

**MONASH UNIVERSITY  
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**GOLDEN ANNIVERSARIES:  
TOURISM AND THE 150th  
ANNIVERSARY OF THE GOLD  
RUSHES IN CALIFORNIA AND  
VICTORIA FESTIVALS**

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## **GOLDEN ANNIVERSARIES: TOURISM AND THE 150th ANNIVERSARY OF THE GOLD RUSHES IN CALIFORNIA AND VICTORIA FESTIVALS**

Anniversary festivals celebrate historical events which occurred an appropriate number of years ago. The choice of the number of years is subjective, though typically multiples of fifty or one hundred years are viewed as worth celebrating. The choices of events worth celebrating are wide-ranging. Common subjects include anniversaries of founding of nations or cities, revolutions, wars, explorations and the births and deaths of famous people.

In the literature of festivals and tourist events, anniversary celebrations are given little consideration. They generally only appear as one of the types of festivals, with little analysis and no discussion as to whether they have any special characteristics or difficulties. For example in Michael Hall's coverage of hallmark tourist events he lists five types of events. Under one - 'cultural events' - he presents a sub-category of 'historical milestones'. This is not defined, but instead just represented by three examples: the US Bicentenary (1977), the Australian Bicentenary (1988) and the 500th Anniversary of Columbus (1992). There is no further explanation or discussion of the special characteristics of events in this sub-category (Hall 1992, 22).

However anniversary festivals do differ from other types of festivals and events. They are especially fraught with difficulties for organisers in two main ways: - through their lack of continuity and the controversy they create.

Anniversary festivals are by definition not routine. Many such festivals occur only once every fifty or one hundred years and it is this distance since the last celebration which give them their special flavour. Their promoters may advertise them as unique or one-off events, while usually not literally true, this may seem reasonable from the perspective of the participants and spectators. If a festival is only held every fifty years, it then becomes close to being a once-in-a-lifetime event. This creates a major headache for the organisers. They are organising a one-off event, in all likelihood with no experience of past celebrations. There is no routine to follow, no organisational memory to draw upon, no experienced staff.

The second difficulty is that by celebrating historical events, society is often divided between the winners and the losers, the conquerors and the conquered. Old wounds may be reopened, inequalities reinforced, injustices celebrated. As David Lowenthal argued, 'heritage [is] a partisan perversion, the past manipulated for some present aim' (Lowenthal 1998, 102). Nowhere is this better illustrated than in anniversary festivals. An example of the use of historical celebrations and the controversies they cause occurred when Australia celebrated its Bicentenary in 1988 and is worth considering in some detail.

The Bicentenary festival celebrated the establishment of the first European settlement in Australia, the convict colony at Sydney. Discussion of the Bicentenary has almost entirely focussed on its divisiveness. The chief criticism was that celebration of European settlement equalled celebration of dispossession of the indigenous Aborigines. Despite some attempts at inclusion, Aboriginal groups and many other Australians shunned the Bicentenary or used it to proclaim that past injustices had not been righted (Hutchinson 1992, Cochrane & Goodman, 1992, Hall 1992, 93-4, Lowenthal 1998, 90).

The Australian Bicentenary and those of the USA in 1976 and the Centenary of Canadian Federation in 1967, were criticised as, 'ambitious and self-conscious experiments in nation-building', for countries with relatively short histories and diverse ethnic compositions (Hutchinson 1992, 3-4). Attempts to include, 'all journeys not just the first', in the Australian Bicentenary provoked conservative objections to a perceived liberal bias amongst the organisers (Cochrane & Goodman 1992, 178-189). The focus on Sydney and convicts led to claims of irrelevance from other states, as had occurred in 1888 and 1938 (Bennett 1992A, xiii-xvi).

Expo '88, which accompanied the Bicentenary, provided an example of international exhibitions as, 'contrived events looking for a pretext to happen'. A major Bicentenary event, it had no relevance to the historic events of the Bicentenary (Bennett 1992B, 123-6). Capital works also generally attracted criticism. An example was the Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame, built with Bicentenary funding, which drew criticism for concentrating on a few big names (often linked to sponsors) and downplaying the role of Aborigines (Trotter 1992, 163).

