‘The Road to Fortune’: Mount Alexander Road in the Gold-Rush. A cultural route?

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Abstract

The early 1850s Mount Alexander Road gold-rush was an event of international renown. Having sailed to Melbourne from Europe, China and America, the diggers joined a throng of historic magnitude, at times facing dangers and hardships of epic proportions. The state of the road was indescribable, and the spectre of bushrangers loomed. Roistering bullockies, the jaunty coaches of Cobb & Co (founded on this route) and Caroline Chisholm’s family ‘shake-downs’, constituted some of its colour and enterprise. For the youthful ‘new chums’ it was an unforgettable adventure, promising an independent and egalitarian life. Further examination of the extensive historical record (including Chinese sources) might reveal intangibles, including the contribution of the journey to characteristics and traditions that became, or have been held up to be, ‘Australian’. Mount Alexander was one the great late-nineteenth century international gold-rush migrations. These rushes stimulated the international economy and dramatically reshaped parts of the world. The significance of goldfields roads as unique heritage places is as yet little appreciated in Australia, and Mount Alexander Road – its buildings, archaeological artefacts, and landscapes – remains unassessed and at risk.

Introduction

The discovery of alluvial gold in 1851 changed the face of Australia. ‘Far famed Melbourne’ and the names of its fabulous goldfields rang around the globe. The Mount Alexander or Forest Creek (Castlemaine) diggings is regarded as having been the largest shallow alluvial goldfield in the world.

‘Mount Alexander Road’ was the gold-era name of the road to the Castlemaine and Bendigo goldfields, some 150 kilometres north-west of Melbourne. It had previously been the track taken by New South Wales overlanders to Port Phillip, and then in the 1840s became ‘Mount Macedon Road’, the link between Melbourne and the squatting runs of the Loddon, Campaspe and beyond.

In each of the three years between 1852 and 1854 some 90,000 people arrived in Victoria. They converged on Melbourne, formed parties and procured provisions before surging up the Mount Alexander Road, originally to Castlemaine, and then a further 40 kilometres to the even bigger Bendigo diggings.

Traffic on the road effectively ceased after the railway reached Bendigo in 1862. The advent of the motor car in the early twentieth century revived the thoroughfare, which was then renamed the Calder Highway after the Chairman of the new Country Roads Board. Recently it has been duplicated or rebuilt as the Calder Freeway, although lengthy stretches have been bypassed.
The cultural significance of the route resides in the 1850s gold-rush era. This was a journey of transforming promise. It held out to common people opportunities inconceivable in class-ridden and revolution-riven Europe: the possibility of riches or, more likely, money sufficient to buy a farm and independence.

Roads: The Gold ‘Rush’ Places

Victoria’s exceptional Central Goldfields towns are thought about today for world heritage nomination. Diggings themselves are recorded and interpreted for tourism. Roads however are considered only as a means of reaching these destinations, rather than as unique heritage places themselves. There has been a failure to fully appreciate the heritage of gold-rush roads, and the pre-eminent Mount Alexander Road is at risk.

Ordeals and triumphs on the Mount Alexander Road featured conspicuously in diggers’ letters and diaries, and also in contemporary publications. Indeed, Manning Clarke identified two phases of the goldfields experience: ‘life on the goldfields’, and ‘the digger on his journey’ (Clarke 1951).

Contemporary illustrations demonstrate this clearly. The heraldic title-pages of early 1850s books on the Australian diggings all include scenes of journeying to and from the goldfields; images of walkers, bullock teams, and the gold escort were popular. In some the journeying is prominent, and occasionally it takes precedence. ST Gill was the most famous of the goldfields artists. In the frontispiece collage of his Victorian Gold Fields 1852-53, four images illustrate the journey to the diggings: the emigration agent; camping on the road; the gold escort; and the bullock dray. Below these are three illustrations of the goldfields themselves (Cannon 1982).

Likewise a public lecture of renowned goldfields songster Charles Thatcher began with five scenes on the ‘journey to the diggings’, from the first sighting of Port Phillip Heads, through excited preparations in Melbourne to adventures on the road itself (Thatcher 1866).

