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RECLAIMING THE RADICAL SPIRIT OF THE EUREKA REBELLION!

INTRODUCTION

The 153rd anniversary of the Eureka revolt provides a once in a lifetime opportunity to reassess the significance of what occurred in Ballarat in 1854. It's both ironic and depressing that in 2006 the events that have helped to shape the consciousness of both a people and a nation are still dismissed by many as a revolt about mining licenses. The celebrations surrounding this momentous historical milestone have the potential to degenerate into a tawdry commercial extravaganza and a genealogical talkfest devoid of any historical context. It's worrying to see that these celebrations are heavily sponsored by the very same State authorities that crushed the revolt in a sea of blood in 1854.

This paper attempts to reclaim that forgotten discarded radical history by examining what I believe are the central themes of the Eureka rebellion DIRECT DEMOCRACY, DIRECT ACTION, SOLIDARITY and INTERNATIONALISM; themes that are echoed in the Eureka Oath "*we swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other and fight to defend our rights and liberties*". An oath that was taken by around 500 poorly armed miners late Wednesday afternoon on the 29th of November 1854 at Bakery Hill, at the foot of the very same flagstaff that saw the Southern Cross first raised the previous day at a monster meeting of over 10,000 miners and their supporters. It's important that somewhere in the list of proposed activities surrounding the 153rd anniversary of the Eureka rebellion that the radical spirit of the Eureka revolt, a spirit that is as relevant in 2007 as it was in 1854, is both acknowledged and celebrated.

DIRECT DEMOCRACY

It's only natural that people, who are denied participation in the decision making processes of the society they live in, develop their own processes. The miners at Ballarat confronted by a government that taxed them, but denied them the right to participate in the decision making processes, soon developed their own organisations. The influx of humanity that tried to eke out their fortunes from the mining shafts at Ballarat, came from around the world. Many had escaped difficult political circumstances; most had flocked to Ballarat to make their fortunes. Faced with a ruthless government and a corrupt bureaucracy, they soon formed their own organisations. Men and women from all corners of the globe faced a common enemy. Old hatreds based on politics, race and religion were put aside in the struggle against a more immediate and dangerous foe. Men who had participated in the 1848 European revolutionary movement, Irish nationalists, Chartists and the apolitical, coalesced into a new organisation that represented the interests of both miners and small business – The Ballarat Reform League.

Talk about forming a league became a reality on the 11th of November, 1854. On Wednesday the 28th of November under the newly hoisted Southern Cross, over 10,000 miners gathered at Bakery Hill to give birth to a new organisation that represented their interests.

The League was born as a result of ordinary people taking matters into their own hands and directly making decisions about what was important to them. They did this through direct democratic means, adopting principles and objectives for the Ballarat Reform League which recognised that the people are the only legitimate source of political power.

The meeting on the 11th of November adopted a number of principles and objectives that clearly challenged the power of the State, "*that it is the inalienable right of every citizen to have a voice in making the laws he is called on to obey – that taxation without representation is tyranny*".

That, being as the people have been hitherto, unrepresented in the Legislative Council of the colony of Victoria, they have been tyrannized over and it becomes their duty as well as interest to resist and if necessary to remove the irresponsible power which so tyrannizes over them.

That this Colony has hitherto been governed by paid officials, upon the false assumption that law is greater than justice because, forsooth, it was made by them and their friends and admirably suits their selfish ends and narrow minded views. It is the object of the League to place power in the hands of responsible representatives of the people to frame wholesome laws and carry on an honest government.

That it is not the wish of the League to effect an immediate separation of this Colony from the parent country, if equal laws and equal rights are dealt out to the whole

free community. But that if Queen Victoria continues to act upon indirectly dictating obnoxious laws for the Colony, under the assumed authority of the Royal Prerogative, the Reform League will endeavour to supersede such Royal Prerogative as the people are the only legitimate source of all political power”.

