Sandhurst 1853 – 4

1853 or 4 Sandhurst
The Southern World Rev Robert Young page 358 to 36..... visited Sandhurst.

In the evening I had a walk among the tents, and heard the inmates of several of them singing Wesley's Hymns, which forcibly reminded me of another land. I also gained much information from some parties I met with. One person told me that the most successful diggers were Cornishmen, and convicts. The previous employment of the former as miners, gave them great advantage as diggers; and the State-education of the latter had made them well acquainted with the use of the pick and the shovel, which they used with good effect in obtaining gold. Another person informed me that the Cornish Methodists on the gold-fields, to whose singing we had just been listening, were very zealous, and would not object to a minister killing himself with hard labour, but would rather praise him for it; and then gathering devoutly around his corpse, they would lustily sing: – "Rejoice for a brother deceased."
December
25th Sunday – Christmas day, and very cold. Yesterday the sun was so hot as to produce a blister on the back of my hand, but to-day I had to wear an overcoat, and a fire in the tent was necessary to prevent me from shivering. At 5 o'clock am, I attended a good prayer meeting. Several appropriate Christmas carols were sung, and many fervent prayers were offered. At 11 o'clock I preached, and again in the evening, to large and deeply interesting congregations. Several present had formerly been under my pastoral care; and our meeting on Mount Alexander was therefore attended with peculiar feelings and many reminiscences. In this part of the gold-fields I found five Wesleyan chapels, or tents, one capable of accommodating 700 persons, the other of smaller dimensions, all supplied by Mr Currey and 14 Local Preachers.
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26th ..... We reached Bendigo at 1 o'clock. The valley through which this creek runs was for miles covered with tents, some of which formed streets and squares, bearing names familiar to those who have lived at the West end of London. The tents were of a superior description to those of Forest Creek; the stores more numerous, and better arranged; and the whole city looking place presented a most imposing aspect, telling of both labour and rewards....

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The Rev Thomas Raston, our Missionary, and several friends gave us a hearty welcome. The Quarterly-meeting of the circuit being held in the afternoon, I availed myself of the opportunity of attending it, and was gratified with the spirit manifested, and the vigorous character of Methodism in that locality. Piety, intelligence, zeal, and liberality marked the character of the meeting.

I was kindly furnished with an apartment in a store for sleeping; but the heat was so intolerable, and the large flies so numerous, and so ferocious in their attacks upon the stranger, that I hailed the morning dawn with grateful emotion, as it enabled me to escape from my tormentors. I had previously lodged in many an uncomfortable place, where rats, and mice, and centipedes, and scorpions, and lizards, had disturbed my repose; but never before had I been so thoroughly beaten, and I felt a willingness to encounter all those enemies again in one grand allied army, rather than have to endure the tortures of such another night of fly-invasion as I suffered at the Bendigo diggings. Never before had I such an idea of the Egyptian plague of flies as was this night so painfully taught me!

27th Breakfasted with Mr and Mrs Burrell in their tent, and was treated with generous hospitality. After breakfast I called upon Mr Raston, and received an account of the severe privations connected

with his recent shipwreck on the coast of Brazil, from the effects of which his excellent wife was still suffered. Whilst I was there a digger came to be married. The eyes of the "intended" were *black*, as the result of a severe beating she had received from him, and for which brutal assault, a few days previously, he had been fined by a Magistrate the sum of twenty pounds; and yet, when the Minister said, "Wilt thou have this man to be they wedded husband?" the woman, nothing daunted, notwithstanding her back eyes, emphatically said, "I will!"

After inspecting many of the diggings, I attended a tea meeting in the afternoon at White Hills. It was held in our tent-chapel, and numerously attended, chiefly by Cornish people, many of whom I had known in that land, "**Whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass**".[1] The tea meeting, with its saffron cake, was got up in the best style of Cornwall. Having been requested to give the assembly an account of my recent visit to Polynesian Islands, I spoke for an hour and a half; after which I baptized five children gave an address on baptism, and then preached a sermon. A collection was made to defray the cost of the chapel, and the required amount was contributed.