Henry Lawson’s ballad, ‘The Roaring Days’ captures the democratic spirit of the goldfields road, its campfire camaraderie, dashing coaches and bold-hearted freedom. Five of its nine stanzas are about travelling to the diggings: of wild dreamers ‘from all the lands on earth’ sailing to the ‘land of promise’, streaming overland to the diggings, of reunions in wayside inns, of hearty

Figure 1. ‘Road Guide to the Gold Fields’, Chas E Glass, 1859. Hotels marked the stages on the route. (Source: State Library of Victoria)
singing and jesting at roadside camping grounds with Cobb & Co flying past. By contrast, only two stanzas describe the actual goldfields. Roads were the essential – constituent – places associated with gold-rushes.

‘Getting there’ was half the great goldfields adventure. And what an adventure! When, after travelling half-way around the world, the diggers finally took to the road they joined a throng of historic magnitude, and faced hardships and dangers of sometimes epic proportions.

The Road to Fortune

In 1851 gold ‘fever’ struck and the rush was on to Ballarat. Melbourne ‘went mad’. Police, prison wardens and publicans, sailors, clerks and labourers deserted their posts, ‘all dreaming of nothing but the road to fortune’ (Garryowen 1888). A few months later this rush was eclipsed by that to the fabulous ‘Mount Alexander’.

In the early months a ‘motley spectacle’ of Melbourne mums and dads – women with young children, boys with frying pans and girls with bundles as big as themselves – set out. Beside them were colonial campaigners – ‘huge burly fellows’, a ‘sturdy and determined pedestrian’, usually armed to the back teeth and in the company of a dog (Bradfield 1972).

Teamster John Chandler recalled the cavalcade of footloose diggers and ponderous drays as ‘a sight never to be forgotten’:

... one continued procession of vehicles of every description, for miles in single file, from a wheel-barrow to a ten-bullock team’. ‘There were all sorts on the road. Doctors, lawyers, tradesmen, farmers, sailors and policemen. Very few knew anything about digging (Cannon 1990: 37-38, 40).

London was agog when in early 1852 ships began arriving with up to 10 tons of gold each. ‘Going to the diggings’ became the talked-about topic in Britain, inspiring plays, panoramas and travelling tableaux. The furore was fed by press reports, hastily published travel guides, and letters home. Each mail was like a bellows on popular excitement confirming tales of untold wealth awaiting in Victoria. ‘We turn up our noses at California’, said one letter, incredulous that the Mount Alexander escort was bringing ‘a ton of gold’ to town each week (Mackaness 1956). The ‘startling’ news created ‘uncontrollable excitement’ among the youth of Selkirk; there is an apocryphal tale of another Scottish village whose entire male population set off for Port Phillip on the strength of one letter home.

In September 1852 the foreign influx began. Traffic on Mount Alexander Road exceeded that on all the other major roads in Victoria combined. Gold commissioner Read reported it was ‘lined with people ten times as numerous as New South Wales’ (Read 1853: 123). Others observed its international proportions: ‘The road resembled one of the great thoroughfares out of London’, observed a clergyman, ‘so full was it of wagons, drays, carts, gigs, equestrians and pedestrians’ (Adcock 1977: 70). In a paper to the Victorian Institute for the Advancement of Science in 1855 engineer Edward Richardson declared that in the period 1852-1853 the traffic on the Mount Alexander Road had ‘exceeded that of any road in England’ (Richardson 1855: 149).

As much as the sheer volume of traffic, it was the nature of that journey – the romance of the wild and the anticipation of riches, the colourful cast of travellers, and the appalling state of the road itself – that were the focus of contemporary writings and illustrations.

The event was a bonanza for writers of travel guides. John Sherer’s noted guide was likely one of those based on second-hand accounts. The vision he conjured of Mount Alexander Road was simply epic: cracking whips driving hundreds of carts, and pedestrians, all of whom (except the women) carried weapons, ‘from the Irish shililah to the six barrelled revolving pistol.’ ‘Verily I believe’, he declaimed, ‘… there never was seen, in any part of the world before, such a heterogeneous stream of human prodigality, pouring itself along a single line of road. Every face was radiant with hope and every one was sure of his fortune’ (Sherer 1853).

