Chapter Four

Victorian Pioneers

'I see a multitude of transports of joy'.
Samuel Becket, *End-Game*, 1957: 25.

'The Victorians are still with us'.
A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, 2003: 1

It was just past daybreak and William Free was sitting on the deck of the *Lady Kennaway* nursing his small son. He was feeling tired and dispirited. Louisa had again been ill for most of the night. She was still weak from the birth of their third child three days earlier, and drained from the little fellow's death and burial at sea the following day. She had not really wanted to leave her friends and family in Cambridgeshire but came for her Will's sake and because so many from Barrington and its surrounding villages were making the same journey. The boy stirred and shifted in his father's arms. He, too, was unwell. The food they were given was alright for the grown-ups but the little ones could not digest it properly, became gradually malnourished, and prey to the bouts of diarrhoea and other illnesses that occasioned life in the cramped and unsanitary steerage quarters of the vessels bringing the waves of immigrants to Australia's shores.

The ship had passed in the night the lighthouse on Cape Otway and was slowly making its way along the coast towards Port Phillip Bay. Now the wind had dropped, everything was quiet save the creaking of the rigging and the murmured voices of the sailors on watch. William wanted to point out to his son how the tall, white-trunked trees growing amid the forested ravines on shore shone in the morning sun. They were like thousands of mirrors, or the specks of gold that many on board hoped soon to sight. But the boy was asleep and so William dreamed alone of

the possibilities and privileges the possession of the precious metal could bring. His innate caution and sense of responsibility both to his wife and those who had paid for their passage meant in any case that he would, on arrival, continue on as a labourer and shepherd; at least for a few years.

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It is likely that at such a moment William would have also reflected on his decision to uproot his family from their everyday life in England and bring them half way around the world to the wilds of Victoria. Their time in Cambridgeshire had always been hard, it was true, especially after the enclosure laws prevented people from grazing animals on the commons and gathering fuel from the surrounding woodlands. Thereafter the working poor had to put aside a few pence each week for food and coal for the winter and, in bad times, had still to rely on the support of relatives or their local vicar. Even then there was no real thought of emigrating. Unlike the tradesmen and artisans who were being displaced by the industrial revolution, most agricultural workers were accustomed to working on an irregular basis. They tended also to be more conservative than their cousins from the towns and cities, less willing to move from the districts in which they were born, and more prepared to try and outlast any times of trouble in the hope their circumstances, like the seasons, would improve. A few from the area did leave of course, but they were pitied rather than envied, because they were unable to cope and entertained the naive view that they would be better off elsewhere. The foolishness of such a hope was, for many, dramatically underscored by the fate of the emigrant ship, the *Cataraque*, which was wrecked on King Island on a wild winter's night in 1845, and all but one of the 367 emigrants on board, including 23 from the Cambridgeshire village of Guilden Morden, drowned.

From around this time, the lot of rural workers and their families in Cambridgeshire also began to worsen. The county's potato and wheat crops failed. There were large-scale floods which, given the flatness of the country, took months to subside. Diseases such as typhus and scarlet fever arose in the wake of the receding flood waters. In order to save money, farmers began using children as labourers, or hired itinerant workers from Ireland, or replaced their men with steam-driven threshers and other mechanical implements. As the number of permanent labouring positions and the average wages of farm workers went down, the price of

food and other basic commodities increased. Those who could not find jobs became paupers, dependent entirely on the charity of others. Some were evicted from their houses and forced to live with friends or relatives in their already over-crowded homes. Others were incarcerated in the dreaded Union Houses that, from 1834, had begun to be built in the county's major towns.

The worsening economic conditions led to increased disputation and conflict. Local labourers fought with imported workers. There were food riots in towns and villages across the county. Farmers and their overseers were abused and their new-fangled machines sabotaged or attacked by angry mobs. Haystacks, sheds and even farmers' cottages were set ablaze. In 1846 the situation was so bad that a local member of Parliament, Eliot Yorke MP, felt moved to warn his colleagues that

> ...if gentlemen think there is nothing to be dreaded from our rural labourers, I fear that they are greatly mistaken. I do not believe there is a village in my neighbourhood that would not be ready to assert by brute force their right (as they say) to eat fully from their own labour...every parish in this neighbourhood is...ripe for an outbreak (cited in Holt, 2001: 52).

The incendiarists and machine-breakers were hunted down and punished. Those who were not hanged were transported to Australia where, if the newspapers were to be believed, they lived much more decent and comfortable lives than could be found at home. From around 1848, the same broadsheets began to preach the advantages of emigration, commending the government and its Colonial Land and Emigration Commission for their efforts in helping the working poor find new lives, and informing their readers there was now no stigma involved in accepting a free passage to the convict colonies. They began publishing information about who was needed, how to apply, and what had to be taken. Most important of all, they included in their columns letters from those who had taken up the government's offer and had already established themselves in Australia. These last reports and other accounts extolling the virtues of the colonies' climate, lifestyle and high wages were passed among friends and relatives, read out at the end of Sunday services, and animated many a discussion around village kitchen tables or at their local taverns.

