

A Conspiracy to Silence: Reports of Otago gold prior to 1861

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In 150 years of Otago gold rush historiography, it has been persistently argued that the earliest reports of gold finds in the decade from 1848 to 1858 were suppressed, hidden, or actively discredited by the local government leadership working with compliant newspaper editors. Recent publications have increased the intensity of this argument, yet examination of the newspaper reports from the time reveals an entirely different story.

A Conspiracy to Silence

The first of the arguments in support of this idea appeared in 1862, a year after the now famous ‘Gold, Gold, Gold’, headline in Dundin’s *Otago Witness* newspaper announced the beginning of the Otago gold rush. Goldfields administrator, law-maker and politician Vincent Pyke (Fig. 1) wrote a history of the early days of the Otago gold rush, and in the process, shaped how these events - and the Provincial Government’s reaction to them - are perceived by the public and historians to this day. In his 1863 report to Otago Superintendent J. Hyde Harris (later included in a report to the *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives 1863*), Pyke says ‘gold was found in various parts of the province ... But the fact was either suppressed, as likely to produce mischievous results, or neglected, as of trivial import’.¹

In his more expansive 1887 *History of Early Gold Discoveries*, Pyke developed this theme and wrote

...peace and security were the chief objects [The Otago Settlers Association] sought when they went out from the country of their birth to seek a home and an abiding place in the remote and savage wildernesses of the Pacific. We may be quite sure that no expectation of possible Goldfields was on their minds when they sailed away from home and friends. There is ample evidence in the records of those early days to show that such an event as the discovery of gold was not only very far from their thoughts, but that would have been exceedingly distasteful to them if they had foreseen it.²

Pyke’s choice of words, in declaring that the facts of gold finds were actively suppressed and characterising all gold news as unwelcome by the governing authorities, set the tone for nearly all subsequent writing on the subject.

Vincent Pyke was no disinterested observer: in 1855 he had been catapulted into political office in Victoria in the aftermath of Eureka and was an avowed progressive liberal.³ Regarded as an advocate for enfranchising miners,⁴ this former linen-draper crafted goldfields legislation that remains the basis for mining law in New Zealand, and was often acerbic in his judgement of his provincial leader paymasters. Characterising the action of the government as obstructive and negative suited his liberal agenda and

the underlying polemic in the 1886 writing reflects his embitterment at his treatment by the Otago administration under Thomas Dick.⁵

Subsequent historians echoed or expanded on Pyke's views. William Pember Reeves in his 1898 *Long White Cloud* history of New Zealand emphasised that the 'good

Figure 1: *Vincent Pyke ca. 1876*



Presbyterians of Dunedin'⁶ were 'thunderstruck at the news'⁷ that gold was found on their doorstep in the late 1850s, an opinion echoed by the Rev. James Chisolm, who quotes Cutten as declaring 'We are not of the number of those who look upon the discovery of gold as the greatest of blessings'.⁸ Thomas Hocken, wrote in the same year that while there were many reported gold finds prior to 1861, '... little heed was paid to these passing notices, and attention to them was not encouraged. The wild, roving life of the digger did not comport with the steady plodding of the Scotch community'.⁹ In his 1947 *Story of Otago*, A.H. Reed echoes these sentiments, commenting that when the gold dust and quartz was sent from Goodwood, 'the fathers of the settlement were not desirous of having its respectability endangered by a gold rush',¹⁰ and later opines:

Source: L. Carpenter Collection.

Captain Cargill looked distrustfully at the yellow metal. It was not that he doubted its genuineness, but that neither he nor his Free Church stalwarts had any desire for the settlement to be enriched at the expense of the invasion of order of godless adventurers from overseas.¹¹

A.H. McClintock came to a different conclusion in his *History of Otago*, concluding that (at least in the early years of Otago) Cargill was not totally opposed to minerals being found in the province.¹² However McClintock says that early reports 'were studiously ignored by leaders and settlers alike', and notes that 'in the mid-1850s, Cargill and the other leaders were fighting a desperate battle to restrict emigration from 'undesirable' sources. Thus the thought of the discovery of the goldfield, with its inevitable and dreaded cosmopolitanism, conjured up a picture not to be contemplated without alarm'.¹³ McClintock is echoed in June Wood's *Gold Trails of Otago*, Geoffrey Duff's *Sheep May Safely Graze* and Tony Nolan's *Romantic World of Gold*.¹⁴ Thirteen years after his *Story of Otago*, Reed's *Story of Early Dunedin* more closely reflects Pyke's opinion, stating that 'the editor, no doubt voicing the views of Cargill and the Provincial Council, deprecated any general rush in search of [Mataura] gold, urging that wild speculation would result in withdrawal of the needed labour from town and farm lands'.¹⁵ Reed discusses the reward offer in 1857, but characterises the Provincial Council responding to demands 'for the localities where gold prospecting and working would be likely to give the best results' with 'an implacable impassivity'.¹⁶

In 1963, in his *History of Gold-Mining in New Zealand*, J.H.M. Salmon eschews Pyke's ideas, noting instead that 'neither the large leaseholder nor the individualist miner was in tune with the spirit of the founding fathers of Otago'.¹⁷ At the same time Hugh Glasson's *Golden Cobweb*¹⁸ and Erik Olssen's *History of Otago* locate Burns and Cargill's opposition to gold in an explicitly religious grounding, but neither makes an accusation of a suppression of gold finds:

gold brought thousands of footloose, single, drinking, whoring, gambling young men; it scattered the population beyond the reaches of the Kirk; it might also bring with it thousands of Catholic Irishmen ... Gold miners pursued pleasure unredeemed by moral purpose. Worse, gold rewarded the gambler and fostered a gambling spirit, enthroned Mammon in God's seat.¹⁹

In the *Reed Illustrated History of New Zealand*, Matthew Wright echoes Salmon, but in his *Old South*, mirrors Olssen: 'The threat to Dunedin's faltering Presbyterian idyll seemed clear; and local authorities were eager to cast gold miners in the worst possible light',²⁰ a theme continued in John Hall-Jones' *Goldfields of Otago*²¹ and John Milton Hutchins' *Diggers, Constables, and Bushrangers*.²²

The most determined polemic alleging activist political intervention by the ruling class in suppressing prospectors' gold finds is found in Stevan Eldred-Grigg's populist *Diggers Hatters & Whores*:

as long as the province stayed under the sway of a Conservative leadership word of gold would not be heard widely. Landowners quashed news of nuggets, or at least did their best to do so, while they held power. Gold was seen by them, rightly, as a threat to their flocks, their landholdings, their wealth and the dignity.²³

Continuing in this vein, Eldred-Grigg declares 'the royal metal was found once more in 1853, this time at Mount Hyde, and once more the news was damped down by the governing clique',²⁴ and suggests an active hiding of Ligar's report, declaring that 'Cargill handled the report skilfully, talking it down when it was brought before the Provincial Council'.²⁵ This serves the class warfare trope for this writer's historicising of the rush in his book, and the book's popularity means that it has shaped many opinions.

