

Duplicate

Despatch No. 112 Reporting official visit to the Gold Fields of Victoria

Toorac – near Melbourne 18th September 1854

The Right Honorable Sir George Grey Bart, K.C.B.

Sir,

Since assuming the charge of this government, I have day by day, been more impressed with the impossibility of arriving at any conjecture, on the state of the internal affairs of the colony, without undertaking a personal inspection and although the pressure of business, incident on the proximate meeting of the Legislative Council was quite sufficient to have detained me at Melbourne, nevertheless I resolved not to lose the only opportunity which might for some time occur to obtain an insight into those interests, which have brought Victoria to its present remarkable pitch of prosperity.

I proceeded in the first instance to Ballarat, where I spent three (3) days including the Sabbath. I found an orderly well conducted people, particular in their observance of the Sunday, living generally in tents, having amongst them a large proportion of women and children; schools of every denomination, and people of every nation are on the diggings, and there was an appearance of tranquillity and confidence which would reflect honor on any community.

For some time I was enabled to walk undiscovered amongst them, and thus I gathered their real feelings towards the government, and obtained an insight into some minor causes on which they desired redress.

At last, my true character became known, and thousands flocked to the hole. over which I was waiting to see the gold extracted, and then burst forth shouts of loyalty to Her Majesty, and cries of attachment to the old country, such as can hardly be imagined; the scene ending by a procession of diggers being formed, to accompany Lady Hotham and myself to our quarters – a distance of full a mile and a half.

The gold at Ballarat is obtained by deep sinking, in some cases the shaft is 180 feet deep – the digger then encounters slate in which the gold is found. The miner of Ballarat must be a man of capital, able to wait the result of five or six months toil before he wins his prize. For this reason he will always be a lover of order and good government and, provided he is kindly treated, will be found in the path of loyalty and duty.

At the Avoca 'I stopped but a short time, being anxious to see Maryborough' on which gold had been very recently discovered, and here the sight surpassed every expectation I had formed. Six weeks before, sheep were grazing on the spot, where a street of tents extending two miles and a half and occupied by twenty-five thousand souls were now erected. Every article was to be obtained, men of almost every profession were here – places of amusement were not wanting; taverns of high and low degree were constructed; we seemed to be in a hive of men, and as if to give a practical proof of the respect which Englishmen everywhere pay to law and order, in the middle of the street stood a solitary policeman, guarding a store full of spirits which had been seized, because the owner had not procured the required license.

It was a wonderful sight – men jumping up, as it were, from the bowels of the earth, and running to see the new Governor; vehicles of every description obstructing the street – water selling at one shilling and sixpence the bucket, without the aid of which, gold cannot be

extracted. Such is anew digging, as men form a line of tents for mutual protection, and as the earth in the neighbourhood of their abodes becomes exhausted, they strike their tents, pitch them elsewhere, and destroy the original uniformity of appearance.

But as the diggers pursue the gold, so the authorities must follow the diggers. The Gold Commissioners must be there to decide upon the claims of ground to be apportioned for digging, and to receive and guard the gold – the Police to maintain order – the magistrate to administer the law – the commissariat to provide those serving under government with provisions. The experience gained elsewhere is of no use here, as everything is peculiar, and the field of action different – all is to be acquired.

I journeyed on to Castlemaine in the vicinity of the famous Mt Alexander, and was everywhere overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the diggers, and deafened by shouts of loyalty. Three miles from the town, the procession met my carriage, flags with various devices were exhibited and addresses presented. I drove through all the neighbouring diggings; I was entertained in the open air by the diggers of Forest Creek, who had prepared refreshments for me; I was invited to a public breakfast where three hundred persons sat down – there seemed to be but one feeling towards the Queen's representative – such was Castlemaine.

But, extraordinary as this may seem, the manifestations at Bendigo far surpassed them. Not less than twenty-five thousand men assembled a league from the town to meet me – by force they took the horses from my carriage, yoking themselves instead, and dragged it to the town. There were triumphal arches, flags, bands of music, vehicles gaily caparisoned, and a continued roar of cheering with scarcely an interval of cessation. The fervency of the people set the police, military and authorities at nought; it had been very easy to get into the carriage, but it was a service of danger to get out. The pressure of the crowd bore everything onward, and it was with no small joy that I availed myself of a trifling check to escape.

During my stay of two days in Bendigo I lived with the people. I attended public breakfasts and dinners to which I was invited and most singular, I opened the exhibition of articles destined to be displayed at Paris! I would particularly call your attention to this latter event, because it marks the rapid advance which this colony has made, in civilization and wealth.

An agitation was set on foot to endeavour to obtain the suppression of the license fee – and as a petition to that effect was presented to me by the leaders, I thought it advisable to meet the people, and addressed them briefly on the subject; I gave them to understand that they must pay for liberty and order, and on concluding was loudly cheered.

It was at this place that the original agitation against the license fee first commenced. The gold is found near the surface – it is accessible to people of small capital who if they are fortunate make no objection to the tax, but on the other hand should they be unlucky, dislike paying the trifling sum required at their hands.

With infinite difficulty could this slight show of disaffection be produced; the mass of the diggers here, as on all other goldfields, are true hearted and loyal, and men who if well treated may be thoroughly depended upon; nor does it matter to what nation the digger belongs, Americans, Germans, and Chinese vie with each other in these manifestations, and are all interested in upholding authority and law.

I went on to McIvor which, once a flourishing gold field, has only a population of two thousand dwelling upon it, and returned through an agricultural district to Melbourne.

And now Sir, having endeavoured to inform you generally on the feelings of the digging population, I deem it my duty to state my conviction, that no amount of military force at the

disposal of Her Majesty's Government, can coerce the diggers, as gold fields may be likened to a network of rabbit burrows. For miles, the holes adjoin each other; each is a fortification, and frequently there is an extensive underground communication; nowhere can four men move abreast, so that the soldier is powerless against the digger, who well armed, and sheltering himself by the earth thrown up around him, can easily pick off his opponent – by tact and management must these men be governed; amenable to reason, they are deaf to force, but discreet officers will always possess that influence which education and manners everywhere obtain.

From the best information which I can obtain, the improvement in the manners and state of feeling of the diggers, has resulted from the large increase of women; it is through their influence that this restless population must be restrained; where the soldier will fail, the interest of the wife, and child, will prevail, and I would rather see an army of ten thousand women arrive than an equal number of soldiers.

Indications of the existence of the precious metal are everywhere to be met and by general opinion the man is not born who will see the end of the gold in this colony. It is my endeavour to stimulate search for new gold fields, by offering high rewards, and the result is that traces of the miner's pick are apparent in all the gullies bearing an auriferous aspect.

But it is to machinery that we must look for the full development of the resources of our mineral wealth, in the belief that gold contained in quartz cannot be entirely extracted except through the instrumentality of the stamping engine; and on the conviction that the intelligent miner is also impressed with the same idea, and therefore prepared to accept the scheme, I have seized the occasion of my visit to the gold districts, to declare my intention of granting mining leases for the purpose of erecting machinery, and as I have met with no opposition, I may fairly assume that the idea is acceptable, and that provided the labours of the digger are not interfered with, or his field of action limited, the introduction of machinery will be looked upon as a benefit to the community.

A general opinion exists that the annual export of gold from this colony will continue the same in amount for years to come, and that as the digger obtains sufficient wealth to procure land, and settle upon it, the colony will rise to a degree of wealth and prosperity such as, in an equal period of time, the world has never before seen.

I have the honor to be Sir, Your most obedient Servant Chas. Hotham