While academic discussion of the Australian Bicentenary tended to focus on its divisiveness and rewriting of history, there were other criticisms which have not been widely covered. Amongst tourism industry practitioners the Bicentenary is still today seen as misallocating resources. Rather than giving the highest priority to sustainable projects, industry sources complain that the emphasis seemed to be on Bicentenary parties and barbecues which left no long term legacy. Where funding was given for tourism-related capital works, such as Bicentenary trails, there was little or no follow-up funding for maintenance. Thus for example, while Bicentenary funding paid for interpretative signage and a shelter for a coastal rainforest walk at Broome in Western Australia, by 1997 all the structures had collapsed and the path disappeared.

Given these twin problems of controversy and lack of continuity why do organisers attempt to conduct anniversary festivals? Surely it would be easier and safer to concentrate their efforts on regular festivals based on non-controversial themes? On the contrary, anniversary festivals, whether for nations, communities or special interest groups are keenly and widely celebrated and interest in them as major events is growing. Part of the reason for this is that for festival organisers and tourism bodies they provide great opportunities for increased promotion and visitation. In many cases they are the one chance for a nation to gain world-wide attention or for a region or town to obtain national exposure. Regular festivals often do not provide that sort of opportunity.

The challenge for anniversary festival organisers is how to maximise the benefits of their celebrations (a higher profile, increased infrastructure, capital works on attractions and infrastructure), while minimising the costs (divisiveness, an increased bad reputation, lack of experience, higher start-up costs).

This article considers two related case studies of anniversary festivals faced with this challenge and how organisers have attempted to deal with it. The two festivals are celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the world's two greatest Gold Rushes, to California (where gold was discovered in 1848) and to Victoria (1851). The first part of the article compares gold-based tourism in the two regions. The second considers the benefits that festival organisers are aiming at. The third and fourth parts look at problem areas, those of centralism and indigenous peoples respectively. The concluding section considers lessons for anniversary festivals in general.

## **GOLD TOURISM IN VICTORIA AND CALIFORNIA**

In both California and Victoria gold and its heritage form an important but secondary part of the tourism industry. In California the main tourist attractions are Los Angeles (including Hollywood and Disneyland) and San Francisco. The goldfields are inland in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, between 150 and 200 kilometres of San Francisco and over 500 kilometres from Los Angeles. In Victoria the main tourist attractions are Melbourne and nearby natural attractions such as the Great Ocean Road and the Phillip Island Penguins. The main goldfields are in the inland highlands, at the closest 120 kilometres to Melbourne.

While of only secondary importance to their respective state's tourism industry, gold dominates non-metropolitan tourism in both states. For the towns of the goldfields, gold, its heritage and connected attractions are far and away the primary drawcards for tourists. Nor, apart from agriculture, is there a great deal of other industrial development or employment. Consequently, variations in visitor numbers and yield have major impacts on the regional economy. Any new attractions, whether festivals or permanent, are eagerly sought after.

Gold tourism is clearly more developed in Victoria than in California. The gold towns of Victoria were always significantly larger than those of California, their nineteenth century buildings were grander and bigger and much more has remained (Frost 1999, 4-6). The goldfields of Victoria have developed their own attractive heritage architectural style, genteel and old-fashioned, widely known in Australia as 'Victorian'. Towns such as Ballarat, Bendigo, Castlemaine, Daylesford, Maldon, Beechworth and Bright have developed as major tourist centres. In contrast the smaller Californian towns are rawer and rougher, with only Nevada City and possibly Placerville comparable in attractiveness to the Victorian towns (Frost 1998B, 5-6). In addition, the Californian towns have been badly affected by intrusive freeway and parking developments (Frost 1998B, 5).

In Victoria, the chief gold attraction is Sovereign Hill at Ballarat. This is an outdoor museum with a wide range of recreated buildings, working mining machinery and costumed characters roaming the site. Established in 1970 by the local community through the Ballarat Historical Park Association, Sovereign Hill has developed a strong reputation for authenticity and interpretative materials (Evans 1991). Sovereign Hill now attracts about 500,000 visits a year and employs nearly 300 people. Sovereign Hill also manages the recently established Eureka Stockade Visitors Centre

Despite a strong emphasis on authenticity and interpretation, Sovereign Hill has attracted much criticism for presenting an idealised view of the past (Evans 1991).<sup>1</sup> It has also been suggested that Sovereign Hill's approach has reduced serious interest in the Gold Rushes. As David Goodman argued, 'the creation of Sovereign Hill ... only confirmed a sense that interest in the gold rush was mostly for children and tourists' (Goodman 1994, x). A further criticism of Sovereign Hill and similar museums has been that they focus attention almost entirely on the quest for exact reconstructions of the outward trappings (clothes, tools and other artefacts) of the past (Goodman 1994, x; Lowenthal 1998, 102).