Horses and carts were expensive, so most were on foot. The pedestrians stepped out gaily, but soon paled. By end of the first day (usually Keilor), many found their swags ‘ridiculously heavy’,...
and discarded gear. Next morning some tried to relieve blisters by going barefoot. Robert Mitchell lost his toe-nails pushing through boggy ground with the soles almost out of his boots (Castlemaine Pioneers 1972).

May 1852 brought huge floods, washing away bridges, and bringing death by exposure and drowning. But boggy roads and unbridged creeks would not deter the brave young ‘new chums’ or the seasoned ‘colonials’ from their prospects. They waded all day through quagmires, and at night lay under a tree, wrapped against the rain in a single rug.

The alternative was for a party to carry its food, tents and tools in a dray. Many soon regretted this option. The roads defied description by even the most articulate. After nearly a month’s travel (on a different route to Bendigo) William Howitt’s party had made only 40 miles. They encountered ‘scores of carts and drays broken down upon the way’, with shattered wheels, axles, or poles (Howitt 1972).

As many as 1500 drays on the road at once meant that the mud was churned a metre deep in places, becoming progressively worse as hauling and digging a cart from a hole left it in a worse state for the next team. The road was littered with animals that had been bogged and left to perish, or which had simply expired. In the worst of the bogs there would be as many as five or six carcasses, ‘half-submerged and stinking’ (Annear 1999).

John Chandler recalled taking a day to move his dray less than a kilometre. When the cart capsized they dragged goods along on top of the mud. Even walkers struggled: those on foot ‘crawled like flies across a plate of treacle’. In these conditions the trip could take three weeks. One merchant’s dray, harnessed to a colossal team of 24 bullocks, took eight weeks to arrive, twelve bullocks having died en route (Castlemaine Pioneers 1972).

At a bog near Carlsruhe Henry Brown watched teamsters hitch 20 of their best bullocks to one dray:

After a few paces, the leading bullocks entering the morass sunk up to their shoulders into the soft, spongy earth; they made an effort to turn round, down came the whip with terrific force, and the driver plunged into the quagmire after them … the drivers … cursed, yelled and flogged with all their might … The men were from all parts of the earth, and as their excitement rose they each let fly in his own particular dialect; it was a perfect babel of sound … the head driver sank suddenly up to his middle and we could see but little more than his head and shoulders … his voice and whip could still be both seen and heard. At last there was little to be seen, but mud, horns, whips and hats (Brown 1862).

A London newspaper resorted to biblical imagery: ‘so much mud as was surely never seen since the subsidence of Noah’s flood’ (Illustrated London News, 14/5/1853: 386). In the end, words failed. A veteran of ’52 recalled the ‘roads’ as ‘a matter of history that may have been
faintly described but not conceived of by those who have seen nothing of them’ (Elliott 1887). The Mount Alexander Road that winter, and the spirit that overcame it, are perhaps best summed up in an image of one small triumph: ‘A new coach, gaily painted and with its passengers intact, arrived on Forest Creek pulled by a team of bullocks’ (Flett 1976).

The troubles didn’t end with winter. When the basaltic clay of the Keilor plains was saturated with rain ‘it was bad enough’, but when half-dried and stiff ‘it was something awful’ (Batey 1910).

By midsummer the incessant traffic had ground the road into knee-deep powdery dust that swallowed the travellers. The same holes that had been filled with concealing mud were now filled with concealing dust, with the same result. The bullock drays threw up clouds: ‘frequently you cannot see three yards before you’ said a police magistrate. Another official party could see nothing below their knees for the dust. For those on foot the 16 miles of exposed and waterless Keilor Plain was worst. Before shanties and hotels sprang up, parties obtained drinking water from ‘ruts in the roadway’.

Companions on the Journey

Bullockies

The bullockies were legendary. The swearing, the thundering cracks of the heavy whips, the incredible exertions of the bullocks were ‘without parallel’:

All day they are shouting and swearing at their teams, and all night they are drinking, singing, rollicking. I fancy that there is not an equal amount of swearing and blasphemy perpetrated in the whole world equal to that which is daily concentrated on the roads to the diggings of Victoria (Howitt 1972: 390).

