chinese diggers to certain areas on the gold fields and charged them £1 per annum for the privilege. By 1857, as trouble deepened, a discriminatory residence tax of £6 per annum was also levied by parliament on the Chinese.[15] These measures gave Victoria the dubious distinction of being the first in the

nineteenth-century world to impose race-based restrictions, on those Chinese both entering and living in the colony. It was the assertion of the power of the majority to put their perceived interests over those of a minority. In that sense both the treatment of women and Chinese marked the limits of Victorian democracy.

Victoria in La Trobe's last few years faced significant new challenges as the young colonial administration, little more than a decade old, struggled with the problems created by the gold rushes and the rush to modernity. The Governor no doubt felt relieved to leave these behind as the *Golden Age* – and he – rode the swell through the Rip and into the wider world towards Home, but it was a Home now no longer inhabited by his recently departed wife Sophie.

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1 See Bernard Bailyn, 'Context in History' North American Studies Bernard Bailyn Lecture no 1, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 1995.

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3 J, D, Merewether, *Diary of a Working Clergyman in Australia and Tasmania, kept during the years 1850-1853*, London, 1859, p. 214

4 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, London, 1968, pp. 86-87.

5 Trygve Tholfsen, 'The Intellectual Origins of Mid-Victorian Stability', *Political Science Quarterly*, v. LXXXVI, n. 1, March, 1971, pp. 63-69.

6 Geoffrey Serle, 'The Gold Generation', *Victorian Historical Magazine*, v.41, n.1, February 1970, pp. 265-272.

7 Quoted in Joy Parnaby, 'Gavan Duffy in Australia', typescript in possession of the author.

8 R. Caldwell, *The Gold Era of Victoria*, London, 1855, pp. 101-103

9 Charles Thatcher, *Victorian Songster, containing new and original colonial songs, together with a choice selection of the most popular songs of the day, from the best authors, price one shilling'*, Melbourne,1855.

10 Peter Papineau, *Homesteads for the People and Manhood Suffrage',* Bendigo, 1855, reprinted in Ian Turner (ed.), *The Australian Dream. A Collection of Anticipations from Captain Cook to the Present Day,* Sun Books, Melbourne, 1968, pp. 64-67.

11 Quoted in H. Hughes, 'The Eight Hour Day and the Development of the Labour Movement in Victoria in the Eighteen-fifties', *Historical Studies,* v.9, n.36, 1961, p. 399.

12 *Age*, 25 May 1859.

13 *Melbourne Leader*, ? November 1856.

14 See Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the Question of Racial Equality*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2008, pp.15-35

15 Richard Broome, *Arriving*, Fairfax, Syme and Weldon, Sydney, 1984, pp. pp. 80-84.

Geoffrey Serle
and the writing of The Golden Age

By Dr John Thompson

Dr John Thompson completed his PhD at the Australian National University in 2004 with a study of the Melbourne historian Geoffrey Serle (1920-98) later published as *The Patrician and the Bloke: Geoffrey Serle and the Making of Australian History* (Canberra, 2006). His other publications include *The Oxford Book of Australian Letters* (Melbourne, 1998, 1999), co-edited with Brenda Niall, and *Documents that Shaped Australia* (Sydney, 2010).
Encouraged by A.G.L Shaw and Geoffrey Serle who taught him history at Monash University, John Thompson commenced his career in librarianship at the State Library of Victoria where with others he worked in the Australian Manuscripts Collection during the period that saw its first rapid systematic expansion. That work of collection-building has since been substantially augmented and consolidated by a succession of enthusiastic staff and supporters. John later worked for many years at the National Library of Australia in Canberra where he held various positions including Director, Australian Collections and Services. He retains a strong interest in the building of historical, archival and research collections and currently works as a consultant valuer and adviser to libraries, archives and museums in Australia.

Following his death in 1998, Geoffrey Serle was hailed by his younger colleague Stuart Macintyre as 'the doyen of Victorian historians'.[1] While Macintyre's defining judgment honoured the sweep of a nationally significant career in the teaching, writing and promotion of Australian history including several years as the distinguished editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (first in partnership with Bede Nairn but later on his own), it recognised that Victoria itself had provided the bedrock and the inspiration upon which Serle's most significant historical achievements had been built. Not the least of these was his first major work (though it was not his first book), the ground-breaking *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria 1851-1861* (1963), a study of the 1850s gold decade in Victoria that quickly became a standard text and which has since assumed something of the status of a classic. Serle dedicated this volume of survey history to the 'memory of four of my great-grandparents and my four grandparents who migrated from England to Victoria between 1853 and 1860'[2] and who served thus as representatives of the generation whose influence was decisive in shaping the colony and its institutions for the whole of the second half of the nineteenth century and beyond into the new twentieth century. The story of that influential 'gold generation' and of its fatal over-reaching in the greedy boom years of the 1880s was

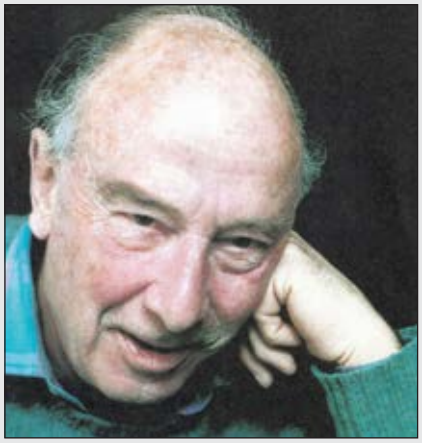
continued in a sequel volume, *The Rush to be Rich: A History of the Colony of Victoria 1883-1889*. In a highly personal way these themes later provided part of the fabric for Serle's superbly distilled and observed miniature account of his father's life *Percival Serle 1871-1951, Biographer, Bibliographer, Anthologist and Art Curator: A Memoir* (1988).

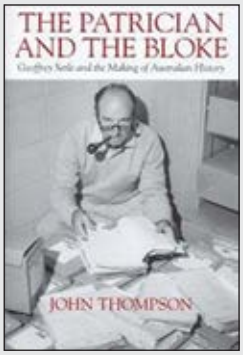
But it is that first work of Geoffrey Serle's sustained historical writing and scholarship that is the subject of this essay. It is viewed here as a significant pioneering landmark in the post-war shaping of what was emerging – due in part to the teaching of the now legendary Manning Clark – as the new and distinctive discipline of Australian history, a subject that could no longer be seen merely as a footnote to British History. While an examination of the writing of *The Golden Age* fits well with the broad theme of gold that is the subject of this special issue of *La Trobeana* marking the 10th anniversary of the foundation of the La Trobe Society, it is salutary to note that very nearly half a century has passed since Serle's *opus* first appeared; and of course it is more than 50 years since work commenced on the book. With the approach of so singular an anniversary, it is appropriate to look again at the work which not only made Serle's name and reputation but which helped Victorians – and the larger entity of Australians – to see themselves and their past in a new light. This larger claim for Serle's audience is important for, while outside his home state, he was always identified as a Victorian first and only then as an Australian, for him the two were indivisible. He had no doubt about his ultimate loyalty and he saw his histories as having a national reach. Indeed, he would always argue that the writing of separate colonial histories was an essential prerequisite for understanding the nation.

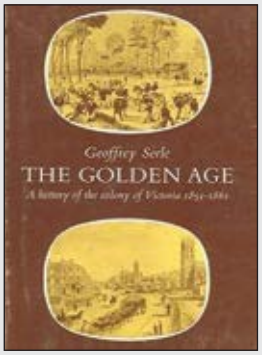
In later years, whenever Geoffrey Serle spoke of his book *The Golden Age*, he always acknowledged what he called 'his remarkable good luck' that the rich and exciting period of the 1850s in Victoria had been so neglected.[3] But there should be no surprise that his first major subject was his home state's golden decade and with the 'fight for freedom' at the Eureka Stockade in 1854 as one of its dramatic set pieces. As a radical Australian nationalist, the Eureka rebellion had long held his interest. In examining the story in some depth at the time of the Eureka centenary in 1954, he had taken a 'donnish delight' in what he came to see as the historical problem of the uprising – how and why it happened while also, as an aspiring writer and historian, relishing its essential colour and drama.[4] More importantly, he had found himself drawn to Eureka for the legend it had become, its strength as a tradition and for its symbolic significance in representing a wider Australian commitment to the ideals of democracy. In his careful and scrupulous way, he was suspicious of any simple glorification of Eureka but he was prepared to see it as ushering in 'the first period of great democratic victories in Australia'.[5] He conceded later that time had bestowed its gloss on the event but he understood its raw appeal to Australians seeking to claim a tradition of their own in the critical war years of the 1940s and in the idealistic period of post war nation-building that followed.[6] Eureka certainly had its own sentimental appeal for him personally since awareness of it had marked a crucial stage in his own growth to political and national maturity when, as a young soldier and then an idealistic student in Melbourne and afterwards at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar for Victoria, he had first thought that he might write about Australia.

Geoffrey Serle returned to Australia from Oxford in September 1950 with a robust confidence in the potential of Australian culture. Unusually for the period, his Oxford D.Phil thesis had been substantially an Australian topic – an exploration of relations between Great Britain and Australia in the years from 1919 to 1939, a subject which had seen him read widely and deeply in the literature of his own country; and the task of researching and preparing his thesis had given him the confidence to think that he might become a writer himself. Now in Melbourne again, though with some uncertainty about his immediate prospects for employment, as he looked ahead to the work he might do, the possibilities seemed infinite: 'All I saw was this vast exciting Australia to be explored or mapped in one way or another'. Comparisons with the United States had helped him form his views of what was needed in Australia. He had read deeply in the history of American literature and was attuned to the similarities between two immigrant cultures formed as offshoots of the 'old world', but with each having the need to fight in order to secure its own independent identity. He knew for how long into the 20th century most educated Americans had despised their own culture, the battle of American writers for recognition in their own country and the ingrained feeling of inferiority which Americans felt in their relationship to Europe.[7] In each of these points of tension and unease, there were similarities to what the Melbourne critic A.A. Phillips would soon memorably condemn as Australia's cringe to Britain.[8]

The 1950s would become the years of Geoffrey Serle's professional apprenticeship. As 'one of the first Melbourne historians with a doctorate, and tingling with a radical nationalism'[9] he was ready to engage in the battle for culture and country. In this decade, he built the first major phase of his career as a university







Geoffrey Serle

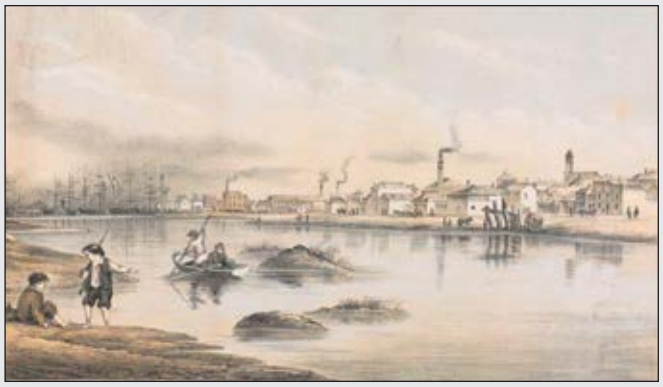
teacher and as someone with something to say about his country and his people and their shared history. These were the years in which he found his vocation as a historian, first in a tutorship in British History but from 1951 as a lecturer with responsibility for the teaching of Australian history. Thus it was in the Department of History in the University of Melbourne, that he prepared and delivered his first Australian lectures; and it was there too that he wrote his first thoughtful and perceptive reviews of Australian books, taking a special interest in politics, biography and social history. Ahead of his time, he became a public historian marking out the interests which were to concern him through the years of a long and productive professional career: the well-being of the 'little magazines' especially *Meanjin*, engaged his interest; and he supported the work of the National Trust in its early efforts to preserve the built landscape of Victoria. In a kindred area of interest, he played a major role. In 1953 he initiated a major program for students of Australian history. Assisted by other colleagues in the department and research students, he would select particular areas of rural Victoria with a view to recording the local history. These highly organised forays, made over several years, included the search for documents and archival records, the recording of oral history interviews and the recording of places of architectural and historical significance. John Mulvaney, later celebrated as the 'father of Australian archaeology', has recently observed that this program was 'a major innovation that shifted the study of Australia's past away from an exclusive focus on conventional written sources'.[10] It also engaged the interest of students in Australian and local history in a satisfying manner and won many converts to the cause of an emerging discipline. Later, Serle built on this practical and constructive program to advance the interests of the State Library of Victoria and the Public Record Office as the principal repositories for Victorian historical records; the collecting and preservation of historical records and the cause of these two institutions would remain dear to him until the end of his days.