In one such letter, published in the *Cambridge Chronicle* on 23 February 1850, William Warren, a gardener from Chesterton who

emigrated to Port Phillip with his wife and family in the previous year and was working at Cunningham's station near Mount Mercer, informed his mother:

> I have got a good master, one of the best gentlemen in the colony: I hired myself as a bullock-driver at £28 a-year and we had to come 48 miles in the bush but my master has made a shepherd of me with a comfortable hut to live in, plenty of firewood, £28 a-year and the following rations once a fortnight: meat 72 lbs; flour 60 lbs; tea 1 1/2 lbs; sugar 12 lbs; and if I cannot live upon that who can; I have a flock to myself, 2,000 besides lambs; I go out at sunrise and come home at sunset. My wife and my children run out to meet me by the barking of my dog, and I am one of the happiest men in the world (cited in Holt, 2001: 197).

In another letter that appeared in the same newspaper a few months before William and Louisa emigrated, a shepherd from the village of Triplow, Thomas Mansfield—who lost both his wife and baby daughter on the voyage out—nonetheless assured his friends that he and his remaining children were well and were living in 'the best country in the world'. 'I let myself to Mr Raven for £40 a-year and rations and live rent free...have plenty of firing, and a good garden to plant potatoes, and everything I want to use. We have flour in the house at once, and a sheep hung up, and when we have done we kill another.' Mansfield added that he intended soon to buy 'ten acres of land of my own' and hinted he might also visit the goldfields where people can 'earn two or three hundred pounds a-month; and there is people that have been transported and are now worth thousands of pounds' (cited in Holt, 2001: 203).

With the discovery of gold there in 1851, the exposure given by the press to life in Port Phillip increased dramatically, as did public interest and the subsequent flow of assisted emigrants. The number of people from Cambridgeshire who took up offers of a free passage to Victoria in the whole of the period 1840 to the middle of 1851—some 342 persons overall—was well exceeded in each of the next three years. The following decade saw a further 2000 men, women and children from across the county emigrate to Port Phillip on ships leased by the Colonial Office (all figures are taken from Holt, 2001). Although detailed statistics are not available, it is likely that at least as many also went of their own accord, or under the patronage of friends and relatives who had earlier emigrated.

This outpouring of humanity was not restricted to Cambridgeshire. From all over the British isles and Ireland people, alone or in family groups, braved extremes of climate, monstrous seas, and the prospect of sickness and death, to seek their fortunes or begin a new life in the southern colonies. In 1853, the year William and his family emigrated, 14,578 assisted and over 33,000 unassisted immigrants landed in the colony of Port Phillip alone. The following year a further 48,000 made the long and sometime perilous journey. The gold-rush decade saw close to 300,000 people travel to Victoria. The total arriving between 1838 and 1900 was over 890,000 where some 166,000 of these, or 23 per cent of the total, came under various government-assisted schemes. The proportion of assisted immigrants who arrived in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia was even greater—72 per cent, 88 per cent and 66 per cent respectively—such that of the 1.5 million people who emigrated to Australia as a whole between 1821 and 1900, some 740,000 did so with government support (Haines and Shlomowitz, 1990). Assisted immigration was a major, if little remarked-on, means of populating the new colony and shaping at least the lower rungs of its society.

The decision of William and others like him to emigrate was driven, in the first instance, by the poor economic and social conditions then pertaining in Cambridgeshire and the other predominantly rural communities in southern England. Unlike some other regions there were few large cities and little industry to absorb the growing numbers of agricultural and other workers made redundant by continuing industrialisation. Beyond protesting about their worsening circumstances, or taking revenge on those they held responsible, the workers of Cambridgeshire had little choice other than to continue on in the hope their lot might improve, or to seek work and a better life elsewhere. Their decision to emigrate to Australia rather than try their luck in Manchester or London or north America, may have been due to the sweet exhortations of such local emigration agents as Josiah Johnson who signed up the majority of the 681 souls who left the Union of Royston to go to Victoria. But another key factor was the swell of interest that was shown in the southern colony at the time and was fostered, as we have seen, by local newspapers and their editors. These generated across the county an atmosphere of urgent anticipation and excitement; a climate akin to later campaigns to recruit soldiers for the imperial cause, and just as effective. They were backed up by a vast institutional apparatus that included, in addition to the Colonial

Land and Emigration Commission and its agents, a range of emigration, benevolent and religious societies, such as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, various employer and transportation organizations, interests and magnates, and networks of local parish officials and clergymen who 'from the beginnings of recruitment in 1831…emerged as efficient and energetic voluntary unpaid recruiters on behalf of the CLEC' (Haines, 1994: 229).

Deciding to go was only half the battle, however. While the government provided them with free passage to Australia, prospective emigrants—many of whom could neither read nor write—had to fill out an application form, and get their local vicar or a magistrate to witness it. They had to find, as a pre-payment 'towards the expense of bedding and mess utensils for the voyage, and as some security that they will come forward to embark', the sum of £1 per adult and ten shillings for each child emigrating ('Notice on Free Emigration to Australia', *BPP Australia*, Vol. 10, 1847-8, p. 587). They had to purchase the sets of clothing and other goods they were required by the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission to take with them on the ship. Finally, they had to make their own way to the emigrant depots and embarkation ports located at Birkenhead, Gravesend, Greenock, Liverpool, London and Southampton. While some were able to meet these not inconsiderable costs from their own savings, or were helped by friends or family members, most were forced to seek assistance from their local parishes and poor unions. By 1850, this support was generally being provided—between May 1849 and March 1854, for example, Cambridgeshire's Chesterton Union spent over £1500 on assisting its members emigrate (Holt, 2001: ...). This was done partly out of good-will, but also because an increasing number of local officials saw assisted emigration as a means of relieving them of the task, and expense, of looking after the country's numerous paupers and unemployed workers.

