6.2 Towards democracy: Eureka and political rights

The Eureka Rebellion of 1854 is seen by many historians as a milestone in the struggle for democratic rights and a more equal society. It was partly a conflict over what kind of society Australia should be. Today it is still seen as a symbol of resistance. The rebellion took place during the gold rushes of the 1850s. The gold rushes marked a turning point in Australia’s history, prompting a massive scramble of people from overseas to the Australian goldfields. The population trebled in the first decade of the rushes and wealth from gold raised living standards. These developments paved the way for more democratic rights and colonial self-government. Australia came to be seen as a land of opportunity, but the rushes also had other consequences, including violent political protests.

Migrant democrats
The great majority of gold rush immigrants were British and Irish, like the convicts and migrants who had come to Australia before the 1850s. But the new migrants also included people from many other countries, including the Chinese who you learned about in chapter 5. The British, Irish and European gold rush migrants included many who had been involved in movements for workers’ rights and political reform in their own countries.

Growing discontent
Life on the goldfields was hard, and for every digger who found riches there were many more whose backbreaking work yielded very little. From 1851 the New South Wales and...
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Victorian governments passed laws demanding that anyone digging for gold buy a licence for 30 shillings a month. This fee had to be paid in advance and gave a digger the right to work only a small area. For diggers who were not British subjects, licences cost twice as much. Many diggers did not buy licences because they could not afford them, so the gold commissioners sent troopers to catch them.

Licence hunts and protests
Diggers caught without licences were fined and had their huts and equipment destroyed. Some were sent to jail. Following angry protests, in 1853 New South Wales reduced the fee to 10 shillings a month. Victoria reduced it to one pound (20 shillings), but this was still too high because diggers’ incomes were getting smaller as less surface gold was found. Mines sunk more than 30 metres required expensive machinery that individuals or small groups of diggers could not afford. When Victoria’s governor, Lieutenant-Governor Sir Charles Hotham, ordered licence hunts twice a week in September 1854, digger anger became explosive.

The gathering storm
Even an unrelated incident could have provoked a riot. On 6 October 1854 a digger was bashed to death at the Eureka Hotel at Ballarat in Victoria. When charges against the hotel’s owner, James Bentley, were dropped, many miners concluded that this was because Bentley had

Source 3 Administering the Oath, Eureka Stockade, 1854, a wood engraving made in 1888. During a protest meeting held on 30 November the diggers solemnly swore to stand together.

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done favours for the police. On 17 October around 4000 furious diggers protested against this ‘police corruption’. They rioted and burned the hotel to the ground.

**The Ballarat Reform League**

On 11 November, at a further protest meeting at Bakery Hill, the diggers formed the Ballarat Reform League. Its demands included:
- abolition of licence fees
- parliamentary representation through voting rights for adult men
- payment for members of Parliament
- abolition of property requirements for members of Parliament.

These last two demands were made so men who were not rich could afford to serve in Parliament.

Digger resentment increased further when news came that on 27 November Governor Hotham had refused to release the men arrested over the hotel burning and instead had ordered more troops to be sent to Ballarat. By 30 November Bentley was no longer the issue, but feelings were running high when Commissioner Rede ordered another licence hunt.

On 30 November, 12,000 diggers gathered at Eureka, where many burned their licences in protest. They appointed an Irishman, Peter Lalor, as their leader. They created a new flag, the ‘Eureka Flag’, with stars on a white cross against a blue background, and swore a solemn oath to stand together. They built a **stockade** at Eureka and began collecting weapons.

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**Source 4** Raffaello Carboni, a digger’s leader, describes events on 30 November 1854.

What’s up? A licence hunt . . . What’s to be done? Peter Lalor was on the stump, his rifle in his hand, calling on volunteers to ‘fall in’ into ranks as fast as they rushed to Bakery-hill, from all quarters with arms in their hands, just fetched from their tents. I went up to Lalor, and the moment he saw me, he took me by the hand saying, I want you, Signore: tell those gentlemen, pointing to old acquaintances of ours, who were foreigners; that, if they cannot provide themselves with fire-arms, let them each procure a piece of steel, five or six inches long, attached to a pole, and that will pierce the tyrants’ hearts . . .

The ‘SOUTHERN CROSS’ was hoisted up the flag-staff . . . There is no flag in Europe half so beautiful as the ‘Southern Cross’ of the Ballarat miners . . .

Some five hundred armed diggers advanced . . . the captains of each division making the military salute to Lalor, who . . . exclaimed in a firm measured tone: — ‘WE SWEAR BY THE SOUTHERN CROSS TO STAND TRULY BY EACH OTHER, AND FIGHT TO DEFEND OUR RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES.’

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**Source 5** Anger and resentment finally exploded on 3 December 1854 in an unexpected dawn attack by troopers on the diggers barricaded in the Eureka Stockade.

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**A** At the 30 November meeting, all present swore allegiance to the Southern Cross flag. Holding a rifle in one hand, and pointing towards the flag with his other, Peter Lalor said: ‘We swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other and fight to defend our rights and liberties’. His men removed their hats and replied ‘Amen’.

**B** Hundreds of angry miners gathered at the stockade after the meeting of 30 November. But the resistance was not well coordinated — by the evening of Saturday 2 December, only about 150 men remained. Even these men might have left had the troops not attacked.

**C** The Eureka Stockade was built by the diggers as a fortification against trooper attack.
The battle at the Eureka Stockade

Before dawn on 3 December there were just 150 diggers in the Eureka Stockade when a force of 270 well-armed soldiers and police attacked. The fierce battle lasted only 20 minutes and the diggers were defeated. At least 25 diggers and three troopers were killed.

The outcome of Eureka

The diggers lost the battle at Eureka but they achieved many of their aims. Juries did not convict the 13 ringleaders who were tried for treason, finding instead that they had acted in self-defence. In 1855 the gold licence was replaced by a ‘miner’s right’ costing just one pound a year and giving its holder the right to vote. Peter Lalor eventually became a member of the Victorian Parliament.

In The Eureka Stockade, first published in 1855, Raffaello Carboni, an Italian revolutionary, provided a first-hand account of the Eureka rebellion. As a fluent speaker of English, Italian, French, Spanish and German, Carboni became such a prominent leader of the diggers that he was tried for treason after the rebellion was crushed.

Activities

1. Make a timeline of events leading up to the Eureka Stockade battle.
2. Use your timeline to identify points at which bloodshed might have been avoided.
3. Explain what could have been done at any one of those points to avoid violence.
4. Explain the reasons for the demands made by the diggers at their meeting on 11 November 1854.
5. How does Source 1 help you to understand digger opposition to licence fees?
7. Using Sources 3 and 4, describe the mood and spirit of the Ballarat diggers by 30 November.
8. Raffaello Carboni’s book (Source 4) is the only complete first-hand account of the Eureka Rebellion.
   a. What skills would have made Carboni a very useful diggers’ leader and ally for Peter Lalor?
   b. What can you tell about how the diggers were organised and armed?
   c. What chance would they have stood against trained soldiers?
10. Study Source 5. Imagine you are a newspaper reporter in 1854. Write a report on the battle and events that led to it. Include short ‘comments’ from representatives of both sides.
11. Enter ‘Eureka Stockade’ into a search engine and make a reference list of 10 books, articles and films that have been written or made about the Eureka Rebellion.

Historical Questions and Research

Enter ‘Eureka Stockade’ into a search engine and make a reference list of 10 books, articles and films that have been written or made about the Eureka Rebellion.