

BOOK REVIEW

Marjorie Theobald, *The Accidental Town: Castlemaine, 1851-1861*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, Victoria 2020, ISBN 978-1-925984-35-4 Paper Back, 330 pages, RRP 39.95.

The title chosen is evocative, making one wonder why ‘Accidental’? Marjorie Theobald has revealed that when the first gold commissioner Frederick Powlett moved the Government Camp from Golden Point, almost six kilometres away from the frenetic activity of the world’s richest alluvial gold diggings to the junction of Barker’s and Forest creeks, this was where Castlemaine came to be established.

Initially, known as the Mount Alexander Goldfield, it was discovered by Europeans on 8 October 1851. Gold was already known to exist by the Dja Dja Wurrung people, something Marjorie failed to mention. However, she had included an excellent ‘Personal Apology’ to the original owners who were dispossessed, although unfortunately, no further mention is made as to how the Dja Dja Wurrung interacted with the diggers.

From the outset the diggers felt the impost of the doubling of the Gold License fee with the first mass meeting in protest held in December 1851; the governor then backtracked. Unlike in Ballarat, the government administration was better on the Mount Alexander Goldfield, a feature Marjorie has supported when referencing the wide variety of sources used in this really well researched work.

The reader is taken through the difficult period when there was no infrastructure, the diggers living under the most primitive conditions, to the time a decade later when the settlement could boast many amenities and was possibly the envy of some of the towns and cities from which they had migrated. The young, predominantly male population were real movers and shakers, some supported by very devoted and hard-working women.

The lack of water inhibited the early mining companies from achieving their goal in successfully operating steam powered gold puddling machines. The exploitation of the quartz reefs was just taking its tentative beginnings in the period covered in Marjorie’s book. There were foundries established, a Gas Works, Mechanics Institute, a Hospital a Benevolent Asylum, and churches of various denominations - all were local initiatives.

Government functions with Post Office, Law Courts and the arrival of the Railway were most important for communication and an ordered society.

Social problems are not swept under the carpet, and in this is warts and all book, power plays between influential citizens are also are brought to the fore. The Chinese were a significant minority, but unfortunately, we read little about them throughout the book, possibly because of the paucity of the records?

The book is rich in personalities and details, there is much to be taken in and carefully considered, and Marjorie’s broad vocabulary and use of language is to be commended.

James A. Lerk