

**THE  
YEA  
GOLDFIELDS**

**Clement Earp**

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*In Memoriam*  
*Jack Douglas (1929-2007)*  
*Noel Schleiger (1926-2013)*

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## Preface

This is the story of the Yea goldfields. Or rather, it is the story of some of the Yea goldfields, because in fact there were many small finds of gold around Yea, and this book is limited to just a few.

To be precise: these are the goldfields of the Yea Anticline, which is a gigantic upward fold in the bedrock running under the town of Yea and crossing the paths of the Goulburn, Yea and Murrindindi Rivers in central Victoria. This single geological feature has determined the endeavours of many Yea citizens over the last one and a half centuries, and created two new towns which arose in a matter of weeks then almost as quickly vanished.

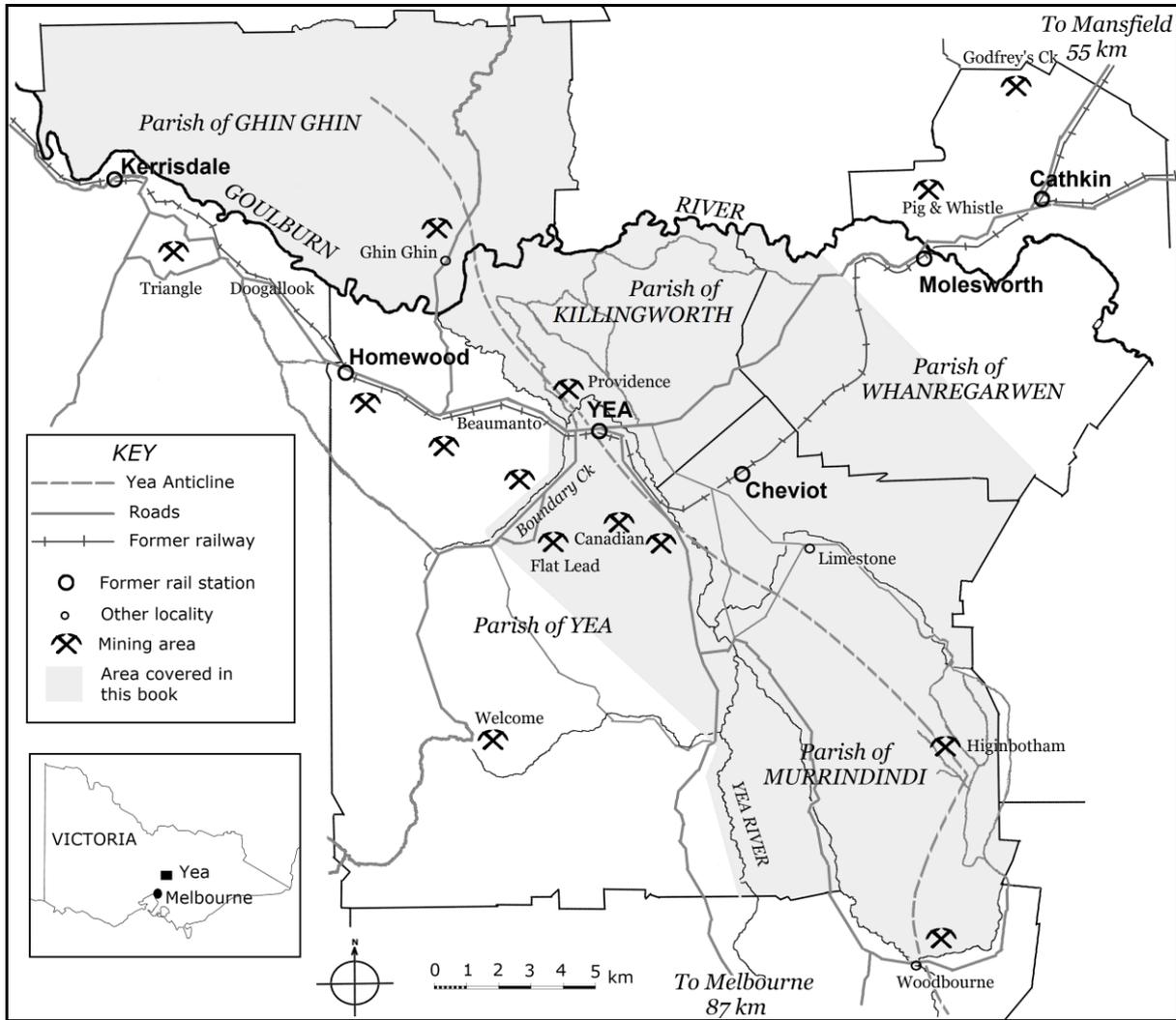
Outside the Yea Anticline, and therefore excluded from this book, are the gold and antimony mines of Homewood, the rich Welcome Mine near Junction Hill, and the Tea-Tree Creek goldfield, to say nothing of other goldfields even further afield which at one time or another fell into the former Shire of Yea.

These were not by any measure the richest goldfields in Victoria. The standard reference on the subject, James Flett's *The History of Gold Discovery in Victoria*, devotes only about a page to the Yea area, a trifle compared with the reams of information on Ballarat, Bendigo and Beechworth. Yet the story of the Yea goldfields is full of interest. No-one made a fortune, but some people did make money. Many more lost money, and a few even lost their lives.