Nonetheless, as Sovereign Hill has proven to be economically successful, other Victorian gold towns have looked to developing their particular assets to encourage tourists.<sup>2</sup> At Castlemaine the developers of the 'Diggin's' trail, which links a number of gold-mining sites, have focussed on complementing Sovereign Hill rather than competing with it. Their philosophy is that if tourists enjoyed the reconstructions at Sovereign Hill, they will be likely to also enjoy real gold mining remains. Interestingly, there is now also talk of a similar developing of authentic sites around Ballarat.

California has nothing comparable with Sovereign Hill (indeed Sovereign Hill is probably the world's top gold attraction). The major player in California is the State Parks. Rather than develop one large Sovereign Hill type attraction, their strategy has been to develop five parks which each highlight a particular aspect of the gold rushes (Frost 1998B, 6-7). These are: Columbia (ghost town acquired during the Centenary in 1948), Coloma (site of the discovery of gold), Empire State Mine (deep lead mine complex), Malakoff Hydraulic Diggings and Old Sacramento (waterfront area and railway museum). Coloma attracts about 330,000 visits a year, two thirds of the attendance at Sovereign Hill. One interesting development is the proposal for a giant privately-owned gold theme park between Sacramento and Stockton.

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<sup>1</sup> A common complaint is that nearly all the costumed actors are Anglo-Celtic, whereas the Gold Rushes were multi-cultural. In response to this, Sovereign Hill introduced a female Chinese character (generating further debate about whether there were many female Chinese on the goldfields or not) and more recently a female Gypsy. However, despite some prodding, Sovereign Hill has stopped short of having Aboriginal characters, arguing that constructing a role which was not either too demeaning or too sanitised was just too difficult.

<sup>2</sup> Other pioneer villages and historical reconstructions have not been so successful. Those at Swan Hill, Moe and Korumburra (all based on agricultural pioneers) have all been threatened with closure and only continue with government subsidies because they give these towns a higher tourist profile than they would otherwise have. Apart from Sovereign Hill, only the restored riverboat port at Echuca is generally counted a success. Surprisingly, given the urgent nature of the issue, there has been almost no research into what makes such heritage attractions successful or not.

Parks California's five parks share the same problems as Sovereign Hill, though being much smaller in scale they have not attracted much attention from researchers. In addition they have problems with *concessionaires*, private operators running shops, tours and other services within the parks. One difficulty is that some concessionaires are far more interested in earning revenue than in providing authenticity, thus Parks California fights an unending battle to keep t-shirt and baseball cap sellers out of its Gold Rush recreations. Another difficulty is that concessionaires limit the services available to tourists. For example, at Coloma interpretation is only provided via a commercial gold panning operation. Unless they pay for a panning demonstration and talk, tourists are unable to access information about the towns or mines.<sup>3</sup>

## FESTIVAL BENEFITS

In planning their 150th anniversary celebrations, California and Victoria adopted very different objectives which in turn shaped the direction of their festivals. In California the anniversary was primarily viewed as a celebration of civic pride. Organisers linked the 150th anniversaries of two separate events - the Gold Rushes (which began in 1848) and Statehood (1850). The resultant three year festival diluted the emphasis on gold and the gold-mining region. Instead, the focus eventually was on Statehood and California in general. This was illustrated by the invitation for participants by the then Governor, Pete Wilson,

The Sesquicentennial is for the people of California and the world, to commemorate California's past and celebrate California's future. Please join me in savouring California's rich heritage, unique culture, abundant natural beauty and resources, diverse peoples and innumerable golden achievements during these three years (California Sesquicentennial 1997).