Gradually too, Serle was moving to identify his first major writing project. In 1954 he played a leading role in the mounting of a citizens' celebration of the centenary of the Eureka uprising; and on ABC Radio he made a national broadcast of his first considered appraisal of the Eureka legend.[11] These projects stimulated his awareness of the larger and neglected story of Victoria's gold rush generation and of the symbolic importance attaching to the Eureka rebels as a vanguard of democratic protest: those stories would give him the starting point that would eventually lead to the two survey volumes of Victorian history that would form two of the major planks in a substantial writing career. In this the young historian was helped by the example of some of his Melbourne colleagues who were showing that Australian history could be written as well as taught. Still fresh was Kathleen Fitzpatrick's *Sir John Franklin in Tasmania 1837-1843* (1949), an impressive pioneering contribution to the, as yet, poorly developed field of Australian biography and written, in fact, by one who professed no standing as an Australianist.

In prospect though was Margaret Kiddle's ambitious and intensely personal social history of Victoria's Western District which would appear after her premature death in 1958 as *Men of Yesterday* (1961). Throughout the 1950s, Kiddle's example of a great Australian subject and her search for the ways to tell a story and evoke a landscape set a standard which Serle would use as a guiding model for his own work and interests, not just in the beginning but throughout his career. Margaret Kiddle was more than a lively colleague. She was a loyal friend and mentor: she affirmed Serle's interests and enthusiasms, she

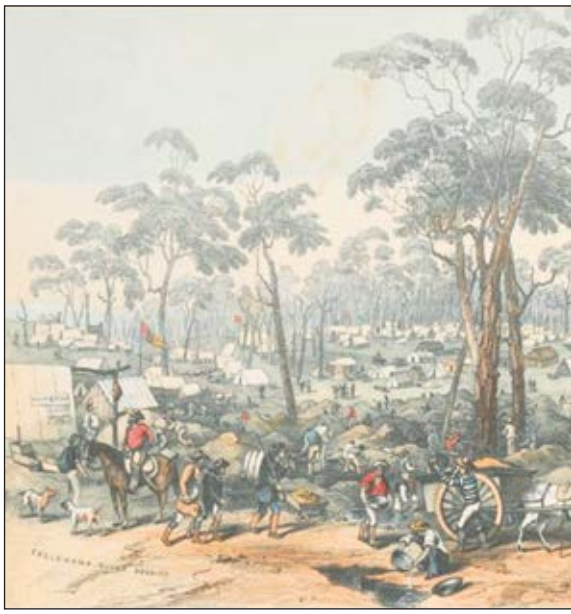
Cont. page 30 >>

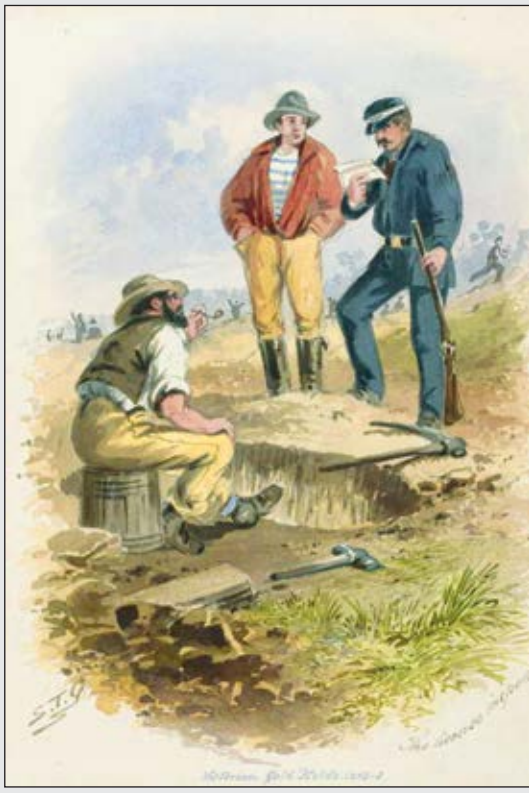
Edmund Thomas,1827-1867, engraver
Canvass (sic) Town, [1853]
Engraving with hand colouring
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H15520



Edmund Thomas, 1827-1867, artist
Yarra Yarra from below Prince's Bridge 1853
Tinted lithograph
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H90.91/602

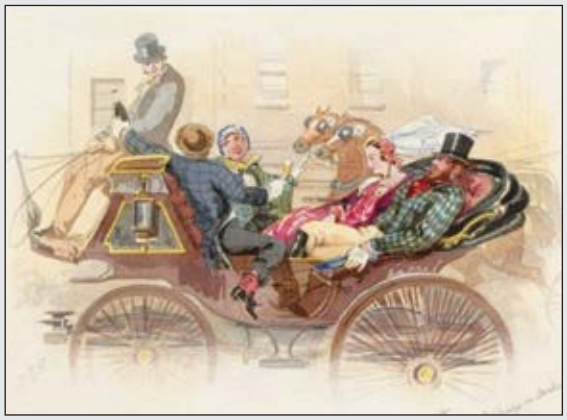
W S Hatton. 1850s-1860s, artist
Hobson's Bay Railway Pier at Sandridge near Melbourne 1859
Watercolour
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H3981





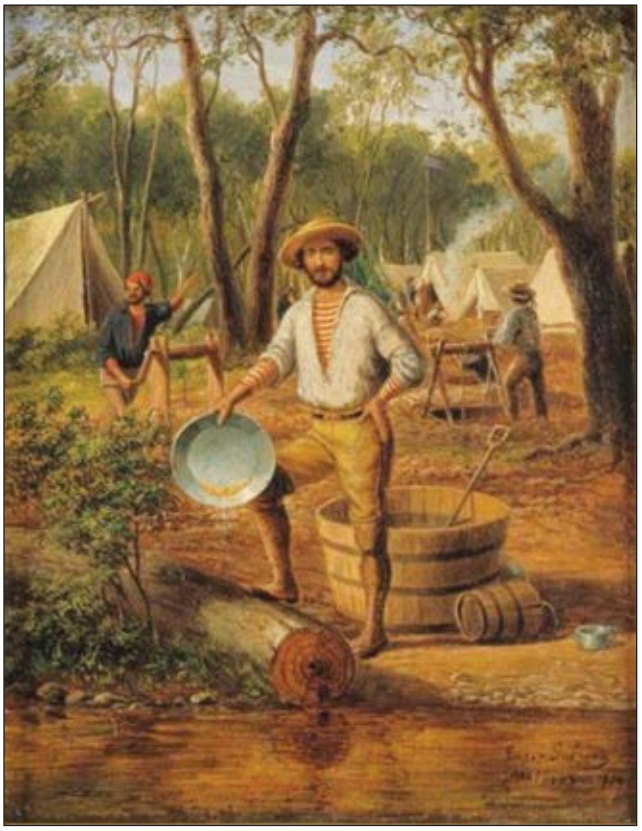
J. Allan 1822-1886, lithographer
Eagle-Hawk Gully, Bendigo 1851
Lithograph
La Trobe Picture Collection,
State Library of Victoria, H25117

Samuel Charles Brees, 1810-1865, artist
The Gold Escort - Bendigo, [1856]
Watercolour
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of
Victoria, H83.50/3



Samuel Thomas Gill, 1818-1880, artist
Digger's Wedding [1869]
Watercolour
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H86.7/38

ST Gill, 1818-1880, artist
The Licence Inspected, 1852-53, [1869]
Watercolour
La Trobe Picture Collection, State ibrary of Victoria, H86.7/7



Eugene von Guerard, 1811-1901, artist
I have got it! [1854]
Oil
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library
of Victoria, H9H15746

Edward La Trobe Bateman, 1816-1897, artist
Jolimont, from beyond the Yarra Yarra, [1854]
Pencil and Chinese white on brown paper
La Trobe Picture Collection,
State Library of Victoria, H98.135/20

<< From page 27

provided warmth and encouragement as he made his way as a teacher, and she offered a continuing sense of excitement and discovery in the shared enterprise of Australian history. In a stream of letters she wrote from the Australian National University (ANU) during her Fellowship there in 1954, she kept her Melbourne colleagues in touch with her progress on the Western District book while also bringing news of other landmark projects then in the making. As his ANU PhD supervisor, Kiddle recounted the unfolding of Russel Ward's research which would appear in 1958 as *The Australian Legend*; and she provided the first intimations of Manning Clark's ambitious but still – to many – mysterious undertaking which would emerge in its several volumes as *A History of Australia* (1962-87).[12]

Geoffrey Serle's own arrival as one of the leading post-war historians of Australia came when *The Golden Age* made its appearance in 1963. Its research and writing had been a large undertaking in its own right and the work had been balanced with the obligations of recent marriage, the setting up of a home and, later, with the first experience of parenthood. He had begun the systematic work on what he called his 'History of Victoria' in February 1957, expecting that it might take three or four years to complete. In fact, the enterprise took fully five years including time spent in the United Kingdom and Ireland consulting library and archival holdings and searching for privately held materials; and then at the end there were some additional months of cutting and revision after he had first delivered what he called 'the monster' to Melbourne University Press.

The manuscript was long, more than 210,000 words including many explanatory footnotes illuminating or extending key sections of the text. In addition, Serle provided some 25 pages of endnotes. Staff members at the press where the manuscript had been keenly awaited were delighted; plans were soon in train to issue the book in a handsome format and to launch it with something of a splash. Serle's chosen subject was as rich historically as the gold which was both its starting point and its principal metaphor for an examination of the collective life and fortunes of Victoria's immigrant generation. With a certain literary flair and even a sense of romance, the author had sought to weigh questions he had signalled in two well-chosen epigraphs: whether gold in Victoria might be seen as 'a burst of sunshine falling across a dark and troubled stream'; or was it, as Carlyle had suggested, worth less than 'a mealy potato to mankind'?[13] His reading of the accounts of visitors, of contemporary letters and diaries, and of many literary sources was as acute and detailed as his meticulous analysis of statistics, of parliamentary votes and proceedings, and the marginalia of a succession of officials in the Colonial Office.