I received a few small nuggets as tokens of friendship, and many expression of thankfulness for my visit. I was grateful to find that so many of our people had remained faithful, and were prosecuting their religious duties with vigour and success. I also learned with much satisfaction that several persons at the diggings had found that which is more precious than gold, and were laying up treasure in heaven. Not fewer than a hundred conversions to God had taken place in connection with Bendigo, and the old members had been greatly quickened and invigorated. One person told me he had come in search of gold, and had found the "**pearl of great price**."[2] But there were other individuals who had proved unfaithful, and become dissipated. One of that class came to me in a state of intoxication, and described the great benefit he had received from my ministry! He moreover urged me to preach from a certain text, and offered to give me a tumbler full of nuggets if I would do so! A most affecting case. DID HE?

With regard to the social condition of the people in the gold-fields, the subject is so wide, that only some general features of it can be noticed. It is now generally known that the best diggings are exhausted; that whereas eighteen months ago an ounce a day per man was the ordinary yield, now men willingly toil for one-fourth part of that amount. In those palmy[3] and "golden" days men were completely reckless of their wealth. Enormous prices were charged for the common necessaries of life, and those extravagant prices were cheerfully paid. Men did not care what they spent; neither did they care for the prices of goods; but a great change has now taken place. Although the cost of various articles of food, etc. has not been greatly reduced, yet the diggers are now wary and economical of their gold.

"Without attempting to darken the scene", says Mr Raston, "There is an amount of misery and wretchedness in the diggings quite unknown to those not residing on the spot. There will always be a class of unsuccessful miners. Physically unqualified their strength fails under the severe labour; disappointment leads on to a course of dissipation, with all its train of evils, disease, and death. Numbers of these unfortunate beings are found wandering in the bush, in a state of complete insanity, or madness; and hundreds die, and are thrown into empty holes, or buried in some obscure corner, far away from knowledge or interference of the governing powers. At this season of the year diseases are

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[1] Deuteronomy8:9
[2] Pearl of great price is from parable and illustrate the great value of the Kingdom Matthew Chap 13: 45-46 .
[3] Palmy means successful.

particularly rife, and as far as cases do come under our notice, they are indeed melancholy and distressing. Without proper food, – without any kind attentions, – without any comforting voice or hand to soothe their last moments, – hundreds have passed into another world, unknown and unlamented."

The life of a gold digger is often sketched more for effect than for truth. The fortunate digger, as he is seen squandering his money in Melbourne, or in other places, may inspire those around him with enthusiasm. But things as seen in the gold-fields, are very different; four or five diggers are generally huddled together in one small tent, often not more than ten feet square, made of a single ply of cotton cloth, and wholly incapable of keeping out the rain, which pours through as from a sieve; and the heat, at this season of the year, scorches up everything inside the tent; whilst myriads of large flies are continually annoying everybody, and destroying everything; and, above all, the very dust seems to be alive with fleas. The digger having finished a hard day's work in a narrow confined hole, half covered with water, (sometimes for weeks and months not getting a speck of gold,) at night retires, with four or five weary companions, to rest upon the bare ground of the tent, covering himself with a soiled blanket. His food is constantly fat mutton and bread, with a pint of bitter-tea. No wonder that so many look sickly and haggard, and that thousands are continually wandering about from one section of the gold-fields to another.

There is, however, in what is called the township of Sandhurst, a rapidly improving state of things. The people have more social comfort, a better class of dwellings, and more of the natural appliances of life. And when the lands should be unlocked, and people can be assured that they are not building on, nor cultivating, lands which may be torn from them, there is no question of a still greater improvement.

With regard to the *moral* state of society, there is a great variety of opinions, and those opinions are widely different. "I have examined the records of crime at the Police Court," says Mr Raston, "and find that an average of twenty-five cases are arraigned every day. Many of the charges are of frightful character; shooting and stabbing with intent, brutality of husbands, etc, all resulting from drunkenness. There are some burglaries, but horse-stealing seems to be the master crime of the country. Yet, considering the vast amount of population, 31,000, scattered over a large extent of country, at least thirty miles in circumference, and comprising some of the worst men from all parts of the world, I feel bound to admit that the morality of the diggings here is above the common average."

It is stated, however, that the present class of diggers is entirely new; that the successful men have left the field, and returned to England, or the neighbouring colonies, where greater facilities are offered for investment of capital in land; but, whether attributable to a change in population or not, it is admitted on all hands, that so great is the change, that there is now more feeling of security, both as to person and property, here than in Melbourne; whilst formerly it was positively dangerous even to be supposed to have gold or money.

