

RESEARCH NOTES

Reply from a Straw Person in Paradise

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A 'straw man', according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is 'an imaginary adversary, or an invented adverse argument, adduced in order to be triumphantly refuted'. Wikipedia says: 'A straw man argument is an informal fallacy based on misrepresentation of an opponent's position. To 'attack a straw man' is to create the illusion of having refuted a proposition by substituting a superficially similar proposition (the 'straw man'), and refuting it, without ever having actually refuted the original position.'

Imagine my surprise, on opening Volume 26 for 2008 of *Australasian Historical Archaeology*, to discover I had turned into a straw person! Kate Quirk's article, 'The Colonial Goldfields: Visions and Revisions', seeks to overturn the 'conventional representations' of the goldfields as 'wild, dissolute and masculine places'. The author says that previous writers have described a 'goldfields culture' involving 'places of wild drunkenness, physical privation, and intensely masculine sociality' (Quirk 2008: 19). Using the case study of the township of Paradise in southern Queensland, she argues that goldfield residents instead 'strove to maintain the very Victorian ideals of comfort, decency and family' (Quirk 2008: 13). She agrees with Susan Lawrence that the way of life in some Victorian gold mining towns was not so very different from that in metropolitan suburbs. Her argument however, seriously understates the diversity of nineteenth-century mining settlements.

In painting a background picture of these 'conventional representations', Quirk identifies a number of earlier authors who have portrayed Australian gold towns as 'harsh, dissolute and highly masculine places', such as Carnegie (2004), Clacy (2003) and Ward (1958, 1978). I find my name included among the authors of those works. It is true that since 1977 I have written 20 or so monographs, journal articles and consulting reports on aspects of the history of mining settlement in Australia, but only one is cited: a conference paper delivered in Italy in 1996 and published in the conference proceedings in 1998 (Bell 1998).

I was rather startled to be numbered among those who characterised Australian mining towns as 'harsh, dissolute and highly masculine', and I naturally re-read my paper to see what I had written. I certainly described some places as 'highly masculine' when I wrote, 'The population of alluvial settlements was usually predominantly male, and their stay in one place was usually short.' It could be inferred from my writing that some miners endured 'harsh' living conditions, because I said that many earned a very poor income, faced high costs, and some lived in tents and endured primitive conditions. I said nothing whatever in that paper about the goldfields being 'dissolute' places.

However, the points I have just listed are not a balanced summary of what I wrote on that occasion, which went on:

The fact that mining settlements were distinctive does not mean that they were uniform. There is very great diversity in the nature of what is loosely called the mining industry. The fundamental difference between alluvial and underground mining had major implications for the kinds of settlement they generated ...

In underground mining settlements the population was likely to be more evenly gender-balanced, including a fair proportion of married couples with children. Most people worked for mining companies at fixed wages, so there was a more stable domestic economy. The stability of underground mining towns varied considerably, but they extended along a spectrum from the smaller base metal towns, where the way of life was only marginally more secure than that of the alluvial camps, up to the grand gold mining towns such as Bendigo, Charters Towers and Kalgoorlie, which were economically as prosperous and culturally as sophisticated as any cities in the country (Bell 1998: 29).

Read in its entirety, this text is in part making almost exactly the same point as Quirk's article. It differs in its approach however, by stressing the diversity of Australian mining settlements, as a prelude to describing the great range of their physical characteristics. I suggest that Quirk's paper fails to recognise this diversity and in doing so replaces one stereotype with another. The article attempts to draw conclusions about a place called 'the goldfields', but there were many different kinds of goldfields.

The economic, geological, technological, climatic, ethnic, demographic and cultural diversity of Australian mining settlements, and the implications of that diversity for their physical form, building construction and material culture, has been a strong theme of my writing since the 1970s. Hence I find it disappointing to be shuffled into a category of writers who have stereotyped the mining fields, based on a limited reading of one of my works.

