Teacher's Notes:

The Indigenous Experience on the Goldfields

Background to the eGold Educational Activities

The content included here can all be found on the eGold website. Student activities are designed to facilitate the self-exploration of this content and the development of independent research skills using eGold's Search, A-Z Index and Message Tree gateways.

Timing & resources

This lesson is designed to take place over two periods. Parts A and B require each student to have access to the eGold website. Part C might take place in the classroom.

Objectives

At the conclusion of this learning activity students will have demonstrated the ability to;

- Employ social and independent modes of research to find answers to a number of targeted questions relating to the Indigenous experience on the goldfields.
- Utilise a variety of online search techniques including eGold's Message Tree, Search engine and navigation tabs to extract information on a defined topic.
- Analyse textual and photographic primary sources.
- Assess the significance of a historical event by taking on the perspective of one of the participants in a piece of creative writing.
- Engage with others in the class and with their work to understand and empathise with different historical points of view.

Overview

The social upheaval and rapid development following the discovery of gold in 1851 perhaps had its greatest impact on the Indigenous population of Central Victoria. The traditional owners of the land on which the first goldrushes took place in Victoria were the Wathaurong (in the Ballarat area) and the Djadjawurrung (in the Mount Alexander area).

The Indigenous peoples living in central Victoria had already been through more than a decade of rapid change, with the pastoral expansion following the expedition of 'explorer' Major Thomas Mitchell in 1836. The district saw frontier violence between settlers and Aboriginal people. From the early 1840s, the Aboriginal Protectorate attempted to control where and how the Indigenous population lived – many Djadjawurrung people went to live at the Loddon Protectorate at Franklinford. But the discovery of gold brought change on an unimaginable scale.

The goldrushes caused environmental damage on a massive scale and also brought terrible hardships to the Indigenous population in the form of alcohol, prostitution, begging and disease. But the goldrushes didn't just 'happen' to Aboriginal people in central Victoria – they were active participants in daily life on the diggings, and for many Indigenous people, the discovery of gold brought new opportunities for economic gain and for cultural exchange.

Popular belief would have it that the Aboriginal population of the 1850s had no capacity to grasp the value of gold. The British press marvelled at how Aboriginal people could have existed for so long in a state of blissful ignorance: 'generation after generation of aborigines has passed away, unconscious of the riches concealed beneath the surface of their native hunting-grounds, perchance to have made them the most powerful race under the sun'. Gold was indeed a useless commodity in the lives and economies of the traditional owners of the land – until the arrival of the Europeans.

Aboriginal people played a key role in the story of gold in Victoria from the earliest days. Members of the Native Police were assigned in early 1849 to guard the 'unofficial' gold discoveries at Daisy Hill, an outstation located 10 miles west of Deep Creek (a branch of the Loddon River).

The history of Aboriginal involvement in events on the goldfields has long been neglected or over-simplified. This website explores Aboriginal participation in daily life on the goldfields and the lasting effects, positive and negative, of the discovery of gold on the Indigenous population.

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References

Illustrated London News, 24 April 1852, p. 314.

'Queen Mary - Ballarat' and Nineteenth Century Photography of Indigenous Australians.

Kruger, Frederick [photographer]
'Queen Mary – Ballarat'
Source: Sovereign Hill Gold Museum

The sepia-toned photograph of an Aboriginal woman dubbed 'Queen Mary - Ballarat' was taken in the 1870s by German photographer Frederick Kruger. Kruger had been commissioned by the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines to capture two series of photographs at Coranderrk Aboriginal Station. The first collection of photographs focused on the station's success and the pastoral 'civilisation' of its residents. Kruger's second commission, however, more overtly reflected the turbulent political climate in which it emerged. The policy of separating Indigenous people based on their racial heritage heightened conflict between the Board and station residents at Coranderrk. Photography played a central role in government attempts to stress the racial limitations of 'full-blooded' Aborigines and to justify their separation from 'half-castes'.

In the midst of these political tensions, Kruger was also working on images which would appeal to a broader commercial audience. 'Queen Mary' appeared on the first page of the *Souvenir Album of Victorian Aboriginals*, a palm-sized souvenir compilation of notable Indigenous figures assigned European royal titles.

In a format popular during the second half of the nineteenth century, Kruger's work fits into a wider ethnographic trend of photographing representatives of a supposedly 'dying race' for posterity. Standing inside a white picket fence, Queen Mary is laden with as many cultural relics as the frame can encapsulate. She wears a possum skin cloak over western dress and holds a basket, boomerang, digging stick and spear. At her feet are another two baskets and a boomerang.

Ethnographic photography featuring Indigenous Australians raises a number of contemporary issues. Photographers, in perceiving Aborigines as a doomed race, might have seen themselves as preserving culture for the future, but they did not anticipate the relevance of their work to the descendants of those they photographed. In many cases

their image capture was focused on documenting a culture for the sake of posterity, for financial gain or for both. Consequently, questions of ownership and the role cultural repositories play in providing access to these photographs are vital questions for contemporary communities. Recent research has also begun to look out from behind the camera, pointing to the type of agency which Indigenous people might find as subject in the construction of these images. Here, in some cases, it appears Aboriginal people were able to manipulate photographic representations of themselves for their own ends.

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References

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Jane Lydon, *Eye Contact: Photographing Indigenous Australians*. London: Duke University Press, 2005.

Philip Batty, Lindy Allen and John Morton . (eds). *The Photographs of Baldwin Spencer*. Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press in Association with Museum Victoria, 2005.

David Horton (gen. ed). *The Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994.