There is also an official history of Yea, Harvey Blanks' *The Story of Yea*. Blanks was commissioned to write his book by the Shire of Yea in the 1970s, and it therefore leans very heavily on shire records and information from local families who had been farmers for generations. Only two pages or so deal with the gold rush days, which were perhaps considered somewhat disreputable compared with the honest labour of farming. I correct that imbalance here by giving over a few pages to the early history of Yea – with some material Blanks missed – in a book that is otherwise devoted to gold mining.

Many residents of the Yea area gave me access to their properties as part of my geological research; in respect of the locations in this book I particularly wish to thank Peter McLeish, Phillip Wisscher, and the Martin family. I also wish to thank Peg Lade for her information on Ghin Ghin, Jack Mahon and Adrian Sier for interesting historical discussions, and Nigel Sinnott for much useful correspondence on toponymy.

Clement Earp  
September 2013



*Sketch map showing the area covered in this book. The map base is 19th-century, hence there may be some differences from modern maps. The same comment applies to individual parish maps in the later sections of this book.*

**A  
NARRATIVE HISTORY  
of  
YEA  
and its  
GOLDFIELDS**

## THE MUDDY CREEK FRONTIER

In 1824 this area of the Goulburn River watershed was known as Warring<sup>1</sup>. The *Warring illum baluk* (“people who live at Warring”) belonged to the Taungurung tribe of the Kulin nation. They would have already known from visiting the Kulin tribes south of the Great Dividing Range that a new people had begun to settle around the shores of Port Phillip and were pushing northwards, but in that year the ngamudji arrived at Warring for the first time from the opposite direction. Hume and Hovell made it their business to scamper from Sydney to Port Phillip by the shortest possible route. Caring not for the lie of the land, the watersheds, hills or rivers, except those which might affect their passage, they pressed on in as much of a straight line as possible – an “exploration” in name but in reality an exercise in marking a map. Crossing the river just east of the present town of Yea, they called it Muddy Creek.

Hume and Hovell having demonstrated that there were no hobgoblins waiting in the interior of Victoria to devour unwary travellers, there came literally in their tracks other men who would show more interest in the natural resources of the country, albeit to exploit them. When the first squatter, Peter Snodgrass, arrived at the future site of Yea in 1837, there was still a large billabong between the present positions of the Post Office and bowling green and “on this same lagoon were to be seen a few Blacks (Natives) paddling in canoes”<sup>2</sup>. By 1844, there were enough squatters settled around Muddy Creek for a race meeting to be held. But the Taungurung were already on the way to disappearing, and the story of their passing has yet to be told. The official history of Yea blithely quotes Snodgrass as saying “their numbers have diminished from disease, and other causes.”<sup>3</sup> In reality, Snodgrass himself was instrumental in that diminution. Nor was he alone, for others would later boast that they too had “helped take the country from the aborigines.”<sup>4</sup>

It was not merely that the ngamudji squatted on the lands of the Taungurung without so much as a by-your-leave. The ecological impact of hundreds of introduced animals grazing the area was quickly noticed. In 1840, the Yowung illum baluk clan of the Taungurung near Mansfield complained that “before the occupation of the land by sheep and cattle emue were plentiful and kangaroos”<sup>5</sup>. It was said even by the ngamudji that “the Kangaroo and other animals ... fly before the teeming herds of the Settler, to seek refuge in the depths of remoter forests and yet untrodden wilds. Hunger comes on with sure and painful pace ...”<sup>6</sup>. There was also a social impact on the Taungurung: “They offered their boys for sodomy. Said all the white men on the Goulburn did so.”<sup>7</sup>

Whether the latter situation pertained to the Yea area is a matter for speculation, but at Snodgrass’s station near the junction of the Yea and Murrindindi rivers there was without doubt some form of prostitution going on involving his workers: “they wanted too much the black women and that they kill Snodgrass’s sheep and given to the black fellow for their lubra and tell black fellow to take them ... they gave them sheep, flour, sugar for their women. Said the white men used to say come on Sharlotte, come on Mary Ann &c.”<sup>8</sup> It is doubtful that Snodgrass would have approved of his employees disposing of his property for their own benefit, but he was often absent in Melbourne.<sup>9</sup>

In March 1840 a party of Taungurung and other Kulin people, armed with a few firearms, passed up the Goulburn River in what seems to have been an attempt to ascertain the disposition of the squatters. They were led by a Woiwurrung man known as Windberry<sup>10</sup>.

They called at Snodgrass’s station, where a meeting took place. At some time or other – details are sketchy – there occurred some sort of incident.<sup>1</sup> It involved Samuel Deighton, one of Snodgrass’s men, who had made himself

<sup>1</sup> The spelling of Aboriginal names in this chapter is mainly that used by the present-day Taungurung.

<sup>2</sup> “Native”, *Yea Chronicle* 7<sup>th</sup> August 1912.

<sup>3</sup> Blanks (1973) p. 66, quoting from a letter by Snodgrass published in *Bride* (1898). Blanks omitted the context of Snodgrass’s letter, perhaps making it seem that Snodgrass was writing about the Yea area. For example, Blanks included Snodgrass’s mention of Aboriginals killing Europeans, as if this was relevant to Yea; however, Snodgrass was relating what had happened in Victoria generally, not in any particular district.