The epic process of human transportation that ensured was not without its frustrations and costs. Just as the country's working poor were the victims of economic and social forces operating beyond their control, so they had no say on when and on which vessel they would travel to Australia. As such some sailed off never to be heard of again. Some were bullied and abused by their captains and crew. Some ended up on disease-ridden 'coffin ships', such as the *Wanata* or the *Ticonceroga,* where they died in

their hundreds of measles or typhus and scarlet fevers. Some, such as the passengers of the *Sacramento*, were ship-wrecked within sight of the land to which they were journeying, and either drowned in the surf or were 'cast destitute, but not friendless, on the shores of the long-looked-for land of promise' (Kelly, 1977: 22). And some, like Louisa, fell pregnant prior to embarkation and had to suffer the trauma and anguish of having their babies at sea where, in too many cases, the birth was prematurely induced by prolonged periods of sea-sickness, rough weather, or the terror of monstrous waves whipped up by sudden squalls, and the child was lost.

In its early years in particular, the assisted emigration scheme also fell short of the hopes and expectations of the colonists. In their view—expressed repeatedly in the reports of local emigration agents and committees—the scheme delivered too many children, too many families, and too many people who had been long-term paupers in Britain. Too many of the single women among the new arrivals were found either to be immoral or ill-prepared for their domestic and other duties. Too many men lacked the qualifications and both the drive and initiative seen to be needed for the colony's thriving pastoral industry. There were too many Irish for the colony's predominantly Protestant sensibilities. And too many of the newcomers were averse to living in the bush, preferring instead the relative comfort and safety of the towns even if this meant having to work for much lower wages. These failings were blamed on the system's perceived shortcomings—such as the absence of an adequate means of policing the testimonials provided by the emigrants—and on the unscrupulous behaviour of some parish and other officials.

The work of such scholars as Schultz (1970), Hammerton (1975) and Haines (1994) reveal that the colonists' complaints tended to be exaggerated, motivated perhaps by a desire to achieve greater control over the immigration process and fuelled by suspicions that the Colonial Office may have been using the system to dump on Australia the spiritless 'outpourings of the poor-houses and the unions of the United Kingdom' *('Remonstrance of 1851 of the Legislative Council of New South Wales'*, cited in Greenwood, 1975: 103). As R. B. Madgwick argued in his study of *Immigration into Eastern Australia, 1788-1851*, the apparent unsuitability of so many of the immigrants may also have had more to do with the different conditions applying in each country than the laxity of the people in charge of the emigration scheme. By the late 1840s,

England was a highly industrialized country with its population massed in towns, or in closely settled rural areas. Its surplus workers included large numbers of wool combers, weavers and other pre-industrial tradespeople who were being made redundant by the advent of the new, steam-driven technologies. They were willing to emigrate but were not needed in the southern colonies. Those who were needed were either reluctant to go, or preferred to emigrate to the United States or Canada rather than 'companion with demi-savages and kangaroos' and be subject to the authority of colonial governors (*Operative*, 3 February 1839, cited in Clarke, 1977: 81). The United States in particular provided almost unlimited opportunities for workmen of all types, and the cost of travelling there was much less than to Australia. As migration across the Atlantic had been proceeding for some time, the emigrant chains that form a key role in the development of colonial settler societies were also well developed. Under these circumstances, it was inevitable that Australia may have 'received not the best possible immigrants, but the best that were available' (Madgwick, 1969: 206).

Included in these, however, were still considerable numbers of the agricultural labourers, shepherds, ploughmen, gardeners, sawyers, brick makers, blacksmiths and domestic farm workers needed by the Australian colonists. As we saw from the previous chapter, these newcomers may not have been as well suited to the rigours of pioneering life as either the emancipated convicts or the native-born white Australians. But they were prepared to work hard and were determined to succeed in their new lives. Indeed, the fact they came at all demonstrated a fair degree of initiative and resolve not to succumb to adversity or misfortune. In this way, they were not unlike the sons and daughters of Britain's moneyed classes who were also flocking to the colonies in order to establish themselves. Unlike their 'betters', however, most assisted emigrants were neither expected nor likely to return to Britain. They tended also to be disparaged and looked down upon not just by the established colonists but by many in their home country as well. The Secretary of State for the Colonies, Earl Grey, for example, thought the emigrants to be 'necessarily far below the average of the working population in respect to steadiness and strictly moral conduct' (cited in Clarke, 1977: 97). Journals such as *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, while generally supportive of emigration, informed their readers that those who 'took advantage of the free passages' often came from 'the dregs of the lower classes' and contrasted poorly in character with 'the young, the healthy, the sober, the frugal, the

industrious, [and] the energetic' who came from the higher classes and paid for their own passage (cited in Clarke, 1977: 103). Even influential writers like Dickens and Lytton tended to portray the emigrants as fallen or weak characters, and the colonies as an appropriate receptacle or emendator for such of Britain's cast-offs.