For local boy Isaac Batey the drama of drays wrestling the glutinous clay on Bulla Hill in 1852 was ‘one of those things never to be effaced from my memory’. The shouting, yelling, and whipcracking were ‘a realisation of hell broke loose’. ‘If downright blasphemy was to be heard Tulips Hill on the Sunbury side was the place to hear it’ (Batey 1910).

Bushrangers

In 1852 the London press reported that the rich Victorian diggings had attracted the most lawless characters in the colonies, including ‘Vandemonian expirees’. Contemporaries remembered 1852 as the year ‘law and order were almost abolished’; it reaped a rich harvest for criminals (Serle 1968). Until at least spring when escort barracks were established along the route, highway robberies, regularly accompanied by brutal injury and murder, were ‘incessant’. Many a successful digger disappeared on his way back to Melbourne.

Many crimes occurred in the Black Forest, whose menacing name, along with that of its most notorious gang-leader ‘Black Douglas’ (a gigantic African American), were on the lips of every new chum disembarking in Melbourne. The vicinities of some inns were also notorious. Instances of summary ‘Yankee’ justice on the goldfields had persuaded some of the desperados to take their business from the goldfields to the neighbourhoods of roadside inns, where ‘the imprudent and intemperate’ invariably became their victims.

Consequently diggers were all well armed and travelled together for protection. James Arnot’s party of 34 ‘bristled with weaponry’, his three particular friends carrying two brace of pistols, a rifle, a ball gun, a bowie knife and a ‘life preserver’. At camp, extravagant salvos were fired to advertise these arsenals, and sentries kept watch all night (Annear 1999).
Gold Escorts

The quantity of gold passing down Mount Alexander Road was staggering. By April 1852 the escort was already carrying half a ton of gold to Melbourne each week. One of the July convoys left Castlemaine carrying three tons (Blake 1978).

Romantic descriptions of uniformed mounted troopers in well-armed formation around the chaise-cart appear in England very early. Even with pensioned-off Waterloo veterans riding gunshot the escorts were stylish outfits. ‘Excellent horsemen’, their military drill and bearing matched the gravity and danger of their task.

The escorts fascinated travellers, their mind-boggling cargoes the pinnacle and proof of the whole fantastic episode. To boys at Bulla, the passing escorts’ panoply of red trimmed uniforms, carbines, holstered pistols and scabbarded cavalry swords (‘rattling in a full gallop’) were a glorious sight (Batey 1910).

Chinese

Gold brought unimagined colour to the muted pastoral scene. The ‘Celestials’, with their conical straw hats, pigtails, and wide knee breeches were the most exotic. They streamed up the road from 1854 until June 1855, when the poll tax forced them to disembark in South Australian ports.

To a shepherd at Bulla, the jog trotting Chinese in single-file with shoulder poles looked like ‘a wire fence with a top-rail’. Even urbane observers like William Westgarth remarked on the ‘odd and foreign aspect’ they imparted to the scene (Westgarth 1857). And from distant London Charles Dickens confidently depicted:

… long lines of these gentry marching to the goldfields – always in Indian file, and each with his bamboo pole and evenly balanced panniers … the very men, who painted upon plates, had lurked under meat and lain in soup for generations (Kiddle 1969)

The road to Mount Alexander truly had brought a stodgy stereotyped society to life. By 1857, 35,000 Chinese had arrived on the Victorian goldfields.

Cobb & Co.

Immortalised in Lawson’s ‘The Lights of Cobb and Co’, the name Cobb & Co still, perhaps, stirs the Australian imagination. In January 1854 American Freeman Cobb and partners founded the company to provide a coach service on the Mount Alexander Road.

Cobb & Co revolutionised coaching in Australia. Its light, leather-sprung coaches, tested in the Californian gold-rush, were ideal for the primitive roads. It introduced short stages, with change stations at hotels at Keilor, Diggers Rest, Gisborne, Woodend and so on every 10 miles to the diggings. This enabled its fresher teams to keep a fast trot or hand gallop, and by the end of 1855 the company had halved the time for the Bendigo trip (Austin 1972).