Vincent Pyke set the tone and other historians have followed and added to his ideas, probably under the conclusion that if Pyke - widely regarded as having overseen the development of Otago as a gold province - drew the conclusion that the newspapers and government suppressed news of gold, then this must be correct. However Pyke arrived in Dunedin in April 1862²⁶ and was appointed to the position of Goldfields Commissioner in late May 1862,²⁷ or a year after Gabriel Read announced his gold find at the Tuapeka. Anything in Pyke's writing prior to this required him to research information or rely on scant and haphazard documentary sources. As such, what is written by Pyke represents this articulate, passionate, thorough, yet highly-opinionated administrator/politician/historian's best efforts to collate, edit and construct a single narrative of the early days of gold finding in Otago. His writing is not error-free and should not be treated as inviolate by modern historians.

Given this historiography, it becomes apparent why the idea of the suppression of gold-finds has taken root in the popular imagination, but what is not widely appreciated is how news of early Otago gold finds was freely – and widely – reported throughout Australasia. The agents of this news dissemination were the new newspapers in the nascent settlements, which acted with little political interference.

Gold Reports in Dunedin newspapers

The first Dunedin newspaper was H.B. Graham's *Otago News*,²⁸ which began in 1848, only nine months after the arrival of the two principal settler ships, the *John Wickliffe* and the *Philip Laing*, when the struggling town had a population of barely 600.²⁹ The first issue boasted that it would provide a 'public organ ... whose iron-tongued mouth may be heard uttering its wants, its benefits, its abuses, its hopes, and fears, thousands of miles away, and stirring up the hearts of men to justice, and to act truthfully at home and abroad'.³⁰

It featured gold on 9 June 1849, reprinting a February *Times* article, 'Gold "Diggings"' which discussed the legal status of the Californian territory and reported the entire military disbanding 'to join the invaders in common quest of plunder'. It also offered a light-hearted survey of goldfields characters:

plodding old stagers grub on steadily in the sand, and wash their scrapings in a tin pan. More lazy ones roll about and pick up the big bits, ... some fine dashing fellows on horses career over the rocks with bowie knives at full speed, and "gouge" out the gold from the crevices [and there is] neither law, nor government, nor police.³¹

In the months that followed, the paper reprinted reports clipped from *Bell's Messenger*³² including letters from 'Gold Pippin' in California to 'Sour Crab' in Auckland: 'You will hardly believe, but the gold which one meets/Is as common as mud that's oft in your streets'³³ and 'Dr J. Tyrwhitt Brooks' of the *Times*, offering 'a perfect febrifuge ... to all the agitated curates, lawyer's clerks, bankers' ditto, who are firmly resolved to throw up their hundred a year next quarter day, to buy with their poor savings a spade and cradle'.³⁴ In November, it carried the *Sydney Morning Herald's* report into California, detailing how 'the gold still continues to be found in abundance ... but still the robberies and the murders, and the sickness which prevailed, has caused much misery and discontent',³⁵ reflecting a change of tone from what had begun as a thrilling 'Boys' Own Adventure' at the Californian goldfields to increasingly prurient details of murder and mayhem.³⁶

In the remaining months that the *Otago News* operated, its offerings about gold ranged from wonder at boomtown San Francisco,³⁷ to the demand for vessels to sail from New Zealand to the goldfields,³⁸ to a summary of the very worst that the editor had heard:

This is the world upside down; awful sufferings are amongst respectable men, who are not accustomed to labour, and are unemployed ... Some do great things at the diggings: 6 ounces, 10 ounces, and even 16 ounces a day; but hundreds do scarcely sufficient to clear expenses. ... Murders are frequent both in country

and city ... I would not advise anyone to come to California without due consideration.³⁹

At the end of 1850 the *News* was sold by the ailing Graham and in early 1851, W.H. Cutten's *Otago Witness* launched with the *News*' printing plant,⁴⁰ minimal fanfare and 120 subscribers, half of whom were overseas.⁴¹ Beginning with prosaic reports of local development, roading issues and agriculture, its fortnightly edition featured columns from foreign newspapers. The overall tone reflected the conservative thinking of the city's burghers, offering what the National Library of New Zealand calls a 'high moral stance', but which was 'insulting, vindictive and highly biased in the way that it helped [Otago Association leader] William Cargill',⁴² especially given that W.H. Cutten was Cargill's son-in-law.⁴³

The *Witness* disapproved of the rush to California, emphasising the most graphic and salacious events, grudgingly admitting riches found, but highlighting the worst aspects as a cautionary tale. Their first article from California said 'by a gentleman who arrived from the Southern mines, we learn of several murders and other atrocities committed there, which developed a very bad state of society',⁴⁴ while their second grimly listed a string of murders.⁴⁵ When news of the gold finds in New South Wales broke later in 1851, the dour tone of the reportage was renewed, reproducing a *Bathurst Free Press* leader:

The discovery of the fact by Mr. Hargraves that the country ... is one immense gold field, has produced a tremendous excitement in the town of Bathurst ... A complete mental madness appears to have seized almost every member of the community, and, as a natural consequence, there has been a universal rush to the diggings. Any attempt to describe the numberless scenes - grave, gay, and ludicrous - ... would require the graphic pen of a Dickens, and would exceed any limit which could be assigned to it in a newspaper.⁴⁶

A fortnight later, horrified at the idea that Dunedin settlers could leave for Australia, Cutten's *Witness* became more strident:

All is not gold that glitters is an old proverb, and the truth of which we expect will be speedily realised at ... the other newly discovered golden regions of Australia ... The number of persons who have proceeded to California, ... and who have perished miserably from disease, famine, and violence, is far beyond what is conceivable by persons living in a quiet agricultural country ... the gathering together of every loose character, and the development of every evil passion to its fullest extent, renders the discovery of gold very far from an unalloyed advantage.⁴⁷

In the pages of the same edition, the *Witness* ran a digest of clippings from various Australian papers, each chosen to influence readers against joining the rush, declaring that what 'has happened in California: ruin, misery, disease, death' awaited them, providing a letter from Summerhill Creek, which advised 'Don't come here by any means, unless you want to ruin yourself',⁴⁸ and concluding with Cutten's homily 'WHEAT IS GOLD, AND THE PRODUCE OF THE FORMER WILL HEAP AN ABUNDANCE OF THE LATTER'.⁴⁹ The next edition expressed the hope that New South Wales would be 'an

excellent impetus to the expansion of local Otago agriculture to supply the new field', but in a throwaway line admitted that gold may be found in Otago, ruefully concluding that 'such a thing is not now-a-days impossible'.⁵⁰

The first gold in Otago

Otago's gold rushes were inevitable. Someone, sometime, was going to pause in the midst of herding a flock of sheep across a stream or washing clothes on a riverside and spy the gleam of gold in the gravels.⁵¹ What is surprising is that it took so long to happen.

