

THE EUREKA STOCKADE

2nd October 1854

He shoved his spade deep into the flowing river stream, down to the very bottom where it struck the dirt with a dull thunk. Lifting the lump of dirt, John dumped it, rough gravel, mud and flecks of sand into his rusty metal pan. Once in a couple hours, one of them would exclaim out to the others. At the bottom of their pan would sit a miniscule speck of yellow shining brightly against the muddy, murky water.

They were some of the lucky ones.

He relaxed under the cool shade of the soft eucalyptus trees that waved above while the stream gurgled beside. Only when the sharp cracking of a twig rang out did they scatter, like prey escaping from a predator. Pans and buckets were overturned, even the greedy glint of alluring gold forgotten. It was too late. The soldiers and police closed in, their leader a rugged policeman mounted on horseback. Bayonets and rifles gleamed on their hips and in their hands.

“Produce ’em licences,” one of them smirked, “you know the rules.”

John fumbled with his coat pocket for a second before producing a sodden strip of inked paper. Then he felt a ringing blow to his skull that reverberated through his head. For a moment he blacked out, then he was spread-eagled on the sloppy mud. He looked up to see the licence torn into a thousand pieces, and his friends being led away with rifles against their back. He winced in pain and collapsed back down as his head throbbed like a steam drill. His face felt heavy, as if leaning down to the ground would subside the constant pain. He curled his fists in anger, but police and soldiers had surrounded him.

The soldiers had tied them all up, coarse rope leaving red welts on their wrists. They marched them all the way to the outskirts of town to the bank. Those who stumbled received a painful prod with a rifle or stick.

“The contents of your fine,” he said to John, voice laced with contempt, “and up right now.”

“And then *maybe* you’ll be free to go.” he smirked.

John shuffled down the road, into the arms of a thousand tents. The bare mud of the fields were strewn with tussocks of parched grass, remnants of once gorgeous hills. He emerged into a clearing amongst gum trees. His tent was a well-oiled canvas hung across a large tree branch and a sheet laid across the ground. There was a single chair and a few tin cans to keep his belongings. John swept the dirt across the ground where he slept and was about to start a fire when a voice called out into the clearing.

“Ay John! Come with us for dinner. We’ll share some grub and rum beside the fire, huh?”

Michael’s careless voice disguised an urge, an agitation. John jumped up and rummaged in his sack for some coin. All he found were a couple of quid and a single tuppence. The skip in his heartbeat reminded John of what had happened that very morning.

They all lined up outside the grub tent. Inside a thin, quivering man scooped out bowls of mystery soup from the dark confines of his tent. Out always came a grey lumpy mass of

porridge. In the bowl was dumped a spoonful of meat clumped together like it was one. The foul substance gave off a clear odour that it was not meant to be touched, or much less eaten.

One of John's friends busted open tall bottles of rum. Already burning was a roaring fire. It lit up the dancing leaves and the night sky above. They sat on logs arranged around a fire. They wore calf-length leather boots, dirtied woollen trousers and worn fabric shirts. Some of those who had been panning in the sun sported short brimmed felt hats. The luckier ones wore thick woollen coats. They hadn't washed the scum from their clothes, and they all stank of sweat, but that was a small price to pay for a tankard of rum with a fire and friends.

Once the fire had died down to smouldering ashes, and the bowls were all empty and hesitantly scraped to the bottom, did they begin to talk. It began with a murmur, but then they began to freely shout their protests. Michael stood up from his log.

"I say, we have our own rights! We shan't let these ragabonds take our pound!"

The men shouted their approval into the forest with the certainty of those who were far beyond drunk.

"We'll defend our rights as people!"

All the miners looked fearfully into the trees, expecting soldiers to burst through the canopy. It was dangerous talk. Discontent had crescendoed into a desire for rebellion.

The fire roared even louder, flames leaping into the sky, anger that was ready to burst out in an unstoppable flood.

6th October 1854

The camp seemed more restless than usual. There were no more bonfires, no more men singing carols linked around the camp. The night air seemed to find purchase in the marrows of bones, steal warmth where there was no more left to take. The tents flapped into the night like bats that set teeth on edge. The winter chill seemed never ending in the face of an approaching summer.

Up on the hill, a distance away, a drunken miner James Scobie was murdered. His demand for drink was met with equal, if not greater resistance. The anger boiled over, turning into a brawl that could be heard for miles away, changing the course of the goldfields forever.

12th October 1854

The murderer of a miner had been released. The diggers demanded their justice. James Bentley's Eureka Hotel withstood a torrent of rocks and bottles that scraped the wallpapers. But it couldn't withstand the hungry fire that snapped up the planks and ripped down the walls. Only smouldering ashes remained. The small square of soldiers that had come to break the riot apart withdrew hurriedly into the night. The warmth of the burning hotel drew the miners together. The winter chill no longer seemed so cold.

29th November 1854

The message had spread quickly through the campsite. Ten thousand diggers gathered at the windy hilltop of Bakery Hill. They shook their fists, threatened violence, and demanded for justice, fair representation and the right to vote.

They could not change the unyielding decision of Governor Hotham. There were to be no reduced fees, no monitoring of the police, no changing of the laws. Several thousand diggers left the hill, devastated by the false hope of a new era. But those who remained were the ones willing to fight. They burnt their licences into a black pillar of smoke and ash that floated far into the sky.

Peter Lalor spoke words that would tie them all together, to fight the soldiers and whatever lay ahead. The five hundred miners kneeled down in the sloppy mud and chanted in rhythmic succession.

“We swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other, and fight to defend our rights and liberties.”

The five starred flag flapped high in the wind above them.