The brilliant title of the book was not Serle's own but a solution offered by his publisher Peter Ryan; and it was as alluring in its way as the precious metal itself.[14] Serle had submitted his manuscript with the prosaic title 'A history of the colony of Victoria 1851-1861'. This had been applied for want of something better since both author and publisher were agreed that any title must enhance the book while conveying the full vigour and colour of the period.[15] The years in question were those of the gold rushes which transformed Victoria from a minor pastoral settlement to the most celebrated of Britain's colonies. Indeed, its reputation had not been confined within the British dominion: 'The

fame of the colony, which in 1851 had sent one token bag of flour to the Great Exhibition [in London], was world-wide'.[16] As all his reviewers would agree, Serle had responded well to the dramatic possibilities of his subject, though some complained that he had laboured through the minute detail of the many shifts in allegiances of a society and a parliamentary and political system then in the process of formation and, as a consequence, in a state of flux. The book offered a chronological and thematic treatment of its subject. Working within the short span of a single decade, Serle had constructed an account of Victoria's political and economic development richly illustrated with a selection of major and minor themes. The principal lines of the story as Serle told it dealt with the gold diggers themselves: their origins, motives, way of life and estimates of their success or failure. It also dealt with larger questions: relations between the goldfields and the administration; the problems of the governance of Victoria in the last days before responsible government; and the transition to and the early operation of the new method of government. Minor themes in varying degrees of detail examined Victoria prior to the discovery of gold, the processes of economic change, the presence of the Chinese on the goldfields, religion and education, as well as the arts and sciences. This suggests a more orderly approach to the task of building the story than was, in fact, the case. While the greater part of the book was structured with an eye to chronology, Serle broke his narrative line for interpolations of biographical sketches (including deft cameos of C.J. La Trobe and John Pascoe Fawkner that nicely foreshadowed his later work for the *ADB* and as the author of major biographies of the soldier-engineer John Monash and the architect Robin Boyd) and retrospective summaries before he switched to the purely thematic chapters that followed.

Serle himself had mixed feelings about his finished manuscript and was certainly alert to his own strengths and weaknesses as a writer. When he handed the manuscript to his publisher he saw it as 'not highly distinguished' but 'not bad either'. He was not just hedging his bets but was genuinely ambivalent about the success of his work. The research and writing of his first Victorian history had been a long haul; it had been a labour of love and a duty. Serle had approached the work with affection for his subject and with much enjoyment in hunting for material and in bringing the Victorian story to life. This made him more than usually protective of his special creation and reluctant to tamper with it too much. As far as he was concerned, his principal audience comprised not so much the general reader but rather 'teachers and my present and future students'. Indeed, on their account he fought (and lost) a battle with his publisher to price the book at a level which might make it accessible to student buyers. The manuscript (and later the book itself) was densely packed with information which Serle hoped would enrich the teaching of Australian history, especially in Victorian schools and universities. So committed he was to this detail that later he found difficulty in responding to his publisher's suggestion that he might produce a popular history of the gold rush period. Ryan had hoped to dispense with the mass of political detail which clogged Serle's original text and to bring the author and his book into contact with a wider audience of readers; but Serle was unable to agree to a proposal that would have seen something like a third of his original text lopped and discarded.[17]

While Geoffrey Serle was confident of the usefulness of his work in a field where virtually nothing existed already, he was initially troubled by doubts about its standing as an artistic creation. He was a stern critic of his own work noting what he saw as its 'patchiness of interest' especially in the level of treatment given to large and complex subjects; and he condemned his own writing for what he called its pedestrian qualities.[18] Some of those self-diagnosed failings were the problems of writing general history – of knowing when and where to sacrifice detail for the broader generalisation. In dealing with so comprehensive a story, he confessed to the difficulty he had encountered in shaping it as a work of art. To one of his early readers – his mentor and senior colleague J.A. La Nauze – he confessed a dilemma that was at once his own and universal among historians, the challenge of writing any history: how to work with parts of a story that were 'hopelessly dull & unmalleable' but nevertheless important. 'What do you do?' he had asked, 'Cheat and leave them out?'[19] Since cheating was not in his character, he had erred on the side of inclusion. Eventually several academic reviewers scolded the new boy with some seeing it as a failure in the craft of historical writing. Robin Gollan said he thought Serle had decided that 'the time has arrived for the facts' while in Perth Frank Crowley borrowed from Milton to deride what he called 'a Serbonian bog of trivia'.[20]

Serle's doubts about his manuscript also reflected La Nauze's friendly advice that the writing could have had a greater tautness and concision as well as more colour and atmosphere. La Nauze had been a tough reader but a fair one and Serle had blessed him for his constructive criticisms: that the Eureka story might be improved in the telling; that the account of a political society in its beginnings lost focus in the detail ('so many names & quarrels'); and the need

throughout to lift a style marred occasionally by flatness.[21] Where he felt he could do so, Serle had acted on most of these, revising the account of Eureka and recognising the need to work again with the 'terrible political chapters'. All over the place, he toned the writing while feeling always a little shy of 'any more purple'. In the end though there was no doubt that Serle's single great theme was arresting and had been well handled. The story of the 'lure of gold' was about the remaking of Victoria and the peopling of it – 'whether or not with the "best blood of the old world" – with men of more diverse talents, skills and backgrounds, and perhaps more vigour than Australia had yet seen'.[22] When it was published, the book was welcomed by the distinguished expatriate writer and former Melburnian Alan Moorehead as 'a landmark in Australian history' and one that offered the key to understanding the mainsprings of life in Victoria, and even Australia as a whole.[23] Such a judgment generously affirmed Serle's larger ambitions for his work.

ST Gill, 1818–1880, artist
Licensing Diggers, First of the Month, renewing Licenses, [1857]
Engraving
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H17855

Until *The Golden Age* (and the later companion volume), the nearest thing to a survey history of 19th century Victoria was Henry Gyles Turner's *A History of the Colony of Victoria from its Discovery to its Absorption into the Commonwealth of Australia*, published in two volumes in London in 1904. But this, judged later by the literary historian H.M. Green as 'more chronicle than a history and not without bias', really had the status of a primary document.[24] Its value was its author's personal acquaintance with the principal characters of his story and of the perspective it offered of a man who had himself migrated to the colony as a young bank clerk in 1854 – one member of the 'transforming generation' as Serle would call his gold rush Victorians. In setting the stage for his own work, Serle stated his reliance on both Turner and on Margaret Kiddle's *Men of Yesterday* and he cited the existence of their work for his decision not to start his story at the beginning of European settlement in Victoria but rather with the separation of the Port Phillip District from New South Wales. Later, however, conscious that his own effort covered a bare ten-year period, he would argue the need for a comprehensive new interpretation of the foundation history of the Victorian colony. In his eventual role as Victoria's leading historian, Serle's later call was for a history which would delineate 'with understanding, sympathy and charity' the migrants who first came to Port Phillip. Such a story, he said, would need to display the 'sordidness and wickedness' of the founders while revealing also 'what nobility there was': he hoped for a new writer who might do 'justice to the pioneers'.[25] That appeal would come to be severely judged by a later generation of historians who would eventually look more critically at the human costs of white settlement, a question barely considered by Serle in 1963.

The Golden Age was received into the enclosed, largely masculine, world of Australian history with a mixture of admiration, respect and irritation – but with warm praise prevailing. It is a comment on the times that no woman reviewed the book but Serle's dissection of Victoria's golden decade was generally welcomed by his academic peers as a measured and fair-minded assessment of a crucial and neglected period in colonial and national history. Its strength – its meticulously detailed examination of a society in flux – was seen to outweigh what some perceived to be its lack of a broader overall interpretation and some tendency to confusion in the shaping of the narrative as a whole. But while some historians variously grumbled or occasionally snarled about technical breaches or weaknesses in the narrative, there was admiration elsewhere. Philip Brown, then editing the monumental *The Clyde Company Papers* (1941–71), responded to 'a refreshing product of sense and sensibility allied to hard work and scholarship lit by humane intelligence'. Working outside the academy as an independent gentleman-scholar, Brown thought it a virtue that Serle was no determinist, no limited intellectual, no romantic, though perhaps on the last he misjudged him.[26] Asa Briggs in the *New Statesman* regretted the consignment of topics such as religion and education and the arts and sciences to separate somewhat sketchy chapters at the end but he congratulated the author on 'one of the best and most important' contributions to Australian history.[27] In *The Times Literary Supplement*, the anonymous reviewer (probably Noel McLachlan) welcomed the new history as a conscientious, compassionate and convincing piece of scholarship and predicted that it would stand for a long time as the authoritative study of the Victorian gold rushes[28] – and so indeed it did.

But no histories, especially pioneering ones, can stand without examination or scrutiny, as Serle himself would have understood. Now, more than a decade into the 21st century, there are signs that a new generation of historians is beginning its own interrogation of the terrain of goldfields history which gradually fell from favour after the high watermark set by *The Golden Age*. Serle had made his reputation as a pioneer, expanding horizons but working also within the constraints of fashion as well as some self-imposed limits of his own. The process of reassessment began in the 1990s when David Goodman looked with fresh eyes at Victoria's gold rush era in a larger cultural history of gold seeking in Australia and California. In that revisiting, Goodman acknowledged the landmark significance of Serle's work in offering 'a broadly cautious, positive picture' of the effects of gold on the development of Victoria.[29] But in the immediate aftermath of Geoffrey Serle, Goodman alluded to the presence of sentimentality and a tendency to idealisation of the gold generation as the precursors of Australian nationhood and as the stimulus to a Victorian tradition of humane liberalism.[30]

In a paper he published in 1970 Serle had reiterated his claims for the gold generation: they *were* Victoria, he concluded and they remained a dominant presence almost to the end of the 19th century, giving a particular stamp and tone to the colony in the years from their arrival in the 1850s to their maturity in the 1880s; and arguably that stamp and tone carried over into the time of statehood within a federated Australia in the 20th century. Serle saw the stream of free migrants to Victoria in the decade 1851-61 as special in the annals of Australian history. For him they stood out as 'magnificent economic material', and as a predominantly respectable God-fearing, educated middle and artisan class: and he argued that their presence in nineteenth century Victoria made 'a huge qualitative difference to Australia'.[31] That generation, with experience gained on the goldfields carried with it a dislike of authoritarianism and a respect for equality. As he examined 'his' Victorians, Serle suggested also the presence of a greater tolerance, respect for other kinds of men and much greater human understanding – all borne out of the special circumstances of their migration and their subsequent life in Australia.[32] It was a powerful and attractive thesis but it carried with it some elements of national myth-making. Serle later conceded that had his two volumes of Victorian history been written at a different period in his life, he would have placed a greater stress on the conservative trends that were present in colonial society – the impediments to social change and reform. He came to feel that he had not fully recognised these while writing as a pioneer in the 1950s and 1960s. In those years, he said, the digger had been his hero.[33]

Manning Clark once observed that in his two Victorian histories, Geoffrey Serle had taken Australians 'through the splendours of his hall of mirrors' to write about some of the things that had moved him in life – the flowering of British civilisation in Australia, and his own great enthusiasm for Melbourne in particular and Victoria at large.[34] For all Serle's protests that he always held a larger Australian view, it is in these aspects of a local patriotism that his two volumes of Victorian history endure even after the inevitable revisions by later writers. But something else is present too. As one of the inheritors of Serle's legacy, Stuart Macintyre has remarked that each time he returns to the Victorian histories, he gains a new sense of their riches and of their lasting qualities as works both of scholarship and of literature.[35] Such a judgment is personal and particular, but it is one which places Serle securely within the canon of the historical literature of his state and country; and in the pioneering narrative that is *The Golden Age*, we may see that the rich gleam of Serle's gold survives undimmed.

