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Mining, Masculinity, and Morality: Understanding the Australian National Imaginary Through Iconic Labor

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Introduction

The twenty-first century in Australia opened with a decade-long boom, with miners dominating the national imaginary. Miners have long been heralded by leaders of Australian states as “modern-day heroes” (Australian Associated Press 2013, 1). Furthermore, historians have noted the importance of mining as part of Australia’s national identity, with Pearse (2009, 1) arguing that “From every direction, Australians are told that their current and future prosperity depends on what we dig, drill and smelt for the world”. However, this celebratory vision of mining is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the mid-nineteenth century, as gold fever gripped the fledgling Australian colonies, colonial governments were forced to enact repressive legislation designed to suppress the rush of labor to the goldfields, and saw mining as a potential threat to the emerging Australian

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nation-state. This chapter will explore the ascendancy of mining in Australia—charting its development as a nascent industry that was originally curtailed and regulated in an attempt to stymie upwardly mobile miners drawn to the lure of the gold rush—to a respected and highly visible sector that is now validated and legitimized by the Australian Government. I will argue that it is not just the mining industry that is now celebrated as part of Australia’s national imaginary but also the nostalgically rendered, rugged, working-class mining men who forged this industry and who ground the identity of the contemporary Australian nation-state.

Central to understanding how mining became a dominant part of the emergent Australian national imaginary is a description of the shift that occurred in the understanding of miners themselves, so that their key qualities and defining characteristics, once a source of anxiety for Victorian-era middle-class moralists, could be integrated into the emergent Australian national imaginary. The national imaginary may best be understood as “the myths of the nation [that] are forged, transmitted, reconstructed and negotiated constantly” (Bell 2003, 75). The aim of this chapter is to draw attention to these multifaceted shifts in the social landscape that provided the opportunity for mining to be elevated and privileged in the national imaginary. The primary mechanism for this change in understanding was the juridico-political system, employing legislation as a technology of power that at first attempted to suppress mining, alongside other unruly and morally objectionable working-class industries, during a distinctive phase in the creation of the Australian state. As Foucault (1982, 791) argues, to understand the workings of technologies of power, we must consider “their historical formation, [and] and the source of their strength or fragility.”

An examination of historical labor legislation, as a key governmental technology of power, provides the empirical and theoretical core of this chapter. Theorizing how the middle-class wielded their power through acts of parliament in a time of concentrated nation-building enables a better understanding of the historical antecedents of the Australian national imaginary in the twenty-first century. By paying attention to this relationship between national myths and the classed and gendered aspects of labor history, the ascendant position of the mining industry

can be seen to be part of a deliberate regime of control through hegemonic heteronormative middle-class morality. The following section explores the historical antecedents of privilege and marginalization experienced by the iconic industry of mining in Australia.

The Middle-Class, Federation, and Nation-Building

Australia, during the Victorian era, was a collection of individual British (predominantly penal) colonies, with governors who were appointed by, and answerable to, the British parliament. The colonies were New South Wales, Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and Queensland, and each had their own governments, military, customs houses, tariffs, and so on. The birth of the Australian nation came in 1901, when the six colonies federated by a peaceful act of parliament and became the original states of present-day Australia. Federation was needed, according to an anxious and insecure middle-class, to unite the colonies against “undesirable’ immigration” (Osborne 2002, 41). To galvanize public opinion behind Federation, a campaign was initiated by the Australian middle-class, including political leviathans such as Henry Parkes (commonly referred to as the “Father of Federation”) and future Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, to promote national pride. The key tenets of this national pride included the exclusion of non-Anglo ethnicities and an intrepid, heroic, and all-conquering masculinity (Osborne 2002).