The first hint that the scenes at San Francisco and Bathurst might be replicated in Dunedin's muddy streets came when C.J. Pharazyn and C. Nairn, two Wellington men searching out land for a sheep run, revealed that they had found auriferous quartz and gold dust at Goodwood (near modern Palmerston). Their letters and analysis of the quartz they found was published in full in the *Witness*, albeit with an introductory admonition from the editor 'Flour is more necessary than gold, and may be more profitable.'⁵² Their announcement elicited little more than a collective shrug in pioneering Otago; the business of adapting to the environment, breaking in new land and securing enough food for them and their livestock occupied every waking hour. Pharazyn and Nairn's letter was reproduced by the widely-read *Wellington Independent*⁵³ at the end of November, but just as it had in Otago, the news caused no reaction.⁵⁴

To cool any ardour for gold-finding among his readers, the *Witness's* editor stepped up coverage of the worst of the Australian rush with vignettes like 'Robberies have become as frequent as sunshiny days ... No police, no protection, and a gang of scoundrels prowling about at night, and drinking during the day are what we have to suffer'.⁵⁵ In addition, Cutten developed his idea that Otago's fertile plains could supply the Australian goldfields,⁵⁶ an idea expanded on in Reverend Richard Taylor's popular 1855 travelogue *Te Ika a Maui*. Taylor was the first writer to highlight the phenomenon of Australian miners investing their gold in New Zealand land: 'A little stream of emigration has begun to flow in ... and will eventually bring to the shores of New Zealand, many of the successful Australian gold diggers'.⁵⁷

Sometime in 1853,⁵⁸ a ship's cook by the name of Edward Peters (Fig. 2) jumped from the immigrant and freight ship *Maori* and served a six week sentence in the Dunedin jail for absenting himself without leave.⁵⁹ With experience of the Californian rush, the Indian-born Peters, or 'Black Peter' as he was popularly known, would find the landscape of southern Otago interesting. In the earliest part of the Otago narrative, he was not known, let alone renowned for anything other than the exotica inherent in his race. He is first recorded in 1857, in Edmund Bowler's diary, as a hut builder and bullock driver on Run 137.⁶⁰

Notwithstanding the provincial newspapermen's efforts to shape opinion and keep their readers in the Presbyterian arcadia of 1850s Dunedin, gold was found. John Hyde Harris was given a small quantity of fine scaly gold, which was 'obtained in 1853 in the neighbourhood of the remarkable chert rocks, designated "the Fortifications", not far from Mount Hyde, and consequently in the vicinity of the Hindon workings'⁶¹ and

when it canvassed Otago's recent gold history in 1862, the *Otago Daily Times* commented that 'at various times gold appears to have been found in small quantities in the [Otago] mountain streams'.⁶²

Pyke would later comment, 'There seems to have been a vague impression existent, that there *was* gold in Otago, though nothing certain was discovered'⁶³ and subsequent retrospectives like the *Witness*' Jubilee edition⁶⁴ revealed that this was widely-known.

Explorer Surveyors

In 1856 Charles Ligar, the Surveyor-General of New Zealand, concluded a survey in the interior of the province and wrote to the Superintendent of Otago. When the Provincial Council met in the afternoon of 2 December 1856, his report was tabled. William Cargill introduced it in deprecatory terms: 'A letter from Mr. Ligar, on the existence of gold, will be laid before you for public information. It is right, however, to observe that gold has been found for years past in Auckland and Nelson, but hitherto quite unremunerative'.⁶⁵ Following this introduction, the Provincial Council dealt with several bills, then adjourned. When the house recommenced, the letter from Surveyor Ligar was read in full. It contained the unequivocal statement: '... in my recent visit to the South part of the Province of Otago, I found gold very generally distributed in the gravel and sand of the Mataura River at Tukurau, and that from the geological character of the District I am of opinion that a remunerative Goldfield exists in the neighbourhood'.⁶⁶ This letter and the other remarks were printed in full by the *Otago Witness* and its competitor, the *Otago Colonist*.

Unlike previous prospectors, Ligar had expertise in gold mining. When the Auckland (Coromandel) field developed in 1852, he was there with Charles Heaphy, advising miners how and where to sink shafts, recommending where best to take samples of auriferous quartz for further analysis and teaching general mining methodology.⁶⁷ As the field developed, Lieutenant-Governor Grey commissioned Ligar to report on how Heaphy was working with Rev. Thomas Lanfear, for the purpose of 'inducing the natives of this district to meet for the purpose of co-operating with the Government to establish some regulations for the good government of the Gold Diggings on this river', and how the field was paying.⁶⁸

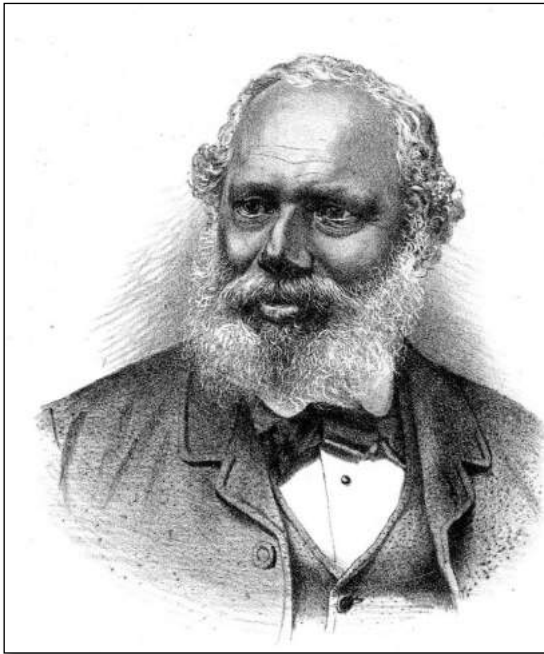
Ligar's expertise was several levels above the ineptitude of Pharazyn and other early gold finders, which shaped the Otago politicians' reaction to his letter. According to historian Vincent Pyke:

If Mr. Charles Ligar had thrown dynamite, in its most diabolical form, into His Honor's office, it is questionable whether he would have created greater consternation. Captain Cargill appears to have had a very lively, and perhaps not altogether unnatural, dislike to Goldfields, 'diggers', and everything connected therewith.⁶⁹

Despite Pyke's characterization of these events, Ligar's letter began a transformation of attitudes and outlook for the editor of the *Witness* and even the Provincial Councilors. In March, Cutten knew that the Nelson diggings, far from being a

brief aberration for dilettante working class colonists to ‘play’ at gold-finding, were rapidly turning into a payable and, more importantly for Otago, attractive proposition.⁷⁰ This influenced how he reacted to the news of the Mataura: ‘There can be no doubt that gold does exist in this Province but ... on the whole it is certainly not desirable ... that there should be any general rush in search of gold, for however much the discovery of an available gold field would ultimately tend to develop the resources of the Province, any wild speculation which would withdraw a considerable amount of labour would be a serious loss to the community’.⁷¹

Figure 2: *Edward Peters (Black Peter)*



Source: V. Pyke, *History of the Early Gold Discoveries in Otago*, (Dunedin, Otago Daily Times and Witness Newspapers Company, 1887), p. 109.

News of Mataura gold was carefully chronicled in the pages of the *Witness*, including the news that a group of twelve citizens from Dunedin ‘rushed to the area to the area to try their luck’.⁷² A fortnight after the above article, the paper’s cautious conservatism was abandoned and Cutten was moved to admit what everyone else knew: ‘We have further intelligence from the South, which leads us to believe that an available gold field exists there ... we have no doubt that New Zealand will be found to be an auriferous country.’⁷³ The *Witness* then described a wedding ring which was manufactured from Matuara gold by Dunedin watchmaker J. Reid, and commented ‘It is very difficult to obtain reliable information on the

subject, as many persons appear to think it advisable to keep the success of their operations secret. We, however, give the information as we obtained it’.⁷⁴

Cutten was moved to comment: ‘The discovery of gold in the Province has produced less excitement than might have been expected, and there appears to be no probability of a rush. The event is looked upon in different lights by some it is assumed to be rather injurious than beneficial to the interests of the Province others, again, think it will be the making of the place’.⁷⁵ His tone, far from the hectoring of the past, changed into benign encouragement, as at Aorere and Mataura he saw little of the hedonism, violence and excess that he had feared gold causing, and he assured his readers that ‘specimens are plentiful amongst the people at the Bluff and Invercargill ... it will be a most singular circumstance that gold should have been spread beneath our feet over such an extent of country comprising the greater portion of the Otago Province.’⁷⁶

The intellectual and business enemy of the *Otago Witness*, William Lambert's *Otago Colonist* took longer to acknowledge the gold news, although it printed a letter from 'A Miner, Waiopa', which said 'it has been supposed by some that the discovery of a goldfield would be very disadvantageous to Otago, who they surmise are not prepared for it ... The government of the United States fostered and encouraged mining enterprise by offering a reward of £500 for the discovery ... Why should not the government of Otago follow such a good an example?'.⁷⁷

The second of the surveyors then contributed his observations of Otago's geology. The intense competition between the Dunedin newspapers saw the *Colonist* first to break news about Chief Surveyor John Turnbull Thomson's survey in 1857.⁷⁸ Thomson reported to the Provincial government, the report reproduced in full by both papers. His introductory comments were unequivocal: 'the existence of Gold is undoubted a fact first brought to light by Mr. Ligar, Surveyor-General of New Zealand. The principal specimens yet found have been obtained in the gravel of the Mataura River, near Tuturau but I am credibly informed that indications are everywhere met with in the Waiopai [sic] and Mataura plains'.⁷⁹ However, because he did not find gold himself, the main response to his report was from sheep farmers who followed up on his report of pasture lands in the interior of the province. But Thomson was collating all the reports and was determinably seeking details from those finding gold, including, it emerged later, Edward (Black Peter) Peters, late of the *Maori*.

In May 1857, a correspondent for the *Witness* writing under the pseudonym 'T.B.G.' contributed articles in a light-hearted travelogue called 'Otago: Pencillings by the way'. These looked at the people, property, fauna and activity around the province. In late April he reached Mataura and tried his hand at gold finding,

We had never washed for gold before, but, accompanied by Mr. C. Lemon, and by his kindness provided with a tin dish, we proceeded to the beach of the Mataura River. ... we filled the dish, and carefully washed out the contents till but a small residuum was left ... sure enough there were several specks of gold, and of no very minute dimensions either.⁸⁰

The correspondent finished his narrative with a challenge to the Provincial authorities that was to have further consequences on the province: 'Let there be a handsome reward offered to any party who shall produce satisfactory evidence of the existence of a remunerative gold field in the colony ... it will give the colony an impetus that fifty years' toil would fail to give'.⁸¹

Auckland's *Daily Southern Cross*, Nelson's *Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle* and the *Wellington Independent*⁸² reprinted T.B.G.'s article in full, and it formed part of the petition to the National Houses of Assembly for the separation of the province of Southland from Otago.⁸³ In Australia the *Empire* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspapers in New South Wales⁸⁴, the *Courier* and the *Cornwall Chronicle* in Tasmania⁸⁵ and Adelaide's *South Australian Register*⁸⁶ printed it in editions throughout 1857. According to a letter written to Vincent Pyke in 1886, one of the two newspapers in Tasmania featuring T.B.G.'s article was read by a Tasmanian veteran of the Californian and Australian gold rushes, Gabriel Read. He, like the good folk of Otago,

did nothing about what he read, desultorily resolving ‘to have a look at [the Mataura field] whenever opportunity should favour’.⁸⁷

Apply (by Pick-lock) to the Provincial Chest

The discussion of gold by the *Otago Witness*’ Cutten revealed just how complete his *volte-face* was, when compared with his earlier polemic. In May, he wrote a reasoned discussion of the merits or otherwise of gold-finding, commenting positively on the behavior and results at Nelson and, most importantly for the history of gold in Otago, made a call that would achieve results:

Gold mining has, however, amongst its many disadvantages (and the evils attendant upon it are neither few nor slight), this advantage; it is so peculiarly attractive that it draws together a large populations who, although they may have little to do with the actual search for gold, yet tend to develop the resources of the country in other ways with a rapidity which no other cause of attraction has ever equaled. It therefore is a question of policy well worthy of the consideration of the public and the Government, whether it would not be advisable to offer an adequate reward for the discovery of an available gold field.⁸⁸

A week later - and possibly as a reaction to this - the Canterbury Provincial Council voted £500 as a bonus for the discovery of a goldfield.⁸⁹ Having made this call the *Witness* stayed mute on the subject until September, confining itself to detailing news of the development of the Aorere field. When he was finally moved to comment, Cutten returned to the subject of canvassing reasons for an official reward to spur a local industry:

The subject of gold digging is thus, as it were, forced upon the attention of the other Provinces of New Zealand; and it becomes a matter for serious consideration whether or not it is advisable to endeavour to develop the mineral resources of this Province by the offer of a reward for the discovery of an available gold field ... The discovery of gold would, however, be by no means an unmixed blessing. ... We do not anticipate that, with even very good digging, we should have anything of a rush, and we should avoid to a great extent that accumulation of questionable characters which rendered Australia and California anything but pleasant places of residence for a time. ... if the Nelson diggings become much more attractive, the matter will become urgent.⁹⁰

The pressure to respond to the challenge offered by the existence of the Nelson goldfield grew, and Cutten now led the charge. In September 1857, the *Witness* printed a series of spoof articles and amusements of a type normally featured in *Punch*. They announced they came from a rival, *The Common-Weal* (‘Printed and Published—where—when—how—and as often as the editor may think fit. Price 0d.’), which promised ‘to lay before the public the truth, the whole truth, and (as an attraction to the lovers of great bargains) more than the truth’,⁹¹ and featured faux-advertisements, such as, ‘WANTED. A compositor who knows the alphabet. Handsome encouragement will be given to one who can read MS. Do not apply at the office of this paper’. It promoted lectures concerning ‘Colonial Diet for a Scotch Settlement — The respective merits of

Caledonian oatmeal porridge and Anglo plum pudding, and the proper proportions of each necessary for diet and the maintenance of a healthy state in the colony' and under the heading of 'Executive Antipodean-Performances', offered lessons in 'Practice of circumlocution, with specimens of lengthy and ingenious political explanations, innocent of all meaning, and explaining nothing'.⁹² In one of these columns and among the amusements, one barb found its target, when the notice 'REWARD To any person who will discover a remunerative Gold Field. Apply (by Pick-lock) to the Provincial Chest'⁹³ appeared.

It was no coincidence that the same *Witness* edition had a serious article headed 'How and Where gold is Found'.⁹⁴ Spurred by the news of the Aorere's riches and supported by the now pro-gold *Witness*, a group of local businessmen called a meeting in October 1857 'for considering the best means of ascertaining if there be a remunerative Gold Field within this Province'.⁹⁵ From this came a petition signed by 138 'inhabitants of the Province' which was presented to the Provincial Council.⁹⁶

Immediately the Provincial Council announced that 'A bonus of £500 for the discovery of an available Gold Field was placed on the Estimates',⁹⁷ the *Witness* commented that 'the Government were anxious to set at rest the question whether or not there existed an available gold field in the Province'.⁹⁸ Concerned that the reward might have slipped the attention of its readers, the *Witness*' editorial in its next edition spelt out its detail, and canvassed the province's recent gold history:

last year, when Mr. Ligar, the late Surveyor-General for the colony, reported that he had found some minute specks of gold in the bed of the Mataura River. Since that period, there have been at least a dozen persons who have procured gold in small quantities in the bed and on the banks of that river. ... but with a new population coming in ... we should think that it was certainly worth the attention of those who are practically acquainted with gold digging, to tempt fortune and make an effort to obtain the £500 reward.⁹⁹

The Provincial Council's resolution was advertised as a notice headed '£500 REWARD' and details of requirements to qualify for it (a quantity exceeding 100 ounces being obtained) spelt out.¹⁰⁰ In case anyone missed this, the editorial headed the section with the unequivocal title 'GOLD', as well as commenting on a letter from another surveyor which was printed in the same edition. The surveyor showed his gold to the newspaperman, because he commented 'the gold is of a very pure description.'¹⁰¹ The letter and gold was from Surveyor Thomson's Sub-Assistant Surveyor Robert Gillies, and it contained the bluntest, most specific and enthusiastic report about gold from an Otago government official to date: 'Sir, I have the honour to inform you that gold has been found by myself and party ... the creek in which we have found it runs between the Waikivi and the Makerewa [sic] Bush, and enters the Makerewa at the north end of the large swamp. We have also found it in smaller particles in the Waikivi'.¹⁰²

In March 1858, Gillies' boss Alexander Garvie, swept into town bearing gold samples with him and met Cutten:

GOLD.

Mr. Garvie, who is engaged in surveying the upper Taieri and part of the Clutha River paid a flying visit to Dunedin during the week. He brought with him some specimens of gold which he obtained in the neighbourhood of the Dunstan Ranges ... Mr. Garvie, who was accompanied by an experienced digger, reports that they found gold in every dishful of earth they washed but as they had only a pannikin to work with, ... his companion states it as his opinion, that the prospecting would, even in Australia, be considered successful.¹⁰³

These government officers had an expectation of finding coal and minerals, chose expedition members who knew how to test for gold, and when they found it, brought samples to Dunedin. They made no secret of what they had found nor where they had found it and their reports were printed in full in the newspapers. Given the opprobrium with which the *Witness* had greeted earlier gold finds, it is remarkable to see the opinion with which the editor bracketed Garvie's summary, saying:

The apathy of our public upon the subject of gold is very surprising. ... Gold has undoubtedly been discovered in several places of Otago, viz., in the Mataura, in the Waiopai, in the Clutha at the Dunstan ranges, and now in the Tuapeka and yet not one single person has made the least attempt to test the value of any of these fields ... the offer of the reward of £500 has not had the slightest effect in stimulating exertion.¹⁰⁴

