



B O M

**THE UNDERGROUND
HISTORY OF AUSTRALIA,
FROM GOLD RUSH TO GFC**

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FINDING

The landscape around Coolgardie brings to mind the continental uniformity that Michelle de Kretser writes about in her novel *Questions of Travel*; it belongs to an Australia where 'you could spend two days on a train and step out into sameness'.

A description of the scenery in Western Australia's richest gold-fields could as easily describe the ugliness around Cobar in New South Wales, or Gympie in Queensland, or the saltbush badlands north-west of Adelaide. The soil is a dull amber, with none of the striking redness of the central deserts. The vegetation is a scrubby barricade of mallee and acacia, hostile to the human form that wishes to pass through it and to the eye that wants to see over it. Too high to offer the relief of a view, the scrub is too low and dispersed to give shade. There are neither creeks nor rivers, nor the gullies and gorges they might cut, but rather the surprise, now and then, of a muddy lake. Where a rare incline occurs, all it unveils is a featureless stretch of more scrub, both barren and overgrown.

You are assaulted by a very Australian kind of menace. There is apparently nothing here. Even after the observer is acclimatised by two centuries of colonisation, the land is stupendously unlovely.

How then would it have looked to men who were one generation or less out of England and Ireland, dressed too heavily for the

heat, blistered and underfed, lumbered with all the food and water and hope they could carry in their jerry-built handcarts? How would they have known where to look for the mineral bounty that drew them here? In the desert landscapes around Broken Hill and Silverton, in the Kimberley or the Pilbara, and in some of the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Northern Territory, it can be easily imagined how an outcrop of rust-coloured or greenish rock would have caught the eye of an experienced prospector. But in the eastern goldfields of Western Australia in the depression of the 1890s, where did they start? It is a miserable enough place through a car window, but it defies belief to imagine your way into the broken boots of the men who set out into this place, a century and a quarter ago, to find gold. When you are in this unyielding landscape, your preconceptions about the gold-seeking days are turned upside down. Instead of seeing the map as we do now, peppered with gold finds, the topsoil a thin blanket waiting to be peeled back from vast underlying reefs, you see it the way they did then: a vast absence and a malign threat, a measureless haystack with no guarantee of a needle. Where the scrub limits visibility to a few yards, there is nothing to see but the next trudging step. John Forrest, later a West Australian premier and the ancestor of an iron ore magnate, had walked across this land back in the 1860s. But, he wrote, he had higher interests: 'I was exploring for pastoral country, and that means that my eyes were not on the ground a few inches ahead of my boots.'

As well as being physically unendurable with the heat, flies and lack of water, the area saps the spirit and haunts the sleep. Knowing that they might chance upon a carpet of loose slugs of gold, more than a lifetime's wealth, behind the next stunted tree, of course gave these men hope, but the tantalising suspicion of gold could just as easily have sharpened their frustration and despair.

The men that ghosted through this land around 1890 formed, collectively, a gold rush in name only. There was none of the festive exuberance of New South Wales and Victoria in the 1850s, when

policemen had dropped their batons and carpenters their hammers to bolt from the city to inland El Dorados. There was little of the urgency and none of the gaiety. The men tramping eastwards from Perth and Fremantle and Yilgarn, or down south from the exhausted finds at Murchison, were dead-enders and veterans from decades of previous rushes. This land looked familiar, and vaguely promising, to them because they had been on auriferous ground before. The Australian gold rush had traced a vast horseshoe from south-east to north-east to north-west and now, finally, to the continent's south-west; and the men of the last gold rush, to Southern Cross and then Coolgardie, 500 kilometres inland from Perth, were an assortment of lifetime failures, rolling stones and psychiatric cases.

Among them was a 27-year-old who might have fitted all three categories: Arthur Wellesley Bayley. An athletic prodigy, a sprinter and hammer thrower who astounded spectators at bush shows with his pace and strength, Bayley was equally vigorous in the pub, shouting beer for dozens of fellow miners when celebrating a strike, and settling disputes with a swing of his fists or even, once, with a shovel. A butcher's son from Newbridge, Victoria, Bayley had been seduced as a child by stories of the gold rushes he had missed. As soon as he was old enough, he ran towards the first rumours of gold. With his brother Tom, as a teenager he roved through Queensland's outback gold towns in the 1880s: Charters Towers, Hughenden, Normanton and even the desperate Palmer River.

At Croydon, in the Gulf country, he met William Ford, known as 'Golden Willie' for his auburn-red hair. Thirteen years Bayley's senior, Ford was a hardened, dour digger who had some success at Croydon with a share in the Golden Queen mine. He was among onlookers who saw Bayley get into a fistfight with a much bigger man and was impressed by his strength and courage. The pair became friendly but did not mine together; they went their separate ways when Croydon's gold ran out around 1887. Bayley returned to Victoria, while Ford went to Broken Hill to investigate

the silver-mining boom. By that time the find at Broken Hill had been claimed by highly capitalised companies employing wage-earning underground miners, and Ford, who did not like the idea of working for a boss, soon left, planning to explore for gold in New Guinea. Hearing of the activity around Southern Cross in Western Australia, he went there instead.