Such nationalistic themes could be found in *The Bulletin*, an influential colonial-era business, political, and literary magazine, which was instrumental in shaping an emergent national imaginary. Important literary figures in *The Bulletin* and other sources in this pre-Federation era, such as Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson (whose father was a gold fossicker), wrote in the 1880s and 1890s nostalgic poetry and stories about the early Australian frontier and outback for an increasingly urbanized and geographically removed public. Their writing romanticized the purported origins of a defining Australian character in “the bush” and its male heroes and anti-heroes (bushrangers, swagmen, drovers, and

rebellious miners). Non-Anglo male laborers important in Australian bush life, including Afghan cameleers (Gibbs et al. 2015), Chinese miners (Curthoys 2001), and the female sex workers who followed the miners out to the digs (Davidson 1984), did not feature at all. Importantly, while many of these characters written into the Australian national imaginary were ratbags and rabble-rousers from convict or other insalubrious backgrounds, they were all hardy white men, and these qualities were then taken to represent all Australians in an emergent national imaginary (and will be discussed in greater detail in following sections).

Grattan (1947, in Barcan 1955, 64) argues that the Australian middle-class condition pre-Federation could be described as a “buffer between the contemporary group with oligarchical tendencies [the landed gentry], and the working class ... thus affecting the social balance, but not defining what it shall be”. The Australian pre-Federation middle-class social stratum was relatively weak, and commanded no position of imagination and influence in a burgeoning national identity. The middle-class therefore had to be content with using existing romanticized working-class symbols from the Australian literary canon, such as the “noble bushman”—“a heroic race endowed with special democratic, Australian qualities”—to further their own populist agenda for a federated Australia (Blackton 1961, 353; Ward 1966; Lawson 1980). In this regard, there is a distinct parallel to the US myth of the frontier on which the American national “character” was made, via heroic male archetypes such as the iconic cowboy figure (Gibson 2013b). Thus, both the media and politics were dominated by middle-class men of European origin, whose nationalistic and insular values came to dominate national myth-making (Blackton 1961). *The Bulletin* was so committed to these values that, in 1886, the editor changed its tagline from “Australia for the Australians” to “Australia for the White Man”, further embedding these values in a pre-eminent media source of the time (AustLit 2017).

Convergent with this emphasis on rural, masculinist symbolism by the Australian middle-class were the broader manifold social relations of the Victorian era. The dominance of Victorian-era morality and gender relations punctuated politics, public discourse, and class dynamics, largely due to the population dynamics that saw the great majority of the Australian population born from British descent. Even in 1881, according to the

census of that year, 30 percent of the population in the two most populous colonies of New South Wales and Victoria were born in the UK, bringing with them such Victorian-era values (Historical Census and Colonial Data Archive [n.d.](#)). Embedded in these values were clearly separated gender roles, where men were placed “firmly in the newly defined public world of business, commerce, and politics; women were placed in the private world of home and family” (Hall 1992, 133). Masculinity and femininity, so defined, could therefore be attributed to specific labor types and the qualities they represented. Thus, for women, domestic service was respectable, feminine work, but factory or sex work was amoral or disreputable. This pre-Federation intersection of labor, gender, and morality is therefore crucial in understanding how the middle-class perceived itself, and the myths that it created in the process of nation-building. The next section explores this intersection in greater detail.

Mining, Morality, and Gender in the Victorian Era

It was with the gold-rushes of the mid-1850s that the mining industry burst forth in Australia, establishing a movement so important that it became ingrained in the national imaginary. Independent alluvial miners traveled from goldfield to goldfield in search of the nugget that would make them rich. This included both new arrivals fresh off the boat, and men absconding from their labor elsewhere in the country, all hoping to strike it rich. This was a provocation to the land-owning upper-class, and emerging middle-class, who suddenly found their supply of labor contracting, and was occurring at a time when the middle-class was attempting to control and define values on the path to Australian Federation in 1901. Despite the chaos caused by the gold-rushes, and the lawlessness and immorality that was perceived to accompany miners in frontier towns, mining was eventually elevated to the position of “nation-builder” (*Dirty Business: How mining made Australia* 2013; Gibson 2013a; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia 2013; Knox 2013; Jensen 2014).