This report confirmed Garvie's earlier unofficial report that 'while engaged in the survey of Tuapeka country, one of the men belonging to my party discovered Gold to be pretty plentifully distributed even among the surface gravel near the mouth of that stream.'¹⁰⁵ Vincent Pyke knew that there was an addendum to Garvie's report that did not make it into the public record and later explained 'Mr. Thomson stated that "the best sample of gold yet brought into town was found in the Tokomairiro River (south branch). This sample indicates a workable goldfield ... It was there that "Black Peter," otherwise Edward Peters, a native of Bombay, was in the habit of washing small quantities of gold from the sands of the river'.¹⁰⁶

According to the *Cyclopedia of New Zealand's* entry on Edward Peters (Fig. 2), 'In March, 1857, [Peters] went to the district under engagement to Messrs Davy and Bowler. ... Whilst on one of his sledging excursions with food to other shepherds, he crossed the Tuapeka stream the thought struck him to try for gold by scooping up some silt with that utensil, and he was rewarded with a rough speck of gold. On other occasions he found other prospects'.¹⁰⁷ A completely different version is related by a descendent of William Dawson:

[Dawson], together with Edward Peters and another man, were sent by Mr. William Anderson, of Inchclutha, with a mob of sheep to find a crossing of the Molyneaux ... and on the return journey the party camped one night at the mouth of a gully ... "Black Peter," ... realised at once that the type of clay was a gold bearing one ... About half an hour later Peters came back to the tent, and, holding out his hand, said: "I got 'im." ... [Peters] gave his "find" to Mr. Dawson to have a ring made for his wife.¹⁰⁸

Given the fact that Garvie was able to produce a significant sample of gold from the area that everyone acknowledges Edward Peters was working, it is clear that Peters showed the surveyor where and how he was obtaining gold and probably gave him the sample.

In May to July of 1858, Dunedin locals with an interest in seeing their province develop, organized a series of evening lectures in the school. They were treated to opinions on the best crops to grow, the southern sky at night, 'phrenology and the insane' and other items of arcane interest. In July, the room was packed to hear Provincial Surveyor Thompson deliver his 'Lecture on the Province of Otago Its Description, Resources, and Capabilities',¹⁰⁹ illustrated with a large map drawn by Survey office employee John Reid. This was published in the *Witness* of 31 July, 1858. Thompson stated '... of minerals, gold has been detected in the Mataura and very generally on the Waiopai plains, also on the Tuapika [sic] and Lindis, but its existence and remunerative quantities has not yet been made apparent'.¹¹⁰ This and other reports still caused little response. Gold finds seem to have become so widely known that a writer contributing an article in November 1858 on the subject 'Where to Settle', could say in passing 'gold is undoubtedly over much of the Upper Clutha country',¹¹¹ without attracting any comment.

In 1859, a year after Thomson's lecture and two years after the reports from Ligar and Garvie detailed their gold finds, an attempt was finally made to claim the reward. It is at this point in the narrative that Edward Peters emerges into the official record of the gold story of Otago. Whatever the truth of Peter's personal history, it is clear that he had discovered gold. In 1859, he sought assistance to apply for the £500 reward from the Provincial Government, a fact that was picked up by the ever-vigilant *Witness*:

The claim was made by Mr. Alexander McNeil, on behalf of Edward Peters, a native of Bengal, who has for some months past been prospecting; and a sample of gold was produced, weighing $\frac{3}{4}$ of an ounce. ... This gold was found in the ranges, near Roxburgh, the residence of Mr. W. Miller, about 5 miles north-west of Meadow Bank, Tokomairiro. ... the Government have considered the discovery to be of sufficient importance to warrant the withholding from sale the land in the neighbourhood until a report by competent authorities can be obtained.¹¹²

This report, like others of a similar ground-breaking nature, was reprinted in other colonial newspapers like the *Nelson Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle*¹¹³ and Auckland's *Daily Southern Cross*.¹¹⁴ It was also printed in Melbourne's *Argus*¹¹⁵ and the *Portland Guardian*,¹¹⁶ and in September appeared in Adelaide's *South Australian Register*.¹¹⁷ Unlike their New Zealand counterparts, the Australian papers accepted that Edward Peters had provably found gold, couching their news in terms that made it clear that they expected the reward to be paid. Unfortunately for Peters, this was not the case. According to William Mayhew, this application was submitted at least twice; the final one having a note scribbled on it 'Received 12th July, 1861 – Disposed of'.¹¹⁸

It would not be until 1885 that Edward Peters would be finally recognised as the pioneer prospector of the Otago goldfields, and then only after petitions by Vincent Pyke¹¹⁹ and concerned citizens of Balclutha¹²⁰ (where the then ailing Peters was living), which yielded a £50 government endowment, conditional on it being matched by public subscriptions.

Gabriel Read

In September 1860 the Tasmanian Gabriel Read (Fig. 3) heard again of gold being worked in the Mataura River. Remembering that he had previously read of the locale,

Figure 3: *Gabriel Read.*



Source: V. Pyke, *History of the Early Gold Discoveries in Otago*, (Dunedin, Otago Daily Times and Witness Newspapers Company, 1887), p. 76.

and in what he later admitted was spur-of-the-moment decision, he left Tasmania in January 1861 on the *Don Pedro II*, with a load of horses, bound for Otago. When he arrived, news of the profitability – or otherwise – of the Mataura diggings delayed Read’s prospecting, but when news broke that road builders on the Lindis Pass had found gold in April 1861,¹²¹ he returned to the Tutarau.¹²² John Hardy, a Tokomairiro farmer who briefly employed Read to help with the wheat harvest,¹²³ sold him the supplies he needed to go prospecting and sent him off with the admonition ‘What we want is a good Goldfield, and we all try to believe it is somewhere about here; and I believe if you would only try, you are the man to get it’.¹²⁴ Hardy’s neighbour knew of Edward Peter.

According to Pyke: ‘In 1860 Mr John L. Gillies, when searching for some vagrant cattle, came upon Black Peter working for gold in a bend of the Tuapeka Stream

at what is now called Evans Flat. ... Mr Gillies stayed with him nearly all the day, and himself washed out some pennyweights of gold ... When Mr Gillies returned to Tokomairiro he took this gold with him, and subsequently communicated the circumstance to Mr Gabriel Read.’¹²⁵ When Read reported his find, the first real gold rush to Otago began - and the province’s demographics, landscape, finances and history changed forever.