Between the formation of the Ballarat Reform League at Bakery Hill on the 11th of November 1854 and the destruction of the movement in a sea of blood on the 3rd of December 1854, the mass meeting played a pivotal and central role in the Eureka movement. All power evolved from mass meetings. The legitimacy of the movement’s leaders and its aims and objectives were related to the direct participation of diggers, storekeepers and inhabitants in mass meetings. Delegates with limited mandates were appointed or elected to carry out the wishes of those present at the mass meetings.

Monster meetings were a feature of life in Ballarat on the 1st of November 1854, over 15,000 inhabitants gathered at Bakery Hill to protest the arrest of Andrew McIntyre, Thomas Fletcher and Henry Yorkie for complicity in the burning of Bentley’s Hotel. It was both natural and appropriate that the Ballarat Reform League was created through structures that miners were familiar with.

Mass meetings allowed the people affected by a decision to make that decision.

The next monster meeting occurred on Wednesday the 29th of November. Under the newly hoisted Southern Cross, over 12,000 people gathered to listen to reports from the delegates they had appointed to raise their grievances with Governor Hotham. Unhappy with their delegates’ lack of success, with the Governor and their violent encounter the previous day with the 12th Regiment, participants in the mass meeting were ready to escalate their struggle.

The League’s committee division between a “moral” and a “physical” force component gave people a stark choice. The diggers, keen to resist the increasing military presence on the goldfields, choose the physical path. Humffray, the President they had elected on the 11th of November, had lost what moral authority he had.

The events that occurred on the Ballarat gravel pits the following day when the authorities continued their license hunts with the aid of the military forces that had been sent to Ballarat, was the last straw. The diggers gathered at Bakery Hill, elected new leaders and formed armed military divisions to protect and defend arrested diggers and fight to defend the inalienable rights and liberties they believed they had.

Ironically few participants in the Eureka rebellion realised that what they had created was an embryonic society based on direct democratic principles. Their short and long term political aims were fashioned around the need to participate in a parliamentary process they had been denied access to. A process that gave

credence to the idea that the democratic process is limited to people casting a ballot every few years to elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf. A few entertained a more radical vision of democracy, understanding the significance of what was happening. Henry Seekamp the editor of the Ballarat Times wrote when the Ballarat Reform League was formed that the League was “*not more or less than the germ of Australian independence*” and that it had the potential to become an “*Australian Congress*”.

DIRECT ACTION

Direct Action in its simplest terms means that people believe they are able to manage their affairs better than those that are doing it for them. Many of the Eureka miners had lost all faith in both the bureaucracy and the colonial authorities. Faced with daily attacks from a bureaucracy that was actively pursuing State policies that threatened both the miners interests and their safety, the scene was set for a struggle that challenged the colonial authority’s power to use force to impose the State’s will on the Ballarat diggings.

The ability of the Ballarat miners to challenge the State was based on the need of citizens of a frontier society who were actively pursuing a policy of dispossessing the local indigenous population through the use of force to have access to firearms. In 1854 Victoria, the State’s traditional monopoly on the use of force was undermined by the need of people living in a frontier society to have ready access to firearms.

The diggers ability to form their own organisations, the need for them to sort out their differences outside of a corrupt judicial system and their ability to formulate demands among themselves through direct democratic processes, created a climate where the creation of a dual power situation became a distinct possibility. The only thing that stood between the Eureka miners controlling their own affairs was the military might of the British colonial authorities. Faced with the possibility of a rebellion spreading to other Victorian goldfields and possibly even Melbourne itself, Governor Hotham, a naval disciplinarian, was appointed Governor to quickly lance the social carbuncle growing on the goldfields.

A direct confrontation between the much hated and poorly armed “Joes” who were using 1840 constabulary carbines and triangular socket bayonets, would have resulted in a quick rout of the foot and mounted police. A confrontation with the British Army was another matter.

As the challenge to the colonial authority’s power increased, Governor Hotham began to flood the area with well armed and disciplined British troops. Both the 40th and 12th Regiment were armed with the more modern 1842 percussion musket which could fire two rounds a minute. The 40th Regiment mounted military force, carried light cavalry swords, 1844 carbines and single shot percussion pistols.

