

Remembering Eureka

Anne Beggs Sunter

Eureka Sunday 1999 dawned gently, an early summer morning of perfect stillness. The sky had been cloudy but cleared towards dawn to reveal the fading stars, and the walkers eagerly looked up to identify the Southern Cross. It was the central focus of the constellations for the 430 men, women and children participating in the Eureka dawn walk, one of a series of anniversary events organised by a committee under the auspices of the city of Ballarat.

The dawn walk is a recent phenomenon that promises to grow in significance every year on the anniversary of the Eureka stockade, Australia's nearest approximation to a war of independence. The five stars of the Southern Cross were identified and admired. These had come to symbolically represent Australian independence and protest against unjust administration.

The rebellion of disaffected miners against British authority occurred on the Ballarat goldfield on 3 December 1854. A few days earlier, on Bakery Hill, the diggers had burned their gold licences as a gesture of defiance against perceived government corruption and inequitable administration. The diggers' cry was 'no taxation without representation' and they raised a specially designed flag of the Southern Cross, swearing an oath 'to fight to defend our rights and liberties'.¹

The colonial government, under Governor Charles Hotham, moved to suppress the rebellion by a dawn attack on the diggers. The diggers were routed in twenty minutes, twenty-two protesters were killed, along with four members of the military. The flag was torn down and 113 men were taken prisoner. Hotham reported to his superior in London that he feared republican revolution.² Some contemporaries saw it simply as a protest against an inept and corrupt administration. Karl Marx saw it as a precursor to his socialist revolution.³

Almost immediately Eureka began to be incorporated into the national myth of democracy, equality and mateship. For some it represented the triumph of parliamentary democracy, for others the right of ordinary workers to 'a fair go'.⁴ The flag became a metaphor for radical action — used by nationalists, trade unionists, civil libertarians and republicans. All have found some symbolic nourishment in the 'stockade everlasting'.

It was perhaps inevitable that the building of an interpretative centre in Ballarat to commemorate the Eureka stockade would be a bone of contention. The idea of building some sort of museum to explain the event had been in the air for a long time. After many false starts and limited commonwealth funding for restoration of monuments, the Victorian Kennett liberal government took up the idea in 1997, through the community support fund. Here was a nice irony — the Eureka interpretative centre would be funded from the profits of gambling at the Melbourne casino. In 1854 the diggers at Ballarat had protested vehemently about the corruption of the administration which was perceived as too closely involved with local entertainment venues.

During the period leading up to the opening of the Eureka centre in March there had been heated debates about which version of history would be represented. The planning process began in 1996 during the interregnum when there was no elected local government. However suspicions of bias were appeased to an extent once an elected council replaced Kennet's appointed commissioners. This council assumed responsibility for the completion of the new museum. The issue of which version of history would be presented in the museum remained an issue of sharp community division.

The unveiling of a statue to the Eureka Pikeman's dog was a central event at the Eureka celebrations in 1999. The bronze statue, sculptured by Perth Irish-Australian artists Charles and Joan Fox, had been commissioned by the Eureka stockade Memorial Trust for the courtyard of the Eureka stockade centre. Paul Williams, a Ballarat taxi driver with a passion for Australian history, founded the Trust in 1994 to promote the 'national significance' of Eureka. It aimed to bring together people of diverse political and ethnic interests and to overcome the divisions that had always been associated with Eureka.⁵

It had taken almost 145 years for the brave little terrier, the pikeman's dog, who stood dutifully beside his dying master at the stockade, to be acknowledged. The committee responsible for preparing the text of the Eureka exhibition had chosen to ignore the canine interest story. But it was a great story, sure to touch the hearts of animal lovers, carrying with it the story of brutal police suppression of the mining population of the Eureka Lead on the Sunday morning of the stockade. At last the story of the dog had escaped the bounds of obscure yellowing newspapers, and stood immortalised in bronze in the courtyard of the Eureka Centre. Perhaps those who favoured a conservative explanation of Eureka were not pleased, but for the members of the Eureka stockade Memorial Trust it was a triumph to have the dog given due honour when its likeness was unveiled by the Irish Ambassador Richard O'Brien and the new (Labor) Premier of Victoria Steve Bracks. The dog had been posthumously awarded the RSPCA's Purple Cross — a badge of valour awarded with great discretion to deserving animals. Immediately the dog was the centre of attention at the Eureka centre. The lively canine statue moves visitors to ask to know more of the story of the dog and the pikeman.⁶