Another way of accounting for the general security is, that the "revolver" has found a lodgement in every tent; and every digger, being well armed, and prepared for self-defence, men are deterred from acts of theft. This will undoubtedly exert some influence upon the population; but there is unquestionably, a higher ground to be taken. The influence of the Christian Church is, in my judgement, the chief cause of the moral improvement which has taken place. Religion is everywhere respected, its Ministers honoured, and all places of worship are well attended. Christianity here does not merge itself – does not lose its identity. It stands out in bold relief and full expression, and the

distinction between the man of God and the man of the world is so striking and manifest, and it's so generally acknowledged and felt, that an ameliorating and moralizing influence is diffused among the community.

Questions answered by Mr Raston: --

1 As many members of the Wesleyan church have emigrated to this region, have they generally been found faithful?

Whether many members of the Wesleyan church have emigrated to this region, the gold field, I do not know, nor have I any means of knowing. With but few exceptions, the whole of our members in the Sandhurst Circuit are from the neighbouring colonies, and from other parts of Victoria, and not direct from England. Of their zeal for the cause of God, I have the highest opinion, and no case of defection has occurred during the past four months. That there are many other persons on the diggings who have been members of our church, in various parts of the world may be readily conjectured; but if so they are not now joined with us. Many present their credentials of membership in Melbourne; what reception they there meet with is not for me to affirm, or whether they maintain their integrity.

2 Have you witnessed any cases of conversion to God amongst the diggers?

About six months ago, there was a great revival of religion at White Hills; some hundred were converted to God, and the writer has heard many express their thankfulness to God for having come to the gold-fields, that it was here they obtained the "pearl of great price", more to be valued than all the gold in the universe. The work alluded to was carried on entirely by the lay-members, there being then no Minister in the place. During the last four months there have been many additions to the Society, and many signal conversions to God; many of the Church of Christ. Not a week passes without conversion to God.

4 What are the present state and prospects of Methodism in this part of the gold-fields?

"The Bendigo gold-fields are emphatically called 'dry diggings'. In the summer months the people leave by thousands, and return on the approach of the rainy-season. So far as I am acquainted with the nature of the Bendigo diggings, I believe they will yield remunerative labour for many years to come, -- perhaps not to individual labour so much as to working companies. But any better discovery would greatly alter the prospect. A striking illustration has just presented itself. A rich gold-field is discovered, and there is a complete exodus. Bendigo, for the present, it greatly reduced in its population. Unquestionably, the rainy-season will bring many back; and especially when the land is sold, there will be a less migratory population.

In October last we had 200 accredited members; there are not now more than 60. Probably, before the end of January we shall have fewer still. The members of our Society, however, form but a small proportion of the members of our congregations.

The Wesleyan church stands high in public estimation, and certainly taken the lead in enterprise and usefulness. But what may be its future history in this locality is quite uncertain. Let us have the people, and we fear not for the future. It is God's own work, and it must prosper."

5 What is the number and state of your Schools?

First day-schools. The school at White Hills is under the care of a very efficient master. The scholars have just been examined, and have given evidence that this is the highest school in the diggings. Scholars, 55. In the school at Golden-square there has been much improvement in general knowledge. Scholars, 64. In both schools, which are examined quarterly, there is great order and

good conduct; but the children are young, and were mostly untaught when first entered. Each school received a grant of £100 per annum from the Denominational School Board.
Second. Sabbath-schools. In the circuit we have four of these schools; 170 scholars attend, with 24 teachers. Rule and order are strictly preserved, and the management of the excelled teachers is such as to win the affection of the children, and to ensure a regular attendance.
In concluding these replies I would observe, that what is statistical is correct, -- what is descriptive may be vastly different with the experience of next week. In no part of the world is the mutability of human affairs so apparent. The diggers are exceedingly moveable goods. At every 'rush' there is a rush indeed. In our church-matters we organise arrange, and make our plans, which, in a few weeks or days are all overturned, and almost every week necessitates an alteration. Under these circumstances the position of a Minister is one which requires much patience and perseverance. What may be the future state – moral, civil, and religious – of this section of the gold-fields of Australia is all unknown. But it is the general opinion that Bendigo will become more densely populated than ever in the ensuring winter; and that, when the land sales are effected, there will be a greater fixity of all interests."
28th Started for Melbourne.

We remained at the "Criterion Inn', but the landlord would not receive anything for our accommodation. This was a mark of great respect paid to the office we sustained.
In replay to various inquiries relative to the Forest Creek gold-fields, I received from the Rev WC Currey the following communications:
"When the gold-fields were first discovered, a great number of prisoners from Van Diemen's Land made their way to them. Having obtained an abundance of wealth, they thought they had a right to spend it as they pleased. In consequence of the inducement offered, the police, with other Government employees, left their situations, and thus completely disorganised society. When I arrived in Melbourne the city appeared to be in the possession of the mob, and every man did what seemed right in his own eyes. A change however, has been effected.