The driving style of its ‘Yankee Whips’ was much admired. However, Batey, at the Diggers Rest Hotel was suspicious. He noted their ‘proudly taciturn manner’ and observed one putting on his driving gloves ‘with the dignity of a haughty aristocrat who imagines he is no small part of the universe’. Yet he could only admire the ‘magnificent’ teams on their run down the long straight grade of the Gap Hill. The way the driver ‘tooled his team down at a pace a little short of a gallop without question was something grand’ (Batey 1910).
Places on the Road

Wayside Hotels

The appalling roads necessitated many stopping places between towns. My research found 13 hotels (not including illegal shanties) on the Keilor Plains stretch of the road, an average of one every 3 kilometres.

Gold-rush wayside hotels were distinct from the goldfields hotels. Many had large stables for coach staging, and most appear to have had or been associated with a blacksmith shop for the repair of drays. Their use as *de facto* morgues seems to have led at least one to incorporate a small cemetery. The hallmark of the goldfield hotels on the other hand was entertainment, seen commonly in attached music halls and bowling parlours and, occasionally, ‘tea’ or ‘pleasure’ gardens.

Wayside inns were roaring places in the years of 1852-54. Gisborne’s famous pastoral era Bush Inn, turned into a place of riotous festivity by returning diggers, was heralded by miles of bottles. On one evening 59 bullock and 37 horse drays were counted outside it (Flett 1979).

At the nearby National Hotel nine barmen attempted to serve the hordes of customers, and its two bars were so crowded that a ‘change pail’ was placed in the centre of the floor to collect patrons’ money.

A little further along at the Diggers Rest hotel the scene was similar:

> The crowd at the counter was three if not four deep, the landlord with a brace of assistants drew liquor as fast as possible which those in the front rank passed to those behind. The outsiders … threw their shillings over the heads of those that stood before them (Batey 1910: 43).

Respectable travellers were generally wary of the wayside hotels, and notorious inns such as the Porcupine were given a wide berth. The gentlemen classes who happened by on other business were especially offended at publicans transferring their deference from the ‘squatter’ to the ‘lucky digger’ – ‘rude men, insolent with drink and success’. Squatter Kerr provided a long description of a late afternoon scene at a two-storey bluestone inn (probably at Kyneton): noisy campers, loud women, rich drunks embracing cases of champagne were the performers in his fantasia. Inside was ‘pandemonium’ – an inferno of shouting and quarrelling (Kerr 1996).

Separation of ‘the better class of travellers’ from ‘the roughs’ was barely possible in those days. But pre-revolution civility was not completely lost. William Dobie Esq was pleased to report the politeness of the ‘little old waiter’ who attended to his every need at Gregory’s Gap Hotel (Dobie 1856).

Fabulous prices were given for hotel sites. Pastoral giant WJT ‘Big’ Clarke, having paid £1 an acre for pastoral land in 1851, by 1855 had sold at least four wayside hotel sites for up to £1,000 an acre. As well as licensed hotels, canvas and stringybark sly-grog shanties (masquerading as ‘coffee tents’) lined the route.

By 1855 many of the hotels were handsome double-storey stone edifices – clearly ‘the best and most conspicuous mansions’ in the wayside towns of Victoria (Westgarth 1857).

Caroline Chisholm Shelter Sheds

The Mount Alexander Road also inspired a unique work of Caroline Chisholm, Australia’s renowned family settlement activist.

In late October 1854 she visited the Bendigo diggings and was astonished ‘beyond expression’ at the state of the road. Its ‘vile conditions’, and the lack of safe accommodation, were the largest obstacle to diggers’ families joining them on the goldfields she reported.

Situated a day’s walk apart her second-class hotels, or ‘shake-downs’, provided cheap accommodation and cooking facilities along the route. Ten sheds were opened in 1855 (Kiddle 1969).
Graves

We will never know how many died on the Mount Alexander Road through mishap, sickness, or murder. Gill’s painting of the ‘Digger That Never Returned’, lying in a forest, suggests it was considerable. Several travellers record the chill of coming upon human bones in the Black Forest.