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1 Stuart Macintyre in Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (eds), The Oxford Companion to Australian History, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001, p.585

2 See also Geoffrey Serle to Manning Clark, 10 February 1957: 'my 4 grandparents and 5 of my great-grandparents migrated to Victoria between 1852 and 1858! I wonder how much such things affect us'. Manning Clark Papers (MS 7550/8/3), National Library of Australia.

3 David Dufty, Grant Harman and Keith Swan (eds), Historians at Work: Investigating and Recreating the Past, Sydney: Hicks Smith & Son, 1973, p.52.

4 Geoffrey Serle, 'The Centenary of Eureka' in The Rationalist, October-December [1954], p.89. See also Serle's article 'The Causes of Eureka' in Historical Studies, Eureka Supplement, 1954.

5 Geoffrey Serle, The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria 1851-1861, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1963, p.186.

6 Ibid. p.187.

7 Serle, 'Ruminations on Australia and the Arts over Fifty Years' [Barry Andrews Memorial Lecture] in Notes and Furphies, No.23, 1989, p.24.

8 Arthur Phillips, 'The Cultural Cringe' in Meanjin, Summer 1950, pp.299-302.

9 This characterisation of Geoffrey Serle is offered by Ken Inglis in John Ritchie (ed.), Geoffrey Serle in tribute, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1994 p.iii.

10 John Mulvaney, Digging up a Past, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2011, pp.91-2.

11 The broadcast was published as 'The Centenary of Eureka' in The Rationalist, October-December 1954, pp.89-93.

12 See letters from Margaret Kiddle to R.M. Crawford and to Geoffrey Serle in accessions of Crawford Papers and Serle Papers, University of Melbourne Archives.

13 The epigraphs read in full: 'Wherever in the world's history, a great goldmine has come to light, there a burst of sunshine falls across the dark and troubled stream' (Edinburgh Review); 'Of all the mad pursuits any people ever took up gold digging was the maddest and stupidest. If they get as much gold as would make a bridge from Australia to Europe it would not be worth a mealy potato to mankind' (Thomas Carlyle).

14 Memorandum from Director, Melbourne University Press to Board Members, undated [1962] and related correspondence, Author file (The Golden Age), MUP Records, Melbourne University Archives.

15 In fact Serle also offered some more literary alternatives: 'Much Fine Gold' (Psalm 19); 'Realms of Gold' (Keats); and 'Mammon Led them On' (Milton). See author file (The Golden Age), MUP Records.

16 Serle, The Golden Age, p.369.

17 Serle to Peter Ryan, 27 August 1963, Author file (The Golden Age), MUP Records, Melbourne University Archives.

18 Serle to Gwyn James, 5 March 1962, Author file (The Golden Age), MUP Records, Melbourne University Archives.

19 Serle to J.A. La Nauze, 29 January [1962], J.A. La Nauze Papers (MS 5248/224/25), NLA.

20 Robin Gollan's review appeared in Historical Studies – Australia and New Zealand, Vol. 11, No. 42, April 1964 and Frank Crowley's in The Australian Journal of Politics and History, Vol. 10 No.1, 1964.

21 See exchange of letters: La Nauze to Serle (undated), Serle Papers (MS 11909/2399/5), State Library of Victoria and Serle to La Nauze, 29 January [1962], NLA.

22 Serle, The Golden Age, p.381.

23 Alan Moorehead to Peter Ryan, 11 November 1962, Author file (The Golden Age), MUP Records, Melbourne University Archives. In his letter, Moorehead invited Ryan to use his endorsement as he saw fit. Serle himself resisted its use on the dust jacket but it was used in printed publicity about the book sponsored by MUP. Moorehead later reviewed the book in The Sunday Times (London), 1 December 1963.

24 H.M. Green, A History of Australian Literature (revised by Dorothy Green), Vol.1, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1984, p.837.

25 Serle, 'How Victoria Began: What has been done and what might be done' in The Victorian Historical Magazine, Vol.39, Nos. 152 and 153, February-May 1968, p.39.

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30 Ibid. pp.11-12.

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32 Serle, 'The Gold Generation' in The Victorian Historical Magazine, Vol. 41, February 1970, pp.265 and 268.

33 Geoffrey Serle interviewed by Neville Meaney, 16 January 1987. Transcript and recording held NLA (TRC 2053/21), pp.39-40.

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The Natural Environments of La Trobe's Melbourne

By Dr Gary Presland

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Charles Joseph La Trobe made his official arrival in Melbourne on 3 October 1839, after being rowed in a cutter from the Port to the town, along the Yarra River. He had arrived in Hobsons Bay on 30 September via the barque *Pyramus* and on the following day had landed at Liardet's Beach and walked the three kilometres to the town. At the beginning of his role as Superintendant of the Port Phillip District La Trobe was thus already familiar with the two main options that visitors and immigrants had in order to reach Melbourne.

Each of these courses presented difficulties to travellers. For most people the direct route across land was preferable – it was far shorter and certainly cheaper than paying for a boat trip of 10 kilometres along the river; however, the ground surface on this southern side of the river between the bay and the settlement was often damp and boggy. Pedestrians had to wend a course that would avoid areas of standing water. One of these, known as Sandridge Lagoon, stretched for about a kilometre in length, close to where passengers disembarked at Liardet's Beach. In time, the line that these immigrants and visitors took to reach the town became a well-marked path and eventually achieved the status of a road, named City Road. Until the Sandridge railway line was opened in 1854, this was the main avenue for people to reach the town.

The alternative to walking through the marshes – a boat trip along the Yarra River – was not always an easy or attractive exercise: the river was narrow, and difficult to navigate because of the many snags created by fallen trees. Larger boats had difficulty maneuvering out of the combined stream of the Saltwater and Yarra Rivers into the narrower Yarra, giving rise among boatmen to the name 'Humbug Reach' for the neck of land between the two streams at their junction. Moreover, at times of low tide

the Yarra River could be reduced to an even narrower stream with only of about 30 cm depth of water.[1]

John Helder Wedge, a surveyor with John Batman's Port Phillip Association, had described the Yarra as

> a twisted cantankerous river ... so choked with the trunks and branches of trees and other obstructions that it renders its navigation a matter of difficulty and delay to even the smallest of coasters. [2]

In some stretches of the river, vegetation grew so closely along both sides that it was difficult to see the way ahead. When Mary Gardiner made the trip in June 1837 she found it unpleasant, and later described how the dense vegetation was:

> ... of such luxurious foliage growing at each side actually in the water forming in many parts most grotesque arches overhead ... Between the trees abound reeds of enormous size some upward of seven feet high which cause the land to be quite impenetrable to our eager searching eyes.[3]

The vegetation along the Yarra was described also by the Reverend John Backhouse who visited Melbourne in the following November. He wrote:

> ... the banks are low and fringed with bushes. Toward the mouth of the river, there are swamps covered with the narrow-leafed white flowered Melalueca, drawn up like hop-poles, to thirty feet in height.[4]

Whatever the difficulties these routes posed to travellers, and despite the difference in distance each involved, both of these courses ended at the same point. The walking path that crossed the Yarra estuary brought travellers to a spot on the south side of the river, opposite the town. From there they could see the developing town spread out on the opposite bank. What they could see also was a rocky ledge that spanned the river on more or less the line of the present Queens Bridge.

This ledge of basalt created a rapid on the Yarra River, which was called 'the falls'. The significance of this natural feature was that it presented an impediment to shipping. The falls marked the upstream limit of navigation by ships and boats on the river. More importantly, however, the falls stopped the advance of tidal salt water any further upstream. Upstream of this point the river was fresh; downstream it was subject to tidal influence twice a day. It was because of these falls that Melbourne was located precisely where it was.

John Skinner Prout, 1806-1876, artist
View from Batemans [sic] Hill, Melbourne1847
lithograph
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria
H30328102131652/5

Robert Hoddle, 1794-1880, artist
Melbourne from the Survey Office, 1840
watercolour and pencil
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H260

From the perspective of officialdom, the site of Melbourne was not the most strategic location for a government presence. That place was the elevated grassy knoll at the top of the Bay, where a small cluster of buildings was subsequently given the name of William's Town. This was where Captain Lonsdale, the Police Magistrate, would have set up his office, on arrival in Port Phillip in October 1836. It suited his purposes because it was well placed for easy access by ship. However, it lacked the basic necessity, a reliable and sufficient supply of fresh water. After three weeks Lonsdale was forced to join the settlers already established in an area adjacent to the Yarra River falls. This was the same site that James Flemming noted in 1803 as the 'most eligible place for a settlement'[5] and Batman in 1835 judged to be 'the place for a village'.[6]

There was little choice regarding where the settlement in Port Phillip would be; the natural history of the area dictated that decision.

Similarly, the natural environments encountered by whites when the Port Phillip District was first colonised were a major influence on the subsequent development of Melbourne. There is much about the history of this city that can be attributed to the physical environments within which it was originally sited.[7]

The landscapes of the Melbourne area today cover five geological formations, each of a different age and character.[8] The immediate area of the first settlement, adjacent to the falls on the Yarra, takes in all of these formations. The differences in geological base would have been apparent to experienced observers through landscape features such as topography and vegetation. As a man noted for his travel experience and varied interests in natural history,[9] La Trobe was perhaps more able than most to appreciate the subtleties of Melbourne's diverse natural history.

On the northern bank of the Yarra in the area where Russell and Hoddle had laid out the town grid, the ground surface comprises two geological formations. The older of these, the bedrock of the Port Phillip area, consists of 400+ million-year-old sedimentary deposits of sandstone, siltstone, and mudstone, from the Silurian period. This formation underlies most of the eastern suburbs of Melbourne; its westernmost occurrence is in the eastern side of the original town grid. Within the inner city area, it underlies part of North Melbourne, as well as Parkville, Carlton and Fitzroy on the north, and East Melbourne and the higher ground of Richmond on the east. The topography of this formation in this area is an undulating terrain; the isolated hills have rounded tops and smooth slopes.[10]

This formation has deep, well-developed soils; coupled with an annual rainfall of about 660 mm in the town, the result was a mature woodland structure. Grassy Woodlands vegetation co-dominated by River Red Gum and Yellow Box spread over much of the Silurian area, including the eastern half of the town grid. The areas of the Treasury and Fitzroy Gardens, for example, were clothed in 'one dense gum forest' with the Treasury Gardens being particularly noted for a grove of Manna Gums.[11] Beneath the canopy of River Red Gum and Yellow Box was an open understory composed of the taller *Acacias* such as Lightwood, Black Wattle, and Blackwood. There was often a scattering of shrubs, such as Common Cassinia, Drooping Cassinia and Cherry Ballart. The most diverse stratum in these woodlands was the grassy field layer. This was usually dominated by Wallaby Grass,[12] but included a wide range of flowering plants, taking in scores of species of forms such as Small Loosestrife, Fireweeds, and Sprawling Bluebell, to name but a few. It was this type of vegetation that covered the block of land that La Trobe purchased for the erection of his residence, soon after his arrival.

