

## PROFESSOR WESTON BATE OAM

### The Monster Meeting Interviews #5

Professor Weston Bate OAM interviewed by Jan 'Yarn' Wositzky

Approximate running time: 55 minutes

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### Weston Bate

Weston Bate is a social historian. He's the author of many books, including *Lucky City: the first generation at Ballarat, 1851–1901* (Melbourne University Press, 2003), *Victorian Gold Rushes* (Sovereign Hill Museums Association, 1999), *Having a Go: Bill Boyd's Mallee* (Museum of Victoria, 1989, with Bill Boyd) and *Essential but Unplanned: the story of Melbourne's Lanes* (State Library of Victoria, 1994). Weston was also Head of Australian History at Melbourne University, served in the Australian Air Force during World War Two, and began his working life as a primary school teacher.

### Overview of Interview

With this great historian we go further into the social politics of the gold rush and the Monster Meeting, viewing the events and times as one of social revolution in concert with the 1840's revolutions in Europe, containing elements of republicanism and small l liberalism, powered by the union of capital and labour and the liberation provided to the ordinary worker by the "democratic mineral" – gold.

### Part One The Ideas of the 1850's Gold Rush

0:00 A view that the gold rushes were one of the world's great social evolutions, raising the question of the proper relationship between those who had governed and those who obeyed orders, with a background of the 1848 revolutions in Europe. Gold as the 'democratic mineral' and radical capitalism.

Europe had attempted to get popular government, and people here were sensing an opportunity to take away old ideas about class and to establish a social democracy where anybody's value was the same as another's, and it was a coming together of capital and labour which gave us "little l" liberalism – a fair go. They were digging capital without the middle man.

## Part Two Victoria Before the Gold Rush

8:51 Description of political set up in Victoria, and relationship between Lieutenant- Governor La Trobe and the Legislative Council (LC), with pastoralists (squatters) in charge of the LC.

Discussion of what squatters knew of gold pre the gold rush.

Outline of character of La Trobe: humane, scholarly but too gentle to deal with gold rush, and being from the gentry he did not want structure of society disturbed, and in the conflict between the pastoralists and the gold diggers (the “lower classes” and the “indigent” as La Trobe called them) how La Trobe is on side of the pastoralists.

## Part 3 Governor La Trobe & The Gold License

15:11 Outline of the gold rush circumstances (as detailed in interview 1), and how La Trobe faced a crisis in the new colony and was inadequate to deal with it.

How La Trobe was deterred from a royalty on gold, and resorted to taxing to keep the working class in order, and also to raise revenue.

Question of why, with the gold crisis, La Trobe’s decision making is slow and faltering.

## Part 4 The Mount Alexander / Forest Creek Gold Rush

The sounds of the gold rush with the use of the Californian cradles and firearms, and the sight of campfires at night, a great scene of human activity, with a mix of people, including ex-convicts who were smeared but well behaved, middle class people and others from across society, and Melbourne emptied of people.

How the 25,000 camped on Forest Creek were approximately 50% of the Victorian population – so the Gold License did not work.

## Part 5 Doubling the Gold License

28:01 How La Trobe proclaimed a doubling of the Gold License from the first day of 1852, and how his communication with England was useless, given the time taken for mail to get to England and back.

Comparison with the Gold License and the fee of £10 per year paid by Barker the squatter to occupy vast areas of land.

## Part 6 The Monster Meeting

31:11 How diggers reacted furiously to this tax – the Gold License – and how the Monster Meeting, whilst dwelling upon injustice of tax, is also focussed upon a sense of injustice and what ought to be done.

How speaker Potts' assertion that the tax was illegal is nonsense, that he was serious about breaking from England, as America had done, and how they would not be slaves, with this the first chance of the labouring classes to do good.

View that this talk is a social revolution that offers independence, a democratic society, and that in unity this was a strength they'd never had before.

Opinion that majority of the diggers would have been in favour of Australia going same way as America should Australia continue to make the same mistakes as England did.

Mention of opinion of David Bannear(see interview 6) that it was at the Monster Meeting that the diggers became the Diggers, how everybody is threatened by the doubling of the license, and later recognised that the whole system was corrupt.

How the Monster Meeting was the largest gathering of people to that time in Australia, that they were calling themselves "citizens", that there were many more than just people who were diggers.

Discussion of speaker Webb Richmond's assertion that a government should be servant of the people, and the sense that the gold question required a political resolution.

#### Part 7     After the Monster Meeting

45:09     Discussion of why La Trobe institutes police on half the fines they can collect: because otherwise la Trobe cannot get police as he doesn't have funds to pay them. Comparisons with current mining boom.

Possibility of La Trobe getting gold fields to run itself, as they did for a time at Ballarat. But La Trobe should be excused, though it did lead to bloodshed at Ballarat in 1854.

Mention of Red Ribbon Agitation at Bendigo 1853, and how introduction of a more liberal regime with diggers taking out license at any time of the month led to bureaucratic nightmare.

Talk of Bendigo Petition where diggers demanded a vote, but nothing came of it as any such change had to go to London.

How at the Bendigo meeting there were people from all around the world, armed, and some from 1848 revolutions, and discussion of non-violence policy from leaders of diggers.

How lesson from this is the need for government to listen and that people must stand against injustice.