<sup>4</sup> J. D. Webster, electioneering speech, *Alexandra Times* 27<sup>th</sup> March 1869.

<sup>5</sup> Robinson (2000a) p. 287.

<sup>6</sup> *Port Phillip Patriot* 19<sup>th</sup> October 1840.

<sup>7</sup> Robinson (2000a) p. 276, again at Mansfield.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson (2000b) p. 25, entry for 4<sup>th</sup> November 1840 and p. 51, entry for 7<sup>th</sup> January 1841. For a discussion of such sexual contacts in Central Victoria, see McMillan (1994) p. 147-148.

<sup>9</sup> Where he had a reputation as a hard-drinking larrikin, who shot himself in the foot in one of his attempts at duelling (Finn, 1888, p. 776-780). The most recent biography (including a portrait) is that of Lewis (2010), who omits the episode about to be recounted.

<sup>10</sup> An English name: Clark, note in Robinson (2000b) p. 51. Ellender & Christiansen (2001) give more information, including a portrait.

objectionable by shooting one of the Taungurung dogs the day before. It should be remembered that dogs and spears were essential hunting tools, and hunting was the principal means of living of the Taungurung. This was no light matter; some form of compensation was called for, and the group asked for sheep.

Windberry is reported to have said “they were entitled to eat the sheep” because “the sheep eat the grass belonging to his kangaroo, and white fellow took kangaroo, and what for no give him sheep.” A clearer statement of the ecological competition could not be made.

As sheep were not forthcoming, compensation was forcibly extracted. The Kulin group assembled with local Taungurung, and watched at a distance as one or more men entered Snodgrass’s storehouse and removed sugar and other food. Deighton was held up with a pistol as this was going on.

Snodgrass could not act against the Taungurung immediately, but bided his time. The opportunity came in October 1840, when the Taungurung met other Kulin tribes at Melbourne to discuss a payback raid on the Wathaurung tribe for a murder. At that time, there had recently been killed a number of workers at a station near Mansfield, and it was said that Windberry was involved<sup>2</sup>. In fact, Windberry had nothing to do with it, and those responsible had belonged to the Waywurru nation, not the Kulin<sup>3</sup>. But Melbourne was in an uproar, and Superintendent La Trobe ordered a mass arrest of the Kulin gathering.

Police and troopers descended on the camp on 11<sup>th</sup> October 1840, shooting the dogs<sup>4</sup> and destroying all movable property. Windberry was the only one to attempt some sort of resistance – with a “waddy” – and was promptly shot dead. The two to three hundred Kulin people, men, women and children, were then forcibly herded into town:

If the women, many of whom had young children, happened to be behind as also the old and infirm, they were goaded with bayonets by the soldiers and hit with the but end of their muskets or cut with the sabre of the native police.

Taken to a yard near the barracks<sup>5</sup>, the Kulin people were offered for viewing to anyone who might hold something against them. Snodgrass seems to have been the only complainant. He and his men pointed out 25 of the Taungurung men as having either been present at the incident with Deighton, or having poached his sheep; five Woi wurrung were also arrested. The men were identified by their “white names”, such as “Long Billy”; no less than four seem to have had conferred upon them the name “Fuckemall” or variants thereof. They were promptly shackled in pairs and locked up in the gaol, which in those days stood in Collins St. near the corner with William St.<sup>6</sup> Those of the Kulin who did not belong to the Taungurung were released as being “less hostile to the whites than their more ferocious brethren of the Goulburn”<sup>7</sup>. The Taungurung who were not arrested, including all the women and children, were locked up in a warehouse for the night, from which they easily escaped, although one youth was shot dead. It turned out “when the body was examined that it was dreadfully mangled, apparently with sabre cuts. How these wounds were inflicted does not appear.”<sup>8</sup>

After due consideration, it was decided that charges should be laid against only ten of the men, who were sent for trial on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1841. None of Snodgrass’s men identified the only Woi wurrung man among them so he was discharged.<sup>9</sup> The rest – nine Taungurung from the Yea area - were sentenced to 10 years’ transportation to a penal colony in New South Wales.

On 14<sup>th</sup> January 1841, the shackles which had bound the Taungurung were struck off and replaced by individual cross irons. “This to them was freedom.”<sup>10</sup> Together with a group of white convicts they were marched to Queen’s Wharf to be loaded on board the cutter *Victoria* to be ferried to the brig *Vesper* which was standing out in Hobson’s Bay waiting to take them to New South Wales. They were guarded by a corporal and three privates of the 28<sup>th</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The following account is taken from two sources: *Port Phillip Patriot* 7<sup>th</sup> January 1841, and Robinson (2000b) p. 7-55 and 65-66. The classic account of early Melbourne by “Garryowen” has only a brief erroneous reference to the trial (Finn, 1888, p. 90).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Port Phillip Gazette* 17<sup>th</sup> October 1840; *Port Phillip Herald* 6<sup>th</sup> October 1840 et seq, although it quickly became apparent this was not so.

<sup>3</sup> McMillan (1994) ch. 13, gives a full account.