The Diggers Rest vicinity might be typical. Having crossed the Keilor Plains under a burning sun, and very sick, Robert Thomas reflected that ‘had I died there I should probably have been laid in a grave by the roadside without a tombstone to mark the spot which would soon be forgotten’ (Thomas no date: 130-1). He was right. A row of at least nine graves is recorded as having been located beside the road at Diggers Rest. The location of this wayside cemetery is now forgotten.

Only one grave at Diggers Rest was marked. Jack Sanger of Woodstock USA was killed when a tilt dray under which he and a mate had been sleeping accidentally (it is thought) tipped on them. His roadside gravestone may be the only remaining witness to those who didn’t finish the journey. (Having no heritage protection, a few years back a local service club was able to replace the original with a replica.)

Construction and Decline of the Mount Alexander Road

In 1853 the new Central Roads Board allocated most of its budget to Mount Alexander Road. Over the next four years 23 timber bridges, including a spectacular American influenced Howe Truss over the Maribyrnong River at Keilor, and five kilometres of ‘plank road’ (corduroy road) improved the situation a little (Chambers 2006; Lay 2003).

The stone bridges that survive today, such as the 1861 ‘corkscrew’ bridge at the Gap, came too late. The greatest period of alluvial digging was over by the mid 1850s, and the 1862 completion of the railway definitively concluded the Mount Alexander Road phenomenon.

Construction of the Mount Alexander Railway had been the result of goldfields meetings and diggers’ petitions in the winter of ‘52 when the road was so bad and the price of cartage so high there was talk of starvation on the goldfields. Together with the Geelong-Ballarat Railway, it was the greatest public work in Australia up to that time, built to a standard never again attempted (McCann & Churchward 1994).

The railway’s impact on the road and its wayside places was dramatic. In 1862 the National Hotel, buildings and blacksmith inclusive, was sold for less than half the price of its original land value. There were doubts whether the large Diggers Rest Hotel would be saleable at all. The Bush Inn and other famous hotels simply closed. Police barracks were downgraded and closed; wayside gold escort stations were sold in 1864. In 1862 Cobb & Co discontinued its Bendigo service and moved its headquarters from Melbourne to Bathurst.

At the turn of the twentieth century it was said that there was less traffic on the Mount Alexander Road in a year than there had been in a day in 1853. The condition of most wayside hotels that had struggled on was poor, and in the early twentieth century many were closed in the Licences Reduction Board’s temperance-driven purge.

Intangibles: The Road to the Promised Land

‘We were never men till now!’ (Hocking 2000: 88)

All this is to sketch the bare bones of an important and colourful event. But ‘the road’ also had more profound associations that warrant deeper consideration than possible here.

The youthful diggers arrived in Australia with hopes of a glorious ‘land of promise’, their heads ringing with the chorus of the shipboard song: ‘Cheer Boys Cheer, for this New and Happy Land … the Land of the Free’ (Brown 1862; Castlemaine Pioneers 1972).

One of their unexpected discoveries was the ‘perfect Babel’ of nations, classes and occupations that they met on the road. William Strutt even marvelled at his own travelling party. ‘This odd mixture of occupations seemed like a parody, in a limited sense, of Chaucer’s Canterbury Pilgrims’ (Mackaness 1979).
Meetings of different classes on the road could arouse tension. The jaundiced views of privileged travellers such as Howitt and Kerr contrasted with the experiences of merchant Henry Brown. As a new chum he had been shocked by the camaraderie of the road. When his dray overturned, men, ‘the roughest of the rough’, unloaded, uprighted and reloaded the dray and simply departed. These ‘good Samaritans’ contrasted with three gentlemen, laden with comforts at their camp, who when asked for assistance, ‘became as consequential and domineering as many of their class at home’. Egalitarianism was a notion that some resisted, but Brown’s reaction in embracing the new order was typical (Brown 1862).

It was practical ‘bush’ skills rather than ‘what you were’ in Europe that determined how you would prosper and be judged in Australia (Clarke 1951). The new chums were keen to learn all they could on the road. ‘The first draughts of scalding tea from our new pannikins’, wrote one, ‘made us quite heroes of the bush’ (Annear 1999). Night time dousings were nothing, reported Ellen Clacy, ‘at the antipodes one soon learns to laugh at such trifles’ (Clacy 1963).

