
Victorian Visions: Imagining a Colony After Gold

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The VCE Study design for Australian History, from 2005, requires a different approach to the teaching of the Port Phillip District. Previously, Area of Study One ended at 1850, now, the topic is extended to include the period associated with Gold Rushes and their impact on Victoria society. The first area of study, therefore, has been extended to 1860 and requires that the course consider “the impact of the gold rushes and the way gold changed people’s visions of the future of the colony”.

The aim of this document collection is to provide students and teachers with a set of materials that deal directly with the “way gold changed people’s visions of the colony”. That said, a brief overview of the types of impact the gold rushes had on Victoria are significant. Most clearly, the influx of new settlers seeking gold fundamentally altered the social and economic fabric of Victorian society. From the time of the Henty family’s first European settlement, in Portland in 1834, until the discovery of gold in 1851, the character of the colony was primarily pastoral. By the time the Port Phillip District had separated from New South Wales in late 1850, it is true to say that there was developing a series of towns in the district but these were small and focused primarily on the needs of the agricultural economy. Almost a third of the district’s total European population of about 70,000 was based in Melbourne, with around 8,000 in Geelong, 1,000 in Portland, with smaller farming communities in Bacchus Marsh, Kyneton, Benalla and modern day Hamilton.¹ Importantly, by 1850 the Port Phillip District was little more than a colonial outpost.

By the decade’s end, however, Victoria had become one of the wealthiest cites of the British Empire. The colony supplied one third of the world’s gold production, its population, of over 500,000, accounted for almost one half of Australia’s non indigenous population. By 1860 Melbourne included what are now the inner suburbs of Richmond and Fitzroy, Geelong’s population had risen to about 23,000, Ballarat, 22,000 and Bendigo 13,000. Relatively speaking the population of the colony was highly literate, urbanised and affluent.²

Given these considerations, it is not surprising that the visions for the future of the colony had shifted markedly from the pre-gold agrarian and pastoralist outlook. During the 1850s, the new population articulated a vision that was broad ranging. Here it is difficult to speak of a single voice or indeed of a single vision. It is also worth noting that many of the concerns raised in 1850s Victoria pre-empt issues in public discourse after 1888. More specifically, in Colonial Victoria, during the 1850s, there emerged debates that mirrored later concerns about who should be represented in government, workers’ rights and immigration policy. In addition, and more particular to Melbourne, were concerns about the future of the city and its place as a metropolis of the modern world.

Many of the documents that emerge from this period, such as the readily available Ballarat Reform Charter of 1854,³ require reading between the lines in order to gain an insight into the way these statements reflect the aspirations and goals of their authors. However, when examined closely they clearly demonstrate the lively nature of political debate in Victoria during the 1850s at the time and point to many political and social concerns. What emerges from these political writings and social commentaries clearly reflects a rigorous dialogue of a society in transition.

Documents addressing the unrest on the goldfields that culminate in the Eureka Stockade were shaped by a combination of British Chartism and local tensions. More importantly they explicitly set out a vision of the colony founded on a more democratic political order. The statement of the Reform League' Charter explicitly articulates ideas of suffrage, political representation, taxation and the identification of the subject as citizen. The vision expressed in this document is much more than a statement of rebellion and dissent. They were advanced with the aim of reforming the political structures of the colony to reflect its changed nature as a result of the gold rush.

Taken alone the gold fields revolt of 1854 could be seen as a singular event. Looking at the 1850s as a whole however it becomes clear that Victoria was heading along a new trajectory, moving way beyond that of a pastoral economy, and envisaging itself as a seat of "civilisation". In terms of cultural institutions, Melbourne was becoming a metropolis rather than a colonial outpost. The establishment, during the 1850s, of a public library, a university and a museum, for instance, highlight the aspirations of this increasingly confident young city. The foundation of these cultural institutions was understood at the time to be a way of promoting order, stability and progress in the wake of the social impact of gold fever.⁴

Other major public works, such as the building of parliament house and the treasury buildings also highlight the confidence and progressive outlook of Colonial Victoria. This confidence was buoyed further by Melbourne's central position in the colony's newly established railway and telegraph networks. This building boom was the impetus of a movement towards improved conditions for construction workers. A series of strikes and demonstrations ultimately culminated in the introduction of the eight hour day in 1856. This development placed Victoria at the fore in what is now termed industrial relations.

The social composition of Victoria, as a direct consequence of the gold rushes, also underwent a marked shift. During the gold rush decade groups of Germans, Poles, Americans and, more importantly Chinese, joined a community which had previously been dominated by settlers from the British Isles. The arrival of the Chinese initiated a debate that shared the same language of later debates about citizenship, race and nation.

Politically, the transformations encompassed self governance, land reform and the emergence of representative democracy suggest the first steps away from the paternalism and elitism of the pre-1850s era. By 1860, Victoria, along with a number of other Australian colonies, had political assemblies "elected by all men, in secret ballots, in roughly equal electorates and with no property qualifications for members".⁵ That same year also saw the implementation of the Selection Act, the culmination of a process of land reform that had commenced with the Land Convention of 1856-57.

The following documents have been selected to provide insight into this changing sense of self and place. They are by no means exhaustive, but rather are representative of new imaginings in the colony of Victoria.

Responsible Government

Originally administered as the Port Phillip District of the New South Wales Colony, Victoria became a colony in its own right in 1851. Charged with establishing responsible government in the colony, the Legislative Council, composed of 30 men, and the representative of the Crown, the Governor, oversaw the administration of the new colony. The council was composed of government nominees and squatters. Once the Legislative Assembly was formed (1856) factions emerged with a radical grouping composed of former Chartists and Irish – such as Duffy, Kelly and O'Shanassey. This radical faction tended to be supported by the Age. The more conservative grouping included government ministers and "gentry".