<sup>4</sup> Because “these animals [are] employed by the blacks in destroying the sheep of the settlers.” *Port Phillip Herald* 13<sup>th</sup> October 1840.

<sup>5</sup> Ellender & Christiansen (2001) p. 74 say “stockyards” but “stockade” is more likely.

<sup>6</sup> Cannon (1991) p.140.

<sup>7</sup> *Port Phillip Herald* 13<sup>th</sup> October 1840.

<sup>8</sup> *Port Phillip Herald* 20<sup>th</sup> October 1840.

<sup>9</sup> *Port Phillip Patriot* 7<sup>th</sup> January 1841.

<sup>10</sup> *Port Phillip Herald* 15<sup>th</sup> January 1841.

Regiment and a constable. Either at this time or prior to it, “white men told the natives they were going to Sydney to be hung.”<sup>1</sup>

The white convicts (“Englishmen” and one woman) were stowed below, but although the master of the *Victoria* wanted all the prisoners safely below deck, the gaoler objected to mixing them. The Taungurung were then placed on deck amidships. Francis Hyde, corporal in charge of the escort, said later “I considered that having the whites secure if the blacks attempted to escape we could fire at them.”<sup>2</sup>

As the *Victoria* sped down the Yarra River on the outgoing tide, the nine Taungurung men evidently decided that, in the words of Shakespeare, it was as good to die and go, as die and stay. Ironed as they were, “on a pre-arranged signal” they rose as one man and leapt overboard. As they struggled through the water towards the shore, the escort opened fire on them with musket and pistol.

It was later reported that “one of them, when a soldier was about to fire on him, made a spring from the water and wrested the gun from the soldier’s grasp – on obtaining his prize he sunk and the musket has not been since discovered.”<sup>3</sup>

There are conflicting stories about the fate of most of the men. Certainly one of them, a boy about 17 years old, was wounded and captured on shore. It was reported that two had definitely been killed, and at least one body was recovered. According to one version, Corporal Hyde stated that “Three or four men were said to have been seen struck and fall in the water, others were fired at in the reeds” while another had it that two were shot “who immediately sunk, (two others in the reeds were fired at and disappeared)”<sup>4</sup>. Black trackers are said to have found the tracks of three men on shore. A newspaper reported one day that “six escaped into the bush” and then after the tracks were found “it is apparent that the remainder were either drowned or mortally wounded.”<sup>5</sup> Another newspaper later reported a “rumour” that all six had been seen and spoken to<sup>6</sup>, but whether that had any more truth in it than those earlier rumours accusing Windberry of murder I do not know.

Having this example before them of what would happen to those who interfered with the progress of sheep farming in the Muddy Creek area, the Taungurung became alienated from their own land. “No black fellow go to Goulburn, no like it mountain, no kangaroo, plenty hungry.”<sup>7</sup> Less than twenty years had passed since the first ngamudji had crossed their territory. Before another twenty years had passed, the Taungurung and other Kulin tribes had been pushed into the first of a series of “reserves” without legal status, from where they were moved on so soon as the settlers required the land.

## THE SMELL OF GOLD

Two great events happened in 1851: Victoria became a colony separate from New South Wales, and a full-scale gold rush developed. The Mt. Alexander goldfield, near what is now known as Castlemaine, produced such stupendously rich takings that ships were left deserted in Port Phillip and districts were stripped of labourers when such of those who were able flocked to the diggings. The “old money”, who had invested their capital in agriculture, spoke of a “gold crisis” and attempted to stem the tide by restrictive legislation<sup>8</sup> before they either became bankrupt or – nearly as bad – they were forced to employ women to perform the necessary work.

It was in this same year, 1851, that we hear the first rumours of gold at Muddy Creek. The *Melbourne Morning Herald* reported from Kilmore that “more than a hundred” prospectors were washing gold at Muddy Creek<sup>9</sup>; the garbled evidence would seem to point to somewhere on the Murrindindi pastoral run, which in those days extended from the present town of Yea some 15 miles or more southwards. But we hear no more about it<sup>10</sup>, and from the less optimistic version of the same story in the *Argus*<sup>11</sup> I am inclined to think that this was just another of those wild

<sup>1</sup> Robinson (2000b) p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Robinson (2000b) p. 54, entry for 15<sup>th</sup> January 1841.

<sup>3</sup> *Port Phillip Herald* 19<sup>th</sup> January 1841.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, *ibid.* and *Port Phillip Gazette* 16<sup>th</sup> January 1841 respectively.

<sup>5</sup> *Port Phillip Herald* 15<sup>th</sup> January & 19<sup>th</sup> January 1841 respectively.

<sup>6</sup> *Port Phillip Patriot* 21<sup>st</sup> January 1841.

<sup>7</sup> Robinson (2000b) p. 56, entry for 18<sup>th</sup> January 1841.

<sup>8</sup> Which led ultimately to the Eureka Stockade uprising.

<sup>9</sup> *Melbourne Morning Herald* 20<sup>th</sup> December 1851.

<sup>10</sup> Another piece in the 22<sup>nd</sup> December edition of the same newspaper, cited by Flett (1970), appears to be merely a rework of the first.

<sup>11</sup> *Argus* 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1851.

rumours which abound in gold rush times. Possibly some miners coming overland from Sydney decided to test the river in passing, and the story grew with distance.

