



The digger's licence

The author of this diary, Thomas Law McMillan, M.D., L.R.C.S.E., L.R.C.P.E., one time President of the Medical Society of Victoria, left Edinburgh University in 1850 to try his hand at mining. He was 24 years old, a medical student. He came to Australia by way of Pennsylvania and California, working his passage as a ship's surgeon. Upon arriving in Melbourne, he set off for the Bendigo diggings with his friends, writing his journal from day to day. Dr. McMillan's granddaughter, Mary L. Turnbull, has preserved and edited his journal and we are grateful to her for allowing us to present it as an authentic picture of Victoria's early bout of gold fever.

Diary of a Digger

THOMAS LAW McMILLAN

AT FIVE o'clock on the morning of 28th February, 1853, s.s. Cleopatra passed through the entrance to Port Phillip, a narrow rocky channel, and, 16 hours later, dropped anchor off Williamstown. It was too late to go ashore, and, though the ship fired guns and burned blue lights, the Custom House officers did not visit us.

During our first day in Melbourne a tremendous sirocco, or hurricane, with winds blowing from the north, filled the atmosphere with sand and obscured the sun's rays. Business was suspended till noon. Welcome rain fell in the evening, and the weather cleared up.

We made preparation to start for the diggings on March 3, but, when Thursday came we were disappointed in getting a team. My friends and I consoled ourselves by hiring an open carriage, and, all dressed in our mining toggery, drove to Collingwood and Richmond. We then crossed the river and walked round Emerald Hill, arriving back in time to attend a concert conducted by Winterbottom at the Great Bourke Street Rotunda. I was very much pleased, it being the best music I had heard in the Colony.

On Saturday we started on our journey to the diggings. It was a bad start, as I was poisoned by eating some kind of fish (mullet) at breakfast, and, also, we missed the

cart. We decided on remaining the first night at Flemington.

From there we packed our knapsacks 35 miles to the Bush Inn, Gisborne, arriving very tired with feet sore and blistered. We waited at Gisborne until the dray came up, and then walked with it to a camp near Macedon, where we rested another day.

Two more stages and we camped by the Colombine. The night was very cold and the horse fell sick. We left it and the luggage cart and walked on to Bendigo, reaching there about 2 p.m., March 11, after seven days on the road.

We straightaway took out our licences and went searching for a place to begin. We fell in with several acquaintances, and finally camped with some Scottish friends.

Next day we took up a claim on the Seventh Hill, where we proposed to sink a pit. We bought tools, collected all our luggage, and pitched our camp in a place convenient to our work.

We wrought hard at our hole for three weeks. At first my hands were sore and blistered, and, very often, we were very tired at the end of a day's digging, but we were young and cheerful and full of hope. At 15 feet down we had to get the help of a windlass. At 50ft., having blasted our way through a bed of solid freestone, and no change, we concluded

that we had reached the bottom. A blank!

We sank several shafts in Bendigo Creek and on Bendigo Flat with no success. They were all sheisers! I began to get mentally depressed at our bad luck, so took a walk up the Bendigo to look out for a situation. The weather, too, had been wet, and we had spent some very uncomfortable nights in wet clothes and damp blankets. Our tent did not protect us, the calico was too light.

One day, the hole at which one of our party was working showed gold. We all lent a hand and brought home 4oz. 18dw., the first fruits of our labors! We were jubilant that night, for we had been laboriously digging for four weeks. Fortunately, I had been able to make a few pounds here and there. Word had been passed round that I had some medical knowledge and experience, and I was called upon to attend casualties and to prescribe in illness. The mine shafts were close to one another, and accidents happened frequently—a roof would collapse, a man might receive an injury from a shovel (either accidentally or feloniously inflicted), or maybe a fight would end in a broken head.

We took it in turns to be cook, and on Sundays we did our washing, patching, and letter writing. Visitors were always welcome to break the monotony, especially if they were

newly arrived at the diggings, and could give news of Melbourne friends or of Edinburgh.

We tried two more holes on the White Hills, but they were sheisers, too. We decided to try our luck in Long Gully, across the Bendigo. This time we determined to build a more substantial home, as it was wet, foggy, disagreeable weather. I was occupied for several days among the woods searching for proper timber, and managed to lose myself several times. A number of aborigines watched our house building—tall, athletic, but savage-looking fellows.

At this time there was a rush to Melvor Creek. Some of our party went off to prospect. I, myself, carried on at our Long Gully hole, as I also had patients to attend to. I had to operate on a man's foot to extract a shark's tooth, which had been lodged in it for upwards of six months. Another case was of pleurisy. The patient had caught a chill from sitting on cold clay and coming up out of the shaft into the cold air while perspiring freely.

Hundreds left Bendigo that day and the following day thousands moved off. Report came back that many of them were stuck-up on the road. Our friends returned bringing favorable news of the Melvor, but we resolved to try Eagle Hawk first.

We dismantled our frame-tent and re-erected it at Eagle Hawk. Again we had an audience of natives—

miserable looking beings they were. The nights were cold and frosty, water freezing to thick ice, but it did not deter the natives from holding pow-wows opposite our tent most nights. Their music was lively, but of a very peculiar character.

