

Australian gold rush sparks customs chaos

By Fletch Heinemann

Despite an outward appearance of pure capitalism, the Australian gold rush of the mid-1850s instigated a vast political and social revolution that not only transformed Australia but also overwhelmed early colonial Customs services.

The gold rush attracted fortune-seekers from all over the world - ship-load after eager ship-load. It also instigated a Customs-administered "White Australia policy" that was not repealed until well into the 20th Century. That policy owed much to an influx of thousands of industrious, frugal and skilled Chinese miners, firstly into Victoria, and then later into New South Wales.

Waves of Chinese migrants, plus thousands upon thousands of diggers from other countries, were all attracted by tales of alluvial gold - just lying there for the taking. However many white miners believed that Australian gold was rightfully the property of white men only. Conflict was thus inevitable - leading to discriminatory immigration laws being passed which burdened an already hard-pressed Customs service with additional responsibilities all aimed squarely at keeping Australia "white".

During one 12-month period, ships sailing into Port Phillip transported over 4000 diggers from China. When the *Onyx* later arrived in Melbourne from Hong Kong, bearing news that 43 of its Chinese passengers had died en route from overcrowding, far from provoking compassion or pity, the incident stirred already strong anti-Chinese feelings to fever pitch.

This incident and Chinese migration in general sparked a political response (which later became the "White Australia policy") which was to persist as part of Australian "life" well into the 20th century.

Following the Eureka Rebellion in 1854, the colony of Victoria relinquished the power to raise revenue by issuing licences. In its wake, a £10 poll tax was levied on Chinese immigrants entering the colony. Coupled with the Passenger Act, this was supposed to restrict Chinese immigrants to one per ten tons of vessel tonnage.

But ships masters and Chinese diggers evaded these Customs-enforced laws by landing at Robe in South Australia and travelling the 200 miles (320km) overland to the Victorian gold fields - on foot. The Victoria-South Australia border was largely unguarded and in a state of flux, making Customs supervision almost impossible.

Henry Melville, the Collector at Robe at the time, watched as 45 vessels from Hong Kong landed about 20,000 Chinese miners - all intent on getting to the Victorian diggings. In another instance, The *Young America* sailed into Guichen Bay with 1000 Chinese passengers.

By the simple ruse of avoiding Victorian ports, Chinese migrants entered Australia unhindered, evaded the discriminatory Victorian £10 poll tax and assisted ships masters to garner lucrative profits by eluding the Passenger Act requirements.

Other government strategies were then tried. These included the imposition of higher Customs

duties on opium and rice. This had a two-fold purpose - of discouraging Chinese migration and bolstering the flow of government revenues. These had ebbed following the Eureka Stockade and the cessation of the gold licensing system.

Opium soon developed into a lucrative source of income for Victoria's colonial treasury. Poppies were grown in south-western Victoria, while authorities tolerated the drug itself.

Customs was then involved in "supervising" the manufacture of opium. A Victorian police report in 1868 conceded that although [opium] use was prejudicial to the constitution of the individual, it does not excite him to acts of violence or depravity against others

as the use of intoxicating liquor does with Europeans.

This sentiment prevailed until the 1880s when new moral objections to opium, married with racial concerns, inspired an inter-colonial movement to ban the drug. But, in practice, banning opium only pushed the trade underground and increased instances of smuggling. For this reason, and due to a political preoccupation with the depression of the 1890s, opium was not banned until 1908.

Victoria's alluvial goldfields dried up in the mid-1860s. Discoveries in New South Wales meant that Customs officers were given responsibility for administering the discriminatory immigration laws in NSW - also directed primarily against Chinese miners. However,

in 1861, some 20,000 Chinese arrived in New South Wales, sparking riots at the Lambing Flat diggings.

With migration pressures centred on New South Wales, Victoria repealed its discriminatory immigration laws. However despite some initial success at deterring Chinese immigration, NSW Customs officers were soon overwhelmed by the tide of migrants entering the colony in the mid-1870s.

White working-class NSW citizens voiced strong opposition against "cheap" Chinese labour. In December 1878, a parade deteriorated into a riot in Sydney's Chinese quarter. Rather than inducing sympathy for its Chinese victims, the riot exacerbated anti-Chinese sentiments which quickly reached high political circles.

In January 1881, at an intercolonial conference, the six colonies acknowledged that a pervasive feeling opposed the unrestricted entry of Chinese people. A resolution was agreed recommending uniform legislation on the part of all colonies to restrict the influx of Chinese into these colonies.

However Western Australia was conspicuously uncooperative, even offering to fund the passage of Chinese migrants to WA where they were to become low-paid labourers, cooks and gardeners on sheep and cattle stations. However, once gold was discovered in the western colony, low-paid work soon lost its allure and the colony imposed immigration restrictions similar to those in the eastern colonies.

Colonial Customs officers were often burdened with attempting to unravel legal loopholes which



The arrival of a china trader: Chinese passengers at the customs house.

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Chinese immigrants soon began to exploit. This was a difficult task. Naturalised Chinese were not to be subjected to the restrictive immigration requirements, sparking a trade in naturalisation papers. Customs officers were required to distinguish forged papers from genuine ones.

Furthermore, Chinese immigrants returning permanently to China would sometimes sell their naturalisation papers to illegal entrants, thus circumventing the legislation once more. David Day suggests in *Smugglers and Sailors* that Customs tried to curtail this trend by appointing "Chinese Inspectors" who were supposed to possess a rare European aptitude - that of being able to differentiate one Chinese from another.

However colonial immigration restrictions (and their clever evasion) were not confined only to Chinese migrants. Afghan migrants also successfully evaded colonial immigration laws by landing in Queensland or South Australia and then journeying overland into New South Wales. At the time, Afghans were respected in outback Australia for the skill as camel-drivers - but along with Hindus, Syrians and Greek Gypsies, the Afghans were soon also attracting unfavourable political and social attention.

In 1898, restrictive immigration laws were "strengthened" by the addition of an "educational" test to exclude unwanted migrants. This was the embryonic version of the later notorious "dictation test".

Officers could administer the "test" in any European language of the officer's choice, including classical languages like Latin or ancient Greek. This arbitrary power was fundamental to Customs' ability to be able to "legally" restrict the

entrance of immigrants - purely on grounds of race.

On Australia's Centenary of Federation, one can only marvel at the enduring nature of Customs' role in repelling illegal immigrants. However these days the laws that Australia's public servants are required to administer are based on grounds far more just and equitable than mere race or skin colour.

Since gold rush days, Australian politics, economics and social attitudes have all experienced profound and on-going change. However, Customs' vigilance in attempting to thwart illegal immigration has remained constant.

Australian immigration laws may now be far more equitable, Customs detection methods may be more advanced and the "opponent" may have even grown wiser - but the battle of wits remains the same.

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