As the 1850's progressed, gold was discovered at Beechworth, and then in the mountainous country of the Upper Goulburn. Hume and Hovell's track became truly well-worn as gold-seekers passed back and forth between Melbourne, the eastern diggings and those of Ballarat and Western Victoria. The crossing on the Muddy Creek became busy, and soon "a blacksmith had erected a hut and forge on the site ... this so annoyed the then owner of Murrindindi, Mr. Miller, on whose run it stood, that he complained to the Government with a view of having him removed, with the result they sent up a surveyor to lay out a township where the hut stood at the crossing."<sup>1</sup> This was in 1855.

The surveyor, Thomas Pinniger, apparently wanted to call the new town after a local lass to whom he had taken a fancy, according to one version of the story. But after due reflection, it was decided to name the town in honour of Col. Lacy Yea<sup>2</sup>, a British Army officer who had just died in the Crimean War, in whose regiment the Surveyor-General of Victoria had been a subordinate. Most sources describe Col. Yea as a "hero"<sup>3</sup>, but the town's most highly decorated military man had doubts. In 1912, Boer War veteran Major F. G. Purcell put forward a case that the town should be renamed. Among various reasons, he stated that "in Colonel Yea we had as typical a despot as anyone would find" and suggested he was just as likely to have been shot in the back by his own men as to have died by enemy fire<sup>4</sup>.

With the proclamation of the township there closed that frontier chapter of Yea's history when the ownership of the land passed from the Taungurung to the squatters, and there opened a new chapter in which there came in the smallholders, the rule of law, bureaucracy, and indeed the whole apparatus of modern society. This was aptly summed up in verse by one of the Yea squatters<sup>5</sup>:

I chased the darkies when I was young and bold,  
The Road Board is my weakness now I'm getting old.

In 1855, Pinniger had mapped some gold workings along Boundary Creek, with the comment "scarcely remunerative"<sup>6</sup>. But real gold rushes crept closer. In 1857, the Reedy Creek goldfield sprang up some 20 miles west of Yea. Prospectors fanned out into the nearby foothills of the Great Dividing Range. In May 1859 Roderick Murchison reported gold on his station at King Parrot Creek<sup>7</sup>. The next discoveries were along Teatree Creek west and southwest of Yea. Finally, late in 1859, payable gold was discovered at Yea itself.

## THE EARLY GOLDFIELDS

According to *The Story of Yea*<sup>8</sup>, one afternoon in 1859 two shearers named Edwards and Ferguson were taking a shortcut to work on the Killingworth pastoral run when they discovered a gold reef just across the Yea River from the town. As it was a Sunday, they regarded it as an act of Providence, and named the discovery accordingly.

The source of this story is not known. Of Ferguson there is no further information, but when James Edwards died in 1896, the *Yea Chronicle* merely remarked that he was "one of the first to open out the Providence Hill", a rather strange thing to say if he had been its discoverer<sup>9</sup>.

In the following year, 1860, prospectors scoured the nearby country for more gold. They found it in Boundary Creek, and tracing the gold up the creek, found it came from a wide tributary gully which became known as the Flat Lead.

<sup>1</sup> "Actum ne agas", *Yea Chronicle* 21<sup>st</sup> July 1912.

<sup>2</sup> Pronounced "Yaw" according to early sources, e.g. "Antiquarian", *Alexandra Times* 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1868 but very soon the Alexandrians were joking "Yay yay or nay nay" (*Alexandra Times* 17<sup>th</sup> August 1867).

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Blanks (1973) p. 131.

<sup>4</sup> F.G. Purcell, *Yea Chronicle* 21<sup>st</sup> July 1912.

<sup>5</sup> J.D. Webster, quoted in *Alexandra Times* 27<sup>th</sup> March 1869. Cf. Homer, *Iliad* Book 4:  
The field of combat fits the young and bold,  
The solemn council best becomes the old.

<sup>6</sup> Pinniger (1856), the field work being done in 1855.

<sup>7</sup> *McIvor News & Goulburn Advertiser* 27<sup>th</sup> May 1859. Murchison was a namesake of (and related to) the great British geologist.

<sup>8</sup> Blanks (1973) p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> *Yea Chronicle* 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1896.

From 1860 also is a report of gold on Duncan McLeish's Glenmore station, which straddled the Yea River.<sup>1</sup> Here there was definitely an alluvial deposit in the Yea River, for which the diggers diverted the flow of the water. But there is also a mention of "McLeishe's reef" perhaps from the same area (it may be that which became known in the 1890s as the Rising Sun mine).

In 1861, in creeks running into the upper reaches of the Yea River near Mt. Slide on the Great Dividing Range, gold was discovered in what was dubbed the Mountain Rush. So rugged is the country that it was for some time uncertain whether the creeks were part of the Yarra or of the Murray-Goulburn watersheds. After the creeks were traced to the Yea River, the Mining Surveyor at Kilmore reported with some satisfaction that he had previously deduced this would be the case because they contained the Murray River crayfish (*Euastachus armatus*)<sup>2</sup>. The Kinglake Goldfield, as it was eventually known, is outside the area covered by this book. But we should note that it is associated with another great fold in the bedrock, the Reedy Creek Anticline, with the same tectonic origins as the Yea Anticline.