The gold-rushes saw Australia's population significantly increase in a very short space of time. The population in the Victorian colony where much of the extractive activity was taking place rose from 77,000 in 1851 to 538,000 in 1857 (Knox 2013). Many of these migrants arrived from Britain, which was in the midst of its great global empire-building project at the time, but large numbers also arrived from China to work the gold-fields (Curthoys 2001). The population growth in the Victorian colony affirmed its capital Melbourne as the largest city in Australia, and the traffic in gold secured it as the nation's financial center (Blainey 1993). While the goldfields provided opportunities for working-class men to gain financial affluence and provided opportunities to ascend classed expectations, there was, however, always the looming possibility of destitution for those who wagered everything in their quest for riches (Blainey 1993; Wright 2016). As the alluvial gold dried up and the rushes ended, men who remained on the fields chose (or were forced by the changing nature of the new capital-intensive form of extractive mining) to relinquish the mercurial fortunes of prospecting for less independent but more financially secure company jobs. Mining towns consolidated, and wives and families began to arrive in mining towns such as Ballarat (Victoria), Broken Hill (New South Wales), Queenstown (Tasmania), and Kalgoorlie (Western Australia). It was around this time that "working-class family life ... shifted a little further towards the style of family life cherished by the middle-class" (Grimshaw et al. 1994, 202). Other industries central to the mining boom, such as sex work, had until this time been "widely accepted as an essential part of a frontier community ... so long as the rollicking atmosphere of the boom years prevailed" (Davidson 1984, 169). However, the changing nature of mining towns, from chaotic and hyper-masculine frontier mining outposts, to places of burgeoning heteronormativity with the family as the center of Australian life (with attendant "appropriate" gender roles for women), explains the "increasing resistance" to sex work and other morally suspect labor in said towns (Davidson 1984, 170). The relationships between miners, sex workers, their families, and the community were fraught, with tensions around new modes of gendered and classed relations. As mining became more "respectable", pre-existing middle-class, Victorian-era ideas about apposite morality (including notions

about the family, class, and gendered expectations) were also introduced to an already complex shifting social milieu.

As amplified gender divisions in the industrializing and urbanizing Victorian-era were separating the male, public sphere of work and politics, from the apolitical female, private sphere of home, the subtle ways that women “were central” to the formation of classed and gendered expectations were largely ignored (Grimshaw et al. 1994, 121). Ubiquitous middle-class conceptions of women being confined to the home, and embodying a particular style of femininity, were fantasies precluding the necessity of working-class women laboring to sustain themselves or their families (Grimshaw et al. 1994). Women’s positions in the labor market were “the result of a ‘negotiated outcome’ between the forces of capitalism and patriarchy” (Digby 1992, 205). At the very bottom of the labor market were women working in increasingly large industrial clothing factories, where wages typically failed to cover the cost of living for a widow with three children (Grimshaw et al. 1994). Gold transformed these existing middle-class social relations, becoming a dominant and disruptive presence in the colonies. The wealth flowing through the Victorian colony saw existing gendered power structures challenged by assertive and morally transgressive women (Wright 2016). Women enjoyed “flash dresses better than making butter and cheese” (Read 1853, 100), which was a serious enough problem that a meeting was convened in Melbourne to decide how “the ever-increasing fickleness of women could be most quickly and safely remedied” (Wright 2016, 1). Gold, by upsetting the pre-eminent social order and emergent middle-class hegemony on cultural and social values, particularly the dominant Victorian-era gendered, moral values, demonstrated its importance in shaping the social discourse of the time.

These examples suggest an emergent hegemonic ideal of masculinity that stood in contrast to new norms of respectable femininity for women, both of which began to structure both work and home life during the nation-building period. The following section delves more deeply into the legislation that elevated mining from its transgressive origins into the middle-class presentation and widely understood imaginings of Australia by Australians.

Mining and the Pre-federation Middle-Class

Minerals, at the time of the first gold-rushes, were considered “Royal Minerals” as Australia was beholden to England as a colony. Minerals were, in effect, the property of the Crown rather than the owner of the land (be they Indigenous or non-Indigenous), and any person who conspired to keep their finds for themselves was doing so illegally (Birrell 1998). People of all backgrounds were irrepressibly drawn to gold, and saw in it a way of “bettering themselves, of gaining independence, of storing money for old age or sickness, of teaching their children to read or write” (Blainey 1993, 38). Working-class people could rise up the social ladder with one modest claim. This class transgression of working-class miners, combined with the general state of social flux on the goldfields (such as the aforementioned challenge to gendered social structures), was an affront to the middle-class and their attempts to impose social order. Thus, mining became a source of anxiety for the middle-class and colonial governments of the mid-nineteenth century. In what may signal a return to such classed anxieties, the accumulation of wealth by working-class miners is causing consternation among the Australian middle-class, exemplified by the antipathy toward the “cashed-up bogan” (Pini et al. 2012, 142).