Parks California, a key organiser of the sesquicentennial and operator of five specific gold mining parks, chose to use the anniversary to attract visitors to all of its 264 parks. In 1998 it utilised the slogan *Strike it rich! Discover California State Parks* to promote its annual State Parks Month. Parks' staff were told that the slogan, 'highlights the rich natural and cultural resources of state parks', and that, 'the slogan is intended for adaptation at parks that may not have strong historical themes' (California State Parks 1998, 1). To push this message to the public, Park District Superintendents were encouraged to explain in a form letter to local newspapers that, 'Striking it rich isn't just about the discovery of gold, it is about enriching our lives when we visit a state park' (California State Parks 1998, 7).

In contrast in Victoria the anniversary was seen as an event centred on gold and gold-tourism. The initiative came from state and local tourism organisations, tourism operators and universities teaching tourism studies (Frost 1998A, 18).<sup>4</sup> The objectives of the organisers included,

To encourage public understanding of the importance of the Victorian Gold Rushes and their effect on the development of Victoria and Australia.

To encourage sustainable tourism development in the Goldfields Regions of Victoria (Frost 1998A, 3).

As with California, in Victoria there were potential links with other celebrations. 2001 is also the Centenary of Federation, which will be marked with a centrally-planned programme of festivities along similar lines to the Bicentenary. Much of the Federation celebrations will focus on Melbourne, for it was the first capital from 1901 to 1927. However, while the organisers of the two anniversaries have worked closely together, the two festivals have remained quite separate. In addition 2001 marks the 150th anniversary of Victoria as

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<sup>3</sup> I believe that at times there are volunteer guides. However, on the day I visited there were no parks' staff or volunteers present.

<sup>4</sup> While all the main university tourism departments were involved, there was little interest from academic historians. The exceptions were the University of Ballarat and some public historians and economic historians. In California there was far greater interest from university historians.

a political unit. Somewhat surprisingly, the Victorian Government has chosen not to celebrate this in a major way, as they are keen to concentrate on Federation instead.

## PROBLEMS OF CENTRALISM

In both California and Victoria the goldfields are some distance from the major cities and tourist gateways. This has led to a debate as to whether the major anniversary activities should occur in the major cities rather than the goldfields. In both cases the anniversary festival organisers are aiming for large visitor numbers. It has been argued by some organisers that high attendances can only be achieved by holding events close to the major cities of San Francisco and Melbourne. It has also argued that it is only in these well developed tourist cities that the infrastructure and expertise exists to successfully stage mass attendance activities. Countering this is the argument that the goldfields need to attract visitors out of these population centres in order to sustain and develop *their* facilities and tourism operators. At present these regional tourism destinations are caught in a vicious circle. They need visitors to develop, but without developed attractions they cannot attract sufficient tourist revenue. The Gold Rush anniversaries provide them with the one opportunity to grab the spotlight. In addition there is also an argument regarding authenticity. Surely, it is argued, visitors interested in the Gold Rushes wish to visit the actual locations. Will they be satisfied with recreations and museum displays in San Francisco and Melbourne?

In California this debate was won by the centralists on the organising committee, much to the dissatisfaction of the regionalists. The centralised shape of the anniversary celebrations is illustrated by two events. The first was the arrival of a fleet of tall sailing ships in San Francisco Harbour in June 1999. For the anniversary organisers this was to be the knockout blow of the celebration. They predicted that such a spectacular event would be watched by a crowd of 10 million people lining the shores of one of the world's most well-known and photogenic harbours. The images of a fleet of nineteenth century sailing ships passing under the Golden Gate Bridge would capture a worldwide television audience. Such publicity for San Francisco, already one of the world's most popular and attractive tourist destinations, would greatly stimulate inbound tourists and there would be a trickle-down effect of some tourists venturing further inland. Inevitably, reality did not match the hype. For many the tall ships were not as spectacular and did not attract anywhere near the promised worldwide publicity as promised. Critics have argued that millions of dollars of the anniversary's scarce budget were wasted with little benefit.

The second instance was *GOLD RUSH! California's untold stories*, the major museum exhibition of the anniversary. This was located at the Museum of California in Oakland, essentially a suburb of San Francisco. Again the logic was to bring the Gold Rushes to the people, not vice versa. Such logic was lost on distraught tourism operators in the goldfields, who had to tell visitors to turn around and drive back to San Francisco if they wanted to see the best museum display. Initially this exhibition was publicised as only being in Oakland, but after continuing pressure, part of it was eventually packaged as a travelling exhibition to regional areas.