During its brief tenure the Legislative Council and Governor drafted the constitution, instituted the secret ballot and commenced building of the parliament building is Spring St.

Other major development in the 1850s included:

23 November 1855	The Constitution was proclaimed on
21 November 1856	First Meeting of Parliament
27 August, 1857	Property qualification for membership of Legislative Assembly abolished
24 November, 1857	Universal Manhood Suffrage introduced for Legislative Assembly
1959	Triennial parliament

QUESTION:

- How did the move for separation indicate a change in the visions of those prominent in the Port Phillip District?

Foundation of the University of Melbourne

Editorial, *The Argus*, 4 July 1954

If the institutions of a country afford a fair criterion of its character and condition, Victoria will soon be able to invite the application of the test. The influence of the gold discoveries, while contributing to that rapid increase of population and wealth which form the material basis of a national structure, has had a blighting effect on the cultivation of those elevated tastes and refined sentiments which give to that structure nearly all its grace, and, we will venture to add, not a little of its usefulness and power.

Now, however, we are beginning to recover the ground we have thus lost. Religion and Education cannot be said to have met with neglect at any period of our history, and the liberal endowment provided for both testifies to the deep consideration with which they are regarded. Science recently forced its merits upon the public, in the establishment of an Institute for its advancement – an object we trust to see fully realised; and yesterday two noble institutions were founded, and dedicated the one to Learning and the other to Knowledge.

QUESTIONS:

- What criticism does this editorial raise about the influence that the discovery of gold had upon the values of the people of Victoria?

Constructing a Metropolis

Given the growth of Melbourne following the Gold Rush it is hardly surprising that the 1850s initiated a building boom. The following list highlight some of the major developments in 1850s Melbourne.

Building	Architect	Date
HM Prison (Pentridge)	Gustav Joachimi (Public Works Department, PWD)	1858-64
Victoria Barracks	Gustav Joachimi (PWD)	1860 - 67
Treasury Building	JJ Clark (PWD)	1857 - 62
Parliament House	Peter Kerr, JG Knight (PWD)	from 1856
Government Printing Office	J.J.Clark	1856 - 1858
Melbourne General Post Office	Smith & Johnson (PWD)	1959 - 67
Customs House (phase1)	Peter Kerr (PWD)	from 1855
State Library of Victoria	Joseph Reed	from 1854
The University of Melbourne	FM White	1854 - 57
Melbourne Grammar School	Webb & Taylor	1856 - 58
Scotch College		1853 - 54
St Patrick's College	TA Kelly	1853 - 55
National Model School	Arthur Johnson	1853 - 54
St Patrick's Cathedral	William Wardell	from 1858
Collins St Baptist Church	Reed & Barnes	1861 - 62
Wesley Church	Joseph Reed	1857 - 58

Source: Gold Treasury Museum, Melbourne, <http://www.oldtreasurymuseum.org.au/gold/532.html>, 7 October 2005.

QUESTIONS

- Considering the institutions that were established after the discovery of gold, how do you think the people's visions of themselves and the colony changed?

Further Reading

Old Treasury Museum

<http://www.oldtreasurymuseum.org.au/builton/index.html>

This online exhibition, while difficult to navigate, includes a brief overview of many of the developments of the 1850s. It compliments one of the permanent exhibitions at the Old Treasury Museum. The site also includes a number of images, including Gill illustrations that could be used for SACS. A visit to the new City Museum at the Old Treasury museum would provide an invaluable start to a field trip.

Parliament of Victoria

<http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/default.htm>

A useful site on the development of the Victorian Parliament. Of particular use are the pages on "Out Democratic History, The Parliament Building and Education.

Public Record Office Victoria

<http://www.prov.vic.gov.au>

The PROV is the archival repository of Victorian Government. An extensive range of primary resources can be consulted in the reading room at the PROV offices in North Melbourne. The PROV's online exhibition, "Eureka on Trial" includes many documents that highlight the ways in which this "revolt" articulated the competing visions of the colony's future.

Cannon, Michael *Melbourne after the Gold Rush*, Main Ridge (Vic), 1993.

Goodman, David, *Goldseeking: Victoria and California in the 1850s*, St Leonards, 1994.

Priestly, Susan, *The Victorians: Making their Mark*, Melbourne, 1984.

Quaife, G., *Gold and Colonial Society, 1851-1870*, Sydney, 1975.

Serle, Geoffrey, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851 – 1861*, Melbourne, 1963

Serle, Geoffrey, "The Gold Generation", *Victorian Historical Magazine*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 265 – 72.

Endnotes

¹ Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851 – 1861*, Melbourne, 1963, pp. 3-4; Susan Priestly, *The Victorians: Making their Mark*, Melbourne, 1984, pp. 65-70.

² For a detailed discussion of the contribution and character of the Gold Generation to the development of Victoria see Geoffrey Serle, "The Gold Generation", *Victorian Historical Magazine*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 265 – 72.

³ The Ballarat Reform Charter, 11 November 1854, newspaper reports of the period and Governor Hotham's reports are all available from the Public Record Office of Victoria's "Eureka on Trial" online exhibition, <http://eureka.imagineering.com.au/home.htm>.

⁴ See David Goodman, *Goldseeking: Victoria and California in the 1850s*, St Leonards, 1994, p.65-88.

⁵ Stuart McIntyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 2nd Edition, Cambridge and Melbourne, 2004, pp. 92-93.