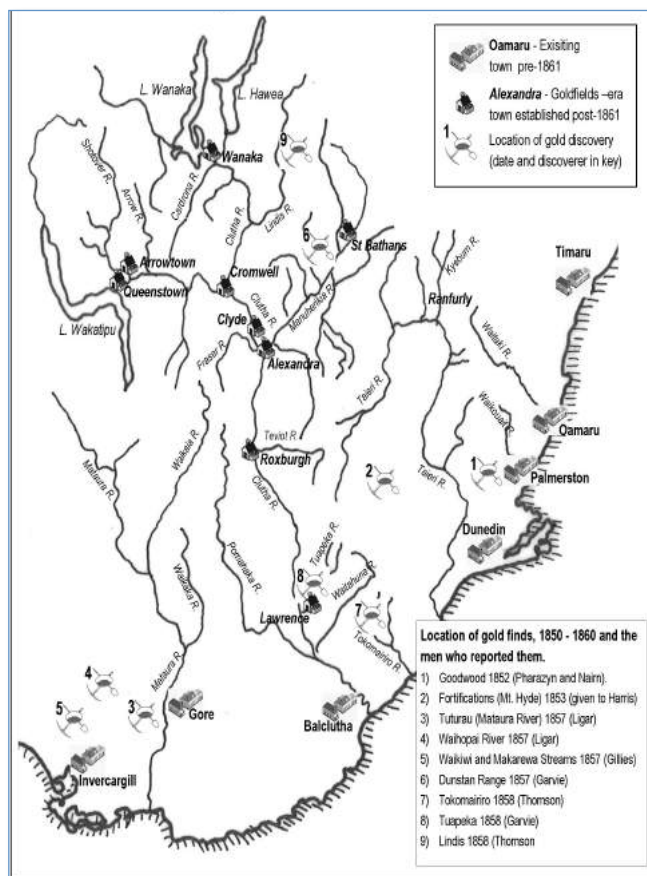
An unsuppressed history

Nothing was suppressed. It is a move of rare ineptitude that seeks on one hand to hide letters and reports from the general view, and on the other to allow those same letters to be printed verbatim in the newspapers. If anyone can read the Otago newspaper articles and any newspaper around the country – or indeed, around the world – can reprint these in full, as happened in Otago, then there is no conspiracy of silence. These conclusions are supported by A.P.F. Browne, who in his Master’s thesis *The Otago Goldfields, 1861 – 1863: Administration and Public Life*, notes that ‘there was no active discouragement’ and characterises writing suggesting otherwise unequivocally as: ‘myths however die hard, and this particular one is still being perpetuated’.¹²⁶

The Otago Provincial Government did not want a gold rush – and that is clear. The editor of the *Otago Witness* began by sharing their view, but to suggest agency on the part of the regional government to conspire to withhold information about goldfields when the press had no such restrictions flies in the face of the evidence.

Browne offers a compelling argument for the delayed development of the gold rush, noting that before the passing of the Goldfields Act of 1858, miners attempting to go onto a sheep station lessee’s land would be trespassing, and going onto Māori reserves was problematic. Additionally, he uses criteria from Geoffrey Blainey’s, *A Theory of Mineral Discovery: Australia in the Nineteenth Century*¹²⁷ to suggest that a combination of a sparsely-settled interior of Otago, an almost total lack of expertise and experience on the part of the prospectors poking around the Matura and Tokomairiro, and the fact that booming grain and wool exports, good land sales, low unemployment and relatively high wages, all offered little incentive to seek gold in the late 1850s. By contrast, the recession of early 1861, marked by low land sales, a 24.7 per cent decrease in wool exports, a 75 per cent fall in grain volumes and rising unemployment in the towns¹²⁸ created the right environment for gold finds to blossom into a fully-fledged rush. The sporadic – and increasing – gold finds around the province, plus the benign encouragement of the newspaper editors created a heightened awareness of gold and, when Read announced his finds, his audience were ready, willing and (with Read’s tuition) able to exploit a field once one was found.

Figure 4: Gold Discoveries in Otago 1850-1860



Source: L. Carpenter.

What it needed was an expert to come to Otago and find gold in such quantities that no-one could argue against it as a proven fact. Road-builder and former Australian miner Samuel McIntyre found gold in the Lindis Pass on McLean's Morven Hills Station,¹²⁹ but its remoteness from Dunedin in an unexplored corner of the province, (illustrated by the fact that the *Witness* initially struggled to locate the place accurately)¹³⁰ and most importantly, its lack of gold - when compared with Read's Tuapeka finds - meant it did not attract a significant rush.

When Read wrote his letter, published in the *Otago Witness* of 8 June 1861, to announce that he had found gold, even he was not taken seriously.¹³¹ As late as 29 June, stories were rife of would-be miners from Dunedin travelling to the Tuapeka and returning empty-handed, and as far as it being a proven field, the *Witness* harboured doubts, saying 'the evidence is extremely conflicting, but upon the whole is decidedly confirmatory of the gold fields being of a paying character.'¹³² In another article, a meeting of the Dunedin unemployed revealed just how far the authorities had to go to convince the general populace that there was a real gold field at Tuapeka, when speakers at the meeting 'denounced the reports of the Gold Diggings, which had appeared in the public prints, as humbug, and got up by the Government and other interested parties, for their own advancement'.¹³³ It took reports of locals finding gold in vast quantities to wake the locals up to the fact that a gold rush of the type celebrated at California, New South Wales and Victoria was on their doorstep, and that they could be a part of it.

The famous *Otago Witness* editorial headline of 6 July 1861, which begins 'Gold, Gold, Gold, is the universal subject of conversation' was published a full month after Read's letter was received, and by the newspaper's own admission, was written a week into the first blush of a genuine 'rush' and then only after gold had been secured in such significant quantities by Gabriel Read and others, that the facts of the matter were incontrovertibly proved.

Taken in isolation, the historians' analysis of the gold finds in early colonial Otago concludes a level of concern, of (at best) disinterest, or at worst, a conspiracy to suppress by the governing class, the 'Old Identity' of Thatcher's songs. After all, when gold was first found at California and in Australia, the first gold prospectors created a sensation and their finds sparked a gold rush, didn't they?

In Otago's golden past, gold was found – but not acted on – for four decades. But this is not, as some appear to think, a purely New Zealand, or even Otago phenomenon.

California

In California, the accepted story of the beginning of the gold rush has James Marshall finding gold in a newly-constructed water race at his employer John Sutter's mill in Coloma on the morning of 24 January 1848. But this is wrong.