A revolution had begun.

1st December 1854

On a bright Saturday morning the diggers stood together under the hot sun. Trees were nailed with sagging posters, all declaring for the rights of the miners. Diggers triumphantly raised guns over the fields. They marched over mud swept plains and tussocks of grass. They gathered at Bakery Hill, for their very last meeting. The hill rang with the constant rat-a-tat-tat of hammers striking wood. Slowly the frames of palisades began to fill in. These walls would defend them, keeping hundreds of bullets from striking flesh. A huge ring of wood and metal formed, unbreachable walls that stretched a metre high. John never faltered in the hot sun, well knowing his life depended on this work. Even a charge of a thousand redcoats wouldn't be able to push down these walls.

John finally took a break, sitting down in the cool shade of a sparse tree. Few were still working in the cold twilight. He held the hot mug to his lips and looked around.

The ring of wood surrounded a few small huts and mines. None were in use. All around were people filling and passing muskets and rifles. The police had taken everything from him. When they attacked, he would be ready from the redcoats.

3rd December 1854

A tent had been fashioned for John, and he was lying in it staring at the blank canvas with his arms behind his back.

They had expected the attack for hours after the construction, yet kilometres away the redcoats did nothing. They knew they were bringing reinforcements, but that was nothing compared to the ever increasing confidence and popularity of the stockade.

Many more diggers had arrived in the construction of the stockade, hundreds of miners from the fields of Creswick, ready to fight in the name of Eureka. Most of the diggers were

outside, either in the streets of town or in their own tents today. Sunday was a day of rest, not of work. They had already shored up the stockade to the best they could.

Then came the stomping of a thousand boots. The earth trembled and the stockade shook. John leaped up from the tent and peered over the rim of the wall.

Field after field of red and bluecoats stormed up the hill. Shouts of fear rang through the defences as diggers scrambled for guns. Over all the disarray Peter Lalor stood, ordering people about as they approached closer and closer. John fumbled with the latch on his musket as the soldiers began to kneel and calmly load their rifles. Peter held his hand high signalling fire, but the redcoats got there before him. Peter Lalor fell, blood spurting from a critical wound in his left arm. Already the miners were turning to flee, but John held fast, stood and shot. Sparse cracks of gunfire from the insurgents were returned with a hail of bullets. Shards and splinters of wood spun away from the wall, stabbing and pricking hard into John's thigh. He fell with a scream. Diggers dragged him away from the stockade into the tents, and from his view he saw the redcoats shoving down the once immovable timber of the stockade. Peter Lalor scrambled out of sight, clawing under a thick slab of stone with his left arm dangling uselessly.

Once the redcoats breached the walls they scattered, hunting for prey. Diggers cowering away in tents were hauled away. Those who resisted were bayoneted in the back. Miners who tried to flee were shot down.

A steady glow lit up the black pillar of smoke in the sky. Flames fed eagerly on oiled canvas and cloth. Soldiers slashed down the flag of the Southern Cross. John hid tentatively in a wooden chest, waiting for them to leave. Hours later, when the cold set in his bones and the screams and laughs of soldiers had long faded away, he tentatively creaked open the chest. The tents around him were burnt to ashes, the rags lying heaped on the gravel. Bullets whizzed past his head as soldiers shot randomly into the stockade. Every step brought him waves of pain that emanated from his leg. He opened his mouth to scream, then closed it with difficulty. If he was found now, he was as good as dead.

John stumbled down Bakery Hill and the road, leaving the remnants of the stockade untouched. He walked all the way to camp, fingers and toes frozen where he met his friends. They took him in, and John lay in a makeshift hole with a blanket under and above his body. He lay looking at the stars with the tent flapping in the wind. The Southern Cross twinkled in the sky above him.



A picture of a Victorian mining camp made from 1855-1860 by David Tulloch
Source:



A watercolour painting of the Eureka Hotel burning amidst a crowd of angry miners by Charles A. Doudiet.



A watercolour painting of the Eureka insurgency by John Black Henderson



A poster advertising a meeting printed at the Times Office on Bakery Hill

BIBLIOGRAPHY

'Art Gallery Of Ballarat' 2013, in *Eurekapedia*, viewed 30 June 2022, <http://eurekapedia.org/Art_Gallery_of_Ballarat>.

Culture Victoria n.d., *A Meeting on Bakery Hill poster*, Public Record Office Victoria, Victoria, viewed 19 July 2022, <<https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/a-diverse-state/eureka-stories/a-meeting-on-bakery-hill-poster/>>.

Eureka Education: Timelines' n.d., in *Eureka Timeline*, viewed 25 June 2022, No title, Eureka Centre Ballarat, <<https://www.eurekacentreballarat.com.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020-11/9.%20Timelines.pdf>>.

'Eureka Hotel' 2013, in *Eurekapedia*, viewed 13 July 2022, <https://eurekapedia.org/Eureka_Hotel>.

French, J 2009, *The Night They Stormed Eureka*, HarperCollins Australia, Australia.

'James Scobie' 2006, in *Encyclopedia Wikipedia*, viewed 2 July 2022, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Scobie>.

Mining camp, Victoria or New South Wales 1855, Watercolour painting, State Library of NSW, viewed 30 June 2022, <<https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/learning/history-gold-rush/mining-camp>>.

National Museum of Australia 2022, *Eureka Stockade*, viewed 19 July 2022, <<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/eureka-stockade>>.

Pierson, T Ergo 1854, *Diary describing the Eureka Hotel and Digger Hunts*, Page entry, State Library of Victoria, viewed 19 July 2022, <<https://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/image/digger-hunts-and-eureka-hotel>>.