On the 1st of December, around 1500 poorly armed miners gathered at Bakery Hill; they marched to Eureka and set up the stockade. They spent the rest of the day

procuring arms, electing their own officers and setting up a hastily erected enclosure. Saturday the 2nd of December, was spent drilling and procuring horses and arms. About 1500 armed men were in the enclosure that evening. By the time the 12th and 40th Regiment and foot and mounted police attacked the stockade the next morning, the number of miners in the stockade had dwindled to around 120. Faced with a determined onslaught by well armed troops, the miners soon gave way to the overwhelming fire power directed at them.

Major General Sir Robert Nickle arrived at Ballarat two days after the battle with the rest of the 12th and 40th Regiments, as well as a naval contingent that had two six-pounder field pieces and two twelve-pound Howitzers.

The comprehensive military victory on the Ballarat goldfields did not spell the defeat or end of direct action. Paradoxically, the concentration of so much military power in Ballarat, made Hotham's administration extremely vulnerable. Thirty seven marines from the recently arrived HMS Fantome and the HMS Electra were posted to guard the Treasury buildings in Spring Street, Melbourne, 1500 "special constables" were sworn in to maintain order in Melbourne. Protest meetings that attracted thousands of people were held in Melbourne and on the goldfields in the days following the slaughter.

The Ballarat miners' decision to directly challenge State power, by challenging the State's monopoly on the use of force, had paid dividends. Faced with a restless population that was willing to directly confront the State, faced with the problem of not having the military muscle to assert its authority and faced with a major loss of credibility, the colonial authorities were forced by the Ballarat miners use of direct action, to find a political solution to a problem to which there was no military solution.

INTERNATIONALISM

It's acknowledged by most commentators and historians that the diggers who flocked to the goldfields came from all corners of the world. What is forgotten is although initially the miners were predominantly of European origin; many came from other parts of the British Empire and the rest of the world. Deeply held views about race and religion were watered down in the face of the common enemy. Irrespective of where they came from, their race or religion, all the miners felt the brunt of the colonial authority's attempts to extract the maximum amount of cash from them.

Their common experiences at the hands of the authorities, created a culture where race and religion were not important issues. The only people excluded from the process were the remnants of the original indigenous population. Carboni was one of the few miners who, in his pantomime '*Gilburnia*' written while he was awaiting trial in Melbourne for High Treason in early 1855, promoted the idea that the original inhabitants were as much, if not more so, victims of the British colonial authorities as the miners were.

The international nature of the Eureka movement is highlighted in the Eureka oath *“we swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other and fight to defend our rights and liberties”* - An extraordinary statement for 1854.

In a period when God, Queen and Country were the dominant ideological themes of the period, the oath began with the word “we”, everybody on the goldfields irrespective of where they came from, their race or nationality were welcomed into the movement.

Some of the most prominent participants in the movement did not use English as their first language. Raffaello Carboni, the unofficial historian for the movement, who on the 1st anniversary of the Eureka rebellion, was giving away his book about the rebellion at the site of the rebellion and Frederick Vern the German who was a rival of Peter Lalor for the leadership of the movement, did not use English as their first language. Three of the thirteen members of the council of war for the defence of the miners, Edward Thonen from Elbertfield Prussia, Raffaello Carboni from Urbino Italy and Frederick Vern from Germany, came from non-English speaking parts of the world. John Manning, Timothy Hayes, Patrick Curtain and Peter Lalor were from Ireland. Thomas Kennedy was from Scotland and James McGill the second in command was from the United States.

Men from non-English speaking backgrounds as well as non-British English speakers also appeared among the list of those who were killed and wounded at Eureka and who were tried for High Treason for their participation in the battle in 1854.

Of the thirteen tried for High Treason, John Joseph was a black American born in New York, Raffaello Carboni an Italian from Urbino, Jacob Sorensen was a Jew, Jan Vennik hailed from Holland, James McFie Campbell was a black man from Kingston Jamaica. Michael Tuohy, Timothy Hayes, John Phelan came from Ireland while Thomas Dignum, the only native born among the thirteen, was born in Sydney. Irish, Prussians as well as a Canadian. Lieutenant Ross made up the list of those killed while fighting at the Eureka stockade. Two Italians feature among the names of those massacred after the battle whose names do not appear on any monuments.