The early assisted emigrants, then, were regarded by many as little better than the convicts who preceded them; as self-inflicted transportees, the products of 'pauper-migration', and the unproductive and unwanted citizens of a *laissez faire* Britain. Emigration, like transportation, was also seen by some as a palliative for the country's social, political and economic problems, a convenient means of easing the dislocations caused by famine, industrialisation, and revolutionary Chartism. As in the case of the convicts, recent studies of the emigrants' backgrounds and capabilities show that such views were generally misplaced and unfair. The emigrants were more self-selecting than selected, petitioning their overseers for aid and assistance and using 'their one strength—the potential burden they might impose upon the poor rates—to extract assistance from their "betters"' (Howells, 2003: 588). They generally had better literacy and working skills than those among their peers who remained at home, and they tended to be more astute and discerning in judging how best to advance themselves.

> The emigrants weighed the costs and benefits of imminent departure and made decisions on the best available information and on their most auspicious immediate prospects. This independence of spirit supports the view that emigrants were not simply 'shovelled out' but tended to act in their own best interests (Haines, 1994: 230. See also Haines and McDonald, 2002).

The various critics of the immigration scheme also ignored or downplayed the important contributions made by the assisted immigrants both to the colony and the empire. They provided a means by which Britain's gentrified classes could demonstrate their continuing generosity and concern for their workers and parishioners and so contribute to an improved relationship between the country's rich and poor (Howells, 2003). The newly arrived immigrants were ready consumers of the goods being massed-produced in England's factories and so contributed directly to the empire's expanding economic prosperity. They provided sufficient 'childless couples and unmarried females to ensure that the future population needs of the colony would be met' and, as people who had been 'well recommended for

sobriety and for industry', helped stabilise the new frontiers especially during the turmoil of the gold rushes (Holt, 2001: 107). Most importantly of all the emigrants provided the squatters, merchants and dealers with the basic workforce needed to change the colony from a penal settlement into a modern economy, in a way, moreover, that did not threaten the established social order.

This was because the emigrants were subject to a rigorous and comprehensive selection process which would yield people who, though individually independent, even assertive, tended also to be socially and politically conservative. Given the key role of the clergy in their selection, the emigrants tended to be 'good Christians', church goers who, whether Anglicans or members of a dissenting religion, lived and worked in accordance with the principle maxims of Victorian evangelism: sobriety, piety, frugality and chastity. Following the lead set by their middle class 'betters', they worked hard, placed great store in family and fireside life, drew inspiration from the Bible and pulpit orations, frowned upon public displays of frivolity and indulgence, and thrilled to tales of imperial adventures. Unlike many of their town and city cousins, those who came from rural communities in Britain still deferred to both rank and privilege, and accepted without demur existing magisterial and religious systems of governance and social control. Their aspirations were generally more personal than political: following their Christian mission, working hard on earth to earn salvation in heaven, and forming, over time and with the blessing of rulers and radicals alike, a land-owning, yeomanry whose members, as George Eliot wrote in *The Mill on the Floss*, 'dressed in good broadcloth, paid high rates and taxes, went to church, and ate a particularly good meal on Sunday' (cited in Altick, 1973: 36).

These predispositions and tendencies were likely to have been reinforced by the lectures, motivational tracts and other edifying literature that were given in great numbers to the emigrants—both prior to embarkation and during the voyage out—by such evangelical organizations as the British Ladies Female Emigrant Society and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. These promoted Australia as a place where hard-working, enterprising Christians could prosper both economically and spiritually: 'If you have never yet given yourselves up to God's service, do so now; feel that He is giving to each of you a commission to do something for Him in Australia' (SPCK tract, cited in Haines, 1994: 187). They also instructed women on their future domestic duties and

responsibilities including that of bringing a sense of morality and civilisation to the former convict colonies while their men got on 'with the more important business of taming the landscape' (Bell, 2001: 7). The emigrants took these and their other Victorian values and beliefs with them as they gradually moved inland from the coast and helped establish rural and regional communities across Australia. In so doing, they served generally to reinforce rather than unsettle the existing social and political *status quo* although both the lure of gold and the subsequent campaign to 'unlock the lands' threatened, for a time, to derail the process.

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Those immigrants who survived the journey out, were no doubt pleased they had arrived safely although the terrors of their voyage, enjoined with the initial experience of their new homeland, might have led some among them to worry whether they had not made a dreadful mistake. For, like William Free, those proceeding to Melbourne were landed not at a harbour but on a beach—Liardet's Beach or Sandridge as the respectable classes preferred to call it—at which there were present some ramshackle buildings, but no quay, no warehouses, no merchants, and no shade in which women and children could rest while the men looked for transport. The shore up to the high-water mark was lined with broken drift spars and oars, discarded ship-blocks, mattresses and pillows, empty bottles, ballast kegs, and sundry other items of flotsam. The township of Melbourne was out of sight, eight miles distant by river and three across land. The *Lady Kennaway* and the fourteen other ships that had arrived on the same day with their passengers and goods from such places as Bristol, Glasgow, Rio de Janeiro and Wanganui in New Zealand, lay at anchor up to a mile offshore. With them were dozens of other two- and four-masted vessels whose crews had abandoned ship and headed inland to the goldfields.