This vegetation structure can be contrasted with that of the western side of the town grid. In this area the structure was open, grassy eucalypt woodland, with a slightly different plant community. In appearance it was not markedly different from the woodland to its east, but it could be distinguished by the occurrence of *Allocausarina* species such as sheoak or buloke. On the western edge of the town, Batman's Hill, for example, was 'noticeable chiefly on account of the profusion of round-headed she-oaks that adorned its sides and summit'.[13]

The differences between the two plant communities within which the settlement was sited can be related to a difference in underlying geology. The ground surface of the western side of the town is derived from episodes of volcanic activity, dating to about 20 million years ago. This basalt is of a completely different character to that of the sediments of the eastern side. The volcanic episode that created this formation is referred to as the 'older volcanics' in order to differentiate it from another, more recent volcanic episode. The area of older volcanics within the original town is the southern part of a ridge that stretches from Tullamarine, through Campbellfield to South Melbourne.[14]

The topography of these older basalt landscapes is one of broad crested hills with gentle slopes. A number of the more prominent hills close to the early settlement, including Batman's and Flagstaff, Hotham on the north-west edge of the town, as well as Emerald Hill to the south, are visible reminders of this earlier volcanic period. Batman's Hill, originally and aptly named Pleasant Hill, was one of the more attractive rises in the settlement, sketched and painted by a number of artists, including Robert Hoddle and Robert Russell, both surveyors. Following Batman's death in May 1839 his establishment on the crest of the hill was taken over by the government and used by Lonsdale and La Trobe. The hill became a favorite place for promenading, and for a time was La Trobe's preferred site for the proposed Botanic Gardens.[15]

The dividing line between this volcanic formation and the much older Silurian sediments can be drawn, within the limits of the town, along Elizabeth Street; the line is most clearly marked by the presence of a shallow valley. In La Trobe's day during periods of heavy rain it was not unusual to see a stream running through

the bottom of this valley. This ephemeral stream, sometimes given the name of Townend River,[16] was fed partly from water flowing off the slightly elevated area to the north of the settlement, where the university now stands. This runoff flowed down the gully where Bouverie Street now runs, and then found its way into the Elizabeth Street valley. Water ran in from both sides of the valley, increasing the volume. In the space between Flinders Street and the Yarra, the stream channel turned to the south-west and water flowed into the Yarra immediately upstream of the falls.

In the years following European settlement, the removal of vegetation around the margins of streams like this one, both here and in other places in the growing Melbourne area, led to greater erosion along creek courses.[17] This in turn increased the amount of water flowing into the stream and, in the case of Townend River, added to the problem of flooding in the town. It also turned the natural beauty of the Elizabeth Street valley into what a later observer called 'a brawling impassable torrent in winter and a snake-haunted gully in summer'.[18]

Robert Russell, 1808-1900, artist
View from Batmans Hill February 5 1844, looking North-West, [22 November 1884]
Watercolour
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H24487

While the older volcanics produced some of the more scenically attractive features near the town, it was the activity of the newer volcanics[19] that created the most significant features of Melbourne's landscape. These episodes occurred in a number of separate phases between 4.5 and 0.82 million years ago. In the earliest phase, massive outpouring of lava and scoria formed an extensive plain that now constitutes the surface of almost all of the area west of the Maribyrnong River.

In a more recent phase, beginning about 1 million years ago, an enormous volume of fluid basalt streamed out of Mount Fraser, near Beveridge.[20] This molten rock flowed to the south, filling the ancient valleys of the Darebin and Merri Creeks. Lapping around the higher points of Silurian sediments, the lava blanketed the lower areas between Darebin Creek and Moonee Ponds Creek, and reached as far to the south as the Yarra River at Richmond. Further upstream, the lava flowed into the Yarra River valley via the course of Darebin Creek, and dammed the river water; the river valley was filled with lava, which flowed downstream as far as Batman's Hill.

For a couple of reasons, the importance of this landform is paramount in the history of white settlement in the Port Phillip District. Firstly, it was the streaming of lava along the course of the Yarra that created the basalt ledge that was the barrier to salt migration upstream. The falls was *sine qua non* for the settlement. Without that barrier salt water would have found its way upstream to the next impediment – the rock falls in Collingwood, later known as Dights' Falls. With no abundant source of potable water close to the bay, it is unlikely that a town would have been envisaged.

The second important aspect of the new volcanics is that it was the basis of environmental conditions that encouraged European settlement. Wherever the town might have been sited, its purpose essentially was to provide infrastructure. The primary reason that whites poured into the area from the 1830s onwards lay with what was on the ground on the western basalt plains. At the beginning of the 19th century the volcanic plain that stretched away from the western side of the Maribyrnong River was covered for as far as the eye could see with a rich growth of native grasses, with only a scattering of mature trees. It was a vegetation regime that was irresistible to pastoralists such as John Batman and members

of his Port Phillip Association, and described by John Helder Wedge, the Association's surveyor as 'of the nature of downs'.[21] The acquisition of this land was the driving force for the settlement of Port Phillip.

The reasons grasslands dominated the western area are attributable to a combination of aspects of natural history. Broadly speaking, the structure of local vegetation is determined by factors such as soil depth, rainfall and elevation. Because the formation is young (comparatively speaking) the soils are thin; and there is very little elevation on the plain, which leads to low rainfall. The nett impact of these factors on vegetation in the western area was to produce grasslands. But there was more than grass growing here: the species diversity of the grasses on these plains was great, but so too was that of the flowering plants. Thanks to a low level of rainfall, plus the management practices of Koorie residents, there were few trees on this plain. This allowed more sunlight to fall on the ground surface, which promoted the growth of a wide range of wild flowers.[22]

To the east of the settlement site there were a few small areas of geology similar to the western plains, with similar topography and vegetation. Most noticeable of these were the low-lying areas of Collingwood and Richmond, each of which spreads across a basalt plain. Lacking elevation, mature trees and well developed soils, these areas were not preferred for residential use; so the land was cheap and taken up by industries. From the earliest days of industrial development in Melbourne it was these areas, as well as Footscray on the western side, that were given over to noxious industries such as tanneries, slaughterhouses and tallow works, all of which made use of the rivers to carry away any effluent.

The environment of these suburban areas perched on the lava can be compared to that of areas across the river such as Prahran, Hawthorn and Kew, on the southern and eastern sides of the Yarra. From the perspective of desirable real estate, what Richmond and Collingwood lacked, Prahran and Kew had in abundance: good depth of soil, elevation and a covering of woody vegetation. The difference between the two sides of the river is a different geological base. All of the higher ground south of the river and east of St Kilda Road, as well the higher parts of Kew is underlain by a formation of sedimentary sandstone dating from the period called Tertiary. It is these sediments, deposited between 20 and 40 million years ago, that form the capping on the higher areas in the eastern and north-eastern suburbs, as well as on most of the higher points in the inner city area, such as Emerald Hill and Flagstaff Hill.[23]

On the southern sides of the Yarra River and Gardiners Creek the predominant vegetation on the Tertiary sandstone was that of an open grassy woodland. In 1839 Daniel Bunce noted that in the Hawthorn area, 'the country was extremely rich, undulating, thinly timbered, and thickly grassed.'[24] The dominant species in the upper level of these grassy woodlands were eucalypt species such as Narrow-leaved Peppermint, Messmate, Mealy Stringybark, and Grey Box. There was a richly diverse understorey of both large and small shrubs including Black Wattle, Blackwood and Hedge Wattle, as well as a complex ground cover of a wide range of grass species.[25]

It was these environments, relatively close to the town, that offered attractive landscapes for residing in – for those who could afford to buy. This was also an appropriate setting for the Botanic Gardens, as La Trobe realised in 1845.[26] The Superintendant had previously looked to Batman's Hill for this purpose but the use of that site by the City Council as a location for a slaughterhouse had lessened the site's appeal as a public garden; and early in 1846 La Trobe proposed putting a powder magazine on the hill.[27]

The most recently formed of Melbourne's five geological bases was the one that all visitors encountered first – the estuary of the river. This landscape feature took in all the area between the Maribyrnong River and the ridge of Older Volcanics underlying the western half of the town grid. In the north-south axis the combined estuary of the Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers extends from Flemington to St Kilda, and also stretches some way up the valleys of both the rivers. In this area, as much as 45 metres of sand, silts and gravels has been carried in and deposited over time.

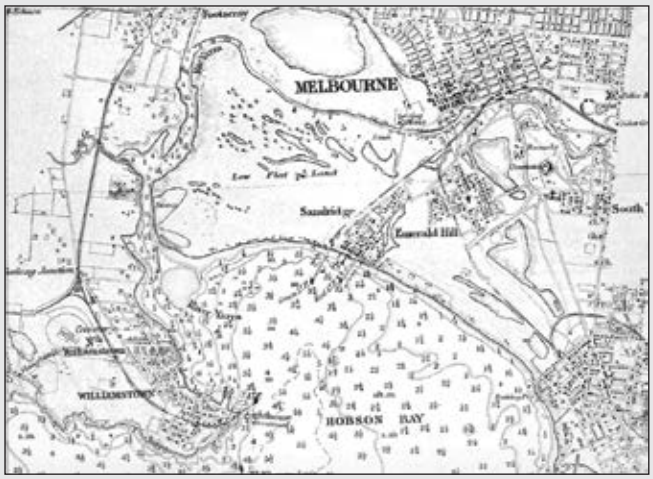
The topography of the Yarra delta is that of a flat swampy terrain.[28] There was some variation in vegetation across this area, with different regimes on the southern and northern sides of the river. In the former case, there were two major plant communities. Along the margin of the bay a mosaic of heathy woodland and sand heathland occurred in a broad band, in which the dominant species were low scattered eucalypts.[29] Most of the damp sandy area south of the river was covered with woodland comprised of similar eucalypt species, but was accompanied and defined by a rich ground cover of herbs, such as Stinking Pennywort, Kidneyweed, and Common Bottle-daisy. Austral Bracken was typically present, as were grass species such as Common Tussock-grass and Bristly Wallaby-grass. The area that later became Albert Park Lake was a brackish wetland that supported

salt-tolerant plants such as Sea Rush, Salt Club-sedge, and Common Reed.

Within the estuary, the northern side of the Yarra was more prone to inundation by tides, so the plant communities there comprised salt tolerant species. The structure of vegetation was that of a brackish lake surrounded by grasslands composed of species adapted to brackish conditions. These included Common Tussock-grass as the dominant species, together with Kangaroo Grass and Wallaby Grasses, Salt Pratia, Australian Salt-grass, Milky Beauty-heads, and Shiny Bog-sedge.

Yarra and elsewhere in the estuary – this natural feature had been a highly productive source of seasonal food and materials for the local Koorie clan; for the white settlers, however, it was an area with little practical use.

The reclamation of West Melbourne Swamp did not occur until the 1890s, as part of a much larger project aimed at improving the port of Melbourne.[31] In the wake of the discovery of gold in Victoria in July 1851 the problem of the port became a major issue. While navigating on the river had never been easy, whatever problems existed prior to the gold rush the difficulties were as nothing compared to those caused by



Henry Laird Cox, 1809-1872, surveyor
Hobson Bay & Yarra River leading to Melbourne. 1864
Cartographic material, La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria
821.09 1864-75 Cox

This lake was one of the more noticeable features of Melbourne's landscape during the 19th century, and perhaps one of the more problematic. Known as 'West Melbourne Swamp', or simply 'The Swamp', this wetland covered a 30 ha area immediately to the west of the town. It was fed in part by the overflow from the Moonee Moonee Chain of Ponds. Because of its proximity to Batman's Hill it was also called 'Batman's Swamp'. George McCrae grew up in North Melbourne in the 1840s and in later years fondly remembered the wetland as 'a beautiful blue lake ... nearly oval, and full of the clearest salt water; but this by no mean deep'.[30] The wetland was noted also as the habitat of numerous species of birds, including swans, pelicans, geese, black, brown and grey ducks, teal, cormorants, water hen, and sea gulls. Fish and eels were also plentiful in the water.

