Before the Australian Nation

Victoria as the heartland of diversity
(before 1900)

Commentary

Before the arrival of white British settlers in the mid1830s, the area now
known as Victoria was inhabited by 36 Aboriginal community and language
groups whose members were connected by marriage and kinship. At least in
the first decade of settlement in Melbourne, there was considerable cultural
engagement between Aborigines and settlers, though violence, primarily over
land, characterised relations on the frontier.

The discovery of gold in 1851, the year in which Victoria became a separate
colony, prompted a huge influx of people into Victoria, and especially into the
areas around Clunes, Warrandyte, Ballarat, Castlemaine and Bendigo.
People came to the goldfields from many places around the world. Seeking to
make their fortunes, large numbers of Chinese, Italians, other Europeans and
Americans joined the 'rush' to Victoria. Among them were people imbued
with ideals of democracy and republicanism, drawn from their experiences of
the Irish famine, the revolutionary turbulence of late 1840s' Europe and the
American War of Independence. Some of these sentiments came to the fore
in the Eureka rebellion of 1854, in which a group of gold diggers of diverse
origin demanded an end to mining licenses and were brutally put down by
government forces. This iconic event would have a long-lasting impact on the
public culture of Victoria and become a founding myth of the Australian nation.

The sudden appearance of large numbers of Chinese in Victoria in the mid
1850s triggered racist fears that Australia would be "swamped" by Asian
hordes. This prompted the government in 1855 to introduce the first anti-
Chinese immigration legislation among the colonies of Australia, imposing a
poll tax of £10 per head for each Chinese person arriving in Victorian ports.
Other restrictive measures followed as clashes continued on the goldfields
and anti-Chinese agitation grew among the trade unions. In 1881, Victoria
introduced a law to virtually prohibit Chinese immigration, in line with uniform
legislation agreed at the first Intercolonial Conference in 1880. This was the
precursor to the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, one of the first pieces of
legislation enacted by the Australian parliament after Federation.

Not all new migrants arriving in the 1850s came to dig for gold. Some became
market gardeners, small traders and hawkers, providing supplies and
provisions to the goldfields and towns that sprang up around the diggings.
Early Muslim immigrants included North Indian and Afghan cameleers, who
provided essential transport to outback settlements, and participated in major
journeys of exploration, such as those of Bourke and Wills in 1860.
Other new arrivals flocked to the thriving metropolis, known in the 1880s as
"marvelous Melbourne" for its booming economy and cosmopolitan flair. But
the depression of the 1890s hit hard. Immigration was reduced to a trickle
over the next decade, while unemployment and uncertainty inflamed ethnic,

class and social cleavages and sectarian animosities. In 1896 immigration restriction was extended to all non-European peoples and a Factories Act decreed that furniture made by Chinese labour had to be so stamped.

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