My first substantial research on Australian mining settlements and housing appeared in a PhD thesis studying the North Queensland region in 1982, subsequently published little-changed as a monograph in 1984. It distinguished sharply between alluvial and underground mining settlements:

Although mining settlements in North Queensland were extremely diverse, all can be divided into two categories, alluvial or underground; distinct in their implications for settlement and habitation, and in the quality of the historical evidence they provide. At one extreme is Charters Towers, with a peak population of 30,000 and every amenity European culture could provide, which has survived for over a century. At the other are the ephemeral camps – Cornish Jim's Rush, Purdie's Camp, Swiper's Flat – about which almost nothing is known except their names (Bell 1984a:21, 1982a:36).

I postulated a sequence of four phases through which a

mining settlement might evolve: establishment, stability, prosperity and decline. Stability was characterised by 'a fairly constant population level, a secure income for the majority, the appearance of service industries and a reasonably comfortable way of life' (Bell 1984a:21). That seems to describe the township of Paradise in the 1890s rather well. It was a town whose economy was supported by underground gold mines. Most alluvial settlements remained stuck in the establishment phase, eventually moving directly into decline.

The demography of many of the larger settlements can be analysed from census returns, warden's reports and birth, death and marriage registers. There is no question that some of the alluvial settlements I described were predominantly male: at the 1876 census the Palmer goldfield had a population of 9,215, of whom just 119 – that is 1.3 per cent – were women (Bell 1984a:24). This was a scatter of ephemeral encampments where 92 per cent of the population lived in tents and the principal cause of death was dysentery (Bell 1991). Life on the Palmer was not so much 'wild' as squalid. It was more desolate than dissolute.

But I also reported that in urban Charters Towers in 1901, the population was 49.2 per cent women, or 70 per cent 'women and children' – a figure remarkably similar to that at Paradise in the same period – living in about 6,000 respectable timber-framed houses. This was a community with schools, hospitals, churches, electric lighting and brass bands playing in the streets on Saturday nights (Bell 1984a:24; 1982a:217, 481).

My research investigated the available registers of births, deaths and marriages from the northern goldfields and pointed out that the birth records are a particularly useful source of information, as they record not only (a) where the parents were at the time of the birth, but in most cases (b) where they were born and (c) where they were married a few years before. The one document therefore provides a glimpse into population movement patterns over time. The birth registers yielded the unexpected information that while the great majority of parents (76 per cent) were born in the British Isles or northern Europe, most (78 per cent) had married elsewhere in Queensland. There appeared to be a strong pattern among parents of goldfield children: emigration while single, followed by some years of experience in the colony including marriage, before moving to a remote goldfield (Bell 1984a:25; 1982a:43-46).

I also investigated the question of just how 'dissolute' the northern goldfields were. Certainly there were individual settlements where the way of life was unattractive to outsiders. A schoolteacher faced with a transfer to the mining township of Redcap wrote in protest, 'I put the case mildly when I say it is perhaps the roughest camp in North Queensland' (Bell 1984a:31). However, this comparative judgement itself implies that there were other places which were much less rough. My thesis concluded:

Despite a romantic notion in much recent popular writing that the mining fields were characterised by violence and debauchery, the diggings are more frequently described in contemporary accounts as exceptionally orderly (Bell 1984a:28).

In an analysis extending over several pages, my published research found that questions of social order on the goldfields, like everything else, were complex and varied. However, systemic drunkenness certainly did not exist on the alluvial diggings, as most miners' earnings made alcohol a rare luxury. The normal level of alcohol consumption on mining fields attracted little comment from outsiders. Cases of violence and disorder on the goldfields were very rare – probably much rarer than in the suburbs of the capital cities – and when they occurred they were localised and usually attributable to an

episode of economic distress such as the sudden collapse of earnings from a particular goldfield (Bell 1984a:28-31). My work was among the first Australian historical writings to question the stereotype of the disorderly digger and nearly thirty years later I find it mildly offensive to be numbered among those who have perpetuated a 'dissolute' goldfields myth, especially when my conference paper cited in this instance did not even mention that topic.