While it was attractive to some people, the very nature of the wetland restricted its utility in the eyes of many others. Although close to the expanding town, the flats could not be used for residential use and were considered by many residents as wasteland. Like the many other wetland areas close to the town – along the

the flood of gold seekers into the District. Prior to then, it was the river itself that was of greater concern to La Trobe's administration.

The river was the life-blood of the young settlement but it also posed problems for Melbourne's residents. Because of the height of tides on the river there was difficulty in maintaining a constant supply of fresh water to the town. At high tide salt water often encroached upstream to the extent of polluting the source of drinking water. During his visit to the settlement in March 1837, Governor Sir Richard Bourke suggested building a dam across the river to bank up fresh water and keep it separate from the salt.[32]

Another major concern was the river's propensity to flood. Melbourne's streets had been laid out on the higher banks of the northern side of the river but they were not always high enough to avoid the suddenly-rising river. The first major flood after settlement was on Christmas Day in 1839 when, according to one observer, the water level rose by eight feet six inches (2.57 m).[33] This flood washed away the beginnings of the dam that was in construction

across the river.[34] Following a visit by Bourke's successor Sir George Gipps in October 1841, work began again on building the dam. Unfortunately, this too was washed away in another massive flood in August 1842. This was the largest of four floods that occurred on the Yarra River in separate years during the 1840s.[35]

These problems would not be solved in La Trobe's time, although a beginning was made on the issue of the town's water supply shortly before he departed Victoria. In one of his last ceremonial duties, on 20 December 1853 La Trobe turned the first sod at Yan Yean, to mark the start of James Blackburn's scheme to supply Melbourne with a reticulated water system.[36]

In his almost 15 years of residence in Melbourne, La Trobe took many opportunities to travel through his district. With an informed and practiced eye for landscape and nature he no doubt had a better appreciation than most people, of both the natural diversity that existed within local environments and the formative processes that had created them. But in the years following La Trobe's departure those environments came under increasing pressure, as the population of the city rose dramatically and its importance as a commercial centre grew. Within fifty years the problems posed by the nature of the area were solved; but part of the cost was the loss of the natural landscapes that had been so familiar to La Trobe.

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'Forty Thousand Bags of Gold Dust': La Trobe and the Gold Licence

by Robyn Annear

Robyn Annear is a writer and historian based in Castlemaine, Victoria. Using her master storyteller's skill of bringing the past to life, Robyn has a lively writing style which brings the past to life in an immensely readable way. Her first book, *Bearbrass: Imagining Early Melbourne* (Mandarin, 1995), won the A A Philips Prize for Australian Studies in the 1995 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and was shortlisted for the 1995 New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards and The Age Book of the Year. Since then, she has gone on to research and write other best-sellers, including *Nothing but Gold* (Text, 1999), *The Man Who lost Himself: The Unbelievable Story of the Tichborne Claimant* (Text, 2002), and *A City Lost and Found: Whelan the Wrecker's Melbourne* (Black Inc 2005). Robyn held an inaugural Creative Fellowship at the State Library of Victoria in 2003.

> That the successful prosecution of the search for gold will bring thousands and thousands to our shores, and operate an unforeseen but immediate change in the whole structure of society, is undoubted. The maintenance of the character of the colony as a British possession, subject to the laws and attached to the constitution of the mother country, and offering a suitable home and place of refuge, not only to the poor, indigent, or restless, but for the sober and enlightened middle classes, as had been hoped hitherto, depends in a great measure upon the power of the executive to assist good order and maintain respect to the laws, in the absence of which no really respectable person would wish to make it his dwelling place, however great the natural advantages.
>
> – La Trobe to the Colonial Office, December 1851[1]

The 'executive' whose powers Charles La Trobe considered so crucial was Victoria's Executive Council. Comprising La Trobe himself, his four senior bureaucrats – the Attorney-General, Treasurer, Collector of Customs, and Colonial Secretary – and five citizens of La Trobe's choosing, this group formed the executive portion of the Legislative Council. The other twenty members of the legislature were elected by the small number of adult males in the colony who owned or occupied properties worth £10 or more per annum in rent, or who held a pastoral licence. Little wonder that the Victorian Parliament was known as 'the House of Squatters'.

The first Victorian Legislative Council was well fortified – by wealth, rank and muscat – to withstand opposition from without. A provincial English newspaper's warning to intending emigrants, that 'The government is supported by the squatocracy [sic], and opposed by all the other ocracies' pretty much summed up the general view. Nor, though, was there harmony within the legislative chamber, with divisions between squatting and mercantile interests, liberals and conservatives, and – most significantly – between appointed and elected representatives. La Trobe's executive could frame all the legislation it wished (with one important exception: colonial governments were forbidden to legislate on matters of Crown land, which remained within British government jurisdiction); but while La Trobe had the power to veto legislation, neither he nor his Executive Council could implement laws or approve expenditure without a majority vote of the full Legislative Council. In theory, that ought to have been a 'shoo-in', with La Trobe requiring the allegiance of his executive and only six of the elected representatives to swing a vote his way. Ah, but how elusive that half-dozen votes would be!

Between the outbreak of the gold rushes in July 1851 and the first sitting of the Legislative Council that November, it was up to La Trobe and his coterie of senior men to decide on the management of the goldfields. They followed the New South Wales formula that, as the goldfields were Crown land and the minerals therein belonged to the Crown, any government revenue accruing therefrom was likewise the property of the Crown – pending notification to the contrary. Needless to say, La Trobe had, with alacrity, petitioned the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Earl Grey, seeking his urgent advice as to how the revenue from Victorian gold should be directed. His New South Wales counterpart, Sir Charles FitzRoy, had done the same several months earlier. Now both men waited anxiously for Earl Grey's reply. While anticipating (or rather hoping) that the imperial government would not lay claim to all the revenue, La Trobe and FitzRoy took the precaution of allowing gold income to be expended only on direct administration of those Crown lands from which the gold was won.

The twenty elected members of the Legislative Council were disgruntled to find that, pending Earl Grey's advice, authority over gold revenue rested solely with the Queen's representative, La Trobe. They showed their disgruntlement by refusing to sanction any expenditure from general revenue 'on account of any service which in its opinion is consequent on the discovery and search for gold' but did not qualify as 'goldfields administration'. In this way, the Legislative Council withheld government money desperately needed for additional police, the upgrading of roads to the goldfields, and shoring up the wages of gold-twitchy public servants. The Council's intransigence forced La Trobe to 'borrow – albeit sparingly – from the Crown's goldfields revenue'. Lampooning his plight, the *Argus* published a spurious dispatch from 'C.J.L.' TO 'MY Lord', the substance (if not the tone) of which was not far from the mark:

> Well, the officials all being
> off and getting tired of taking
> down the shutters at the
> Treasury with my own hands,
> I applied for assistance to the
> Legislative Council … This
> was, of course, refused, as
> everything is sure to be refused
> by the uncultivated savages;
> and, therefore, I was obliged
> to break into one of the forty
> thousand bags of gold dust
> which I was keeping for you,
> and give a few nuggets to an
> old crawler that was going past,
> just to sweep up the offices and
> keep down the fleas a little.
> …I won't give old Snooks one
> more than sufficient to keep
> him from the diggings. I expect
> forty thousand bags more by
> the beginning of next month,
> so don't be cantankerous about
> a trifle.[2]

What *was* this goldfields revenue, this figurative forty thousand bags of gold a month that La Trobe was stockpiling for His Lordship? Back in August 1851, the Victorian governor had announced that he would follow the example of his New South Wales counterpart in the momentous matter of gold licences. Though, by rights, they exceeded their authority over Crown lands and the income therefrom, how else than by introducing licences could they hope to hold back the rush of diggers? They couldn't. So, each in turn notified the Colonial Office that they had, on the Home government's behalf and in recognition of the plundering of Her Majesty's antipodean wastelands, presumed to impose a licence fee of 30 shillings (£1 10s.) a month on all who would dig for gold.

The introduction of a gold licensing system was announced in the *Government Gazette* of 20 August 1851, and the following day's newspapers carried La Trobe's proclamation to the masses. From 1 September, diggers had to take out licences or face prosecution for illegal

occupation of Crown land. Thirty shillings a month for 26 days' work, payable in advance, was taxation without representation, and a hefty taxation at that. A squatter with a vote and 20 square miles of land paid an annual tax of just £10, yet a digger with no vote, no land, and no influential friends must pay £18 a year for a licence to dig for gold.

In the eleven days between the proclamation and the end of August, most of the diggers cleared out of Buninyong, which was near-gutted anyway. A Gold Commissioner and a contingent of police troopers, charged with managing the diggings, had been stationed there since the start of August. Diggers who were keen to put some distance between themselves and the government's men come 1 September and who, at any rate, were meeting with little in the way of gold, decided it was a good time to up stumps. Many headed north over the ranges, not just to avoid the authorities, but to find a spot that did justify the cost of a licence. Thus, the advent of La Trobe's 'Juggernaut tax' was in some degree responsible for the discovery of Ballarat, the goldfield they called 'the Golden Juggernaut'.

D. Tulloch, fl.1851-1852, artist
Thomas Ham, 1821-1870, engraver
Great Meeting of Gold Diggers Decr. 15th 1851, 1852
Engraving
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, 30328102131678/5

Within five days of the proclamation, diggers at Buninyong staged 'a solemn protest of labour against opposition'. The *Geelong Advertiser*'s correspondent wrote:

> I was never more struck with a scene in my life, and something whispers to me that it will be an important one … Here, a month ago, was but bush and forest, and to night for the first time since Australia rose up from the bosom of the ocean, were men strong in their sense of right, lifting up a protest against an impending wrong, and protesting against their Government.[3]

'Some men,' reported the *Argus*, 'went so far as to dare the Government to molest them' and declared their readiness to take up arms for the preservation of 'what they consider a right'.

While the papers sketched scenarios of bloody insurrection on the first day of September, commercial interests voiced concern that the premature introduction of licences would wring the neck of the colony's fledgling gold industry. Victoria had yet to produce a goldfield to rival those of New South Wales, they argued; it was possible that the paltry gold yields at Clunes and Buninyong would scarcely offset the cost of the monthly licence, in which case diggers would forsake Victoria in favour of the proven fields near Sydney, and development of the colony's gold industry – perhaps even of the colony itself – would falter. But that's not what happened.

As the month of September broke, the incipient Ballarat diggings were the colony's worst-kept secret. Still, on the day that mattered (the first of the month), there were no police or licence-peddling officials on the spot to fray the diggers' freedom. An *Argus* correspondent at the new goldfield that day couldn't help crowing: 'We have no beef, no mutton, no butcher's shop, no hay, no maize, no magistrates within 25 miles, *no constables*, no commonage – but plenty of rain, and shocking bad roads, so you see there is an abundance of negatives, and a fair sprinkling of positives'. Officialdom and the gold licence were not long in arriving at Ballarat. But with the diggers reaping easy gold for the first time, and Victoria's status as a gold colony now assured, opposition to licence fees subsided for the time being.