The two rich prospects at Yea, then, were Providence Hill and the Boundary Creek-Flat Lead area. Both were to serve Yea well, yielding gold on and off right into the twentieth century. The two were different in many respects, however.

Providence Hill lies right on the Yea Anticline, and the mineralisation lies within a fairly narrow band which extends discontinuously for many kilometres northwest and southeast along the fold axis. Thus, although Providence Hill itself is a fairly confined space, gold was eventually found at many points along the Anticline, from Ghin Ghin in the north to Murrindindi in the south. Indeed, the first such find after Providence Hill was in 1860, only a mile to the north, at what became known as Ready Money Hill,<sup>3</sup> although the name was more optimistic than the results obtained. Any alluvial gold shed from Providence Hill would quickly wash into the Yea River and would be a very tricky proposition to extract.

The Flat Lead reefs, by contrast, are associated with a number of parallel folds and shears in a wide metamorphic pressure zone to one side of the Yea Anticline. These reefs threw off their alluvial gold into broad gullies where it lay relatively undisturbed some distance from the turbulent river.

As a result, the mining history of the two areas is different. At Providence Hill, we see a small number of reef companies – one, two or at most three – doing their best to operate in the confined space. At Flat Lead and Boundary Creek, there were at various times up to five companies at work on the reefs, while in 1867 there was said to be a rush of 150-200 claims on the alluvials<sup>4</sup>.

Why, then, is Providence Hill so well known, while the Flat Lead area is seldom heard of? Part of the answer lies in the fact that it required a significant amount of capital to mine at Providence. Once the shafts reached the level of the Yea River, water poured in through seepage and serious machinery was needed both to pump out water and raise the ore. Capital was provided by some of Yea's prominent citizens, and it is to their involvement that Providence owes its local fame. Only late in their history did one or two local identities become involved with Flat Lead and Boundary Creek, and then not always happily.

One of the earliest investors associated with the Providence was James Daniel Webster, one of Yea's early squatters. Starting as a farm hand, he gradually saved enough to be able to select land which he not only farmed but, in the early days, he operated as a government pound<sup>5</sup>. Poundkeeping was a somewhat despised occupation but it brought in extra cash. His selection, called Beaumanto<sup>6</sup>, was near the present-day Yea Racecourse, where he also ran a store before the town of Yea came into being. He himself was manager of the Providence Mining Association's operations from 1864 until they ceased in about 1869 or early 1870, and he invested in other mining ventures in Yea and Alexandra.

<sup>1</sup> *Mining Surveyors' Reports* January 1860.

<sup>2</sup> H. C. Campbell, *Reports of the Mining Surveyors*, July 1861. Campbell erroneously refers to two "Murray lobsters", the other being the common yabby (*Cherax destructor*).

<sup>3</sup> *Mining Surveyors' Reports* February 1860.

<sup>4</sup> *Kilmore Free Press* 14<sup>th</sup> November 1867.

<sup>5</sup> *Gazette* 1853, p. 154.

<sup>6</sup> Probably pronounced Bumanto, which is how the early surveyors wrote it; Billis & Kenyon (1974) are responsible for the mangled version Burnanto. Sometimes written Beaumonto (e.g. Blanks 1973, *Yea Chronicle* 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1891) but the correct spelling is given in the *Gazette*, in newspaper advertisements for the station (e.g. *Yea Chronicle* 30<sup>th</sup> March 1891) and in letters from Webster (e.g. *Alexandra Times* 27<sup>th</sup> March 1869). In the recent re-edited version of Gordon (1997), Tom Dignam states "we agonised over Beaumanto" before adopting this spelling.

When Webster dropped the lease on the Providence, there were two men in particular who were waiting for the opportunity to pick it up. They jointly owned a store in Yea, and were the first in what almost became a tradition of the Yea shopkeepers to invest in local mines. John Wishart Cairns owned a number of shops in various country towns<sup>1</sup>. There is a rather unflattering description of him as “a common pot-house rough, a race-course brawler, a fellow continually getting into unseemly quarrels with stable boys and rowdies, and getting his eyes occasionally blackened for his pains.”<sup>2</sup> His Yea partner, and shop manager, was Eaton Stannard Purcell, a son of County Cork who came to Yea in 1865, when aged only about 20. Purcell became one of the town’s most prominent citizens, receiving one of its largest funerals after he died in 1917.<sup>3</sup> Although seemingly less pugnacious than Cairns, we shall see later that he could also join a melee when the occasion warranted.

At least one of the early miners later became a prominent citizen. William Oliver came out from Essex in 1859 aged about 21, and moved to Yea in 1860. “On arrival he worked for some time at the Providence Hill, which in those days comprised a number of claims, and gave employment to a goodly number of men. It was here he formed a close acquaintance, and made a mate of Mr. William Rattray<sup>4</sup> ... In 1862 the two, who were then in their early manhood, and bent on the acquirement of fortunes, shifted to the Jordan [goldfield].” A couple of years later, he came back to Yea, married a daughter of Daniel McLeish (another shopkeeping mining investor whom we shall meet shortly), and became proprietor of first the Muddy Creek Hotel, then the Commercial Hotel, the latter in partnership with Rattray.<sup>5</sup>

Less fortunate was Joseph Cook, a Cornish miner from Quethiock. He arrived in Yea in about 1863, and worked mainly at the Providence for most of his life until his death in 1898 aged 55. He and his wife had to supplement his income with barbering and other work when the Providence was idle.<sup>6</sup>

## THE GHIN GHIN GOLD RUSH

The Ghin Ghin goldfield is situated across the Goulburn River north of Yea, in a valley running into the foothills of the Strathbogie Ranges. The original homestead of the Ghin Ghin run still stands, some 2 km. west of the valley where gold was found.