A major aspect of remembering Eureka in 1999 was the dawn lantern walk, an event which began in 1994 and which has effectively focussed national attention on the Eureka story. The walk is organised by the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery and participants assemble informally before dawn in the centre of Ballarat to collect paper lanterns and fall into a relaxed procession behind the leaders. It is very different from the earlier Eureka marches. It is designed as an inclusive commemoration, which embraces participants and their descendants on both sides of the stockade. There is almost a New Age spiritual quality about the dawn procession of twinkling lanterns, that serve as metaphor for the stars which fade as dawn approaches. As recent Anzac Day ceremonies have shown, Australians seem hungry for some replacement for traditional religious rituals and observations. As Muriel Porter points out, 'Australians are seeking identity and meaning in past events and old rituals'.⁷

The walkers pause at strategic locations along the route to hear a reading from an eye-witness to the events of 1854, with voices selected to represent the military

and the diggers, men and women. As dawn breaks the procession reaches the Eureka Monument. It is a simple obelisk built in 1884, made poignant in the last anniversary dawn of the century as a lone piper plays a mournful tune, calling the walkers to listen to the oration of Australia's first Chinese Senator, Tshen Tsen. There is a deliberate multicultural emphasis to the proceedings — a careful consideration of political correctness.

This is very different from the first procession to honour the memory of the Eureka rebels in 1856. Diggers marched two by two, wearing crepe ribbon on their left arms, from the stockade to the new memorial at the Ballarat cemetery.⁸ The cemetery became a hallowed spot, where they could 'cherish the memories of those martyrs to tyranny and injustice'.⁹ As Michael Evans pointed out, in the years immediately after the stockade, there was public discussion in the local newspapers about which site was the most appropriate gathering place — whether it should be the stockade itself, 'Lalor's stump' on Bakery Hill, or the burial site at the cemetery.¹⁰ From the beginning there were debates about whether the event belonged to Ballarat or had wider interest, debates about whether political groups should use it for propaganda purposes, about public versus private remembering. The cemetery became accepted as a private place remembering old friends, away from the glare of publicity. As Chris Healy points out, these gatherings continued quietly as an anniversary service which 'did not announce itself as an historic occasion because its historicity was known and assumed by those involved'.¹¹

The thirtieth anniversary in 1884 revived public memories and made old comrades poignantly aware that some amongst their number were dying. They were rapidly passing into history, a fact highlighted by the decision to form an organisation called the Old Identities Association, the criterion for membership of which depended on evidence of having been 'on Ballarat' prior to 1855.¹² Hence the old diggers met and decided to erect a monument at the stockade. They held meetings, and argued about the exact location of the battle in the editorial columns of the local newspapers. This public discussion again brought controversy to the fore, with some correspondents arguing that reviving memories of disloyal events would cast a slur on Ballarat, which saw itself by 1884 as a 'foundation stone of Empire'.¹³ The new monument had to be reticent in its recollection, with a simple plaque stating 'Eureka stockade, Sunday morning, 3rd December 1854'. The memorial committee was careful to present their monument as marking an historic event, hence the gift of cannons from the Victorian government was accepted as an appropriate gesture. On Eureka day about 200 men visited the unfinished monument.¹⁴

The attempt to start a new tradition of public commemoration did not take hold. The following year there was no commemoration. On Eureka Day 1890 stockade veteran James Esmond died, and historian W B Withers records in his obituary that he strolled to a hill overlooking Ballarat and saw 'in the distance a white shaft of granite, glittering in the sunshine, and marking the spot where the hot red blood was shed'.¹⁵ He is quite alone in paying his respects to the fallen diggers.

The rapid passing of old pioneers sparked the formation of the Australasian Historical Records Association in 1896, with one of its aims to collect Eureka relics. The Association revived the celebration of Eureka Day with a decidedly

carnival atmosphere, involving a picnic and bicycle races at the Botanic Gardens.¹⁶ The Eureka reserve lay neglected, the monument overgrown by weeds.

The fiftieth anniversary in 1904 galvanised the few remaining old diggers into action. Ballarat must, and did, have a grand celebration, bringing people from far and wide, thanks to the free railway passes issued by the Victorian Government to old stockaders. A new political note was sounded by the Political Labour League, which was active in organising events throughout Australia, seeing 'the Eureka stockade incident as a purely labour movement'. Hence on this special occasion the grand procession started from the Galloway monument, the Eight Hours monument at the bottom of Sturt Street. The route of the procession was a circuitous one, going up Sturt Street, to pass Peter Lalor's bronze statue, then back to the stockade.¹⁷ No wonder the few old diggers, exhibited almost as historic relics, arrived at the stockade feeling fatigued. Behind them were young native-born Australians, dressed up as diggers, showing that a new generation had taken up the duty of commemoration.