Accepting that the lure of gold would be too strong to suppress after witnessing the madness of the California Gold Rush in 1849, and the subsequent rush at Ophir in New South Wales, the New South Wales government gazetted the Provisional Regulations of the goldfields in May 1851 (Birrell 1998). These regulations, although not an official law of the colony, provided for the appointment of commissioners, mostly young British men educated at private and military schools, to issue licenses that endowed prospectors to keep any gold they found. They were also charged with ensuring each miner had a certificate of discharge from their previous employer, without which a license would not be issued, a measure designed to regulate the labor market and address the soaring rate of men absconding from their general trades. Considering that a gold-rush by its very nature involves beating out others to the rich claims, most men did not obtain such certificates before leaving, nor would employers likely

issue them. The obvious difference in class between the commissioners and miners, and the attempted suppression of mining by the commissioners, ensured the commissioners were unpopular with the miners (Birrell 1998).

These Provisional Regulations were an obvious example of how the upper- and middle-classes viewed gold as a harbinger of transgressive class mobility and a disruption to well-entrenched forms of labor exploitation. It was thus inevitable that these they would become law, and in 1852, the first law to regulate mining in Australia—the Victorian *Act to Restrain by Summary Proceedings Unauthorised Mining on Waste Lands of the Crown*—was passed. New South Wales followed suit with a *Gold Fields Management Act* in December of that same year. The tone of the middle-class anxiety toward this transgressive male working-class labor was set for the next half-decade. Yet, despite mining's precarious legal status and the hard work required, "for most [men] it was the first time in their lives they were independent and they cherished this" (Birrell 1998, 18). The lure of gold encouraged prospectors to trespass on agricultural land where they encountered resistance from land owners and local Aboriginal people (O'Hare 1971). In the *Gold Fields Management Act 1852*, New South Wales attempted to mitigate any conflict by granting permission to mine on private lands, which was later repealed in the *Gold Fields Management Act 1857*, demonstrating some of the political ebbs and flows of the era, and dynamics between the middle- and upper-class positions toward mining (O'Hare 1971). It was however a violent event (the Eureka Rebellion) on the Victorian goldfields that acutely transformed the legislative environment and national imaginary around mining.

The Eureka Lead was a seam of gold just outside Ballarat in the colony of Victoria. The infamous Eureka Rebellion there in 1854 violently dragged Victoria and the rest of the colonies of Australia into the democratic age. Blainey (1993, 56) recounts the scene of the Rebellion:

On Saturday evening, 2nd December, more than a thousand men were in the stockade at Eureka, and more than four hundred soldiers and police were in their camps on the hills two miles away ... In the pale light before the sunrise, soldiers and police attacked the stockade ... The fighting lasted

less than half an hour but killed an uncounted number of miners, perhaps thirty, and five soldiers ... and by breakfast that Sunday morning the rebellion was bleeding ... Eureka became a legend, a battlecry for nationalists, republicans, liberals, radicals, and communists, each creed finding in the rebellion the lessons they liked to see.

Eureka became known not only as a defining moment in the history of mining but also in Australian history more generally. The retelling of this traumatic event through the poems of prominent figures in the national imaginary, such as Henry Lawson,¹ and the elevation of miners into the political class, eventually ensured the events of the uprising pushed mining into the forefront of Australian national mythology. This elevation into the political class occurred through both political and economic channels.