By the end of November, Forest Creek was the scene of a rush the like of which Australia had not yet seen. Public servants were deserting

at a furious rate, there were no hands for shearing or the harvest, and the diggings themselves were increasingly beyond government control. Clearly 30 shillings a month was no antidote to gold fever.

Reporting the 'general belief' at Forest Creek that the government would raise the licence fee or even outlaw digging altogether, the *Argus*'s man on the spot warned: 'If such is the case it will be necessary to have a strong force here, for four out of every five appear determined, even at the expense of a scuffle, to resist the imposition …'. Nevertheless, on 1 December the government announced that, effective the first day of 1852, the cost of the monthly gold licence would double to £3.

Charles Lyall, d. 1910?, artist
Sketch on the Road, [ca. 1854]
Pencil, pen and ink on cream paper
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H87.63/26

Profile of mounted policeman on horseback holding sabre, pencil sketch of digger behind him, pencil sketch of horse drawn wagon on road. Possibly meant to be a detail of a gold escort.

La Trobe outlined to Earl Grey the reasons that he and his Executive Council had deemed such a measure advisable. First, he cited 'The notorious disproportion of the advantage derivable under the licence system to the public revenue, compared with the amount of private gain'. Visiting Forest Creek in the fortnight after the rush broke out there, La Trobe had gnashed his teeth at seeing fortunes made before *petit dejeuner*. Second, there was the Legislative Council's withholding of ordinary revenue from gold-rush exigencies. And third, La Trobe hoped the £3 licence would act as a deterrent to those 'who may not be in a position, or of a character, to prosecute the search with advantage to themselves or the community'. The dispatch concluded, somewhat desperately:

> Whether it will have this effect remains to be seen; but … do what you will the present cannot be held to be any other than a scramble, and a scramble in which nothing but the most unremitting and breathless exertion enables Government, under every circumstance of disadvantage, to keep pace with the popular movement, and maintain, in appearance at least, some degree of public order and respect to the laws and regulations.[4]

While it is hard not to feel sorry for the man, it is harder still – from this distance – to conceive of a measure *less* likely to engender respect for the laws and regulations. The *Argus*'s view was that 'this step will eventually break the only link that holds the crowds on the ground in order'.

Notices appeared on tree trunks along Forest Creek a week after the proclamation was posted, calling on 'Fellow Diggers' to 'Meet – agitate – be unanimous'. Speakers at a Monster Meeting on 15 December addressed a crowd numbering about one-half of the goldfield's total population of 25,000. They called the £3 licence 'extortion' and asserted that 'we are willing to pay a little, but skinned alive we will not be!'

> The Home Government do not require, nor do they possess the power to enforce unjust taxation. … There are few here who would advocate separation; few who do not love the Country of their adoption; few who do not feel themselves Free! and none, I trust, who will be slaves![5]

Successive speakers exhorted the crowd to keep their heads, keep the peace, and keep their powder dry; but above all to refuse to pay the '£3 imposition'. It was stirring stuff, and just two days later came the back down: the licence fee increase had been revoked.

Dawned 1852 and still La Trobe waited for instructions from London saying what his government must or might do with the revenue raised from gold licences. There was considerable apprehension – not just in official circles, but on the diggings – as to how the Home government would react to news of its colonial goldfields. Would it impose a prohibitive royalty? Would it claim the lion's share of goldfields revenue, leaving the colonial governments paupers in a country awash with gold? Might it even outlaw the working of the goldfields entirely, pending some system of imperial control?

When the first intelligence of New South Wales gold reached London the previous September, *The Times* had urged the British government to fix tight regulations on mining enterprise in the colonies, arguing that 'If the Crown suffers all who please to gather gold on its lands, it is a virtual abdication of its sovereignty'. But when Earl Grey's dispatch to Sir Charles FitzRoy on the subject of goldfields' revenue finally arrived at Sydney in March 1852, it congratulated the New South Wales governor on 'very properly' introducing a system of licensing, and authorised the colonial government to apply the entire revenue to expenses arising from the gold rushes. La Trobe took that as authorisation to do likewise, the *Argus* observing that 'Earl Grey's despatch to Sir C. FitzRoy seems to have set the Executive at work spending the gold digger's money.'[1] Not that the *Argus* or its readership were displeased about that – not at all. As part of their campaign against the proposed licence fee increase, diggers had argued that, since the government gave them nothing in return for their monthly tax – not peacekeepers, nor roads, nor a vote – they could hardly be expected to pay still more into the 'bottomless pit'.

In the months following the advice from London, the government injected a good deal of infrastructure and manpower into the management of the goldfields. As well, it began to pay heed at last to the diggers' repeated call for 'bridges and roads, bridges and roads, bridges and roads'.

In authorising the expenditure of goldfields revenue, Earl Grey had advised that the first priority must be 'the establishment of an adequate police force for the maintenance of order amongst the seekers for gold, and for the enforcement of regulations which have been established'. The *Argus* agreed that even more urgent than the diggers' 'bridges-and-roads' litany was their incessant cry of 'police, police, police'. What they needed was protection; but what they got was something rather different. From the call for 'police, police, police' would emerge a mocking contradictory echo: 'Joe! Joe! Joe!',[2] the diggers' cooee, warning of a licence-inspector's approach and becoming a battle-cry at Eureka.

1 In the twelve months from October 1851, the 'gold digger's money' raised at Forest Creek alone amounted to more than £250,000.

2 Said to derive from 'Charley Joe', the diggers' nickname for La Trobe.

1 La Trobe to Earl Grey, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 3 December 1851 – in *Correspondence Relative to the Recent Discovery of Gold in Australia*, HM Stationery Office, London, 1852

2 *Argus*, 1 December 1851, p. 2

3 As syndicated in *Argus*, 30 August 1851, p. 2

4 La Trobe to Grey, op cit

5 *Argus*, 18 December 1851, p. 2

La Trobe's Golden Testimonial

By Andrew McIntosh CPA

Andrew McIntosh CPA is a qualified accountant and marketing strategist currently taking a career break from the corporate lifestyle to enjoy more time with his young family and to work on his first book. His personal research interests include the history of colonisation and the impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. He mentors several young Indigenous men in business and life skills and is working on several projects to promote Indigenous culture and capacity building. Andrew is also devoting time to the public consultation process on the recognition of the First Australians in the Constitution and has an interest in art, with a particular focus on early European representations of Aboriginal peoples in wood and copper engravings, newspaper illustrations and other print mediums.

Many Victorians are aware of the La Trobe Testimonial Candelabrum Centrepiece that is currently on display at the Ian Potter Centre, National Gallery of Victoria. The spectacular silver and glass piece was manufactured in London by Stephen Smith & William Nicholson (1854-1855). This testimonial was presented to Lieutenant Governor La Trobe following his return to London in 1854.

The silver candelabrum is, in fact, the second of two significant testimonial works presented to La Trobe. The first testimonial, an enormous gold cup, was presented at a 'grand ball' in Melbourne on the stormy evening of Wednesday, 28 December, 1853. Controversy surrounded the gold cup even then, with the *Argus*[1] reporting that while there was only a small objection taken to the ball, some 'indignation'

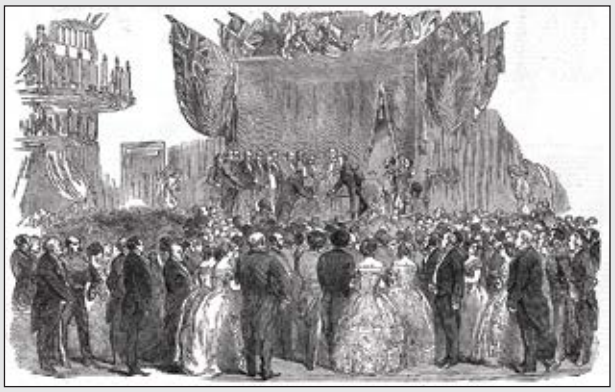
Stephen Smith and William Nicholson, English (London)
La Trobe Testimonial Candelabrum Centrepiece, 1854-55
Silver, glass
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

was felt about the golden cup being presented and that it was no less than an 'outrage' that such a man should receive the cup.

Despite the local debate about La Trobe's competency and how unpopular some felt he was, the *Illustrated London News*[2] reported details of the grand farewell from the 'last Australian mail', six months later in June, 1854. 'Highly popular throughout the Colony', with nearly 2000 people attending, the gold cup was presented at the grand farewell in Melbourne.

Victorian goldsmiths Bond and Tofield under the supervision of the retailer, Mr Drew. For these reasons alone, the gold cup is significant for Victorian State history.

The cup was 16 inches in height, with the inscription on the front and the arms of the Colony on the back. It was decorated with solid figures of a digger (representing La Trobe's friend Captain Brown) and a 'native' throwing a spear, as well as figures of an emu, a kangaroo, a sheep and gold nuggets.



Presentation of Gold Vase at Melbourne, to the Lieutenant Governor of Victoria
Engraving
Illustrated London News, 17 June 1854, p. 575
Copy in the possession of Andrew McIntosh.

The gold cup could contain one and half bottles of wine, or 'about the same in table beer', and was no doubt used for this purpose at the ball: there were toasts 'drunk with loyal enthusiasm' and with a band numbering 100 performers, the 'enjoyments of the ball were prolonged until about five o'clock the next morning'. The *Illustrated London News* carried a sketch of the Ball and, perhaps more importantly, what could be the only remaining visual representation from the period of the gold cup.

With the discovery of gold only a few years earlier in 1851, goldsmiths in the Colony were still in their professional infancy by 1853. Important works of the time were often created from Victorian gold shipped back to Britain for use by reputable London goldsmiths. La Trobe's golden testimonial was reported as being 170 ounces of native Victorian gold and, importantly, manufactured by native talent, the

While controversy surrounded the gold cup in 1853, we are less than two years away from the 160th anniversary of its manufacture (which reputedly took only two weeks), and very little else is known about this golden piece of Victorian colonial history. Mystery now remains about the fate of the cup, as it seems to have vanished without trace.

Hypotheses abound as to its fate – was it melted down, or does it remain in the dusty vaults of a European museum or an American private collection, or was it shipped to a great exhibition and sold? It is hoped that renewed interest in La Trobe and Victoria's golden past will uncover more information on the ultimate resting place of this unique piece of Victorian history.

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1 *The Argus* (Melbourne, Vic), 28 December 1853

2 *Illustrated London News* (London), 17 June 1854, p. 575

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S T Gill, the Artist of the Goldfields

By Dr Dianne Reilly

Dianne Reilly acknowledges her debt to previous research about ST Gill and his works by both Mary Lewis and Christine Downer. The State Library of Victoria holds 331 pictures by the quintessential goldfields artist S T Gill who did so much to preserve in his works the atmosphere, the way of life, the highs and the lows of daily life in this tempestuous period of our history.

