

# Notes on *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*

WINNER OF THE 2014 STELLA PRIZE



*The great gift of Eureka — its beauty and, in a sense, its terror — is that the story of women's effort, influence and sacrifice is both politically correct and historically true.*

Clare Wright, *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*

## SYNOPSIS

*The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* aims to reinstate women in the traditional accounts of the Eureka Stockade. It does not attempt to eject men from these accounts and, in fact, by including the stories of the women who were integral to this momentous event in our history, the stories of men become much more complete too, and it becomes easier to understand their complex motivations and struggles.

The book takes place over a 5-year span from before and to slightly after the familiar events on the night of the Eureka Stockade. In a clamour of voices, women insert themselves back into every aspect of this story, from emigration, travel and settling to fighting and rebelling. They play vital parts in these historical events, influential every step of the way.

Their stories are told in snippets grouped almost thematically, and the book itself is divided into three parts: 'Transitions', 'Transformations' and 'Transgressions'. Although Wright tells a number of stories, there are some characters that she follows more closely than others, including Martha Clendenning, Margaret Johnston, Sarah Hanmer, Catherine Bentley, Ellen Young and Clara Seekamp.

In the first section of the book, 'Transitions', the reader is caught up in the heady excitement of the gold rush as it spreads across the world. Clare Wright identifies the many motivations for both men and women to leave their old lives behind and make the often perilous journey across the ocean to Australia. The tone in this section of the book is buoyant: people writing home of the possibilities, the money

and the chance at independence. The harsh realities of the ocean journey are not glossed over, although the death and disease do little to dampen the spirits of those who land in Melbourne. Here Wright introduces many of the characters who we will follow through the rest of the book and some of the other voices that have been neglected in traditional histories, including those of the Wathaurung people.

The second section, 'Transformations', sees life on the goldfields becoming reality. The women who have emigrated start carving out their own roles in the community. Martha and Sarah open a store, building up a loyal clientele and cementing their place as vital members of the community. Some women set up bars; others take up writing and acting. They become far more than the sum of their domestic responsibilities. They are at once hardworking entrepreneurs, and wives and mothers. They petition to change laws that are unfair to them, and are vital players in the overturning of unfair taxes.

There is one especially memorable scene where the heroism of Sarah Skinner is detailed in her ultimately tragic death in childbirth. This scene is also a prime example of the inclusion of men in this version of events. While Sarah labours, her husband is also present. His presence is labelled 'as ineffectual as a handkerchief in a tempest', but it nevertheless offers readers a perspective on men as more than bawdy gold-diggers. These men were devoted husbands and fathers too, men with as much fear as courage and determination.

In this section, Wright also touches on the domestic abuse that was all too common in the community.

The final section of the book, ‘Transgressions’, focuses on the dramatic events of the night that most readers will be familiar with: the rebellion that spilt blood across the goldfields. It begins, almost innocently, with the insult of Catherine Bentley by James Scobie. The narrative follows the inquiry into the murder of James Scobie, warning of the mounting danger and growing tensions within the community. In the midst of this panic and paranoia, a robbery occurs. Over £15,000 is stolen and a new mother, Ann Quin, wife of one of the thieves, is refused bail. Eliza Smith is one of the robbers, going under the name ‘Elijah’ and invisible to the ‘gender-blind beurocrats [sic]’. This final section of the book is one that explores the varied and often tough characters of the women. Everyone is becoming more desperate, starting to lose more, to be more reckless, and the rebellion is close. The final chapter sees ‘idealism and energy collid[e] with brutality and death’. The book ends with the Eureka Stockade, but even here Wright offers new information, pushing readers as always to wonder and to question. In this case the question is: why has the death of a woman at the stockade been left out of the story until now?

## AUTHOR BACKGROUND



CLARE WRIGHT is an award-winning historian, author and public commentator who has worked in politics, academia and the media. She holds a PhD in Australian Studies from the University of Melbourne, and an MA in Public History from Monash University. She is an internationally recognised scholar of the social history of alcohol and women’s political activism. Her expertise in Australian history covers the gold-rush period, 19th- and 20th-century women’s history, democracy movements, mining history, bushrangers and the liquor industry.

Her best-selling first book, *Beyond the Ladies Lounge: Australia’s Female Publicans*, met with both critical and popular acclaim. *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* was the winner of the 2014 Stella Prize and will be published in a young adult version in 2015.

[www.clarewright.com.au](http://www.clarewright.com.au)

[www.thestellaprize.com.au/2014/04/the-stella-interview-clare-wright/](http://www.thestellaprize.com.au/2014/04/the-stella-interview-clare-wright/)

## THEMES

Australian history  
Women in history  
Masculinity  
Independence

## LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

This nonfiction book, which fills in large gaps in the traditional accounts of Australian history, links to numerous cross-curriculum priorities as well as many of the general capabilities.

Although the focus of the book is women in the history of the Eureka Stockade, this narrative also draws in the voices of Chinese settlers and the Wathaurung people. There are connections in these parts to **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander** stories and also **Australia’s relationship with Asia**.

In addition to this, the very fact that the book is necessary to fill such a large hole in our historical records requires students to think **critically** and **empathically** about Australian history and their place in it.

## READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ In *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*, Clare Wright asks the question: ‘Where were we in this story?’
  - Consider the traditional narrative of Eureka. Who else is missing from it?
  - How does this story fit alongside the traditional narrative?
  - How does it challenge it?
  - How does it support it?
  - How does it change your view?
  - What questions does it make you ask of your own past?
- ◆ Historically, what roles were considered fitting for women?

