THE TRANSFORMATION OF A SOCIETY

Rarely is a society so radically transformed as was Port Phillip by the discovery in mid-1851 of the high value, easily transportable commodity called 'gold'. The how, when and why of its discovery does not concern us here. Rather we are focused on the impact that this golden find had on Port Phillip and how it shaped new visions of a future society.

In a matter of a few months it became clear that the old hierarchical world of the squatters, the sheep kings of Port Phillip, would be shaken. As the months changed into years; as the words 'Ballarat' and 'Bendigo' fell easily from the lips of people across the world, and as a seemingly endless flow of people entered the newly formed colony of Victoria; it was clear that a new society with new aspirations was dawning.

These aspirations were summed up in the phrase used by Rev. J. D. Lang, in his book titled *Freedom and Independence for the Golden Lands of Australia*: a desired escape from the Old World dominated by the wealthy, landed few, structured by class, and ranked by birth not merit. That dangerous word 'democracy' began to be whispered as well, as people desired to make the Old World anew.

GOLD RUSH IMMIGRATION

The statistics below indicate some of the demographic (checked your dictionary) impact of gold.

DOCUMENT 4.1

Year	NSW	Port Phillip /Victoria	Vic. Masculinity
1840	110,000c	10, 291	238.85
1850	189,341	76,162	148.35
1860	348,546	538,234	158.85

Source: *Victorian Year Book, 1973, Centenary Edition*, Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, Melbourne, 1973, pp. 32, 106.

QUESTIONS

1   Calculate in percentage terms how the discovery of gold changed Victoria's population.

2   In percentage terms reveal how gold changed the relationship between NSW and Victoria.

3   What is masculinity as a demographic measure? What do the figures in the right hand column signify about Victorian society?

The statistics in document 4.1 only begin to explain the demographic impact of gold. To deepen your understanding read the following section from my book, *Arriving*:

DOCUMENT 4.2

Approximately 584,000 persons emigrated to Victoria from July 1851 until the end of December 1861. Tens of thousands more overlanded from the adjoining colonies. Of those who arrived by sea, 300,000 or just fifty-one per cent came
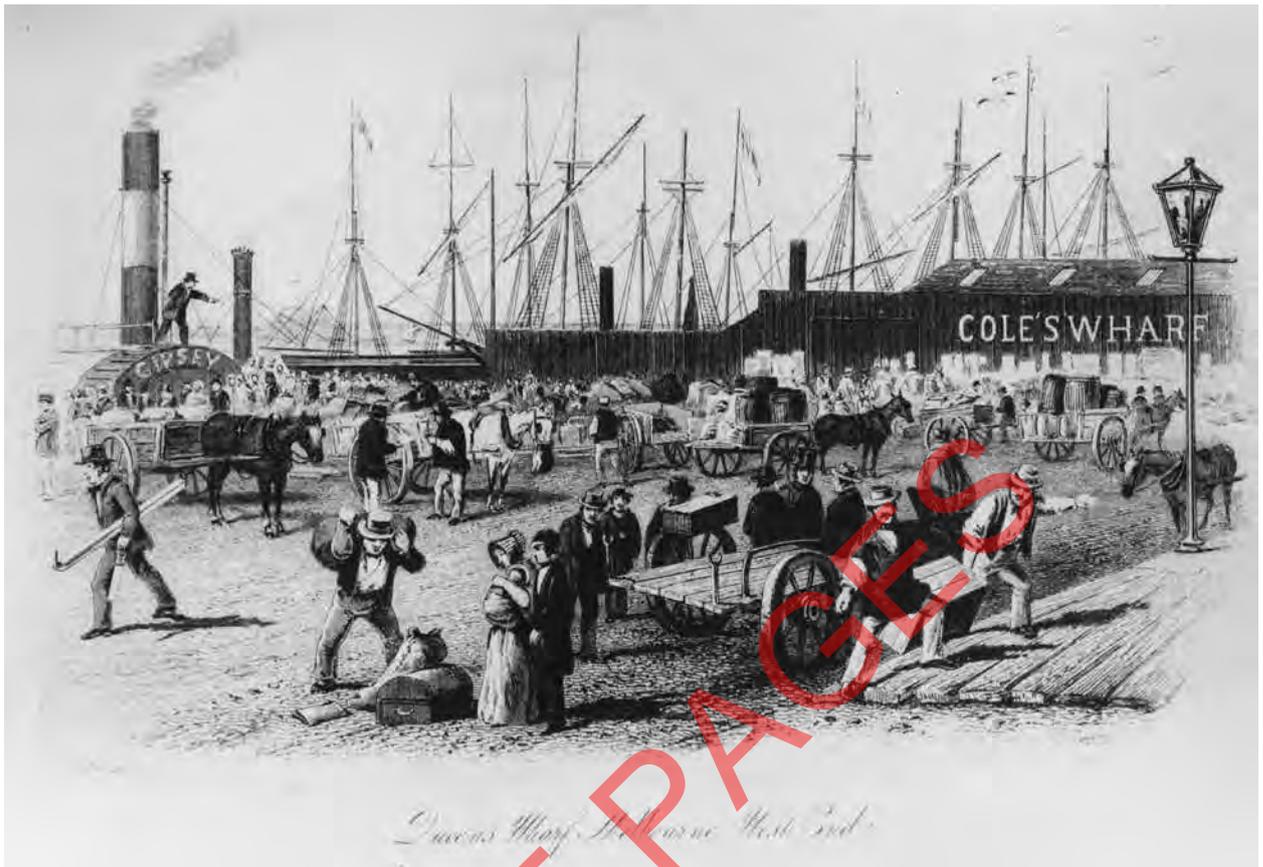
FIGURE 34 'Queens Wharf, Melbourne, West End' by J. Tingle.
Rare Books Collection, State Library of Victoria.