Probably very few had ever camped out in their homelands, and account after account testifies the sheer joy of camping in the ‘Australian bush’. From the outset the southern sky became an enchanted symbol of a new life in a new world.

The first night we camped on Keilor Plains, everything being romantic and pleasant ... After supper, smoking and yarning began until, one by one each dropped off to his resting-place for the night. Bullocks, and horses did their best to lull us to sleep with their tinkling bells around their necks ... and our whole experiences might be likened to a repetition of the thousand and one nights (Castlemaine Pioneers 1972: 78).

Another new chum recalled that:

With light hearts we strolled on through Flemington ... and reaching the verge of the plains, camped, having Mother Earth for our mattress and heaven’s bright canopy spangled with myriads of stars, amongst which shone the Southern Cross, for our bed-curtains (Castlemaine Pioneers 1972: 34).

It was this Southern Cross that the diggers would adopt as the symbol of the free and fair country of their dreams.

In contrast to the quiet awe of an isolated camp, popular roadside camps enabled socialising, or the chance to sit back and contemplate the great host on its grand quest. A picturesque description of 200 people flitting about at a gold-rush campfire ‘the laugh, shout and, not infrequently, the loudly uttered oath …’ suggested to one historian the possible origin of a legendary Australian tradition (Annear 1999).

The beauty of Mount Alexander Road’s undulating open woodland countryside impressed deeply. Camping at the foot of The Gap, Ellen Clacy was overcome by ‘a picture too magnificent to describe ... a spot whose natural beauties I have never seen surpassed’ (Clacy 1963). James Bonwick too thought the road between the Gap and Gisborne ‘one of the loveliest countries in the world’ (Bonwick 1942). The road from Elphinstone to Big Hill was moving: ‘nothing had really prepared me for the magnificent bold expanse of country that was spread out before me’; ‘the country between here and the “Porcupine Inn” is exceedingly beautiful’; ‘From Harcourt to Sandhurst the country is like one stupendous park’ (Brown 1862; Clacy 1963; Birchall 1987; Kelly 1977).

For more vigorous souls Mount Alexander Road realised dreams of freedom:

We became elated and charmed with the “New and Happy Land” sung of on shipboard. Here we camped out, felled trees, lighted fires, roamed about shooting free from molestation from any biped (Castlemaine Pioneers 1972).

To some diggers the ‘road’ would become home, as they ‘flitted from spot to spot’at the cry of ‘Rush, Oh!’ (Kerr 1996; Bonwick 1942). ‘In the life of the digger there is a kind of gipsy existence with a charm that is indescribable’ said one. ‘The life is a life of freedom, which can almost be felt: no rates, not shackles of any kind’ (Castlemaine Pioneers 1972). Lawson showed in ‘The Roaring Days’ that he understood: ‘if Dame Fortune frowned, our swags we’d lightly shoulder, and tramp to other ground.’
How much did this ‘gold fever’ contribute optimism, or risk taking, to the Australian character? In a big country there was always another rush, another new field waiting to be discovered. Until recently bachelor prospectors like John Campbell Miles, son of an unsuccessful 1850s Victorian digger, who in 1923 discovered one of the world’s richest ore bodies at Mount Isa, could still be encountered around Victoria’s auriferous mountain streams.

Historian Geoffrey Serle observed that ‘Temporarily, during the early years of the gold-rush, class distinctions were almost obliterated’ (Serle 1968). Keir Reeves, similarly noting the ‘high degree of social transformation’ in the earliest phase of the gold-rushes, cites anthropologist Victor Turner’s notion of the ‘liminal moment’, a period characterised by ‘the suspension of the usual norms and social roles, and by an overflowing sense of communitas or collective camaraderie’ (Reeves 2008).

