PART 2

Commentaries and Vignettes

Victorian Goldfields World Heritage Nomination: Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park

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The Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park (CDNHP) is Australia’s first national park created to protect historic heritage as the primary value. Since its reservation in 2002, the park has been added to the Victorian Heritage Register (2004) and the National Heritage List (2006). Logically, the next step is World Heritage listing.

The CDNHP, encompassing 7440 ha, is situated in the Victorian Goldfields region, 123 km north of Melbourne and 38 km south of Bendigo. It extends 50 km southwards from Castlemaine towards Daylesford, and is up to 10 km wide. The CDNHP is associated with the historic goldfields of Castlemaine, Chewton, Fryerstown, Vaughan, Campbells Creek and Guildford.

The case for World Heritage nomination has been built on the premise that the CDNHP is an outstanding cultural landscape exemplifying the migration-based gold rushes of the mid-nineteenth century.

Within the park boundaries are the geological formations – the gold-bearing gravels and quartz reefs from which the gold was shed over millions of years – which formed the basis of the Mount Alexander gold rush of the 1850s, Australia’s richest shallow alluvial rush (Blainey 1964). Archaeological surveys have identified key areas in the park that are rich in evidence of

Figure 1: Sailor’s Gully Alluvial Diggings Landscape. (Source: David Bannear)
gold-rush era mining activity: digging, panning, cradling, sluicing, quarrying, crushing and ore-roasting. Other landscapes in the park illustrate a range of subsequent forms of gold mining. In addition there are large numbers of habitation sites and groups of sites that depict the pattern of gold-rush settlement. The citation for the Commonwealth’s National Heritage List states that, in combination, the CDNHP presents an archaeological record which is outstanding ‘in terms of diversity, integrity and time-depth’.

The Mount Alexander gold rush, as with its contemporaries in the mid-nineteenth century, was a radical departure from earlier mining eras. Unlike, for example, the global spread of Cornish copper-mining expertise and technology, the Mount Alexander rush was not controlled by tradition and large companies, but was a spontaneous migration event that created a new class of miners: the independent digger.

Gold rushes were exceptional, even in a period when the Western world was migration-minded – events driven not just by aspirations but by the lottery-like possibility of transformation at the turn of a spade. Moreover, they encapsulated the economic, industrial and liberal philosophies that characterised the Victorian era.

The next goal for the park is inclusion on Australia’s World Heritage Tentative List. Consideration of the World Heritage values of the CDNHP inevitably leads to discussion of a gold-rush serial listing. This would entail more extensive comparative research to clarify whether an Australian or transnational serial gold-rush nomination is preferable to a single bid. The gold rush story is indeed a wide-ranging one. The CDNHP may be best in the world at illustrating gold-rush mining methods, but there may be places elsewhere that better exemplify other aspects of the gold rush-era story better, such as environmental impacts and migration routes.

References