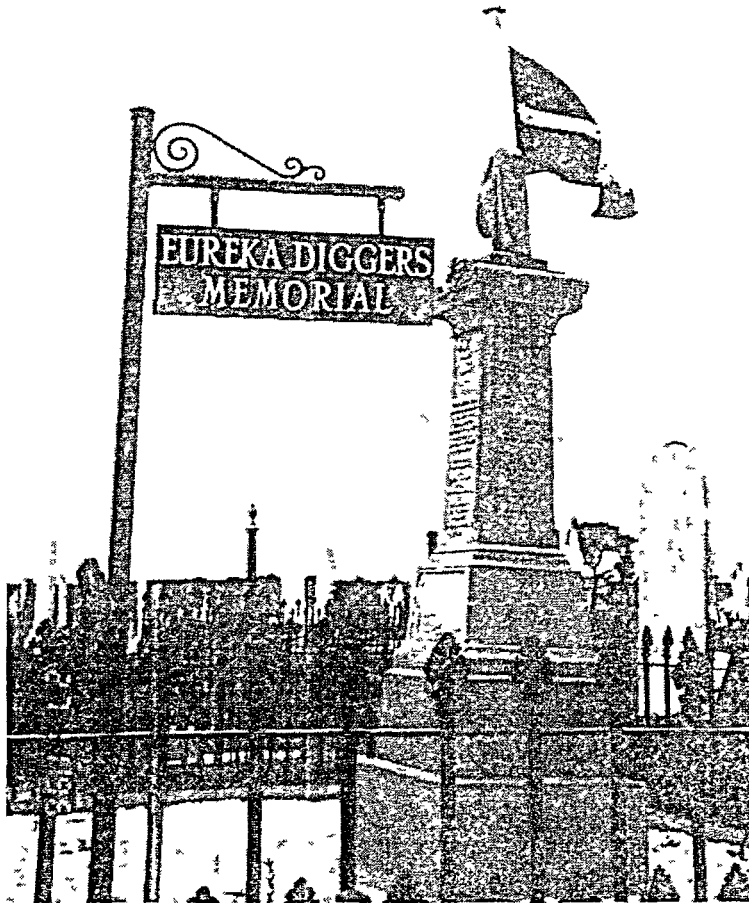
Once the excitement of the golden jubilee was over, the mists of neglect again fell over the stockade. So much so that in 1912 a Eureka Improvement and Progress Association was formed by local residents determined to rectify the disgraceful state of their local park. This committee began the tradition of annual anniversary services at the Eureka monument, insisting that such services be non-political and non-sectarian. It also made a deliberate effort in 1917 to link the memory of the old diggers to the memory of the new diggers who were fighting for their country, planting a seed of the lone pine at Gallipoli a few metres from the monument.¹⁸

During the awful carnage of the first world war, the Ballarat homecoming celebrations were held in April 1917. They were organised as pure public theatre, relief from the daily round of deadly news from the war front. The celebrations concluded with a pageant at the Eureka stockade, held 'in beautiful weather'. The Argus report of 11 April estimated the 'crowd in the streets was the largest seen at any function of the kind in Ballarat. At the stockade reserve, 20,000 gathered to watch a re-enactment of Eureka of the early 1850s, complete with digger hunts and the feature of the afternoon, the burning of Bentley's hotel'. Local historian Nathan Spielvogel estimated that there were 50,000 present.¹⁹ The fire succeeded in keeping back the crowd, who otherwise seem to have rather hampered the performance by over-running the stage. Any political connotations had been removed by the organisers, and the public came to enjoy the spectacle as pure entertainment. This event would seem to be the precursor of Sovereign Hill's hugely successful sound and light show, 'Blood on the Southern Cross', introduced in 1993. Re-enactment of an 'historic event' has proved the least contentious kind of public commemoration.

In the 1930s a new politicisation of Eureka commemorations began to take place. The combination of economic depression and fear of war made left-wing activists turn to Australian history for radical role models. The story of the Eureka stockade as promoted by the socialist R S Ross and his son Lloyd fitted the bill.²⁰ This politicisation 'by outsiders' was resisted by the Eureka stockade Progress Committee which continued to arrange its strictly non-sectarian anniversary services, as did the Victorian Centenary Committee in 1935 with its Victorian

centennial celebrations. The organisers of the centenary pageant in Melbourne on 8 June 1935 decided there would be no float to represent Eureka, the organising secretary explained this by the argument that 'no single Eureka float could do justice to its historical importance'.²¹ Whether this was a polite way of saying that the secretary was in a tricky diplomatic position owing to conflicting interpretations of Eureka is impossible to say, but certainly open to speculation.

