I have recently had the pleasure of undertaking the Australian Alps Mining Heritage Conservation and Presentation Strategy, funded by the Australian Alps Liaison Committee. This project looked at the European quest for metals, from the 1850s. It was noted, of course, that Aboriginal people were the first miners in the Alps, extracting stone for tools, and ochre for ceremonial purposes.

Gold has been overwhelmingly the most important metal mined in the Australian Alps. Gold-mining is an activity that is not constrained by topography, altitude or environment, nor is it influenced by regional or even national demand. Gold was, and is, a global commodity. There would not be a creek or river within the entire Alps that has not felt the blow of a prospector’s pick and the rattle of a gold pan some time in the last 150 years, nor a mountain range that has not echoed to the hoofbeats of a prospector’s pack-horse. Nearly a billion dollars worth of metals, principally gold, has been wrought from the Australian Alps National Parks and attached Historic Areas, but this is only the tip of the iceberg. Metals production itself is limited by the existence of actual resources, but perversely, mining activity is not. An important cultural dimension operated – the lure of gold and other precious metals, and the promise of instant wealth, drove the level of activity in the early years. Mining in these early years had astonishing productivity for its relatively short life, compared to other economic pursuits of the period. It was very labour-intensive, and acquired a complex support infrastructure, not the least of which was a strong governmental regulatory presence.

Grazing and sawmilling have also affected large areas. Both were constrained by environmental factors—suitable high-altitude grasslands or wide lowland valleys for the former and suitable timber species and growth characteristics for the latter. Cattle-grazing, in particular, was not labour-intensive, and while the environmental influence may prove to be long-lasting, the cultural heritage is largely tied up in the legends of the relatively few cattlemen, rather than deeply imprinted in the landscape. Sawmilling was a service industry that, in historical times, was greatly influenced by local and regional demand. The later hydroelectric schemes and the ski-fields are geographically constrained, relating to developments in particular topographies and altitudes within the Alps National Parks. Their local impact may have been enormous, but they do not touch the greater portion of the Australian Alps National Parks.

While the study of such a wide-ranging and important European cultural influence as mining is necessarily complex, the results were relatively simple. Historic mining sites are widespread through the Alps, and are principally archaeological in nature. By the very nature of mining, the fabric of these places is generally robust, and usually deeply imprinted in the landscape. The regrowing vegetation is an integral part of the significance and experience of these places, offering a sense of discovery, and mute evidence of the passing of a way of life. Therefore the natural and cultural environments are particularly compatible at historic mining places. Management intervention may be limited to places targeted for interpretation, places requiring risk works because of their locations, and some of the more significant and fragile machinery sites. While historic mining sites are abundant, discernible mining landscapes are not, tending to be masked by the regrowing vegetation. There are spectacular exceptions, of course, such as Kiandra.

Little is currently available in interpretation of historic mining areas throughout the Australian Alps National Parks, and the strategy recommended cultural heritage presentation works at three places in Victoria and three in New South Wales. In New South Wales, recommendations were made to extend interpretations at Kiandra, attend to minor conservation and presentation works at the battery on Three-Mile Creek near Kiandra, and to install basic cultural heritage information on a board at Thredbo Diggings. In Victoria, basic interpretations for the Brandy Creek Mine and Jokers Flat diggings were recommended, as well as conservation and presentation works at the Monarch Mine. These places are strategically located, and present the principal characteristics of mining in the Australian Alps. They have good visual qualities and show a wide range of instructive features, from gold-rush landscapes and diggings, to quartz mines with abundant artefacts of former operations. They occur in a spectacular array of natural environments, from Alpine grasslands and woodlands, to rugged mountain bushland, to scenic mountain river valleys.

Two things troubled me at the beginning of the project. The first of these was a comment by a Parks Victoria cultural liaison person in an area of the Victorian Alps with a massive mining influence. He expressed the view that the cultural heritage of the area lay with the cattlemen of the High Country, and that mining was essentially trivial. Totally ignoring thousands of years of Aboriginal occupation and use. I naturally wondered about the ability of this particular local area to come to grips with cultural heritage. It also made me revisit the early years of European incursion into the high Victorian Alps.