In 1867, a young man from the north of Ireland, Ezekiel Wilson Pennington<sup>7</sup>, working with two local men, James and Daniel McLeish, struck alluvial gold in the valley of a creek on the Ghin Ghin pastoral lease. The three men took a one-third share in the prospecting claim; but only Pennington and James McLeish applied for the Government reward for finding a new goldfield (the reward eventually paid was £50 each, a handsome sum in those days).

It would seem from this that Daniel McLeish was perhaps only a financial partner, he himself only claimed to have been “the first man that spent money to open up Ghin Ghin”<sup>8</sup>. From his absence in later proceedings it also seems that he may have quickly sold his share to J.D. Webster, whose station lay across the river from Ghin Ghin. Daniel McLeish was the owner of the A1 Butcher in Yea “which vocation was very lucrative”<sup>9</sup> because of the gold mining activity, and he was perhaps looking to invest in the Murrindindi field, in which he held interests for considerably longer than at Ghin Ghin. According to Blanks he had been a digger himself at Bendigo. His daughter Christina married one of the local miners, Charles Forbes.<sup>10</sup>

James McLeish (a brother of Daniel<sup>11</sup>) was born in Perthshire in about 1812. On coming to Victoria in 1852 he settled at Glenburn and began farming, but after discovering Ghin Ghin he seems to have taken up mining for good, and his name appears in many operations at Yea and its neighbourhood. He died at the ripe old age of 94.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Blanks (1973) p. 75-76.

<sup>2</sup> George Grant, reported in *Yea Chronicle* 15<sup>th</sup> September 1871.

<sup>3</sup> Blanks (1973) p. 92-93; obituary, *Yea Chronicle* 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1917 (with portrait photo).

<sup>4</sup> Blanks (1973) p. 101, 156 erroneously calls him Ratorary.

<sup>5</sup> Obituary, *Yea Chronicle* 11<sup>th</sup> January 1900.

<sup>6</sup> Obituary, *Yea Chronicle* 29<sup>th</sup> September 1898.

<sup>7</sup> His first name is nowadays given as *Ezekial*, e.g. by Flett (1970), but this probably stems from a typographical error in a government list of goldfields rewards. The spelling is not found in any other contemporary documents. Waghorn (1982) uses both versions.

<sup>8</sup> *Alexandra Times* 27<sup>th</sup> March 1869.

<sup>9</sup> Obituary, *Yea Chronicle* 13<sup>th</sup> April 1899.

<sup>10</sup> Obituary of Christina Forbes, *Yea Chronicle* 19<sup>th</sup> April 1900.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon (1997) p. 45-46, who relates he was threatened with lynching if he did not reveal the location of the find.

Pennington and his party dubbed their claim Palestine, no doubt because it seemed to them to be the Promised Land. A problem quickly became apparent: geographically, the goldfield lay in the Beechworth Mining District, for which the nearest official representative was at Alexandra, a distance of 20 miles. The remoteness from authority quickly led to lawlessness. One man boasted he was joining the Ghin Ghin rush in the company of

Flash Harry, Rowdy Joe, and Crooked River Bill ... useful men indeed at a rush, in the event of a "barney."<sup>2</sup>

Men such as David Bird, John Chambers, John Elmeel and Evan Rowland abandoned diggings at the newly proclaimed town of Alexandra to try their luck at this new field. Charles Anderson was one of those who left the Pig and Whistle goldfield near Molesworth.<sup>3</sup>

At an early stage of the rush, many diggers failed to turn up gold.

Claim after claim was bottomed ... yielding on an average to each tin dish tried, one speck, in conjunction with two floaters. Some bore their disappointment with the resignation of christian philosophers, piously ejaculating "there goes another duffer for Her Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria" but ... the majority of diggers irreverently damned the rush – in choice vernacular – as a "rank shicer".<sup>4</sup>

[Pennington and his partners] were surrounded by a throng of disappointed and indignant diggers ... and were threatened with lynch law should the rush turn out to be "a salt," or "storekeeper's rush".<sup>5</sup>

The crowd were only mollified when one of their number was allowed to wash a pan of dirt taken at random from the shaft, which satisfactorily produced 3 dwt. gold.

Word soon spread. By 26<sup>th</sup> September it was said there were upwards of 500 men on the field, on 19<sup>th</sup> October the population was estimated to be 700, on 31<sup>st</sup> October it was 1000, and two weeks later 1500 was the top guess. Not even 30 years would pass before legend would have it that "7,000 men worked on the ground".<sup>6</sup>

Getting to the goldfield was not easy. Those who tried to come directly from Melbourne, via Whittlesea and the Kinglake Ranges, were faced with "heavily timbered forests, magnificent alpine steppes, bridgeless creeks, blind gullies and crab holes; and mile after mile of black peat like quagmire."<sup>7</sup> Alternatively they could take a train or coach to Kilmore, then make their way from there via the "Magpie and Stump"<sup>8</sup> and Reedy Creek, a distance of 35 miles<sup>9</sup>. They could even take a coach which left Melbourne three days a week for Yea and Alexandra.



