

## ***Book Reviews***

**Gilbert M. Ralph**, *Bullfinch and the Yilgarn Goldfield*, Hesperian Press, Victoria Park, Western Australia, 2007; xvi +265pp. ISBN 0 85905 395 4

**G**ilbert Ralph's history of Bullfinch centres on the 1950s, the decade when Western Mining Corporation's subsidiary, Great Western Consolidated NL, set out to revive the Yilgarn goldfield and indeed goldmining in Western Australia. The book is a product of his friendship with Laurence Brodie-Hall and Arvi Parbo, two giants of Western Mining Corporation who were leaders in Great Western's Yilgarn venture and who encouraged him to write it, promising that they would contribute their memoirs. Brodie-Hall described his time at Bullfinch (1951–58) as 'the busiest and happiest years of my life' and Parbo had an equally 'exciting' if 'demanding' time at Marvel Loch (1956–60). Ralph's book has certainly been enriched with their memories but also with the reminiscences and personal photographs of many 1950s Bullfinch residents. Their recall pictures Bullfinch in the terms Brodie-Hall describes: 'a happy and proud community' with 'a spirit of getting things done, people looked after themselves and each other and entertained themselves', basically 'a contented community'. Mid-twentieth century Bullfinch was a planned mining town with new housing, adequate essential services, and lively and well-supported community amenities. In so far as isolation allowed, it was a modern town. Ralph provides a valuable insight into the aims and activities of a mining company building a new town and, through that process, building community with the goal of creating a venture 'free of industrial trouble on site', in Brodie-Hall's words. Great Western seems to have succeeded in this social goal. No doubt some people did not like the place and left as soon as they could but, for those who stayed, their Bullfinch years were as memorable and golden as Brodie-Hall's.

Ralph's book is more than a social history of Bullfinch, interesting as that is. Most importantly, it draws effectively on Western Mining Company archives to construct a mining and company history of Great Western Consolidated, its aims and activities, leaders, struggles and eventual failure. Lindesay Clarke's decision to move Western Mining Corporation into the Yilgarn in 1946 resulted in extensive exploration and sampling, and the pegging of more than one hundred leases in an area stretching from north of Bullfinch to south of Southern

Cross. Great Western Consolidated NL was incorporated in 1948. Buildings and plant were acquired from inactive ventures around Western Australia's goldfields, and Great Western's centrepieces – Bullfinch's Copperhead deep mine, open cut and large treatment plant – were developed. The new plant was designed to process ore not only from the Bullfinch mines but also from the company's mines across the Yilgarn where test results had been promising. The workforce followed the work from Wiluna, Big Bell and other declining ventures to the new enterprise. With what must have been industry best practice (or close to it) in all areas, the venture seemed set for great success. Yet it proved an uphill struggle from the start with shortages of money, materials and ore to keep the mill working at full capacity. Great Western reached further south to Marvel Loch for more ore, using large road trains for ore transport to Bullfinch. Despite this wide reach, none of these re-opened Yilgarn ore bodies lived up to expectations and gold recovery (3.4dwt/ton) remained lower than anticipated (4.3dwt/ton). To the embarrassment of board members, a Great Western gold bonanza with an anticipated £800,000/yr profit did not eventuate. Inflation ate away at profit margins and much of the modest profit of the mid-1950s resulted from a gold mining subsidy provided by a sympathetic state Labor government keen to see postwar revival come to the goldfields and by the federal government's Gold Mining Industry Subsidy Scheme. By 1960 Great Western was failing. Operating at a loss, the company ceased all development work. The treatment plant closed in 1963 and equipment began to be sold off or moved to other Western Mining ventures. W.S. Robinson's 'sting in the tail' of a letter he wrote to Brodie-Hall said it all: 'Never have I seen £3½ million lost with greater efficiency'! And Bullfinch resumed the precarious continuing existence to which it had clung prior to Great Western's arrival.

The earlier and later histories of the Yilgarn goldfield bookend Ralph's account of Great Western's postwar venture. Appendix II graphs the fourfold rise and fall of gold production on the field in the 1910s, 1930s–1940s, 1950s–1960s and 1990s–2000s. By far the greatest gold production, by a factor of four, occurred in the most recent period when the price of gold rose, ore transport costs declined, and mining and ore treatment technologies improved, most notably with the introduction of the Carbon in Leach process. The Yilgarn goldfield flourished as previously unprofitable deposits and old workings were given renewed attention. Then decline began again. Ralph presents these mining cycles with an insider's optimism as well as a sense of the inevitability of it all. Companies, syndicates and individual prospectors 'pass into oblivion. Such is the way of mining. But others follow'. In the history

of the Yilgarn goldfield, however, Great Western Consolidated's 1950s venture is unlikely to be forgotten. Ralph's account is both authoritative and interesting, and the book is one to be recommended.

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**Barry McGowan**, *Fool's Gold: Myths and Legends of Gold seeking in Australia*, Lothian Books, Sydney, 2006. ISBN 0 7344 0884 6

**B**arry McGowan needs little or no introduction to devotees of Australasian mining history, least of all to readers of this journal or members of the Australian Mining History Association. His enormously successful *Australian Ghost Towns* remains a firm favourite with both popular enthusiasts and more serious scholars, a lively and well illustrated volume that reflects the romance of the 'outback' and yet raises important questions for the historian to consider. For, in addition to his undoubted ability to spin a good yarn, Barry McGowan is also Visiting Fellow at the ANU School of Archaeology and Anthropology, an academic as well as a professional writer.