The transport from ship to shore and thence to the boarding houses and hiring depots of Melbourne was conducted by boatmen, carters and draymen who assessed in a glance their prospective passengers and charged accordingly—2s. 6d. a trip for ordinary immigrants and as much as £1 for single gentlemen or those who protested at the price. These were no doubt outraged at being 'fleeced' by members of the labouring classes or, worse still, by former thieves who had been earlier transported 'for their country's good' (Howitt, 1972: 50). But

given the demand for transport, there was little they could do other than walk or carry their possessions along the sandy track edged with scrubby tea-trees and banksias that ran from Sandridge into town. After skirting a number of swamps and gullies, the traveller would have come upon Emerald Hill, an exposed, grassy area near where South Melbourne is today and at which were encamped, in tents that looked too 'thin and white for outdoor life', hundreds of immigrants and their families (Howitt, 1972: 12). These were destined for the diggings around Ballarat and Bendigo, and preferred to pay the government five shillings a week to stay on this and other wastelands than the exorbitant rents being charged by Melbourne's denizens. In spite of the numbers present, the atmosphere in the camps was generally happy, almost buoyant. People sat around their cooking fires talking and laughing. Many of the men had removed their jackets, and the younger children ran about the place barefooted.

While Melbourne had grown beyond the collection of 'cottages and mean huts' observed by Alfred Joyce a decade earlier, it continued to exhibit a 'straggling and unfinished appearance' (Howitt, 1972: 13). The central area of the town contained a number of churches and other large buildings made of stone and iron. But these were scattered unevenly across the city space, and between them were located a rough assortment of yards, stores and lodgings constructed mainly of canvas and wood. Along the river were the town wharves which were marked by lines of lighters, steamers and other small sailing vessels, three and four deep, discharging their various cargoes into the substantial warehouses that lined the bank. The streets were neither lit nor drained and were clogged with horse-driven drays, coaches, vans and carts in such profusion that the scene would have reminded many newcomers of London or Dublin. Except in the town centre, where the roads were laid out and flagged, these vehicles were driven wherever there was space, churning up the soil and, in summer, contributing to the clouds of dust that hung over the town. On the other side of the city area, flowing from the higher ground to the north down into the vale of the Yarra, were the suburbs of Collingwood and Richmond. According to William Howitt, who arrived in the colony the same year as William, 'a balder and more unattractive scene' could not be imagined. Where before there had been grassland and evergreen trees, the area was now

> ... a wilderness of wooden huts of Lilliputian dimensions; and everywhere around and amongst them timber and rubbish, delightfully interspersed with pigs, geese, hens, goats and dogs innumerable ... there is not the trace even of the idea of a garden (Howitt, 1855: 15-6).

Like all newcomers, William Free was likely to have been struck by the feverish spirit of the town and the rawness of the life and behaviour of its inhabitants. Alongside the hopeful immigrants and the gold-seeking adventurers thronging the streets were the diggers; wild-looking fellows with broad hats and flowing beards that 'might have frightened a Russian bear' (John Sherer, cited in Kiddle, 1963: 191). As Margaret Kiddle described, the digger was easily distinguishable from the newest arrivals. His face was 'darkened not only with sunburn, but dirt; the loose blue or scarlet serge shirt was belted over trousers stained with yellow mud; pistols and knives were stuck into the belt; picks and shovels were carried as well as a swag, and the whole rig-out was generally accompanied by a ferocious dog' (Kiddle, 1963: 189).

The diggers' language and manners were as shocking to the newcomers as their lurid shirts. Many labourers and workers among them who had struck it rich took particular delight in flaunting their success. They wore toppers instead of their usual cabbage-tree hats, dressed in the best broadcloth, and covered themselves with flashy gold rings and other expensive adornments. They used bottles of expensive wines for their games of skittles, lit up their cigars with five-pound notes, and drunkenly paraded about town in carriages driven by liveried coachmen. In these they were often accompanied by women or girls who were 'decked out in the richest and brightest of silks and satins, below which not unfrequently peeped bare red feet' (J. H. Kerr, cited in Serle, 1977: 29). When they were not carousing in the local taverns and inns, some successful diggers took their place in the dress circles of the town's theatres where they and their consorts smoked Barret's twist in their short-stemmed pipes and, seated alongside the theatre's normal patrons, watched the latest entertainments from London and New York.

The respectable denizens of Melbourne may have looked askance at the raucous diggers and their female companions, but they shared with them a profound interest in the latest news from the diggings. The intensity of the fever caused by gold waxed and waned but, much like malaria and other tropical diseases, never fully left its host, lying dormant in the blood, until activated by a

newspaper report, a conversation, or one of the rumours that seemed always, like Melbourne's dust, to be hanging in the air. In the early days, an outbreak of gold fever would empty the squatters' runs of their workers and the towns of their male inhabitants—for the disease seemed mainly to affect men. In later years it would see, in addition to the streams of overseas hopefuls flowing from the towns into the bush, hundreds, sometimes thousands of miners suddenly rushing from one digging to the next. In the process, what had earlier been a secluded bush valley became a 'street about two miles long, lined on both sides with the tents of storekeepers, butchers, doctors, barbers, eating houses, refreshment sellers, auctioneers and a host of nondescript tradesmen...with thousands of diggers in the background on both sides (Alfred Joyce in James, 1969: 152). And, from daylight to dusk, the quiet calm of this ancient country was rendered by the creaking of windlasses, the thud and scrape of picks and shovels, and the oaths and utterances of men of all classes and nationalities who laboured side-by-side in their holes in the ground.