from the United Kingdom, 45,000 or nearly eight per cent arrived from foreign ports and 8,000 or just over one per cent came from New Zealand and the South Seas. The remaining 229,000 or forty per cent came by sea from the other Australian colonies. Many of the latter were old hands or ex-convicts, although others were fresh arrivals from overseas who then headed for Victoria. About ten per cent of the immigrants were neither British or Irish.

About 90,000 of the 300,000 people who came from the United Kingdom were assisted: the largest sponsored inflow in any decade before the 1940s... Nearly two-thirds of them were female, for the Victorian Government encouraged married couples and single women to counteract the predominance of single men among the unassisted immigrants. Over half the assisted were domestic servants, a third were agricultural labourers, a tenth were mechanics and a small number were tradespeople. Forty-two per cent of them were English and Welsh, thirty-three per cent were Irish and twenty-five per cent were Scottish, although the percentages of these nationalities in the United Kingdom were sixty-five, twenty-four and eleven respectively. The Irish were over-represented by about a third and the Scots were more than double their expected percentage.

Detailed figures of place of origin gathered from the passenger lists exist for the years 1850 to 1856. In the seven years to December 1856, 65,000 persons were assisted to Victoria, at the rate of thirty-eight in every 10,000 people in the United Kingdom. However the spread was uneven, for only thirty-three out of the 118 United Kingdom counties had assisted emigration rates equal

to or above the United Kingdom average. Only six were counties in England, seven were in Ireland and twenty were in Scotland (although Scotland only has thirty-three counties). As in the 1840s, the southern Irish were over-represented, Country Clare having the heaviest emigration rate, five times the United Kingdom average. Most notable was the heavy emigration from the highlands of Scotland, which partly reflected the activities of the Highland and Island Emigration Society in clearing the paupers from many highland estates. Most of the Scottish counties with an above average rate of assisted emigration were highland counties. The highest rates were from Sutherland which produced six times the average, Argyleshire and the Islands which had a rate eight times the average, and Inverness-shire which contributed nine times the average rate of United Kingdom assisted emigrants.

This uneven distribution brought grumbles from both officials and colonists. The Victorian Immigration Agent, Edward Grimes, claimed that many of the highlanders were 'in a most deplorable state of ignorance, and quite unacquainted with the English language'. Unfortunately we know little about their problems of adjustment in Victoria. Grimes added that they were not an acquisition to the colony as few were acquainted with agricultural and pastoral employment and they were imbued with 'indolent habits'.

The familiar complaints against the southern Irish were repeated. Edward Bell, the Immigration Agent in 1854, claimed that most married couples were 'idle, uneducated and dirty' and that the single women were generally 'unaccustomed to domestic service'. The civil servant, G. W. Rusden, feared that the southern Irish might lower education standards and raise the crime rate for, while a third of English and Scottish assisted immigrants were illiterate, two-thirds of the Irish were unable to read or write. Complaints about southern Irish servant girls were persistent. Hugh Childers, the Immigration Agent in 1852, when closely questioned about this by the Irish Catholic parliamentarian, John O'Shanassy, claimed Irish servant girls were 'utterly ignorant of the duties of household service' and at best could cook potatoes and scrub floors. Despite the protests, many southern Irish continued to come under the assisted scheme, as the emigration commissioners could not obtain sufficient single women from other parts of the United Kingdom.

The London needlewomen sent out by the philanthropist Sidney Herbert were also unpopular. One goldfield storekeeper, William Probert, alleged that these English women were 'indecent and disorderly' types who earned their living on the streets. Edward Grimes was more temperate, but he believed that a minority of them were from 'the very dregs of society' and pointed out that the colonists paid them a rate of wages less than other women workers.