McGowan's happy knack of appealing to both popular and more scholarly audiences is evidenced in his most recent book, *Fools Gold: Myths and Legends of Gold seeking in Australia*. Another roaring good read, again superbly illustrated, the book ranges in content across Australia, with tales of spectacular success and (mostly) dismal failure, a story of stubborn optimism and endeavour that all too often ends in tragedy. As the publisher's cover blurb puts it so aptly, 'From the fabulously unsuccessful rushes in Queensland to the famous saga of Lasseter's Reef, *Fool's Gold* brings to life the bloody clashes, disappointment and insanity that gripped Australia in the name of gold'.

Here, if we may push a tired but appropriate cliché a little further, McGowan has struck a rich vein. In a largely urban country, with the overwhelming majority of the population living on the south-eastern littoral, the inaccessible and forbidding interior of Australia has always exerted a certain mystique and allure – terrifying but endlessly fascinating. McGowan's book begins in the nineteenth century, as one would expect, but a

perhaps surprisingly large part of the book is devoted to the twentieth century, detailing gold-hunting adventures – such as Joklik Expedition to Central Australia in 1950-1 – that are still well within living memory. In Geoffrey Blainey's famous phrase, we are reminded how until so recently Australia remained 'a land half-won'. Perhaps it still is; at any rate, there are still many budding explorers – Barry McGowan prominently among them, as his book reveals – who are prepared to brave the 'outback', if not as fossickers and prospectors then certainly to trace the routes of the great (or foolish) men that have gone before. (The reader senses, for examples, McGowan's enormous respect for the memory of the legendary Fred Blakely, most revered of twentieth-century gold-seekers). In this respect, McGowan's book is firmly in the tradition of Australia's love-hate relationship with the interior, and will have a ready appeal for the reading public.

Yet McGowan's book is more significant still. As well as offering an excellent synthesis of existing knowledge, coupled with much that he has discovered afresh, McGowan offers some important insights for us to ponder. His return to the poignant, almost improbable, story of Lasseter's Reef reminds us of the ability of individuals who, through their own driven ambition and sheer will power, can persuade others to discard their balanced judgments of dubious evidence. Such is the lure of hidden treasure that normally cautious men were sometimes prepared to give the benefit of the doubt to the Walter Mitty characters of the 'outback'. As McGowan notes wryly, it is ironic that Harold Lasseter – whose failure to locate Australia's 'El Dorado' led directly to his own miserable death in the wilderness – should now have a Federal Highway named in his honour (as devotees of the soap-opera 'Neighbours' will observe, he also seems to have a tele-fictional public bar named after him). But, in its way, it was also apt, for Lasseter was an extreme example of Australian fascination with the 'outback' and its supposed beckoning wealth. Lasseter had been influenced by the American novelist Harold Bell Wright (so much so, that he adopted the first two names as his own), who had written exciting adventures about the quest for boundless riches in the American West. Wright, as McGowan shows, was but one author among many in what was for a time a popular *genre* – stories of the search for mineral wealth on the frontiers of the New World – a literary phenomenon that had a major impact on the fertile imaginations of Australian readers.

In these fictional stories, as McGowan also shows, the indigenous people – Native American or Australian Aboriginal – have a role to play: sometimes hostile, sometimes co-

operative; sometimes loyal and sometimes perfidious. Yet they are almost always uncomprehending, exhibiting a pre-modern bewilderment at the white man's obsession with the yellow metal. Here is the real irony of Lasseter's demise, for in his agonizing last hours he was helped by local Aborigines who knew the country well and could tap its resources far better than he. For 'the land half won', with the intriguing fascination of the harsh and dangerous interior, was the perspective of the European settlers and subsequent generations of white Australians. It was not a view that Aborigines would have recognized. To his credit, Barry McGowan is not afraid to confront such complex and controversial issues. His treatment of the Palmer River rush in northern Queensland, for example, is refreshingly honest and insightful. As he observes, there was significant conflict between the beleaguered gold-seekers and the local Aboriginal population. The Aborigines resisted the Chinese prospectors as fiercely as they did the white, and from this conflict emerged lurid tales of Aboriginal cannibalism, including the suggestion that the Aborigines preferred Chinese flesh to European. As McGowan observes with commendable candour, such stories found their way into the lore of Australian mining and into Australian folk-memory generally, and remained there with such intensity that even today they inform social and political attitudes. As McGowan shows, 'These accounts assumed political significance ... when Pauline Hanson, the leader of the One Nation Party, asked when would the 'descendents of those blacks who cannibalized Chinese miners on the Palmer River in 1875 be required to bear the guilt of their forefathers'.

Here Barry McGowan takes us considerably beyond the conventional bounds of popular or academic books on Australian mining history, and points one possible way ahead. In a subject area that is all too often fixated on the minutiae of technical detail – the gauges of mineral tramways or the dimensions of pump-engine cylinders – this focus on the culture and psychology of gold-seeking offers a new perspective on the social history of Australian mining, and in so doing provides an important insight into the collective Australian psyche and the paradoxical relationship between urban Australia and the vastness of the 'outback'.

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