While such analyses are most commonly related to the politicisation of the diggers on the goldfields themselves, evidence suggests that for many, Mount Alexander Road was a cultural turning point, providing their initial formation in pragmatism, independence, and egalitarianism. In the highly-charged atmosphere of ‘the road’, the willing new chums began their education in colonial ways, walking beside those of different nationality, class and religion, testing their own aspirations for the fair and free new world sung of on shipboard, and glimpsing the beauty and seemingly endless horizons of their new land.

While the Mount Alexander ‘rush’ lasted just a few years, many diggers’ diaries and memoirs suggest the abiding personal impact of their experiences on the road. Broader gold-rush historiography suggests that these impressions had enduring cultural impacts.

**International Significance**

In one sense the aspiring diggers travelling up Mount Alexander Road were of a piece with migrants everywhere who set sail for new lands and new lives. But the prospects of the diggers were glittering, and their hopes unbridled.

A great goldfield was like ‘a burst of sunshine … across the dark and troubled stream’ said the *Edinburgh Express* (Serle 1968). Notwithstanding the trials, the motif of this and all goldfields journeys was ‘hope’. Diggers’ anticipation built as they sailed into Port Phillip, and intensified as they struck out across a new land with new comrades, their destination within reach.

In considering whether this and other gold-rush routes might be ‘cultural routes’, we should also consider that, while distinctive, the Mount Alexander Road experience also represents – perhaps epitomises – a whole class of internationally historic events. Its travellers were ‘part of a broader gold-seeking phenomenon that in some way touched nearly every part of the world during the second half of the nineteenth century, underlining one of the great migrations of that century’ (Reeves 2008). People from all continents set off to rushes, beginning in California in 1848 and continuing through the Pacific Rim countries of Australia, the Caribou in British Columbia, New Zealand, the Yukon, Chile and Peru, as well as South Africa. These rushes stirred the imagination of the world, stimulated it economically, and reshaped parts of it.

**Heritage Management**

In his essay on the Chilkoot Trail portion of the Klondike Gold Rush route, Guy Masson discusses the need to identify the cultural resource (buildings, works, landscapes and archaeological artefacts), articulate the significance of the trail, and finally to respect and protect this cultural significance.

While its heritage is yet to be documented and assessed, Mount Alexander Road is likely an outstanding representation of the international gold-rush trail phenomenon. Firstly, its prodigious traffic increases the prospect of archaeological relics of shanties or shakedowns. One cursory investigation of historical maps led straight to the foundations of a previously unidentified gold-escort station. Secondly, although the recent freeway has destroyed parts of the original road, ample survives to be able to interpret its story. Gold-rush evidence on the roads would enhance the mooted ‘central goldfields’ world heritage listing.
There are challenges. Of the half dozen or so wayside gold-rush hotels known to survive (at Flemington, Keilor, Diggers Rest, Kyneton, Malmsbury and Taradale), the exterior architecture of most is altered. It will take a fresh appreciation of historical significance by the heritage profession, and local communities, if they are to be protected. The fire-damaged Diggers Rest Hotel is presently subject to a demolition application.

Some communities along the road know their own ‘cultural resource’. A number of threatened places such as escort station lock-ups have in past years been relocated or (more problematically) reconstructed by energetic locals.

Conservation of gold-rush cultural routes would require the participation of local communities; the heritage, tourism, education, and road industries; and different levels of government. North American experience with the Yukon ‘Gold Rush Trail’, and perhaps the ‘Oregon’ or ‘Sacramento’ cultural trails, will likely offer lessons. Victoria’s ‘Golden Way’ heritage driving trail might include the ‘rush’ routes themselves. Interpretation would enrich perceptions, and build anticipation for arrival at Bendigo, Ballarat, Castlemaine and other goldfields.

**Conclusion**

The nineteenth century gold-rushes were heady, explosive episodes that released streams of vigorous young optimists upon the social order. Ocean voyages and overland routes became formative experiences for tens of thousands.

In 1852 news of Mount Alexander had flared across the globe, proclaiming possibilities and heralding hope. Although most diggers found it didn’t lead to the fortune they had imagined, Mount Alexander Road charted a new path in Australia’s history. Kalgoorlie, the Palmer River, and the Chinese routes from Robe to Victoria’s goldfields are among the host of other Australian gold-rush routes whose heritage also warrants attention.

**References**


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