The ALP took up Eureka in 1936 when the Labor Sports and Cultural Federation of Victoria had its first pilgrimage to the Eureka Monument, involving special trains and buses for trade unionists from Melbourne. The ALP added depth to the event by organising a political school in Ballarat as part of the day's events.²² Another political group to take up Eureka at this time was the Melbourne Artists' Branch of the Communist Party, which made replica Eureka flags the centrepiece of its 1938 May Day march. On the same day in Sydney the Trades Hall Council included a representation of Eureka in its Sesquicentenary Celebrations at the May Day march.²³ When the CPA's Eureka Youth League was formed in 1941, it began a tradition of marches which used the Eureka flag in a highly political context.²⁴



Eureka Monument, Ballarat Cemetery, 1996 (Anne Beggs Sunter)

During the second world war when Australia faced invasion by Japan, Eureka was evoked for nationalist and patriotic purposes. Members of the Eureka Youth League serving in the army urged their fellow Australians to stand up for their independence as the diggers had in 1854.²⁵ But by the end of the war this unity was breaking down in the face of a growing wariness by western governments of Stalin. Suspicions were aroused against communist sympathisers, amongst whom were many trade unionists. Members of the Ballarat Trades Hall wanted to march to the stockade, behind a replica of the Southern Cross, on 9 December 1945. The march was banned by the city council, but went ahead anyway.²⁶

With an increasingly acrimonious anti-communist atmosphere fuelled by the Menzies government's Petrov enquiry, the centenary celebrations in 1954 produced special tensions. A local committee orchestrated a week of celebrations and a pageant was held on an amphitheatre below the Sovereign Hill lookout, where a crowd estimated at 5,000 came to enjoy a re-enactment of the events leading up to the stockade. The redcoats were played by young men from the RAAF Radio School, and the miners by members of the Ballarat Trades Hall Council. The burning of a dilapidated reproduction of Bentley's Hotel was a crowd highlight. The report in the *Courier* notes disapprovingly that members of the Communist Party and the Eureka Youth League used the occasion for propaganda purposes, which the reporter felt was in bad taste given that this was 'an historic occasion of considerable importance'.²⁷

Just as in the 1860s when Eureka was deliberately pushed out of the public mind because it smacked of disloyalty to empire, so in the later 1950s Eureka was again officially forgotten, this time because it had acquired a 'pinko' tinge because of its association with communist movements. The trade union movement and socialist movement continued to commemorate Eureka, quietly, with small gatherings of the Connolly Society held every year at the stockade after 1954.

During the 1970s the symbolism of Eureka was interpreted in very different ways by a number of groups, including the Builders' Labourers Federation, the Maoist Australian Independence Movement, and the extreme right-wing National Alliance. Out of concern for this contested situation, the Eureka Commemorative Society was born in 1979. It was a local Ballarat organisation and it deliberately aimed to disassociate Eureka from political and ideological causes. Because the people involved had a strong link to Sovereign Hill Historical Park, it fostered a new interest in tourism, seeing celebrations and battle re-enactments as a way of promoting Ballarat's economy. The president of the society was Peter Tobin, a Ballarat funeral director, who appropriately revived the old tradition of a graveside commemoration at the cemetery. Through his military training as a young man, he made a strong link between Eureka and Gallipoli, seeing both historic events as outstanding expressions of mateship. Thus he attempted to replace ideological meanings with nationalistic overtones.

By the end of the twentieth century, there was an emerging sense of reassessment of Australia's place in the world. As Australia's economy became intrinsically linked to Asia, and with the ending of the old 'white Australia' policy, it was no longer appropriate for our neighbours to see Australia as a colonial outpost of Britain. From the 1970s there was a revival of the republican movement which had been sidelined at the time of federation. The story of Eureka and its flag again became important, this time in a republican and nationalist context.

The 1988 bicentenary celebrations brought the issues of Australia's place in the world squarely into focus, with an official emphasis on celebrating the multicultural nature of our society. In this context another Eureka organisation was born, Eureka's children, the brainchild of Melbourne advertising man Paul Murphy. The aim of the organisation was to bring together all descendants of those who fought at the Eureka stockade, thus emphasising the multicultural character of the Ballarat goldfields of the 1850s.²⁸ On Eureka Day 1988 hundreds of descendants gathered in Ballarat to march to the cemetery and to the monument for a commemoration service. Although the organisation claimed to be open to the descendants of those who fought on either side at the stockade, some descendants of diggers took exception to Peter Tobin's Eureka Commemorative Society paying homage at the soldiers' monument. The old private commemoration at the cemetery had suddenly become publicly contested.