The basic nature of this enterprise together with the goldfield's polyglot and increasingly cosmopolitan workforce provided the seeds of a more democratic, egalitarian and representative society where, in the absence of governmental structures and leadership, the workers often took responsibility for the management of their lives and conditions. The daily toil and common dangers faced also generated among the diggers 'an air of swagger and independence, of courage and resolution—doubtless, in many instances, infinitely heightened by the magnitude of the[ir] black, sandy, and red beards' (Sherer; 1973: 58-9). Within this 'hairystocracy', as William Howitt labelled it, a person's importance was judged not by his level of education or condition of birth, but by his capacity and willingness to work. 'Work is the word', declared the Englishman John Sherer, who laboured on the goldfields in the early 1850s, 'and if you cannot do this, you are of no use there', (Sherer; 1973: 10). But even though all were concerned with improving their lot, there was also present among the diggers a strong sense of egalitarianism, kinship and communal endeavour. As Geoffrey Serle observed, in this regard at least, the social conditions on the goldfields were not unlike those that prevailed during Victoria's early pastoral age, and they stemmed from similar factors and forces:

> The loneliness of men thrown on their own resources in a country far from home and the accustomed reassuring conventions of an old

> country, the general absence of female company, the sparseness of settlement and the dangers of travelling, all drew men together, as in army life. Idealists should beware of romanticizing the digger. But if, as much or more than other migrants to Australia, he kept his eye on the main chance, he yet had his saving graces (Serle, 1977: 94).

Such saving graces were, as we will see shortly, useful in the coming battles with the authorities over the diggers' licence fee and the administration of the goldfields. They would also be important in the concurrent struggles between the country's working and ruling classes over the ownership of land and the right to vote. As Serle further observed, the goldfields replicated but, in important ways, was also at odds with the spirit that held sway in Melbourne in particular during the height of the gold rushes. There, as we have already seen, there were few saving graces in evidence. In the words of one contemporary writer, Melbourne witnessed at the time 'neither brotherhood, nor charity, nor generosity, nor virtue…All worshipped Mammon and Mammon was their god; [and] selfishness was disgustingly universal among all save the diggers' (Cornwallis, cited in Serle; 1973: 122).

The assisted immigrants were not immune from such feelings of course. They would have read about the earlier finds in their newspapers at home, discussed on the long voyage out the prospects of striking it rich, and, on arrival in the colony, were quickly engulfed by the atmosphere of frenzied speculation that enveloped Melbourne and the other ports of entry. As the *Lady Kennaway* dropped anchor on 15 August 1853, its passengers would have read, or had read to them from papers brought on board by the ship's pilot, news of the latest rush in progress from the McIvor to the Goulburn diggings. According to the *Argus*' correspondent at the scene, '[m]an, woman, child, horses, bullocks, goats, tubs, cradles, picks, tools and stores of all descriptions, are all off and away', driven on by the 'excitement produced by the various stories of "lucky finds" of gold, [that] have become almost painful to listen to'. The 'bright fires of the McIvor' have so paled before those of the Goulburn, the correspondent continued, that 'apparently soon will the shepherd resume his solitary rambles on the once gay and lively banks of the former place' (*Argus*, 15 August 1853).

The immigrants were also apprised of the dangers posed by the former convicts, or 'old lags', who were said to be pouring into the colony from Sydney and Van Diemen's Land and, when not carousing in the town's grog shanties, preyed on the colony's

newest citizens. The edition of the *Argus* that notified the passengers on the *Lady Kennaway* of the latest gold rush, also detailed the activities of two such 'tigers turned loose among us', Henry Turner and John Smith, who had just been 'sentenced to the last dreadful penalty of the law'. This was for first shooting and then robbing one man in broad daylight on the high road, and then shooting another, with whom they had breakfasted, in the face and leaving him, blinded and stricken with terror, while they ransacked his tent and belongings. 'These men', the paper's editor warned his latest and undoubtedly appalled readers, 'are but a type of a large class amongst us...[the output of] the perfecting process of such a seminary of crime as is established by the transportation system'. These products of the 'devil's den' of Tasmania, he continued, are being 'turned loose among us by scores,' and are 'more bloody, dangerous and cruel that either snake or carnivorous beast' (*Argus*, 15 August 1853).

The main target of this editorial tirade, the studious and remote Victorian Governor, Charles Joseph La Trobe, was less concerned about the undoubted menace of Vandemonian bushrangers as with the continuing agitations of the miners at the Victorian goldfields. A few days before the arrival of the *Lady Kennaway*, La Trobe had been presented with a petition bearing the signatures of some 5,000 diggers from the Bendigo, Forest Creek and McIvor goldfields. In it the aggrieved miners requested that the existing licence fee be reduced, the administration of the diggings be overhauled, and the diggers and other workers in the colony be given access to Crown land. The petition ended by reminding the Governor that the miners were also unrepresented in Victoria's new parliament, an issue whose resolution the *Argus*, for one, considered to be paramount to the success of their cause.

