

MARJORIE THEOBALD

The Monster Meeting Interviews #4

Marjorie Theobald interviewed by Jan 'Yarn' Wositzky

Approximate running time: 54 minutes

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Marjorie Theobald

Marjorie Theobald began her working life as a secondary school teacher, then became a historian at Melbourne University from 1987-2001. Upon retirement she has written books, including *Ruyton Remembers 1879-1978* (Hawthorn Press, 1978), *Knowing Women: Origins of Women's Education in Nineteenth-Century Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), and *The Wealth Beneath their Feet: a Family on the Castlemaine Goldfields* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2011). Marjorie is currently writing a history of the first decade of her home town, Castlemaine, and her iconoclastic piece, *Lies, Damned Lies and Travel Writers: Women's Narratives of the Castlemaine Goldfields, 1852-54* (Victorian Historical Journal Vol. 84 No 2 November 2013) is well worth a read.

Overview of Interview

With Marjorie we go deeper into the political machinations of early Victoria, the Monster Meeting and the Gold License, with a keen and incisive eye for the character of Lieutenant-Governor La Trobe, the squattocracy, the diggers, and the consequences of the Monster Meeting.

Part 1 Introduction

0:00 Marjorie Theobald tells of her family history on the goldfields, Sunday afternoon conversation about "nothing but gold", and she reviews the teaching of gold rush history.

Part 2 Before the Gold Rush

1:57 Reflections on how the land rush before the 1850's gold rush had removed Aborigines from their land, and how we now have to confront this difficult history.

Outline of how pre-1850's squatters paid £10 per year to occupy their vast Victorian lands, and resisted the gold digger's claims to mine gold

whilst attempting to turn their leaseholds into 640 acre blocks that they could own.

The story of shepherd John Worley who wrote to the Argus newspaper about gold on the property of squatter William Barker, at present day Barker's Creek near Castlemaine.

Part 3 The Gold License

8:14 How Victoria gained independence from NSW in July 1851, with Lieutenant-Governor Charles Joseph La Trobe, a highly cultured gentleman, having to deal with a Legislative Council of squatters whilst also getting the mechanism of government in place amidst a gold rush.

On 16 August 1851 La Trobe issued notice of Gold License of thirty shilling per month, which was not rescinded till after the Eureka tragedy. In tandem with the Masters & Servants Act, this regulation was impossible to enforce.

How gold always belonged to the Crown, and the aim of the Gold License was to control labour, keep people in their jobs and to balance the budget whilst paying for administration of the goldfields.

However the license failed to stop people going to the gold rush, where the evasion rate on paying was about 50%.

Part 4 The Monster Meeting

15:27 How the Monster Meeting was a response to La Trobe doubling the Gold License, with a preliminary meeting of up to 4000 diggers on 8 December 1851. How at the time there was no animosity from the diggers towards the authorities and Gold Commissioner on the fields. Sketch of the first meeting.

19:30 Explanation that the Gold Commissioners were converted Land Commissioners, and how the Commissioner on Forest Creek, Frederick Powlett, later condemned the license system. Explanation that there were few police left in Melbourne (they'd all gone digging) and on Forest Creek there were only 38 police.

Account of how at the preliminary meeting of 8 December the diggers requested Powlett to chair the main meeting (the Monster Meeting) to come on 15 December, but he refused because he had to go to Melbourne. A shepherd's hut was chosen as the site for the Monster Meeting and news was spread by posters and word of mouth.

24:27 Description of meeting: there was a sax and horn band, a dray for the speakers, a chairman, and speakers who ran off on all kinds of issues other than license and made inflammatory statements:

Speaker Potts likening the situation to Britain's loss of the American colonies, and how La Trobe might react to this talk; speaker Harrison calling the tax unconstitutional; rhetoric of unity and combining to resist oppression.

Sketch of background in Europe: a time of dissent where in England only middle classes were enfranchised and much discontent, and that all this talk alarmed La Trobe, who was hoping for a knighthood, rather than being the man who lost the colonies. How he panicked, took threats of overthrow of government seriously and in despatches to London and Sydney he requested military assistance.

32:50 Discussion of speaker Potts asserting that though they were loyal to the Crown that in the new society they would not be slaves, and how the Monster Meeting was a wonderful confrontation with the old order.

Part 5 The Media

34:27 Discussion of illustration of the day (go to *link) and how the Argus newspaper was a partisan force in the digger's favour, and that the editor, William (*Spelling?*)Curr, wrote splenetic editorials against Governor La Trobe. The other paper, the Melbourne Morning Herald, supported the digger's cause but railed against leaders of Monster Meeting. Praise of Argus reporter Howard's work.

Part 6 La Trobe's Response to the Meetings

38:29 On 17 December the diggers find out that on the 13th La Trobe had backed off on doubling the license. The miners won.

But then, with the Mining Act of January 1852, La Trobe makes shopkeepers and others on the fields pay the license, puts the police on half fines they generate, and institutes paid informers to do on unlicensed diggers.

Marjorie explains the legal background to this Act, and how it was to get at the "idlers and vagabonds" on the goldfields.

Part 7 Corrupt Policing

44:18 How the police corruption and brutality created by the Mining Act set in train the path to bloodshed at Eureka, with police rounding up miners and diggers resisting by various means.

Explanation that La Trobe's motivation was to collect revenue, from unlicensed diggers and sly groggers.

Part 8 The Follow Up

46:55 How at a subsequent meeting in Melbourne on Flagstaff Hill the

diggers formed an association and drew up a document on how to better run the goldfields, which was rejected by government.

Part 9 Legacy of the Monster Meeting

49:48 Outline of the Red Ribbon Agitation in Bendigo (1853) and Eureka (1854), and how we can take from this a tradition of not allowing yourself to be trampled upon by people in power.

How the diggers fashioned passive resistance, and how the power of this tactic was recognised in the authorities' letters, where they acknowledge that they were powerless to enforce the Gold License if the diggers on mass adopted passive resistance. But by Eureka the diggers did not understand the power of passive resistance. (*not sure this is what MT actually said?*)

But we take from the Monster Meeting an idea that you band together for your rights.

Changes

1. The heading La Trobe's Response to the Meetings should be at 38:29.
(It is currently at 39:49)

Script: MT: "...major effort wasn't it?"
La Trobe's Response to the Meetings
JW: "So this meeting's on the 8th of December..."

2. At 44:18 the heading should be Corrupt Policing, not The Follow Up
(which is further on at 46:55)