*A rough vignette of the Royal Mail Coach to Yea shows an open-sided charabanc with four rows of seats, cheaper by far than the stagecoaches beloved of film and TV. From advertisements in the Alexandra Times 1868.*

<sup>1</sup> Obituary, *Yea Chronicle* 24<sup>th</sup> May 1906.

<sup>2</sup> *Woods Point Times and Mountaineer* 24<sup>th</sup> August 1867, report dated 19<sup>th</sup> August 1867

<sup>3</sup> PRO8521.

<sup>4</sup> *Woods Point Times and Mountaineer* 24<sup>th</sup> August 1867.

<sup>5</sup> *Argus* 19<sup>th</sup> October 1867.

<sup>6</sup> *Yea Chronicle* 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1895.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> A tavern at Sunday Creek: Flett (1979).

<sup>9</sup> Itinerary in *Kilmore Free Press* 31<sup>st</sup> October 1867.

Thomas Couchman, a government geologist on his way to the Alexandra diggings, wrote that the road between Broadford and Yea was so rough that one of the coach horses dropped dead in its tracks from exhaustion and abuse<sup>1</sup>.

Having reached Webster's station just west of Yea, the aspiring digger would have to strike north and cross the Goulburn River. Here the closest part of the river was often too dangerous to cross on horseback, and out of the question for anyone on foot. At least one miner drowned in the river. Thomas Green lost his life on 6<sup>th</sup> February 1868, the body not being recovered for 3 days<sup>2</sup>. So at the riverbank the traveller to Ghin Ghin would have to pay his dues to Pennington and party in order to ... enable them to cross the Goulburn at pleasure, they found it necessary a considerable time ago to purchase a boat, which they have now placed on the river, with a ferryman in it, for the accommodation of the public, who are enabled to cross the Goulburn, *en route* to the new diggings, at the charge of sixpence per head, and store goods and merchandise are taken over at a corresponding rate. The prospectors having procured the necessary licence from the Government, have advertised for tenders for the construction of a punt, which is to supplant the boat, which is found to be insufficient for the exigencies of the rush, but which at present is the only available means of reaching and leaving the diggings ...<sup>3</sup>

That was said at the beginning of the gold rush, but after a few months things had soured:

... the one small boat that constitutes the sole means of communication at the present time, has been, and must be, earning for the proprietors, prospectors, and company, a very comfortable weekly dividend. Notwithstanding this, it is scarcely credible that the owners of the said boat should be so parsimonious as not even to have the banks of the river cut away, to enable passengers to reach the boat in safety, not to say anything about convenience. The charge for swimming a horse across the river behind the boat is five shillings, and a good number cross and re-cross. Now these animals have to be pushed down the steep bank at considerable risk to the horse also to the boatman, who one day last week had to plunge into the river, to save himself from being crushed ... The above mentioned boat proprietors have now had a grant for a punt, some two months or more ... They should have, long ere this, had the punt under weigh, or have given way to more enterprising parties. The pervading influence of the district, has been keen to monopolise – slow to perform.<sup>4</sup>

Having paid Pennington's ferryman, the digger would then walk or ride about a mile over the river flats, then up a slight rise, with the town of Ghin Ghin in view about another mile ahead. Smoke would be billowing from dozens of rough chimneys and fires, the main road would be busy with carts and horses, and the sound of pianos would have been heard from the hotels that lined the main street. Behind the town on all sides would have been hundreds of shaft heads and mullock heaps, and hundreds of surface workers would be swarming like ants, where today all is silence.

### THE CLAIM JUMPERS

We now come to an episode which made Ghin Ghin notorious, so that it was said "probably there is no goldfield in the colony of Victoria that has been more grossly misrepresented or foully maligned"<sup>5</sup>. As background to this, it should be noted that by the 1860's gold mining had moved on from the early years of easy riches for anyone armed with just a pick and pan.

Most of the surface and easily acquired gold had been obtained, and the mass of independent and unskilled miners working for themselves, who were attracted by it, were fast departing from an occupation which was now beginning to require, if it was to be profitable, co-operation, capital, and machinery; or they were absorbed as paid laborers into the mining companies now fast increasing.<sup>6</sup>

Many did not like the changed times, nor did they like

... the hawks, sharks and vultures of the mining community who prey upon miners, whose field of operations is not the claim, but the broker's office and the several mining "Corners." Their implements are scrip,

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<sup>1</sup> *Age* 15<sup>th</sup> August 1867.

<sup>2</sup> *Illustrated Melbourne Post* 27<sup>th</sup> February 1868.

<sup>3</sup> *Argus* 19<sup>th</sup> October 1867.

<sup>4</sup> *Kilmore Free Press* 15<sup>th</sup> December 1867.

<sup>5</sup> *Alexandra Times* 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1868.

<sup>6</sup> Smyth (1869) p.388.