To discover that people in Paradise lived comfortable and respectable family lives does not alter the mathematical fact that the Palmer was almost entirely a male community, or imply that, despite the rumours, Redcap was really a nice place to live. They were different places and life on the mining fields was far more complex and diverse than Quirk's paper recognises. Clearly there is a profound difference between a transitory camp of men living in tents in the wilderness and dying of epidemic diseases and a township of family houses with a school, a church and a grocery store down the street. Yet both could be described as 'goldfields' communities, if one wishes to think as loosely as that. I believe that any research which seeks to describe life on 'the goldfields' must begin by recognising the complexity and diversity of that topic. There is a very large body of literature written by authors over several decades who have already looked at many aspects of the subject. New work on the topic is always very welcome, but it needs to be founded on the body of existing critical research.

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Reply to a ‘Straw Person in Paradise’

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I would like to thank Peter Bell for his comments about my recent paper in *Australasian Historical Archaeology*, and for this opportunity to clarify my argument.

At base, I don't believe that my position and that of Bell are very different. We both have an interest in how the goldfields are portrayed and are aware that life on the goldfields was highly complex and variable (as it is in any type of settlement). However, we seem to have come at the problems from different ends and this, I think, is where the argument lies. While Bell has used extensive historical and archaeological studies of northern sites to construct a detailed understanding of the goldfields, I was more concerned with exploring the overarching narratives of goldfields life that continue to shape perceptions of the past. Eventually, I think that Bell's 'bottom up' approach and my 'top down' view would meet somewhere in the middle.

I fully acknowledge Bell's point that it is a nonsense to speak of the 'goldfields' as a singular entity. Indeed, that was the central argument of my paper: that this idea of the 'goldfields' (like the notion of the 'bush') is a fiction dreamt up by an urban intelligentsia and then given veracity by mid-twentieth-century historians (Davison 1978:192-202; Ireland 2003:60-2; Lake 1986:117-20; White 1981:90-105). As discussed at length in my paper, this fiction painted the 'goldfields' as places where men could escape family life and Victorian morality to live a simple masculine existence of drinking, gambling and deeply unattractive accommodation (Quirk 2008:14-5; Ward 1958:118-128; 1978:173). There is no consideration of the variability of the goldfields in this myth, only the unifying idea of male escape. If there is a 'straw man' in my paper, then it is this myth of goldfields life, not Bell's previous work.

One way to confront this myth would be to present data from a range of different goldfields sites, demonstrating the way that the variability in the historical record confounds the homogeneity of the ideal. However, I chose instead to focus on the myth itself; on the notions of homosociality, individualism and misogyny which are its defining features and also the root causes of its creation (Quirk 2008:13). My aim was to examine each of these notions in turn and to demonstrate that 'goldfields' life, as represented in this case by Paradise, actually bore little resemblance to this 'ideal' (Quirk 2008:15).

As Bell points out, and as I discuss in my paper (Quirk 2008:15), I am by no means the first archaeologist to make such an argument. Lawrence's (1998, 2000, 2003) work on the Victorian goldfields and other 'bush' settings, for example, has already challenged various aspects of the goldfields mythology. However, I thought that the point was worth further exploration for a number of reasons.

In the first place, unlike the alluvial goldfields of Lawrence's study, Paradise was a hard rock field. As Bell notes, different types of goldfields generated very different types of settlements (see also Hardesty 1988:85) and it seemed apposite to examine the goldfields myth in the context of both.

In the second place, Paradise existed at the time that the goldfields myth was being created (Davison 1978:192-202; Ireland 2003:60-2; Lake 1986:117-20; White 1981:90-105), and in a place (frontier Queensland) where this 'goldfields' life was supposed to be at its most extreme (Quirk 2008:15; Ward 1978:185). Paradise therefore offered a perfect opportunity to juxtapose the elements of the goldfields myth against the realities of goldfields life.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, despite the best efforts of historians and archaeologists, the 'goldfields' and broader 'bush' mythology continues to dominate public perceptions of the colonial period. Australian icons continue to be the apparently all-male denizens of the frontier; the miner, drover, swagman and bushman (Ireland 2003:62; Lawrence 2000:16). Until this is redressed, and a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of Australia's past is generated, we need to continue to challenge these myths and to generate alternative views of colonial life.

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