In Victoria there was great concern that the anniversary could easily become centralised on Melbourne. There was a particular fear that potential sponsors would want to focus on Melbourne in order to gain maximum return for their support. From the beginning the organising committee was adamant that the celebration should be centred on the actual goldfields. This would lead to a greater feel of authenticity and bring economic benefits to these economically depressed regions.

Nonetheless recent developments in Melbourne have tended to confirm these fears. In 1998 a permanent exhibition, *Built on gold, Melbourne: a city built on gold*, was opened in the historic gold vaults of the Old Treasury Building. The exhibition was only possible through a major sponsorship by Rothschilds Bank. 1999 saw the opening of the *Golden Mile Heritage Walking Trail* by the Melbourne Convention and Marketing Bureau and the Museum of Victoria. Modelled on the *Freedom Trail* in Boston, it linked the major historic buildings and exhibitions in the city centre. These two gold related developments, combined with major rebuildings of the Museum of Victoria and the National Gallery of Victoria, the opening of an

Immigration Museum and heavy government support of a wide range of festivals in Melbourne, are part of a major strategy to strengthen Melbourne's position as a major cultural tourism destination. However, they have led to growing fears that regional destinations cannot compete and will lose tourists.

Such fears have gained greater attention following the 1999 Victorian elections. In a surprise result the conservative Liberal-National Coalition were replaced by a minority Labor government supported by three rural independents. Probably the key factor behind this result was a widely-held perception that the Liberal-National government was overly focussed on economic development in Melbourne and had ignored the needs of people in regional areas. Significantly Labour won nearly all the goldfields seats. The message was clear. Centralism (at least temporarily) was an unpopular position. Politicians of all persuasions were keen to favour the non-metropolitan regions.

## VICTIMS OF GOLD

The major criticism of anniversary celebrations is that there are usually specific ethnic groups who object to the celebration of events which disadvantaged them in the past. This was certainly the case with the 150th anniversary of the Gold Rushes in California, but was of far lesser significance for Victoria. Such a contrast was due to differences in their respective histories.

Prior to the discovery of gold in 1848, California was a minor province of Mexico. Its economy was based on cattle and their hides and its non-indigenous population was small. San Francisco had a population of only about 500 people. In contrast Victoria was far more developed prior to gold. Its economy, based on wool, boomed in the late 1830s and early 1840s. Pre-gold Melbourne had a population of 23,000 people. Immediately prior to gold, California was ceded from Mexico to the USA as one of the spoils of the one-sided Mexican-American War. Immediately prior to the discovery of gold in Victoria, its economic development was such that the British had decided to make it a separate semi-self governing colony.

In California the Gold Rushes has become associated with the dispossession of Mexicans, Native Americans and other groups. The flood of miners and settlers from the eastern states quickly proved intolerant. In the vacuum arising from the overthrow of Mexican government, the American miners quickly adopted strong local government. This allowed them to legally (and often violently) to exclude Mexicans and Native Americans from both mining claims and adjoining pastoral lands. Similarly, certain immigrant groups, particularly Peruvians, Chileans and Chinese were chased out of some goldfields (Goodman, 1994, 14-24 & 88-104; Rohrbough, 1997, 220-9).

In sharp contrast the Gold Rushes in Victoria carried far less shameful baggage, but only because the savage and ruthless dispossession of the Aborigines had occurred well beforehand. The British established centralised government, which retained relatively good order throughout the Gold Rushes and though there was widespread discrimination against the Chinese it did not result in anything like the level of bloodshed in California (Goodman, 1994, 14-24 & 64-88).

These differences are best illustrated by population estimates of indigenous peoples. In Victoria there may have been as many as 50,000 Aborigines when the British first arrived. At the beginning of the Gold Rushes there were only 2,700 left. In California there were about 150,000 Native Americans when gold was discovered. Within ten years the effects of the Gold Rushes had reduced their numbers to 28,000 (Goodman 1994, 1).