Samuel Thomas Gill (1819-1880) was born at Perryton in Devon, England, the eldest of five children of Rev. Samuel Gill who was a Baptist minister and a schoolmaster. He began his education in his father's school in Devonport, and later attended Dr Seabrook's Academy in Plymouth. Since he had shown an aptitude for drawing very early in life, he began work as a draughtsman and took classes at the Hubard Profile Gallery in London owned by W J Hubard, a talented silhouette portraitist. After the death from smallpox of two of his siblings, the Gill family immigrated to South Australia, arriving in Adelaide in December 1839. There, S T Gill soon established himself, advertising in the local press as a portrait painter situated in Gawler Place. In addition, he could create correct resemblance of horses, dogs, etc. with local scenery, etc. executed to order. In his twelve years in Adelaide, Gill gave proof of his talent in drawings and watercolours of the inhabitants, streets, architecture and significant events in this early period of the city's history. He sketched the departure of the explorer Charles Sturt from Adelaide in 1844 in search of a route into Central Australia, and he visited that other great pioneer traveller Edward John Eyre at his home on the Murray. Both explorers used Gill's works to illustrate the published accounts of their journeys: Eyre's *Journals of Expedition and Discovery into Central Australia* and Sturt's *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia.*

Gill was an accomplished horseman and it was as a result of being in the saddle so much as he travelled through the South Australian countryside that his work began to assume an Australian style. The distinctive characteristics of the Australian landscape were able to be communicated in his sketches, so much so that the Adelaide newspaper, the *South Australian Register* praised his style in glowing terms:

> It was only the other day
> we had the opportunity to
> see some of his bush scenes.
> They are the most vivid and
> lifelike of any that have been
> before presented to us. He
> gives the true idea of South
> Australian scenery. Nothing is
> exaggerated, nor any point lost.

In 1846, Gill joined the ill-fated expedition of explorer John Ainsworth Harrocks into the interior of South Australia. Although the journey was curtailed by the accidental death of Harrocks, Gill produced many works which were displayed in the Adelaide 'Exhibition of Pictures: The Works of Colonial Artists' in January 1847 and his paintings again featured in an exhibition in 1848.

Samuel Thomas Gill, 1818-1880, artist
Diggers licenceing (sic),
Forest Creek [1872]
watercolour, pencil, gum arabic or varnish on buff paper
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H25972

Despite the fact that Gill had introduced the art of photography to Adelaide at about this time by importing Daguerreotype equipment from England, his attempts to earn a living from this failed and he sold the apparatus. By this time, he was drinking heavily and, in 1851 he was declared bankrupt. Some historians consider that this rather shy and sensitive artist was overshadowed in South Australia by painters of less talent than himself. He was a prolific artist, but known to be a very poor businessman who did not follow up on debts that were owed to him. These aspects of his character, together with an unfortunate temporary swelling and paralysis of his right hand, let to his decision to depart South Australia to seek his fortune on the Victorian goldfields.

He arrived at the Mount Alexander (Castlemaine) diggings in 1852 with his brother John and a friend. In this area of central Victoria, the surface and shallow workings especially at Forest Creek, were very productive. It was reported that, in nineteen days, three diggers had uncovered here 360 ounces of gold, and another group had obtained £1000 worth of gold in a mere two weeks. The yield was so rich that diggers even deserted Ballarat for the Mount Alexander field. On 6 December 1851, shortly before Gill's party ventured there, 150 drays were counted on the track between Kyneton and Forest Creek.

In his watercolour "Diggers on the way to Bendigo, 1852', Gill depicts prospectors en route from Melbourne north through the Black Forest, where diggers were sometimes waylaid by highwaymen, past Kyneton to Forest Creek. The diggers are carrying their blankets and the essential mining equipment of tin dish and cradle. They are well armed and often, as in this image, had the protection against thieves and bushrangers of a fierce dog. In this sketch, a dray lumbers ahead, and a woman is walking the arduous journey on foot.

Gill's party dug for gold at Pennyweight Flat, Little Bendigo on Forest Creek where many Adelaide diggers had gathered, and Adelaide Hill and Adelaide Gully were landmarks. Forest Creek had its Adelaide store and Adelaide restaurant, and Adelaide gold-office where South Australian diggers could deposit their gold for safe escort home. However, Gill soon gave up mining to indulge his passion for recording all aspects of life and work around him in sketches and watercolours. Gill's images of Forest Creek are strong in detail and topographic in style. The viewer is treated to detailed mining scenes, and yet there are intimate glimpses of diggers as they maintain a semblance of normal life.

Gill was fascinated by all he saw. There was so much of interest as he rapidly sketched men, women and children at the diggings, 'Diggers of High Degree', 'Diggers of Low Degree' and 'Diggers Licensing'. His close-up of views of the processes involved in surface gold fossicking are documented for posterity in 'Tin Dish Washing', 'Cradling', 'Paddling' and 'Fossicking'.

When his brother and his friend became successful diggers, they rode home to Adelaide, while Gill made his way to Melbourne to record life and happenings in this rapidly growing city. These, more curious scenes awaited his paintbrush. Gill's 'The Digger's Wedding' captured the euphoria of the successful gold miner who returned to the city to establish himself in metropolitan life. Bride and groom are seen driving through the streets in an open carriage, the best man quite overcome from

celebrating, and offering a glass of champagne to the bemused driver. Hire of a carriage was six pounds a day and champagne was purchased for at least three pounds per bottle. The cost of such celebrations often amounted to £100 or even £200. The fashion was to celebrate on Sundays, horses were decorated with rosettes, and up to six carriages for friends were hired at a time.

Gill visited the goldfields at Ballarat each year until he left for Sydney in 1856. His Ballarat sketches were rather more formal than his earlier views of the Mount Alexander goldfields, and showed the progress of diggers from the primitive surroundings of the diggings to the more sophisticated activities associated with life in town.

Gill was a keen eye-witness to the development of the city of Melbourne which prospered largely due to the gold rushes. His 'Coles Wharf', 'Post Office, Melbourne', 'The South-East Corner of William Street and Lonsdale Street, Melbourne' and document a Melbourne largely forgotten since the demolition of so many buildings to make way for progress.

Gill established himself in Sydney from 1856 as a teacher of painting in George Street. He contributed to the popular sporting paper 'Bells Life', and he published lithographic views of scenery in and around Sydney before his return to Melbourne.

In 1869 that the Trustees of the then Melbourne Public Library (now the Sate Library of Victoria) had the foresight of commissioning Gill to paint forty scenes of the Victorian gold fields as he remembered them. The album he produced was title *The Victorian Gold Fields 1852-53*.

One of Gill's most important pictures is a watercolour and pencil sketch with Chinese white highlighting on buff paper titled 'Doing the Block, Gt. Collins Street'. The Block was that section of Collins Street between Elizabeth and Swanston Streets which, from the late 1840s, was a popular venue for those in fashionable society to parade up and down and to meet their friends and acquaintances. In Gill's 'Block', we can see elegantly dressed men and women parading along Collins Street.

On 27 October 1880, S. T. Gill collapsed on the steps of the General Post Office on the corner of Bourke and Elizabeth Streets, and died soon afterwards. The *Argus* of 28 October which had once reported on Gill's work and described the artist as 'one of the notables of the land of gold', briefly mentioned the death of an unknown man. However, the Melbourne *Daily Telegraph*, reporting also on 28 October, gave many more clues to the artist's identity in this account of the death:

> A fearfully sudden death occurred yesterday afternoon. About half past 4 a man, name unknown, about forty years of age, of slender build, 5 ft. 8in. in height, with reddish beard, was observed to fall down on the Post-office steps. Constable Connolly, who was on duty, at once had him placed in a cab for the purpose of having him taken to the hospital, but he expired almost immediately. In his pockets were found a purse, key and a book on which was written the name of Davies and Co., chemists, and several bills on which the name 'Gill' was written. The body now lies at the hospital dead-house awaiting identification and an inquest.

The next day, the *Herald* confirmed that the dead man was, in fact, the well-known artist S. T. Gill, 'who once occupied an opulent position, but has of late been in reduced circumstances'.

An obituary in the Melbourne journal *Tabletalk* in 1891 described his talent:

> He was an absolute master of his materials, whether it was a simple black lead pencil, a brush full and flowing with Indian ink, or colours, bright, clear, pure and certain in their tones and gradations.

Despite the fact that his life was undoubtedly very difficult and his circumstances trying and tragic, it was S T Gill who, so consummately, conveyed in a manner, often light-hearted or even comic, and at times, sad, but always telling, the life styles of those he met and the landscapes they inhabited in a way that they appeal to all. Their appeal lies in the fact that he was able to conjure up an era, to document it in its tiniest details, to give us today a picture of the past which is as fresh as it was at the time when he wielded his paintbrush. Without exception, S. T. Gill is Australia's best known and most appreciated artist for evoking the colonial period of our history, especially the gold rush era.

Friends of La Trobe's Cottage

The garden

Much has been happening in the garden at the Cottage and members who have visited it recently will have enjoyed the beautiful spring showing. Recreating the Cottage's garden as it might have been is slowly becoming a reality through the efforts of our devoted gardeners under the expert leadership of Sandi Pullman.

La Trobe Society members and members of Friends of La Trobe's Cottage will also find all the latest news and photographs of the garden on the C J La Ttrobe Society website www.latrobesociety.org.au

This issue of *La Trobeana* is largely devoted to the gold rush period and it is worth considering its impact on Charles and Sophie La Trobe's garden. In a letter to her daughter Agnes, 23 January 1852, Sophie wrote

> *'…all the menservants…went to the diggings. The garden suffers much from the want of a gardener and yet we are still pretty well off, as in some families they have lost every one of their servants – males and females! This wretched gold country!'* [1]

The twelve and a half acre plot (about 5 hectares) bought by Charles La Trobe in 1840 became a gentleman's estate with a garden that reflected the ornamental gardens he knew from Europe with star and moon crescent-shaped beds of hollyhocks, and other flowering plants. Roses and ornamental trees were also a feature of the garden.

Later, however, due to lack of manpower, particularly during the gold rush and because of periodic drought, the garden changed to a somewhat wild, if equally charming garden, where Charles La Trobe planted species that were more drought-tolerant. Charles La Trobe also grew to love native plants: three plants were named after him. Read more about these plants and the garden on our website.

Loreen Chambers
Hon. Editor

1 quoted in Helen Botham. *La Trobe's Jolimont: A walk round my garden*. Melbourne: The C.J. La Trobe Society & Australian History Garden Society. 2006. p19. Source: La Trobe Neuchatel Archives (La Trobe Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria MS 13354, PA 96/147, Box 13) plus MSS transcriptions held by Helen Botham.

Forthcoming events

DECEMBER

Friday 9

Christmas Cocktails
Venue: Melbourne Club
36 Collins Street, Melbourne
Time: 6.30 pm
Speaker: Mr Shane Carmody, Director of Development at the State Library of Victoria.
Topic: Charles Joseph La Trobe and the Uneasy Class
Cost: $65 per person
A booking slip has been sent to members.

Candlelit Carols at the Cottage
Venue: La Trobe's Cottage
*** PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS EVENT WILL NOT BE HELD IN 2011**

MARCH

Sunday 25

La Trobe's 211th Birthday Celebration
Time: 2 – 4.30pm
Venue: Domain House and La Trobe's Cottage
Speaker: Professor Richard Broome, Professor of History, La Trobe University
A booking slip, for catering purposes, will be sent to members nearer the date.

Contributions welcome

The Editorial Committee welcomes contributions to La Trobeana which is published three times a year.

Further information about
the journal may be found at
www.latrobesociety.org.au/LaTrobeanaIndex.html
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"Qui la cèrca, la trova"