The international nature of the Eureka movement is one of its most important elements. The miners, faced with a common enemy, the hated colonial authorities, joined together in a movement that included people from non-English speaking parts of the world as well as different races and religions. The hatreds, that would be expected to normally divide people, were put aside in the common struggle to destroy a system that made all their lives a misery.

SOLIDARITY

Solidarity is one of the central themes of the Eureka rebellion. Individual miners could never have hoped to achieve what was achieved at Eureka. Solidarity between all the major players on the goldfields, irrespective of their race, nationality, religion or whether they made their livelihoods from digging up the ground or providing goods and services to the miners, was an important ingredient in the mix that allowed them to resist the colonial authority's plans to restrict and remove what few rights and liberties people living on the goldfields believed they had. The participants in the Eureka rebellion understood the importance of solidarity. The central role that solidarity played in the movement is both outlined in the Eureka oath "*we swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other and fight to defend our rights and liberties*" and in the actions the participants in the rebellion took to protect each other from the colonial authorities actions.

Digger license hunts by the "Joes" were met with stones and the occasional gunshot. When diggers were arrested, taken away, fined and imprisoned, the anger on the goldfields increased. The local newspapers, especially Henry Seekamp's *Ballarat Times*, threw their support behind the diggers. The *Ballarat Times*' printing presses were used to produce many of the flyers that were posted up around Ballarat advertising the monster meetings that were held at Bakery Hill. The diggers were especially upset when ten of their number were singled out and arrested for burning down Bentley's Hotel. Three were eventually charged and imprisoned for their role in the "riot" which led to the burning down of the Hotel.

Governor Hotham, well aware that discontent was not just limited to Ballarat and that he faced a possible insurrection on the goldfields, did his best to ensure that the better armed Americans did not join the revolt. The Americans favourable treatment before the courts, before the revolt and the lack of charges laid against those American like James McGill, the deputy commander of the revolt, reinforced people's opinions on the goldfields that a deal had been done between the American Consul and Hotham which resulted in only a few of the better armed Americans becoming involved in the Eureka rebellion.

As injustice piled on injustice, as inquiry after inquiry didn't come up with any real answers, as the license hunts intensified and the military took an active part in the hunts and as the level of official corruption increased on the goldfields, the miners were forced to rely on themselves.

Solidarity became more and more important, faced with a network of government spies and government attempts to use the legal system and the military to put down the unrest on the goldfields, many of the people working the claims and providing goods and services to those on the Ballarat diggings were forced to form their own organisations, arm themselves and eventually use these arms to protect themselves against the State. The situation at Ballarat progressed to armed rebellion because those living at Ballarat were concerned about their neighbours safety, as well as their own. Their shared oppression and the inability or unwillingness of the colonial

authorities to resolve their concerns, the daily injustices meted out to individuals within their community by a hostile and indifferent administration, provided the spark that convinced the miners that the only way that colonial authorities would take notice of them and their grievances was by burying their differences and increasing their strength by working together as a single united movement that believed an injury to one was an injury to all.

CONCLUSION

Reclaiming the Radical Spirit of the Eureka Rebellion is essentially a political polemic. My interest in the subject is directly related to my activities as an anarchist activist. Although I have had a life long interest in the Eureka rebellion, it's only in the last few years after reading detailed accounts of the rebellion by Bob O'Brien *'Massacre at Eureka - The Untold Story'* and *'Eureka'* by John Molony, that I realised that the central themes of Eureka 1854 and the post modern anarchist movement are almost interchangeable. Direct democracy, direct action, solidarity and internationalism played a central role in the events that unfolded at Ballarat in 1854. The same themes have played and continue to play a significant role in an anarchist movement that has challenged and continues to challenge the dominant role that both the State and the corporate sector continue to play in the lives of so many ordinary people.

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The cuneiform inscription above is the earliest known written appearance of the word "freedom" (ama-gi) or liberty. It is taken from a clay document written about 2,300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash. An Anarchist Society is a voluntary, non-hierarchical Society in which the political and social structures are organised so that all people have free and equal access to the wealth and decision making power of that Society.