The number of inhabitants on the principal gold-fields is about 80,000, -- that is, about one-third of the population of the colony. The population of Mount Alexander, including Forest Creek and Bendigo, has generally been about the same in number; very great fluctuations take place between the two places; sometimes the population in one place doubles that of the other, --Bendigo being preferred in winter, and Forest Creek in summer.
Although the population may remain about the same as to number, the individuals of which it is composed are constantly changing; it is like the ebb and flow of the sea. The average stay of each party is, I should think, about three months. The same parties may return, but still their stay, while in the gold-fields, is not longer than three months. The alterations are sudden, and the effect most amusing. What is called a 'rush' takes place, and, in a few days, where not an indication of man's existence was perceivable, thousands are congregated. First appear a few carts, on which are placed the digger's tools, clothes etc. The tents are soon pitched, trees cut down, first lit and all the hurry and bustle of a busy encampment at once is seen. In a short period butcher's shops are erected, stores make their appearance, medical men exhibit their signs, stores make their appearance, medical men exhibit their signs, lawyers announce their presence, and all the blessings of civilized life a placed within reach of the lucky digger. The varied character of the signs is most amusing; on the one hand you observe 'Best London Boots', on the other 'New York Lodging-house'. Here you see 'Restaurant of all Nations', there you observe 'Adelaide Boarding-house.' Every nation and colony is here represented in the flags and signs exhibited, with the exception of Van Diemen's Land.

These encampments are formed with great rapidity, and disappear with equal celerity. I have observed, several times, encampments consisting of from five to ten thousand people formed in the course of a few days, and as rapidly melt away; the ruins of a golden city being nothing more than a few chimneys, and broken bottles strewed all around. (page 369)
....I have not known an instance of a man or woman willing to work, who has not been able to do well.....(page 370)

As a church, we have accomplished much. We were the first to preach the Gospel in the gold-fields, erect chapels, commence Sunday-schools; and we have been made an abundant blessings. Mr Symons commenced to labour there, in conjunction with Mr Chapman, in the month of February 1852. They had to submit to great privations, in common with the diggers. They had to perform all the domestic duties for themselves. I went to the diggings in August, 1852 Mr Symons had left for Adelaide. I found one chapel and now at Forest Creek alone we have five. We have now employed 14 Local Preachers, with 7 Class Leaders, 107 full members, and I believe three times as many who are members elsewhere, and hope soon to return to their friends.
We have to endure hardships; but I have laid down this principle, that what any number of men can do for gold, I can do for Christ. We have had glorious manifestations of the Divine presence; souls saved; believers comforted; and although we have been unfaithful, I hope that God has been glorified.
With regard to the general question of emigration to this colony, it is the opinion of gentlemen well acquainted with the subject that there is room for all; and that the colony of Victoria would support a larger agricultural population than any other in the Southern Hemisphere. The Government are now surveying the land in the neighbourhood of the gold-fields, and when this is sold the miners will settle down, and great benefit will result..
....
The diggers comprise in their number men of all classes. I have seen Justices of the Peace, members of University, Clergymen, Dissenting Ministers, and members of the most respectable families, engaged in gold-digging. They learned, in many instances for the first time, the full effect of the curse and will, no doubt, respect the working classes as long as they live.

29th – we left early, that we might rest during the heat of the day. In taking my leave of the gold-fields, I could not but feel thankful to God for the good which existed thereon. I left with a much more favourable impression relative to the moral condition of the digging population, than I had previously received from newspaper reports. But as it is constantly changing, it may, in a few days, present a very different phase. The Gospel, however, is there, and will doubtless still be corrective....

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About 3 o'clock we reached Melbourne in safety. During our tour I asked scores of persons, including individuals of nearly every class of society, two questions; namely, Does the state of things in the colony meet the expectations you had formed of it previously to your arrival? And, is it your intention to settle in this colony? To each of these questions, in every case from recent emigrants, the reply was a most decided and emphatic *No.* They spoke of the climate, and their unexpected discomforts, as reasons for returning to their native land as soon as possible. Others, however, who had been a few years in the colony, and who had got over their home-sickness, and learned to "rough it", spoke very differently on the subject..