The sweep of the gold trek into Western Australia in the 1880s had been heartbreaking for most. Adam Johns and Phil Saunders were survivors of the Northern Territory rush who walked west and found gold in the Kimberleys in the early 1880s, but couldn't make it pay for lack of water. After gold had been found around Yilgarn, inland from Perth, in the middle of that decade, prospectors had struck another field at Southern Cross in 1888. The trek into the interior, now 370 kilometres from Perth, had winnowed the gold-finders down to the toughest and most fervid; it continued to lure men deeper into the unforgiving inland of the west. Gilles McPherson and Jim Speakman led separate expeditions but retreated, nearly perishing from thirst. At Redcastle, another 200 kilometres east of Southern Cross, three Murphy brothers found 600 ounces of gold, but it exacted its price: Pat died of typhoid, Jim caught the fever while arranging Pat's affairs, and Dan, the last surviving sibling, died in his tent.

When Ford arrived, Bayley was already in the west, busy failing. He worked for wages at Southern Cross and cared for old Gilles McPherson, who stumbled into the settlement half-dead from exhaustion, hunger and thirst, muttering of gold further east, but the lack of water and the harshness of the land had defeated him. Bayley kept the tip at the back of his mind but invested his wages, disastrously, in tin mines at Greenbushes. He walked all the way to the Ashburton River goldfield 450 kilometres to the north, and was on his last legs when he found a 68-ounce nugget. For the irrepressible athlete Bayley, living from one small find to the next, the west was ever a bonanza waiting to be found. He returned to Perth, restocked, and set out for the Murchison goldfields with

another miner named Taylor. Bayley's luck and skill were improving; within three months the pair had netted £3000, allowing Bayley to return to his family in Victoria and show them that he had not perished in the desert, but done reasonably well.

Ford, meanwhile, had crossed similar ground in the west, begrudgingly working for wages at Greenbushes and Southern Cross and having some luck with gold at the Parker Ranges. Like Bayley, Ford was addicted to prospecting, and his aim seems to have been purely to win enough money to finance the next expedition.

Both men were in Southern Cross in the winter of 1892 and their paths crossed again. It happened that they were at the same point in the prospector's cycle – recuperating and resupplying, haunting miners' hotels and listening for the clue that might lead to the next find. In the Steinbeckian world of gold towns, men often worked in pairs, and Ford was, physically if not mentally, the George to Bayley's Lennie. Wiry, bearded, as pessimistic as Bayley was broad and bluff, Ford acted as the foil for the showman. Where Bayley was excessive, the older Ford was cautious and cagey. Yet he gave Bayley direction. They pooled their resources; one story has it that Ford won 'shinplasters' – a currency that mining companies issued in lieu of cash – by gambling on Bayley in footraces. Bayley did some more prospecting around Nannine, but on a holiday back in Perth he and Ford decided to join forces to trek 400 kilometres north-east to New Norcia and Mount Kenneth. When their horses ate poison-bush and died, they beat a slow retreat to Toodyay, where they replaced the animals and set out for the Gnarlbine Rocks, inland from Southern Cross.

Virtually giving up, they rode some 60 kilometres back towards Southern Cross when they stopped at a rockhole near a locale called Fly Flat to camp and water their horses. It was said that Bayley and Ford were following the footsteps of McPherson, but they were actually retracing the path of another rumour-mongering prospector named George Withers, which took them near the 'place of the water hole' known as Coolgardie. There were rumours that the

ground had been pegged in 1888; that the peggers were still sitting there, as skeletons by their camp, speared by Aborigines. There had just been rain, which had washed away a few millimetres of the sandy red topsoil. In the early morning of 17 September, Bayley saw a nugget lying on the ground. Without the rain, it would have stayed buried.

Bayley and Ford ate their breakfast and specked the ground. They knew they were rich from the first half-ounce nugget they came across. 'I think we were more excited over that little bit of gold than any we found afterwards,' Ford would recall. They collected 20 ounces of gold that day. As in the first days of any gold rush, the stuff was lying there waiting to be picked up.

After walking for days, Bayley and Ford's boots were crunching on nuggets. But they were not alone. No man could take a step without another peering over his shoulder. Four prospectors, including one named German Charlie and another called Jack Reidy, arrived. Ford started filling his bags with nuggets while Bayley went out to misdirect the men. But the new arrivals were more worried that the wily Ford would follow them, so they moved on quickly.