The remarks about highlanders, the southern Irish and needlewomen reveal the prejudice of 'decent' people against assisted immigrants and the mistaken concern that Victoria receive the best educated and most skilled immigrants. It was a mistaken concern, shared by some recent historians, because the colony's development in the 1850s depended as much on muscle as on education. William Westgarth recognized this when he lamented that 'amongst the unsuitable multitude that streams into the colony are many young men of good education but untrained to any particular vocation'. Also, the assisted generally came to stay, while many of the unassisted arrived to make a killing and leave. Most of the assisted immigrants were to live decent and useful lives in the colony.

Over a quarter of a million immigrants from overseas paid their own fares – about £25 for steerage and £50 for a cabin on British ships – and brought a small stake as well. In 1859 the amounts carried by those without a will who

died on the voyage were made public. The forty-five unassisted passengers whose assets were listed carried £546 in cash and £329 in money orders and, if the one who owned £350 is omitted, the average for the rest is £12 – hardly a fortune. Yet, as many of the unassisted had skilled jobs or better, it is likely that some had other assets at home or deposits in colonial banks. Only sixty-two per cent of the British and Irish unassisted were labourers (as opposed to ninety per cent of the assisted), twenty-three per cent were skilled tradesmen and ten per cent professionals. Only a third of the unassisted (from all places) were women. A sample of the unassisted passenger lists of British ships revealed that the Irish were under-represented, probably owing to the high cost of the fare, and that only a quarter of the Irish came with their family, whereas half the English and Scots did so. The most common age group among those sampled was between twenty and twenty-four years.

Richard Broome on the 'Origins of the Diggers' in his *Arriving*, Fairfax, Syme and Weldon, Sydney, 1984, pp. 72-74.

The next document is composed of two tables containing census returns for the goldfields in 1857:

DOCUMENT 4.3

Overseas-born (Excluding those from the United Kingdom) on the Victorian Goldfields in November 1857

Birthplace	Total Goldfields		
	Persons	**Males**	**Females**
France	905	777	128
Germany	4,761	4,046	715
Other Europe	3,536	3,431	105
United States	1,817	1,702	115
China	23,623	23,621	2
Other	248	228	20
Total Pop.	**169,980**	**125,836**	**44,144**

Birthplace	Particular Goldfields					
	Ballarat	**Castlemaine**	**Avoca**	**Bendigo**	**Beechworth**	**Other**
France	219	188	226	118	133	21
Germany	1123	707	1075	1266	492	98
Other Europe	653	795	694	945	378	71
United States	392	223	522	253	385	42
China	7532	4668	3096	3629	4695	1
Other	48	39	68	67	21	5
Total Pop.	47,653	31,237	35,823	32,544	18,592	4,131

Broome, *Arriving*, 1984, p. 81.

FIGURE 35   'Canvas Town, between Princess Bridge and South Melbourne in 1850's'
by De Gruchy and Leigh. *Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria.*

QUESTION

1   After examining documents 4.2 and 4.3, make a list of dot points about
the range and complexity of the gold rush immigration to create an
understanding of those who entered Victoria in the 1850s.

The large inflow of people and the lure of gold had diverse impacts on Victoria.
Following are just a few outcomes.

Lieutenant-Governor Charles La Trobe wrote to his superiors in London in October
1851, just three months after the discovery of gold at Clunes and Warrandyte:

DOCUMENT 4.4

Within the last three weeks the towns of Melbourne and Geelong and their
large suburbs have been in appearance almost emptied of many classes of their
male inhabitants; the streets which for a week and ten days were crowded by
drays loading with the outfit for the workings are now seemingly deserted.
… Cottages are deserted, houses to let, business is at a stand-still, and even
schools are closed. In some of the suburbs not a man is left, and the women
are known for self-protection to forget neighbours jars, and to group together
to keep house. The ships in the harbour are, in a great measure, deserted…
drained of its labouring population, the price of provisions in the towns is
naturally on the increase, for although there may be abundant supply within
reach, there is not sufficient hands to turn it to account. Both here and at
Geelong all buildings and contract works, public and private, almost without
exception, area at a stand-still.

In the country your Lordship will easily conceive that, viewing the season
at which these circumstances have occurred, and the agricultural and
particularly the pastoral interests at stake, that this is the commencement
of the shearing season, and that shortly the harvest will call for labour, great

embarrassment and anxiety prevail. ... Some would wish to see Government decline to sanction the issue of gold licences, and to forbid the working at this season of the year till the shearing and harvest are over. Your Lordship may, however, readily conceive that, even if really held expedient, it would be quite impossible to withstand such a general popular movement, excited by such a cause, by any practicable means whatever. There is but one way, and that is, to let the current expend itself, and meanwhile see that as far as possible it is kept within proper bounds.