Ballarat began to realise the tourist possibilities of remembering Eureka only in the 1990s. In 1993 Sovereign Hill's 'Blood on the Southern Cross' began its twice-nightly performance. This dramatisation of events has been seen by many thousands of visitors from throughout Australia and the world. It is non-controversial, telling the story as a 'colourful event' in Australian history. Because reputable historians like Weston Bate were involved in script development, the sound and light show does effectively tell the story, but avoids vexed questions of significance.

With the demise of the Eureka Commemorative Society, the Ballarat academic Jack Harvey invented a new commemoration on the morning of 3 December 1993. He had a scientific interest in establishing the exact location of the stockade, a question which created much emotion in the letters to the editor columns of the local newspaper. He invited interested members of the public to join him on a dawn walk which would follow as closely as possible the route taken by the soldiers from the government camp in Lydiard Street to the stockade. Along the way primary evidence for pinpointing the location of the stockade was read and discussed. The following year, 1994, saw a number of Ballarat's organisations — both government and commercial — get together to promote the 140th anniversary celebrations. Jack again organised his dawn walk, this time with considerably more participants. A new tradition was in the course of invention, its characteristics described by Eric Hobsbawm in 1983 as 'a set of practices with a symbolic content which seek to inculcate certain values by virtue of repetition, suggesting that this set of practices has a continuity with the past'.²⁹

In 1998 the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery took over the event, combining it with lantern-making workshops before the event which involved local schools. National publicity put the event on the map, and re-kindled the *Bulletin's* old discussion of 1888 about making Eureka Day a National Day. The City of Ballarat declared the Sunday after Eureka as 'Eureka Sunday'.

So we come to the last commemoration of the millennium. In spite of careful attempts by the organising committee to be 'non-political and non-sectarian', controversy flared. Threats were made by members of Eureka's children to disrupt the dawn walk because it was following the soldiers' route. A leaflet handed out by Eureka's children executive officer Paul Murphy described the walk as 'offensive in the extreme because it commemorates the march and attack by

soldiers on innocent men, women and children' and he further threatened that if the walk was held again, he would get the combined union forces of the Melbourne Trades Hall to barricade any attempt to enter the battle site. With Peter Lalor, a detective sergeant in the Victorian police force and descendant of the original Peter Lalor, Murphy claimed to re-establish the Ballarat Reform League which would push to remove the Eureka flag from the Ballarat Art Gallery because it had been stolen from its owners and was housed 'on contested ground'. The Gallery is situated in Lydiard Street on part of what was the original police camp for the goldfields.³⁰ The 'local versus outsiders' issue was alive again in relation to controlling the story and its icons. Additionally, ideological issues were again being stirred.

The threats made were serious and worrying enough for police protection to be sought for Margaret Rich, director of the art gallery and architect of the dawn lantern walk. The convivial ambience of the University of Ballarat's 'Through Irish Eyes' dinner was also broken when the same threats were made to those contemplating joining the walk. In the event the only physical manifestation of the threats were leaflets handed out to walkers, and publicity gained by the protesters in the daily newspapers.³¹

After all, Eureka Sunday was celebrated congenially in Ballarat. Commentator Bob Ellis best described the experience of the dawn walk when he wrote in the *Bulletin* that 'it took your breath away it was so simple and sincere'.³² It was followed by an outdoor breakfast of sausages cooked by members of the Eureka stockade Memorial Park Committee, a special Eureka mass at St Alipius' church, the unveiling of the Pikeman's dog statue, and finally a convivial luncheon at the Old Colonists' Club with Gough Whitlam and Professor John Molony, Eureka historian, as special guests. By mid-afternoon the participants who had gathered in the centre of Ballarat before dawn were beginning to wilt. The practice of public commemoration in 1999 had proved emotional and physically exhausting.

Most of all it had borne out the words of Brian Fitzpatrick who had written in *Meanjin* back in 1955 of 'the contentious Eureka legend'.³³ As Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton have pointed out, the greatest opportunity for contest and controversy comes in collective memory exercises, where one group will attempt to determine how all remember and commemorate. These anniversaries can become the forum for heated debates about the event that is being remembered by participants who have different interpretations of the event and all of whom seek to have their version approved as a means of reinforcing their own security and identity in the present.³⁴

It seems certain that Eureka will continue to be remembered and contested at these anniversary celebrations.