In the next four weeks, while dry-blowing further layers of dust from the red earth, Bayley and Ford found £800 worth, or about 170 ounces, of gold.

Bayley might have liked a drink and a chat, but under Ford's counsel he kept his garrulousness under control. The pair rode back to Southern Cross to resupply, then crept out of town again to go back to their find. There was a miners' strike at Southern Cross that winter, though, and three curious prospectors noted Bayley and Ford's quick exit. These three tailed the pair 200 kilometres back east. When they caught up with Bayley and Ford, who were specking and dry-blowing, one of the followers, Tommy Talbot, said 'we found gold galore, in fact gold all around us. We could see it glittering in the sunlight . . . I think we were off our heads for quite a few minutes.'

After warning the newcomers off, Bayley raced back to Southern Cross with 554 ounces and the intention to register his claim, which, under West Australian colonial law, could not exceed an area roughly the size of a suburban cottage. Talbot and his partners declared that Bayley and Ford cheated them, by over-pegging their own claim on the richest ground. In such isolated country, where these were the only handful of gold-seekers within all four horizons, there was a code of honour about respecting the integrity of the wooden pegs men hammered in to mark their claims. The Talbot group would accuse Bayley and Ford of moving the pegs to widen their area. Bayley and Ford countered that their pegs had been in the ground first.

While Bayley was rushing back to the Southern Cross bank and mines office to stake his claim, Ford remained to gather up hundreds more ounces, either picking it off the ground or crushing it out of the surface outcrops of quartz with a mortar and pestle. The pair bagged £8000 worth of gold in ninety days, and set off the last of the great Australian alluvial rushes.

Within a decade, the town that sprouted around the Bayley-Ford find, named Coolgardie (a corruption of *coolcaby*, as the local Aboriginals referred to the drab mulga scrub and waterholes in the locale), was the third-biggest settlement in Western Australia. It had railways, banks, pubs and a post office, and some 25 000 residents in the town and surrounds. It had become the springboard for a new rush to an even bigger goldfield, 38 kilometres further east, at Kalgoorlie. Politically, Coolgardie altered Australia's future: by 1900, it had four times as many voters as Perth, and its mining residents, immigrants from the eastern colonies known as 'Tothersiders', overwhelmed Western Australia's pastoral rump to vote in favour of joining the Australian federation. If not for the Coolgardie miners, the nation would have been cut off at the Western Australian border. It may even have been cleaved further by the federalist miners' plan to create their own colony out of the goldfields, to be known as 'Auralia', should the rest of the West

somehow manage to win the vote for independence. Not only did the Coolgardie miners draw Western Australia into the federation, but they ensured that the unforeseen mineral wealth of those early fields – more gold in Kalgoorlie, another 500 000 ounces in Coolgardie, a rush for nickel in the 1960s to Kalgoorlie's south, and the mountains of iron ore and underground reservoirs of natural gas that now underpin Australia's export earnings – would be incorporated in the nation as a whole.

For their contribution, surely Bayley and Ford, the finders, would find their faces on banknotes, their statues in town squares bearing their names? Far from it. Bayley followed the path of many successful prospectors: he gave up. His journey had taken him thousands of kilometres around the dry continent, and now he had had enough. He sold his claim to some silver men from Broken Hill and travelled south to Albany, where he married a bricklayer's daughter, Catherine Fagan. Leaving her behind, he returned to the Victorian pastoral land where he had started out, and assumed what might have been his ultimate ambition, the role of a gentleman sheep farmer. Within two years he caught hepatitis and haematemesis and died, aged thirty-one, popular with all who knew him except perhaps his widow, to whom he left none of his £29 000 estate. William Ford, meanwhile, continued prospecting before settling in the east as a wealthy man. He married late, had two children, and lived to eighty before dying in the comfortable Sydney suburb of Chatswood.

Far from being household names, Bayley and Ford are only commemorated in Coolgardie, now a ghost town, its long main street with a scattering of gold-rush buildings a touristic shopfront for a withered-looking dormitory suburb of today's outlying gold-mines. Its founders left the town at the first opportunity. For all their influence on Australia's future, Bayley and Ford are not seen as heroes, but chancers whose identities could easily have been interchanged with those of other prospectors, such as the three unnamed Irishmen or Tommy Talbot and his mates.

The symbolic fate of Bayley and Ford, almost as insignificant and random agents of a larger, impersonal history, is typical of the discoverers of Australia's minerals. Mining is an industry lacking in folk heroes. Doomed explorers and roguish bushrangers, not to mention the pioneers of wheat and wool, stand larger in Australia's defining mythology. Bayley and Ford started the final great gold rush, but their fate, to die more or less unknown, would be similar to that of the vast majority of the finders. If we are examining the ambiguous hold mining has on our national mindset, we must start with the compromised, corrupt, unreliable, and sometimes plain lucky men who started it all.