C. J. La Trobe to Earl Grey, 10 October 1851, *Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers*, 1852, vol. XXXIV, paper no. 1508, pp. 45-46.

John Chandler who immigrated as a boy to Melbourne gave this account of Melbourne in 1852:

DOCUMENT 4.5

Emigrants for England were coming in very fast, and there were no houses to be got at any price. It was a harvest to the landlords. The Government laid out a piece of land between St Kilda and Emerald Hill [South Melbourne] for the new chums to fix tents on. ... There was soon more than a thousand tents of every sort and size, and every kind of trade was carried on amongst them; it was called Canvas Town. It stretched along the St. Kilda Road for nearly a mile, and all along the wharf this side of the river. The emigrants began to sell their surplus clothes and every description of articles – books, accordions, watches, guns and pistols, from a needle to an anchor; this was called Rag Fair. This got to be such a rowdy place, and so much cheating, gambling and vice existed that it had to be stopped.

John Chandler, *Forty Years in the Wilderness*, Loch Haven Books, Melbourne, 1990, p. 61.

As people streamed into Victoria the crime rate rose. The government passed the Convicts Prevention Act of 1852, which prevented ex-convicts with conditional pardons from entering from Van Diemen's Land [Tasmania]. The British Government disallowed the Act on grounds of curbing the rights of freed men, which the colonists refused to accept. George Train, an American merchant living in Melbourne in 1853 to 1855 remarked:

DOCUMENT 4.6

I say I have never before realized the startling truth that I am living in a country filled with the scum of all the jails in England – the homicide, the burglar, the forger, and the blackest villains that the world can produce; men so hardened in their damnable crimes that it were a folly to believe for a moment that they were ever touched with the celestial want of repentance.

I have not thought it worthy my while when writing you to notice the occasional 'sticking up' of some unfortunate traveller, or the brutal murder of a poor digger – so many instances of which occur, but never come to light, and even passed by without remark... [he then recounted some desperate and violent crimes] ...On Monday morning last three of the 'lags' who shot into the [gold] escort were hung at the Melbourne jail, in the presence of thousands of the lower classes, making some eight or nine individuals that have been strung up since I have been in the colony, less than five months.

A short time after the execution on Monday, while passing down Great Bank street, what should I see but one of the dead bodies in the show window of a

drinking saloon, decorated with flowers and ribbons! What a disgusting sight! Oh, ye people of Victoria, how passing strange are some of your doings!

E. Daniel and Annette Potts (eds), *A Yankee Merchant in Goldrush Australia, The Letters of George Francis Train, 1853-1855*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1970, pp. 68, 71.

QUESTIONS

1 Explain the situation facing La Trobe due to the discovery of gold as outlined in document 4.4. Is he in control of the situation? Explain.

2 Read the accounts of Chandler and Train and consider the impacts of the gold discovery on Melbourne and its society. List them under different headings: social, political and economic.

3 Examine figure 36. Who is Mr Punch and what does he represent?

4 What are the representations of the gold rushes in figure 36?

THE DIGGERS' LIFE

Geoffrey Serle remarked in his 'Conclusion' to *The Golden Age*, that: 'most of the men who came to Victoria worked for some period on the diggings'.[1] If this is the case it is important to get some sense of their experience.

1 Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age, A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851-1861*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1963, p. 376.

The next five documents, 4.7 to 4.11, will deepen your understanding of those who came to dig for gold and how that experience might have shaped them.

Englishman John Sherer arrived in Victoria in 1852 and after striking it lucky returned home and wrote an account of his adventures. He described his fellow gold seekers on the road to Mount Alexander [Castlemaine]:

DOCUMENT 4.7

Hundreds of drays and carts were tearing and toiling through the deeply-rutted track; horses and bullocks smoking and sweltering beneath a broiling sun; drivers shouting and cracking their whips to the loudness of pistol-report, tradesmen of every kind and degree; women of every size and age between twenty and forty-five; clerks, shopmen, doctors, lawyers, shepherds, and sailors from all countries; German and Swiss wine-growers, broken-down army-lieutenants and ruined gentlemen's sons of the old country, might all have been found upon that road wending to Forest Creek, Mount Alexander or Bendigo, to seek for 'the root of all evil'. All except the women were armed with weapons of some kind or other, for the Irish shililah up to a six-barrelled revolving pistol. Verily, I believe, there was never seen, in any part of the world before, such a heterogeneous stream of human prodigality, pouring itself along a single line of road, with such golden prospects in view. Every face was radiant with hope and every one was sure of his fortune.

John Sherer, *The Gold-Finder of Australia*, 1853, reprinted Penguin, Melbourne, 1973, p. 21.