In California, the anniversary celebrations were always going to run into criticism and protest for celebrating events which dispossessed the Native Americans and Hispanics. This potential for divisiveness was exacerbated by two other factors. The first was the linking of the anniversaries of gold and statehood, with the latter being viewed by critics as essentially the final part of a process of conquest. The second was that the heavily populated and heavily Hispanic southern part of the state (including Los Angeles) had little connection to the Gold Rushes and therefore no cause for celebration.

Two examples illustrate the sort of problems which arose. The first concerns the 1996 celebration in the town of Sonoma of the 150th anniversary of the Bear Flag Revolt. This was an incident at the beginning of the Mexican-American War. An American Army survey team under John Fremont had arrived in California seeking supplies. Knowing war to be imminent they convinced American settlers to declare an independent republic and were able to defeat Mexican troops. Celebrating the victory of the Bear Flag Revolt was therefore celebrating the triumph of Americans over Mexicans,

Public attendance at the Sesquicentennial was smaller than anticipated, possibly caused by advance knowledge that Mexican-American student protesters would be there in an attempt to disrupt the celebration. Nearly 50 protestors did show up with banners and signs and they shouted and screamed and blew horns during the opening ceremonies ... Sonoma police officers told this writer that violence might break out between the protestors and the celebrants. A police helicopter flew overhead ... The protestors became loudest during Governor Wilson's address ... To the dismay of the celebrants, most media coverage focused on the protestors instead of the Sesquicentennial activities (Anderson, 1996: 10).

The second example was the *GOLD RUSH!* exhibition at the Museum of California. On its Internet site the Museum set up a 'Guestbook' for comments. A number of comments were highly critical for what they saw as bias in the displays. These included:

I do not see mention of the 70,000 Indians that were murdered by these gold seekers. Where is the rest of the story?

"There is no mention of the 70,000 American Indians who were killed." Murdered by the invaders, seekers of the "Yellow Metal", these people deserve to have their side of the story told, no matter how horrible it may seem. Only honest representation and historical fact can educate the masses, so this type of action ceases to exist in this country, and in California!

Why are European Americans' faces the only ones displayed under the rubric of "Americans?" There were many who were born here who were automatically named [in the exhibition] Chinese immigrants, or Mexicans, for example. Do you have to be white, in other words, before you are recognised as an American? (Oakland Museum of California, 1999)

## LESSONS FROM THE SESQUICENTENNIALS

Anniversary celebrations are becoming more and more popular and larger in scale. Where once celebrants unveiled plaques, they increasingly mark the celebrations with major capital works like museums and exhibition centres. Simple gatherings have been replaced by parades and festivals spanning many days. Re-enactments proliferate. Authorities, once content to merely show their respect for history, now see anniversaries as useful glue to bond society together and build support for their re-election. And there is an increasing realisation that anniversary celebrations generate tourism and economic benefits. Already there is eager anticipation for two mega-celebrations in just over a decade, the centenary of World War One and the sesquicentenary of the American Civil War.

However, celebration anniversaries have two special difficulties. First, they are hard to organise as there is usually a significant gap between their running. Second, they are controversial, often stirring up old wounds and disputes. The two case studies considered here - of 150th anniversaries of the world's two greatest Gold Rushes - demonstrate these problems. Their organising committees were built from scratch, there were no templates or precedents to follow, there were often competing and contrary interest groups at work. The celebrations generated controversies, the struggle between cities and the country surfaced and in California especially there was concern that this was a celebration of the conquest of Native Americans and Mexicans. At times, such problems threatened to sink the celebrations. It was only the significance of what was being celebrated that enabled planning to continue.

Can these difficulties be minimised or avoided? Two areas might repay consideration. The first is further research into anniversary celebrations. Up to now consideration of these festivals have focussed almost entirely on the controversies generated. A wider approach is needed. We need to know more about the benefits, the organisational issues, the role of community groups. We need case studies of successes and of failures.

A second area is in how controversies are approached. Typically organisers fear disunity and protest. This was the case with the Australian Bicentenary and these two Gold Rush anniversaries. Perhaps this fear is misplaced. In the short term re-enactments might be disrupted and officials red-faced. However, in the long run, such intense and passionate debate may be very healthy for society. For example, the Australian Bicentenary significantly boosted debate about issues relating to Aborigines. It may be that the anniversaries of the Gold Rushes increases our understanding of issues affecting regional areas and indigenous peoples.

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