- What roles did the women of Eureka undertake?
- How did these positions challenge gender roles and stereotypes?
- How were the roles filled by women in Eureka integral to our history?
- ◆ What evidence does Clare Wright offer for her version of events? Is it reliable?
- ◆ How does Clare Wright show respect in her book to existing historical accounts?
- ◆ What challenges do the women in this book face:
  - In their home countries?
  - On the boats?
  - In Australia?
- ◆ In addition to women's, what other perspectives does *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* offer to readers?
- ◆ In what ways does telling the story of women in our history deepen our understanding of the men during that time?
- ◆ What traits did women need to be successful in Australia in those days?
- ◆ How did women participate in the campaign to change the laws of the time?
- ◆ How did emigrating to Australia offer women the chance to be more independent?
- ◆ How were women's reasons for emigrating different from those of men? How were their attitudes to their lives upon arrival different?
- ◆ Why are books like this – and Henry Reynolds' *Why Weren't We Told?*, which challenges the myth of 'uncontested colonisation in Australia' – important? Why is it necessary that we have a complete view of history?
- ◆ What is the impact of the many voices that make up the book?
  - How do the many voices challenge or enhance your reading of the book?
  - How do they make you respond to the personal stories being told?
  - What faults can you see with the use of many voices?
- ◆ How are history books written in this more accessible, dramatic style different from traditional history books?
  - What are the benefits of telling history in this way?
  - What are some of the concerns with this technique?
- ◆ What is the significance of the flag on the front cover?
- ◆ Why do you think women have been left out of the pages of history?
- ◆ How and why have the voices of the Wathaurung people been excluded from history?
- ◆ How is dress presented in the book?
  - How are women judged by what they wear?
  - How are clothes used to mock, dominate or judge?
  - How do the women in the book break convention in this area and why?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* asks where women were in traditional accounts of the Eureka Stockade. Clare Wright encourages readers to consider their place in history and wonder about their connections to the past.

Write a journal entry about how this book makes you feel. How does it make you wonder about your own past? What does it make you think about what you know? What questions does it make you ask of what you don't know?

Research a woman from your own family who was alive at the time of the Eureka Stockade. What is their story? Are they connected to the events in the book? What themes or issues can you find in their life that you can see in the lives of the women in the book? Does researching your family make you feel more connected to the past and give you ownership over your history?

2. As women are written out of their history, so too are their needs, their contributions, their innovations. *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* writes these details back in.

In the second part of the book, Martha Clendinning identifies a need in the marketplace solely for and because of women and childbirth. Being an entrepreneur requires identifying a need and providing a service accordingly. Find a modern female entrepreneur. Write a piece discussing the similarities of her attitude and character traits with one of the entrepreneurial women in the book. How do these ideas and innovations have the potential to change history? (Consider comparing how an innovation that started during the period covered in *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* appears now with how your chosen innovation is likely to appear 150 years in the future.) What struggles do the two women share? In what ways are they different because of the time?

**3.** In a review in the *Sydney Review of Books* (link below), Rachael Weaver connects women's activism in the book to 'other historical instances of women becoming politically mobilised: during the French Revolution, in relation to the Chartist Movement in Britain'. In groups, using one of these examples or another from the book, research the way that women are represented in your chosen moment in history. Consider not only the evidence in existing accounts, but also the gaps – what voices aren't being heard? What questions aren't being asked?

Present your findings to the class, and record the final project to upload to a school or class blog.

## REFERENCES

### Reviews

#### *The Australian*

[www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/women-had-their-eureka-moment-too/story-fn9n8gph-1226831689510](http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/women-had-their-eureka-moment-too/story-fn9n8gph-1226831689510)

#### *The Drum*

[www.abc.net.au/news/2014-04-30/perkins-review-the-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka/5421162](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-04-30/perkins-review-the-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka/5421162)

#### *The Independent*

[www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka-by-clare-wright-book-review-9613067.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka-by-clare-wright-book-review-9613067.html)

#### *The Newtown Review of Books*

[www.newtownreviewofbooks.com.au/2014/05/08/clare-wright-forgotten-rebels-eureka-reviewed-annette-hughes/](http://www.newtownreviewofbooks.com.au/2014/05/08/clare-wright-forgotten-rebels-eureka-reviewed-annette-hughes/)

#### *The Sydney Morning Herald*

[www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/the-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka-by-clare-wright-wins-stella-prize-20140429-37fv6.html](http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/the-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka-by-clare-wright-wins-stella-prize-20140429-37fv6.html)

#### *Sydney Review of Books*

[www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/forgotten-rebels-eureka-clare-wright/](http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/forgotten-rebels-eureka-clare-wright/)

### Interviews

#### MADE Ballarat (VIDEO)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=bambByxMiOU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bambByxMiOU)

#### Australian women writers challenge: history, writing and television

[australianwomenwriters.com/2014/03/30/history-writing-and-television-an-interview-with-clare-wright/](http://australianwomenwriters.com/2014/03/30/history-writing-and-television-an-interview-with-clare-wright/)

### Other

#### Flashers, femmes and other forgotten figures of the Eureka Stockade

[theconversation.com/flashers-femmes-and-other-forgotten-figures-of-the-eureka-stockade-20939](http://theconversation.com/flashers-femmes-and-other-forgotten-figures-of-the-eureka-stockade-20939)

#### The Other Australia Day

[www.theconversation.com/the-other-australia-day-november-11-throughout-history-19891](http://www.theconversation.com/the-other-australia-day-november-11-throughout-history-19891)

#### *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth about Our History* by Henry Reynolds (Penguin Books)

#### Women of Eureka

[www.eurekapedia.org/Women\\_of\\_Eureka](http://www.eurekapedia.org/Women_of_Eureka)