The Eureka Stockade



The Eureka Flag based on the constellation of the Southern Cross. Image courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ballarat.

The Eureka rebellion, which is often referred to as the 'Eureka Stockade', is a key event in the development of Australian democracy and Australian identity, with some people arguing that Australian democracy was born at Eureka' (Clive Evatt). In addition, the principles of mateship, seen to be adapted by the gold diggers, and the term digger' was later adopted by the Anzac soldiers in World War I.

The rebellion came about because the goldfield workers (known as 'diggers') opposed the government miners' licences. The licences were a simple way for the government to tax the diggers. Licence fees had to be paid regardless of whether a digger's claim resulted in any gold. Less successful diggers found it difficult to pay their licence fees.

**Population of the goldfields**

The population of the Victorian goldfields peaked in 1858 at 150,000. More than half of these were British immigrants, and 40,000 were Chinese. There were also Americans, French, Italian, German, Polish and Hungarian exiles as well as many other nationalities. (The Oxford Companion to Australian History)

*Between 1851 and 1860, an estimated 300,000 people came to Australian colonies from England and Wales, with another 100,000 from Scotland and 84,000 from Ireland. Gold seekers from Germany, Italy and North America also made the journey to Australia in search of gold. Just over 5,000 people from New Zealand and other South Pacific nations, and at least 42,000 people from China, also arrived in Australia during the 1850s gold rushes. During this period, the colony of Victoria received 60% of all immigrants to Australia.*

eGold: A Nation's Heritage: Immigration and Ethnicity.

**1854 – the year of the rebellion**

In 1854 there were about 25,000 diggers of many nationalities on the Ballarat goldfields. Aboriginal people were also present in many capacities: as Native Police, guides, wives and gold diggers, as well as trading cultural items and food. Women on the gold fields were assisted by Caroline Chisholm.

Law and order on the goldfields was enforced by the Gold Commission's police force which was later reinforced by a garrison of soldiers.



The Social Order Notice. Image courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ballarat.

Governor Hotham came to power in June 1854 and set up licence checks twice a week to enforce the licensing laws. Tensions began to boil over as opposition to the licences increased.

Official corruption was another concern for the diggers. This issue came to a head after a group of men beat to death a drunken Scottish digger. The group included local publican James Bentley. Bentley was a friend of the local magistrate and he escaped prosecution, as did three other men from the group.

This led to the diggers meeting on 17 October to try to bring the men to justice. After the meeting a crowd of diggers burnt Bentley's hotel to the ground. Soon after three diggers were arrested and charged with arson for their part in setting fire to the hotel.

On 11 November, 10,000 diggers met to demand the release of the three diggers, the abolition of the licence and the vote for all males. The outcome of this meeting was the forming of the Ballarat Reform League under the chairmanship of Chartist John Basson Humffray . Several other Reform League leaders, including Thomas Kennedy and Henry Holyoake, had been involved with the Chartist movement in England. Many of the miners had past involvement in the Chartist movement and the social upheavals in England, Ireland and Europe during the 1840s.

This was followed by an even larger meeting on 29 November where the diggers decided to publicly burn their mining licences. At this meeting the famous Southern Cross flag, which was to become known as the Eureka Flag, was displayed. In response to the meeting, the Gold Commissioner ordered a licence hunt for the following day.

**The Eureka Stockade**



Government troops and police stormed and ransacked the Stockade on the morning of December 3rd 1854. Image courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ballarat.

On 30 November another mass burning of licences took place at a meeting on Bakery Hill. Under the leadership of Peter Lalor, the diggers then marched to the Eureka diggings (named after the 'Eureka lead', a deep lead of gold being mined by the diggers) where they constructed the famous stockade.

Early in the morning of Sunday 3 December the authorities launched an attack on the stockade. Some weeks earlier the government had ordered the 12th and 40th Regiments to the goldfields to support the police troopers. The diggers were outnumbered and the battle was over in twenty minutes. Twenty-two diggers and five troops were killed. The Southern Cross flag was pulled from the flagpole and souvenired by the victors. Peter Lalor escaped the scene even though his arm had been badly injured (later requiring amputation).

**The Eureka legacy**

The Eureka rebellion is considered by some historians to be the birthplace of Australian democracy. It is the only Australian example of armed rebellion leading to reform of unfair laws.

*Sourced from australia.gov.au*