Guy Giffen's research has yielded a chain of not-quite-substantiated-but-persistent stories of Californian gold finds across four centuries, beginning when Sir Francis Drake's clerk hinted that they found gold on the coast in 1579 and Spanish

explorer Sebastian Vizcaino reported possibilities of gold in a report to his king in 1602. Russians were reputedly aware of gold there in 1814, a General Vallejo saw Lieutenant Antonio del Valle trading in gold in around 1820, and in 1825 Jedediah Smith found gold near Mono Lake.¹³⁴ Donald Cutter describes Californian gold being found in 1816, in 1828 at Delores, New Mexico, and in 1838 on Tuerto Creek, a town of 4,000 people who had rushed to work the gold found there.¹³⁵

Richard H. Peterson reports that Padre Luis Antonio Martinez of Mission San Luis Obispo operated a small gold mine in his district in 1829¹³⁶ and that gold was found throughout the 1830s, with a receipt from the Philadelphia mint recording 851 oz., 63 dwt. of ‘California native grains’ (placer/alluvial gold) dated 30 January 1838 and supplied by a New York trading firm with links to Californian traders. On 9 March 1841, Californian vaquero Francisco Lopez found good gold deposits in the San Feliciano Canyon,¹³⁷ and ‘William Heath Davis, an early pioneer, estimated that \$80,000 to \$100,000 in gold was taken from the mines in the first two years, and Hubert Howe Bancroft stated that by December 1843, 2,000 ounces had been taken, valued at \$38,000’.¹³⁸ Cutter notes that the existence of gold in California was officially notified by Thomas Larkin, the US Vice-Consul at Monterey, in a dispatch to Secretary of State James Buchanan in March 1846.¹³⁹

No-one suggests a cover-up; the historians simply conclude that a combination of questions over Californian sovereignty, lack of clarity around mineral law, and a lack of skill in the population contributed to a pervasive ignorance of the riches that lay in the gravels at their feet. Ralph Bieber also found that contrary to legend, even those present when Marshall found gold at Sutter’s Mill were reluctant to cease their regular work due to persistent doubt that there would be sufficient gold to justify giving up regular work to seek it, and it was only when people found rich pockets of gold in the ensuing six to eight weeks that a general excitement erupted.¹⁴⁰

Australia

In the same way, the history of gold-finding at Australia has the Hargraves discovery at Ophir as its foundational gold find, although unlike California, when this was declared his claim was immediately challenged by others, including those who had accompanied him.¹⁴¹

The first reported gold-finder in Australia was surveyor James O’Brien, who saw ‘numerous particles of gold’ in 1823 near the Fish River (east of Bathurst). And just as their Otago contemporaries were doing, for decades before the rush, farm workers and shepherds were in the habit of picking up pieces of gold and small nuggets from streams near where they worked.¹⁴² In 1842, James Gumm lived in the Plenty Ranges in what would become Victoria, finding sufficient gold to earn the nick-name ‘Gumm the Gold-hunter’ and was the first of what Robin Annear calls ‘a small band of proto-diggers who conveyed precious consignments to town in their handkerchief corners’, finding gold in an area where its presence was ‘an open secret.’¹⁴³ Explorer Paul de Strezlecki discovered gold in the Victorian Alps in 1839 and William Campbell found gold on his sheep run in Strathloden, Victoria, in 1840.¹⁴⁴

In 1841, clergyman William Clarke found auriferous quartz near Hartley, inland from Sydney, and upon showing his best sample to Governor Gipps in 1844 was famously told ‘Put it away, Mr Clarke, or we shall all have our throats cut’.¹⁴⁵ De Strezlecki’s correspondence led Scottish geologist Roderick Murchison to predict gold in Australia in scientific papers in 1844 and 1846, and when talking with unemployed Cornish tin miners in 1846, urged them to emigrate and search for gold in the New South Wales mountains.¹⁴⁶ Gold was also discovered at Castambul by Mr Tyrrell, captain of the Montacute Copper Mine, north-east of Adelaide South Australia, in 1846.¹⁴⁷ A brief article appeared in the *Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser* in July 1848 under the heading ‘Gold’, which detailed how a person had arrived in town with ‘a paper full of gold dust’¹⁴⁸ (this occasioned no further comment), and in 1848 William Tipple Smith openly displayed a large chunk of rich quartz he had bought from a shepherd, who had found it near Bathurst. One year later, a young shepherd boy called Chapman found 38 ounces of gold on Glenmona station near modern Amherst and created a brief rush, which was subsequently broken up on the orders of Governor La Trobe.¹⁴⁹

Geoffery Blainey notes in *The Rush that Never Ended* that ‘historians have long insisted that ... the governors prevented the rise of gold-mining ... and that there could be no gold rushes until the governors relented’, but he concludes that ‘the evidence for an official ban on gold mining is weak’,¹⁵⁰ and locates the main reason for the hesitation to develop a goldfield in the retention of archaic English laws vesting ownership in the crown.¹⁵¹

Conclusion: a Class War?

Suggestions of a conspiracy to silence gold finds or to somehow rob the less-wealthy amongst the new settlers in Otago of the opportunity of earning riches by exploiting the gold reserves retrospectively, creates a class war where none existed.

The influence of religion on the thinking of the leaders in the new settlement of Dunedin cannot be underestimated, and as Matthew Wright and Erik Olssen¹⁵² have outlined, it was their fear of the corrupting influence of gold and the behaviour it engendered which led them – and the newspapers they influenced – to highlight the worst of the gold rushes in other parts of the world.

The leaders and editors saw, in contemplating a local gold rush, the worst aspects of the commercial and industrial world they left behind in Britain, and none of the opportunity to construct the ideal, God-fearing society which good, honest toil would create. Such levels of paternalism appear anachronistic and an anathema with one and one-half century’s hindsight, but for a new, marginal settlement, in a colony at the farthest corner of the British empire, their fear of the drastic consequences of choosing badly must have weighed heavily on their minds, and this influenced how they viewed gold (and the social disorder that brought).

Nevertheless to accuse these leaders and editors of a campaign of the deceitful suppression of information and participation in a conspiracy to silence gold finds is wrong.

Endnotes

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- ⁴⁶ ‘Latest News from the Gold Mines (From the *Bathurst Free Press*)’, *Otago Witness*, 16 August 1851, p. 4.
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- ⁵¹ There is considerable evidence to support the idea that Otago Māori told new settlers and whalers that gold was in the Mata-ou (Clutha) River, however this is outside the central thesis of this article. For more on Māori mining history, see Carpenter, L., ‘Finding Te Wherrou in Otakou: Māori and the Early Days of the Otago Gold Rush’ in *MAI Journal: A New Zealand Journal of Indigenous Scholarship*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, November 2013.
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