The increasing legitimization of mining as labor and industry through official political means occurred primarily after a *Victorian Royal Commission on Goldfield Problems and Grievances* (Victoria, Parliament 1855), which gained urgency after the Rebellion, and in 1855, handed down its recommendations. The recommendations proposed the establishment of the “Miners Right” to replace the existing gold license system, which was essentially a tax on mining. The introduction of the *Miners Right* enabled its holders to be elected to local courts, where they were empowered to create by-laws for the working of claims, and resolve disputes between miners, doing away with the power of the unpopular commissioners. The *Miners Right* further allowed holders to vote in the Victorian Legislative Assembly. By the end of 1855, 50,000 *Miners Rights* had been issued (Heritage Council Victoria 2007). *Miners Rights* were, for all intents and purposes for the holders, a pre-cursor to universal manhood suffrage in 1857 (Birrell 1998). Blainey (1993, 57) called this “the high tide of Australian democracy”, and as representation of the miners in the court system in Victoria grew, the balance of power shifted away from the dominant, pastoral upper-class that largely controlled politics at the time.

The legitimization of mining from an economic perspective came despite the calamity of the Eureka Rebellion and ensuing loss of life.

According to Blainey (1993, 62), the gold-rushes gave “California and then Australia ... such purchasing power that they largely revived the sick economy of Britain”. This in turn stimulated prosperity throughout the developed world. At home, in Australia, gold mining was understood to be bringing Australia to the international stage, and elevating its station from a colonial backwater and dumping ground for Britain’s criminals, to a cosmopolitan destination. But this situation required a continuing supply of gold, and as the easily accessible alluvial gold began to dry up, colonial governments began to welcome investment and capital in extractive mining ventures because of the revenue that could be generated from taxes. So began the shift from repressive colonial governments that wished to limit mining activity, to ones willing to encourage mining. Miners themselves saw extractive mining as a threat to their independent way of life, but they were fighting against the tide of history and the changing demands of gold mining, which were increasingly capital-centric.

Thus, as miners were increasingly incorporated into middle-class power structures, such as the Victorian courts and parliament, and critically, as they embraced heteronormative family values (as described in the previous section), the mining middle-class could seriously challenge the pre-existing social structures and values of the landed gentry that had been in place since settlement began in 1788. Barcan (1955, 69) thus concluded that without the legitimation of miners, “it is doubtful whether the middle-classes of town and country (the farmers and merchants) would have been strong enough to impose political democracy” on Australia’s landed gentry. Mining laws were amended at various points from the mid-1850s after Eureka, but did not substantially change again until another Royal Commission, the *Gold Fields Royal Commission of Enquiry* (Victoria, Parliament 1862), was instituted in 1862. The recommendations from this Commission included the need for a uniform code of mining law, abolition of Mining Boards, and creation of a Minister for Mines with a Mining Affairs Department (most of which was incorporated into the *Victorian Mining Statute* of 1865) (c.f. Birrell 1998). This statute shaped the development of mining legislation in all the other Australian colonies. More importantly, however,

the mining statutes rendered mining as a fully legitimate industry, indeed *necessary* for the economic prosperity of the colonies, and ensured that mining need no longer be a source of anxiety for the middle-class. Over the course of this transition from anxious, amoral labor, to a legitimate and necessary industry, the heroic hetero-masculinity and symbolism of the miners was the key enabler of change and will be discussed in the following section.

Discussion

During the early part of the 1850s, mining occupied a place of anxiety in the imagination of the Australian upper- and middle-classes. The previous section identified that this anxiety increasingly found its way into legislation that attempted to suppress working bodies that were Othered, primarily working-class women and men, including sheep-shearers, sex workers, publicans, miners, Aboriginal domestic workers and farmhands, any other non-Anglo laborers, and any workers that were antagonistic to social order, or considered abject. Yet, as mining became increasingly important to the wealth and prosperity of the colonies and global capital, and as the gold-rushes continued to edge their way around the continent (expanding the frontier as they went), the “miner” was incorporated into the masculine, heroic signifiers of the national imaginary. Significant portions of the national imaginary were cemented in the decades before Federation by a middle-class that, although nostalgic for a romanticized, frontier past, was also increasingly urban, industrialized, and in control of political power and the power to legislate (Blackton 1961). Mining mobilized the popular imaginary to reify hegemonic masculinities as a way of creating space for working-class men as they moved from a no- or low-waged labor, into a more clearly defined middle-class position as a result of changing political structures, largely attributed to Eureka and the increasing importance of gold for the prosperity for the colonies. In fact, mining was such a powerful force, that the values of Victorian society imported wholesale from England had to be renegotiated to accommodate this new stratum of mining men.