A horse and cart became a necessity. After attending horse sales at Sandhurst unsuccessfully, we finally bought a horse and cart by private bargaining, paying £50. We set to work to build a stable. We chopped wood, and had a busy day rolling and lifting, and got the walls and frame finished. Meantime, we had much trouble with the horse. He lay down in a waterhole and was nearly drowned. As we found that he needed much petting and urging, we took him back to his old master, according to arrangement, but the man refused to have the horse back. On Sunday I had to drive five miles for a cart-load of grass for the horse.

We continued to puddle and cradle, getting small amounts of gold. We hewed out a trough 24ft. long and 3ft. wide—the largest longtom in Bendigo. Symons and I went over prospecting to Dead Horse Flat, five miles away. We pitched our small tent and commenced a hole. We managed to bottom it, though water was coming in, and we had to fight to keep it bailed. Finally, water burst in like a torrent from some old holes. The bank gave way, and covered tools and everything. I thought I was drowned, but managed to get our safety with the assistance of a rope.

On American Independence Day the Yanks, of whom there were a large number at the diggings, all went on the spree, firing musketry and playing and singing Yankee Doodle. I, myself, spent the evening quietly reading, as usual. I was accustomed to the din the natives made outside our tent at nights. There was no shortage of books, and they were readily passed from one reader to another. The loan of an old newspaper, however, was an event. A copy of *The Argus* cost 3/.

A friend and I discussed the idea of opening an album for the reception of literary contributions, to be read every Saturday night. Finally, a literary society for young men was formed.

Sometimes, we attended a concert at the Crystal Palace Restaurant, or perhaps Burton's Circus might be in Bendigo. Maybe, we would look in at a miners' meeting. There was agitation to have the licence fee reduced to 10/. When we went along to purchase groceries or clothing, there was always some added excitement, certainly a pugilistic encounter, occasionally a Chinese funeral conducted with much colorful ceremony, sometimes a runaway horse; or most diverting of all, a chance meeting with friends from Melbourne or Edinburgh. Usually a cup of chocolate with friends at *The Argus* office would fortify us for the walk home.

One of our neighbors was put in jail for taking dirt which belonged to another party. We believed in our friend's innocence. The shafts and dirt heaps were very close to one another. A mistake could happen.



A gold escort sets out from Castlemaine on the road to Melbourne.

I reasoned with the prosecutor, and then applied to the Chief Commissioner, and had the man released.

In settling accounts with my partners, I found that, after five months of incessant toil, there was only one pound for my share! I felt rather queer. Also, I realised that I did not find my enjoyment in the animal existence we were leading. I longed to be restored to society once more.

However, when, on August 22, we heard most exciting news from Goulbourne, I resolved to go with my friends to see for ourselves. We hurriedly made our arrangements, and set off at 10 a.m. the next day. The days were fine, in fact they were translucently beautiful, and we enjoyed the walk very much. We spent the first night beside the Campaspe River. It was my night to watch the horses. There were many people on the road, but we managed to indulge in some pistol shooting as we proceeded on our journey.

We reached the Goulbourne diggings at 2 p.m. on the third day, and camped within a mile of the lagoon. The frame-tent we put up was much approved. We heard varying and conflicting accounts of the diggings. The general opinion was that wages could be made if water were nearer than the lagoon, four miles away. People streamed in all day. More than half the diggers seemed to be Americans.

We prospected for five days without much result. Returning after having attended an aggregate meeting of diggers about the licence question, some of our party decided to quit. We commenced our journey to Melbourne the following day.

For the first two days the weather was fine and the roads good. We passed troops of mounted police, and, also, many diggers on the way to Goulbourne. As we moved south,

however, conditions worsened. It rained all day and the roads were terrible. By the time we stopped to camp in the mire near Kilmore, I had caught cold and was very tired. The rain continued, and the ground was soaked by the time we made our next camp at Pretty Sally Hill. I crawled miserably to my very uncomfortable bed under the cart. It was a cold, stormy night, and by morning the weather was still wet and boisterous. After a cheerless breakfast we proceeded through the mud. That night we put up at an inn by the roadside, 10 miles from town. An ordinary bed seemed a novelty after six months of sleeping on the ground!

We reached Melbourne at 2 o'clock in the afternoon of the 7th September, 1853. Having purchased new clothes and donned them at the public baths, we went to the theatre to hear Mr. and Mrs. Stark, of America, and were well pleased!

Thomas McMillan advertised in the columns of The Argus and found his cousin, Mr. Daniel Blyth. Within six months time he had married Mr. Blyth's sister-in-law, Miss Staley. He had gold enough to make the

wedding ring. He and his wife moved to Kenningsington, near Geelong, where he practised medicine for 12 months. Friends and relations at the diggings urged him to sell the practice and join them at the Blackwood diggings. This he did.

On the road thither, storms and floods arose, and we had queer and soul-stirring experiences before we reached Blackwood. Of course, we got little or no gold, yet there was a strong fascination about the wild life of freedom which carried us on in buoyant and cheerful spirits. We were all in the heyday of youth, and nothing was a hardship to us. We made our tents comfortable, and each kept lots of fowls. Blackwood was a very romantic spot. We got patches of gold now and then, but not enough to satisfy the wishes of any ordinary, rational being.

One fine day I took matters into serious consideration. I saw that this digging was a mere will o' the wisp, and that no permanent good could come of it. I resolved to go home to Edinburgh and furbish up my knowledge of medicine, which I had so foolishly neglected for so long.

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