Until then La Trobe had thought that the goldfield era, while not without its problems, had proceeded sufficiently smoothly that his successor, Charles Hotham, who was due to take over the duties of Governor in May 1854, would be 'in a fair position' to run the colony. He now felt it necessary to inform his superiors in London that his government was 'involved in serious and unexpected difficulties'. These had, in La Trobe's mind, been precipitated by a proposal by the Legislative Council of New South Wales to consider abolishing the monthly goldminer's licence fee—which all diggers had to pay whether they were successful or not—and replacing it with a form of gold tax. While not unsympathetic to such a move in the longer term, the overly cautious La Trobe was loath to make such a change without his

superiors' blessing. He was also worried that Sydney's precipitative move might serve to galvanise the Victorian diggers, not only in their disparate efforts to improve the goldfields' administration, but also to push for a range of more extensive political and social reforms. As he lamented to the Colonial Secretary, the New South Wales government's proposal

> ... furnished a main thread with which all other minor subjects of discontent or agitation, or grievance, real or supposed, could be linked; and engaged the cooperation, to a greater or less extent, of a large mass of the population of all classes, otherwise little disposed to complain and hitherto unaffected by the ordinary subjects of agitation (BPP, 1853: 160).

What the Governor chose not to spell out to his superiors was that the 1853 petition was the latest in a series of actions and agitations by disgruntled diggers that dated virtually from the time gold was first discovered by James Esmond at Anderson's Creek near Clunes in July 1851. On receiving this news, La Trobe, following the precedent set down by his New South Wales counterpart, declared that all gold found in the colony belonged to the Crown and that persons seeking it would, from 1 September of that year, be required to have a prospector's licence which could be purchased from the government for the sum of 30 shillings a month. The imposition of this 'juggernaut tax', as the licence fee was described by one newspaper, brought cries of protest from across the colony (*Geelong Advertiser*, 26 August 1851, cited in Serle, 1977: 20). A meeting of miners at Buninyong resolved to 'resist and avoid, by all lawful means, the payment of the tax', whereas those at Ballarat agreed that five shillings represented a more appropriate fee. Worried by the reaction, the government deferred the implementation of the licence regime by one month, although not before a good number of people had paid their money. The government had got off to a bad start and, in spite of some wishful thinking on the part of La Trobe—who reported there had been only a 'slight show of opposition' to his government's actions—the situation would not improve (cited in Serle, 1977: 21).

In December 1851 Victoria's squatter-dominated Legislative Council sought to increase the monthly licence fee from 30s to £3, largely as a means of preventing their workers leaving before the harvest season ended. This provoked further outcries from the diggers at Forest Creek in particular and their delegates—branded 'Red-Republican ranters' by the Melbourne *Morning Herald*—who decreed that anyone arrested for not

paying the new fee would be rescued, if necessary by force, from their captors (Serle, 1977: 25; Kent, 1972: 4). Four months later, as the goldfields' administration began to be overwhelmed by the influx of prospectors from overseas, the same diggers formed a Mutual Protection Association to carry out functions normally conducted by the police. Both this and the earlier agitations were diffused in part by the subsequent deployment of extra police to the areas affected but also by the discovery of the Ovens goldfields which precipitated a rush of diggers there from the Forest Creek diggings.

In September 1852 the government sought, at the instigation of the Colonial Office, to introduce a gold export duty of 2s. 6d. an ounce where the new duty would be in addition to the existing licence fee. The bill introducing the measure was eventually voted down by the Legislative Council but not before the diggers, who were already angry over the lack of police protection against criminal elements and the poor state of the roads leading to the Castlemaine goldfields in particular, condemned the new tax and sent a delegation to Melbourne to put their views to the Governor. While the rush to the Ovens and the Council's decision not to proceed with the gold tax temporarily defused the diggers' anger, it arose again following a series of clashes between the miners and local goldfields administrators and police.

The most serious of these occurred at Reid's Creek in February 1853 after a miner, William Guest, was accidentally shot dead during a licence inspection being conducted by the young, inexperienced and widely disliked Assistant-Commissioner Meyer. According to an account in the *Argus*, some 2000 miners rushed to the spot, the police were 'disarmed, beaten and pelted by the enraged crowd', and the constable who had fired the shot was 'fearfully ill-treated'. Meyer fled and the diggers, now numbering around three thousand, marched on and then ransacked the Assistant-Commissioner's camp, smashing to pieces all the weapons there they could find. They did not, however, touch the Commissioner's Office and neither looted government property nor stole any of the money and gold that was being held there in safe storage. As Bruce Kent later argued, this showed that the riot was not 'merely an instance of blind mob violence.' Rather, the diggers seemed to 'have acted with remarkable restraint throughout' where their 'concern was purely and simply to put an end to a long succession of acts of tyranny and injustice, of which the shooting, if the most flagrant, was but another example' (Kent, 1972: 8).

The continuing maladministration of the goldfield, the zealous collection of fees by police who were either corrupt or overly contemptuous of the diggers—many treating them as they treated the convicts—and the government's apparent indifference to the inequities of the licence system, ensured that the lull in digger agitation that followed the Legislative Council's decision to vote down the export duty would not last. In June 1853 the diggers at Bendigo formed an Anti-Gold-Licence Association which sponsored a series of meetings, both there and at adjacent goldfields, where grievances were aired and signatures collected for the petition—measuring some forty feet long and bound in green silk—that was presented to La Trobe just prior to the arrival of the *Lady Kennaway*. The meeting between La Trobe and the delegates conveying the petition was, according to Geoffrey Serle, 'unsatisfactory' for all the parties concerned.