The story of John Mitchell’s journey to the Bogong High Plains in 1843 has been discredited, so we are left with an 1850s, grazer-led European exploration of the Victorian Alps. The story is repeated in all histories relating to the region in the last 40-odd years. Brown and Wells, from Cobungra Station, blazed the first trail over Mt Hotham in 1852-3, guided by Larrin, a local Aboriginal. They were the first onto the Bogong High Plains, named most of the geographical features, pioneered high country grazing, etc. Maps have been drawn, detailing the various routes of their Alpine explorations. Strange as it may sound, none of this seemed to be part of any earlier written histories that I came across during the study.

In fact, it is at odds with some of the scraps of contemporary documentation that happened to surface. A Lands Commissioner from Benalla trying to find a route from the Ovens Valley to Omeo in January 1852 in response to gold discoveries, but turned back by unseasonal snow. A party of miners leaving Wangaratta early in 1852 to push into the ‘Buffalo and Snowy Mountains’, with hints that they had been there before. Pardoe and party ascending the Ovens River to the Buckland Gap near Mt Smythe in 1853, before descending into the Buckland valley. Von Mueller claiming to be the first (European?) person in the highest part of the Alps in 1854. A
Goldfields Commissioner attempting to blaze a route over Hotham in 1854, and reporting that miners were regularly and haphazardly crossing the Alps. A newspaper report of 1866 crediting miners with the systematic pushing back of the frontiers in the Alps.

High country summer grazing does not even rate a mention in local histories of the late 1800s and early 1900s. We know it happened, but when? Alfred Howitt observed summer grazing in 1866, and the original Bogong High Plains grazing lease dates from the same year. Note that gold miners were working adjacent to the Bogong High Plains on the Mt Fainter goldfield in 1881, some five years earlier. The grazing lease was broken up into smaller leases in 1887. Around 1920, it is reported that the High Plains were rarely grazed, only intermittently for drought relief by properties to the west (i.e. the Kiewa Valley side). Opportunistic use of the high country for grazing seems to have been a characteristic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is a far cry from the annual musters of later times.

So what about Brown and Wells? We know that Larnie existed, provided that he is the same Slannie or Convomung described by Robertson in 1844. But Brown and Wells' exploits derive solely from an interview with the McNamara brothers, revealed by Stella Carr in 1962. It is oral tradition, over one hundred years removed from the events, and confirmation was by way of corroborative tales from other local cattlemen. That is, no corroboration. This is not to say that the events described did not happen or could not have happened.

Some logic can be applied. What interest would the early graziers have had in the Alpine country of Victoria, a mere postage-stamp compared to the vast high-altitude grasslands of the NSW Alps? Before gold, grazing around the Victorian Alps was on unimproved pasture with very low stocking rates. The graziers were not the 'squattocracy' — these people were pushing the frontiers into what was then very marginal land. State and regional populations developed massively during the gold rushes, providing impetus to pasture improvement, higher stocking rates and the development of intensive agriculture. It would seem likely that high country grazing was a response to post-gold pressures on stocking rates, and subsequent sensitivity to drought and fire. If Brown and Wells did explore the Victorian Alpine areas prior to the gold rushes, it is likely to have been through a spirit of adventure, rather than an economic imperative. Undoubtedly a short cut to Wangaratta would have been beneficial to them, but would a simple blazed trail over Mt Hotham have been suitable for the graziers' needs, given the rugged and steep topography of the Ovens Valley fall? For Brown and Wells, and their employer Gray, the Hotham route was definitely not the best short-cut across the Alps. In any case, government officials were clearly still trying to blaze this trail for gold-miners in 1854.

So what is the real post-contact history of the Victorian Alps? Were gold-miners in fact the first Europeans into the highest parts of these Alps? I don't know, but perhaps a little more research and rigour could be applied to the issue. The cattlemen of the High Country are seen as important in the European cultural heritage of the Victorian Alps, and therefore they are, quite validly. But their significance in Victorian Alpine exploration is based in tradition, and unsupported. And their incorporation as key icons into the cultural heritage and history of the Victorian Alps seems to have begun in the mid 1900s, as Melbourne-based academics began to venture into the Alps in bush-walking clubs, skiing clubs, and for research, and were exposed to the camp-fire yams of the cattlemen.

Is it important to know the truth (as far as 'truth' can exist in historical discourse)? Perhaps it may be. The entrenched legend of the mountain cattlemen is used to defend existing grazing rights, and is based in an almost Aboriginal-type connection to the land. It is said that they were the pioneers, they have been there ever since, they operate in an equilibrium with the land, and they have a special cultural affinity to the place developed over generations. The scientific evidence strongly suggests that the equilibrium does not exist, and the rest may not be supported by the historical record.