Mining was originally a lottery, initially raising many men from impoverished working-class precarity, to a more solidly middle-class wage and way of life. Unlike the hyper-masculine “noble bushman” of Australian folklore, heteronormative middle-class ideals, such as waged work, separation of gender roles, and the nuclear family, do not fire the imagination. In the fledgling Australian nation, those attempting to build a national identity closely aligned with British values and unified by the desire to “protect” the nation from unwelcome migration from China and other non-Anglo countries, were impelled to develop and embrace a national myth powerful enough to inspire the population (in circumstances that seem doomed to repeat themselves in Australian immigration policy). Thanks to writers like Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson, Australian folklore was populated with such ready-made myths, and in *The Bulletin*, there was a ready-made mechanism for distribution to the middle-class audience. Miners, embodying the noble bushman character as they helped “open up” the frontier during the gold-rushes, eventually transitioned to waged workers in company mining towns, where family life was valued in alignment with more hegemonic, heteronormative middle-class ideals. So tamed, the hyper-masculine miner could be incorporated into the moral economy of the time, and increasingly epitomized as a heroic masculine figure within the developing Australian imaginary.

The development of the mining industry was and is vitally important to understanding the Australian national imaginary, because it essentially shifted normative and rigid ideals about “appropriate” standards that dictated ideals about class, nation, and gender. Whereas many miners in developing contexts continue to be understood as dirty, backward, and degenerate, the Australian mining industry, and the rugged, individualistic, and hegemonic masculinity of the miners themselves, is now memorialized and valorized in the Australian national imaginary.

Conclusions

This chapter has interrogated shifting perceptions of mining, through a dominant middle-class technology of power—legislation—during a time of concentrated nation-building. Legislation, implemented by an anxious

middle-class determined to protect their social status (by keeping working-class men and women on the periphery), was formative during the colonial period production of mining. Over time, legislation shifted according to the corresponding increased social privilege experienced by miners, as they rose to prominence in politics, and gravitated towards the genteel, refined archetype of a gentile British nobleman. Rather than competing against an ideal figure, and an insular society that was impossible to penetrate without requisite amounts of social and cultural capital, the pioneers of Australia forged their own unique national identity and character. This rugged form of masculinity permeated (and still permeates) the Australian national imaginary.

This chapter attempts to rectify the narrow, masculinist frame of the Australian national imaginary by drawing attention to mining, and to an important modality of one key historical technology that gave rise to a stable and enduring representation of the heroic mining figure. This chapter adds to existing debates on the foundations of the Australian nation-state by looking at masculinity, mining, and the regulation of (women's) respectability. Female dominated industries such as factory and sex work, and other forms of precarious employment (c.f. Sanders-McDonagh 2010, 2017), were previously obscured by masculinist frames of the national imaginary, in no small part due to the influence of mining, and deserve to have a more prominent position in our reading of Australian history (Frances 1999). In other words, the persistence of stable or enduring national imaginaries welded to heteronormative masculinist forms of work problematically precludes reimagining the nation in more plural ways.

Note

1. Excerpt from *Eureka* by Henry Lawson (1889). About the streets of Melbourne town the sound of bells is borne That call the citizens to prayer that fateful Sabbath morn; But there upon Eureka's hill, a hundred miles away, The diggers' forms lie white and still above the blood-stained clay. The bells that toll the diggers' death might also ring a knell For those few gallant soldiers, dead, who did their duty well. The sight of murdered

heroes is to hero-hearts a goad, A thousand men are up in arms upon the Creswick road, And wildest rumours in the air are flying up and down, 'Tis said the men of Ballarat will march on Melbourne town. But not in vain those diggers died. Their comrades may rejoice, For o'er the voice of tyranny is heard the people's voice; It says: "Reform your rotten law, the diggers' wrongs make right, Or else with them, our brothers now, we'll gather to the fight." 'Twas of such stuff the men were made who saw our nation born, And such as Lalor were the men who led the vanguard on; And like such men may we be found, with leaders such as they, In the roll-up of Australians on our darkest, grandest day!

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