> The delegates tried to be respectful but were tactless; and though they earnestly endeavoured to emphasize how serious the situation was, they put their case badly. La Trobe was not at his best. He could not unbend, quickly lost patience, said he was determined to uphold the law and do his duty, and closed the meeting quickly (Serle; 1977: 108).

Newspaper reports of the meeting prompted further mass demonstrations at which the assembled diggers offered three groans for 'old Joe' as they called the governor, and the miners at Bendigo agreed to pay only 10 shillings for their next licence. Should this offer be declined by the authorities, they would then not pay any fee. Alarmed by this development, the government reinforced its garrison at Bendigo and requested military reinforcements from both New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. In his despatches home, La Trobe blamed the growing tensions on foreign agitators and other subversives who were said to be flocking to the colony in their thousands and were promoting social and internal disorder. Indeed some within the government believed the intent of the diggers was less to achieve goldfields reform than to overthrow the established order and replace it with a Yankee-style republic. As Geoffrey Serle described, such a view was unjustified, ignoring the loyalty shown by the mass of the diggers to the Crown, their general preference to act constitutionally, and the realization on the part of their leaders that violence was neither appropriate nor likely to be effective. In this last respect, the diggers 'had begun to think in political terms, and fully realized that the vote was the only

satisfactory long-term solution for their grievances' (Serle; 1977: 113).

To try and diffuse the miners' growing anger, La Trobe announced the appointment of a select committee of the Legislative Council to examine the system of licence fees. The committee sat throughout September and October and took considerable evidence from the diggers themselves. While recommending that licences be retained, it suggested the system be changed in ways that would probably have been acceptable to most of the goldfields' inhabitants. In addition to a proposed reduction in the level of fees charged, the principal change was to tie the possession of an annual licence to the right to vote in forthcoming council elections. A solution to the goldfields travails was at last at hand but, again, either because of government laxity or perfidy, neither the resultant Goldfields Management Act nor the proposed constitution for the infant colony provided the diggers with an effective franchise. This betrayal was bitterly resented by the diggers and played no small part in the lead-up to the bloodletting at Eureka.

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The continuing concerns of the diggers were likely to have been far from William's mind when, at Melbourne's employment depot, he put his mark to a contract to labour for a Mr Patterson of Collingwood for six months from 26 August 1853. For this he would be paid at the rate of £80 per annum and he and his family would be provided with rations. William's employer may have been the celebrated John Hunter Patterson who owned a residence in Brunswick Street and was renowned in the early days for driving about town in a 'spanking carriage with a fine four-in-hand team' (Bride, 1969: 151). As a boy, Patterson sailed with his parents from Leith in Scotland to Hobart Town in 1822. In the late 1830s, he entered into 'numerous large speculations in and near Melbourne' before going bankrupt during the 'hungry forties'. A few years later he acquired the lease to the Campaspie plains run where he made a fortune selling mutton to the miners at the Heathcote and Maryborough diggings. 'A public-spirited man', Patterson was a member of the 'squatters' clique' in the Victorian Legislative Council from 1856 until his death three years later.

Before starting work for Patterson, William lodged his family with a cousin in Boorandara (Camberwell). On returning home

from work a week or so later, William found Louisa's condition had worsened. Her small, round face had no colour. Her hair was matted and her cheeks sunken. Dark rings emphasised even more her cobalt-blue eyes which, instead of brightening at seeing him, remained focused on some distant world. Their daughter Rebecca was standing by the foot of the bed watching her mother's struggle. Oblivious to the shadows gathering around him, their small son John played with some stones on the earthen floor. William's cousin had called in a doctor who, when he eventually came, administered some medicine and then rushed off; while most arrivals seemed to undergo a season of illness before adjusting to their new environs, the number of people suffering, and dying, this year from fevers and dysentery was much increased.

William's presence and the medicine seemed to work and Louisa rallied, even taking some broth that her cousin-in-law had earlier made. She rested while he fed the children and put them to bed. Later on, he held her hand while they talked quietly of their families and home, and sat with her while she slept. William was angry with himself for inflicting on her such trials, and spoke of 'putting it right' by finding gold. A good Anglican, Louisa made him promise that, whatever happened, he not expose their children to the evils of the diggings. So this routine continued for the next few nights until one morning, after starting from his own dream-filled slumbers in the chair set next to her bed, he found his beloved companion and wife of just under five years had died in the night. Louisa Free, the eldest daughter of George Chapman and Rebecca Dilley, was just twenty-two years old. She had been in her new homeland a mere fifteen days.

Four months later, in the midst of a heatwave that had lasted for weeks, and during one of Melbourne's regular dust storms, young John also died of exhaustion and malnourishment caused by constant vomiting and diarrhoea. He was buried with his mother in the bushland cemetery that lay outside the fringes of Melbourne's settlements and provided them with a measure of peace and tranquillity they had not been able to enjoy in their brief time in the colony. During the small service, William determined he would leave this cursed place before it also claimed his Rebecca. True to his word, a few days after completing his contract on 24 February 1854, and in spite of an offer of extra pay by his employer to stay on, William, his first born and all their possessions were loaded onto one of the steamers that regularly sailed from Melbourne to Geelong. There

he would work as a shepherd—his true trade—at a place named Mount Hesse.