Throughout the Australian Alps, there is massive documentation of the oral histories of the relatively-few graziers and cattlemen, but little of the tens of thousands of miners who ventured into the Alps, establishing townships and camps, living, working and sometimes dying in the High Country. Why? Simply because they were gone. In the NSW Alps, the tales of mining that are recorded are largely the testimonies of the grazer-miners, and this colours our better understanding of the mining sites and landscapes.

Have myths become facts through the retelling? There may well be many early histories throughout the Alps that need revisiting, or at least caution applied in their telling.

The second thing that troubled me was an abundance of published histories that neatly divided the history of the Alps into blocks, or phases. That is, we had the long, pre-European, aboriginal phase, followed by the European explorers and pioneer graziers. Then the miners came and left. Then came the later graziers and agriculturalists, after that the development of the ski-fields, National Park and tourism development, the hydro schemes etc. Well and good, perhaps, as a very rough chronology, but in the era of European exploration and use, it does a great disservice to the dynamics of regional development.

Before gold, the European presence in and adjacent to the Australian Alps was sparse at best. Gold discoveries adjacent to the Alps, at places like Adelong, Tumbarumba, Beechworth, Bright, Omeo, drew relatively large numbers of people into the Alps. Prospecting was widespread throughout the Alps, and townships developed in the major mining areas. In the NSW Alps, the gold was principally burried led and alluvial, and the early camps and settlements rapidly disappeared as the surface gold deposits were worked out. In the Victorian Alps, quartz mining developed as the surface gold deposits were worked out, and the townships assumed a more settled appearance. However, even these resources were eventually depleted, and within the area of the Alps National Parks, the miners left, the townships died, and the bush slowly reclaimed the land. So was that it? Well, in examining the influence of gold-mining in the Alps, it is necessary to look further. How different would the Alps, and our view of the Alps, be today without historic mining?

I certainly don't have the answers, but I do have lots of questions. Let us consider the Victorian Alps. Without the entrepreneurial efforts from the adjacent mining towns of Bright and Omeo, and the mining tracks and shanties across the mountains, would the Mt Hotham Ski Resort have developed? Without the local lobbying from Bright and the railway connection, what would Mt Buffalo be like today? Could it have ever been developed from what would essentially have been a
dead-end valley with a small grazing presence? When would the timber industry have developed in the Alps, and how different would its incursion have been without the local demand stimulated by mining and mining populations, the developed settlements from which to base operations and draw labour, and the established roads on which to transport its products? How and from where would we access the Alps nowadays? How different would our fundamental view and understanding of the Alps be, and how different would our conservation needs and efforts have been?

Similar questions abound for the NSW Alps. While high-country grazing had been established before the Kandra rush, how different would our concept of the Alps be today without the influence of Kandra and the large adjacent mining populations at Tumut/Adelong, Tumbarumba and Cooma? Without mining-associated settlements on the roads to the diggings at Jindabyne, Adaminaby, etc? Without the thousands of miners and prospectors turning the unknown into the familiar, and the daily newspapers of the era bringing the mountains to the masses for the very first time, with every new gold find?

From a time of very sparse European presence, mining was the engine that drove regional development, and in just a few decades laid down the demographics and infrastructure that pre-determined much of what is familiar today in the Alps.

The influence of mining can be very personal. In Bright, from my kitchen window, I look up the valley to the snow-covered peak of Mt Bogong in winter, and from my lounge-room window I can glimpse the snowy top of Mt Buffalo peeping above the foothills. Without gold-mining, I would indisputably be trespassing on somebody's farm! Many of the roads we follow into the Alps only became roads because of gold-mining, even where some may have existed as trails before. Some of our lasting visual impressions of the Alps may have thus been modified by mining. Did we really get over it? I don't think so.

But for a cultural influence that is so pervasive in the Alps, and occasionally so personally relevant, we often have difficulty in effectively interpreting the historic mining sites and landscapes. It is very easy to take the soft option, that of treating them as technological places. While evolving technologies do relate to the development of our culture, the real cultural interest is obviously in people. We need to develop innovative ways to put the missing people and stories back into our mining sites and landscapes.

In a very real sense, these sites and landscapes were not created by miners, as we understand the appellation today. The gold rushes—the great treasure hunts of the nineteenth century—cut across the whole spectrum of society. More than in any other occupation or pursuit, the digger was 'everyman', or put another way, these people were very much just you and me in another age.