

**MAKING AN EDGIER INTERPRETATION OF THE GOLD
RUSHES: CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVES FROM AUSTRALIA
AND NEW ZEALAND**

Warwick Frost

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Abstract

This article examines the interaction between new interpretations of history and interpretation provided at heritage tourist sites. Generally, the literature distinguishes between history, which is seen as objective and fixed and heritage interpretation, which is characterised as biased, selective and serving parochial interests. It is argued that history is actually far more dynamic and subjective and that this requires an ongoing revision of interpretation for visitors as historical interpretations change. To illustrate these processes, Goodman's concept of a new 'edgier history of Gold' is applied to interpretation at Sovereign Hill and the Mount Alexander Diggings in Australia and the Central Otago Heritage Trail in New Zealand.

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MAKING AN EDGIER INTERPRETATION OF THE GOLD RUSHES: CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVES FROM AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

INTRODUCTION

'Just give me the facts' is something that detectives say but which no historian can really do, for the 'facts' are a response to questions, and one person's questions are never quite the same as another's.¹

Perhaps it is the malleability of gold, as both material and metaphor, which has caused it to seize the imagination of countless men and women over the centuries. It has mobilised them – bond or free – to travel the globe, has driven them to lie and cheat, to suffer and speculate, to risk their lives, to move mountains and reshape the landscape, to create a myriad of objects as conspicuous for their beauty as for their ostentation.²

The distinction between history and heritage troubles researchers in tourism and heritage interpretation. Hewison argued that 'heritage is not history'. Rather heritage was a 'distortion of the past' that promoted 'fantasies of a world that never was'.³ Lowenthal argued that history is often seen as factual and 'real' and therefore unchanging. In contrast heritage was biased 'bad history', at its worse 'a partisan perversion, the past manipulated for a present aim'.⁴ Timothy and Boyd argued that heritage 'is often the re-creation of the selective past'.⁵ Furthermore, they claimed that:

Many people erroneously equate heritage with history. History, however, is the recording of the past as accurately as possible ... history is what a historian regards as worth recording and heritage is what contemporary society chooses to inherit and pass on.⁶

This view of history as objective and factual and heritage, in contrast, being subjective and biased is simplistic and deeply flawed. It ignores the historians' analytical role by assuming that history is just a series of facts and results in self-justification of one's opinions ('my view is right and history, the views of those who disagree are not history'). As Davison, in rejecting the views of Hewison and Lowenthal, argued:

Even before the [history] discipline was exposed to the influence of postmodernism and poststructuralism, historians had largely abandoned the pretence of objectivity. Any history, they would cheerfully admit, was written from a point of view and, while they might eschew deliberate fabrication and distortion, the past they portrayed reflected as much of themselves as their subjects.⁷

Nonetheless, it is recognised that this view of history as objective and heritage as subjective is widely held, not only amongst the general public, but some historians and heritage managers. The recent attacks by Windschuttle and Prime Minister John Howard against what they call the 'black

¹ G. Davison, *The use and abuse of Australian history*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2000, p. 6.

² I. McCalman, A. Cook and A. Reeves (eds), *Gold: forgotten histories and lost objects of Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 1.

³ R. Hewison, *The heritage industry: Britain in a climate of decline*, London, Methuen, 1987, p. 10.

⁴ D. Lowenthal, *The heritage crusade and the spoils of history*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 102-3.

⁵ D.J. Timothy and S.W. Boyd, *Heritage tourism*, Harlow: Prentice Hall, 2003, p. 237.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 4.

⁷ Davison, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 120. For changing perspectives on the meaning of heritage see D.C. Harvey, 'Heritage pasts and heritage presents: temporality, meaning and the scope of heritage studies', *International journal of heritage studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2001, pp. 319-338.

armband view of history' illustrates how such a view is entrenched in parts of Australian society.⁸ This problem of differing groups arguing for their particular version of history to be recognised as the truth in heritage interpretation (*contested authenticity*), has long been recognised.⁹

Such contests raise enormous difficulties for interpreters at heritage sites. In order to be authentic they aim to present the right or authentic view of history. However, what if that right view is not obvious? What if there are debates or historians' interpretations of history are changing? Do interpreters select from a number of competing histories? If so, what are the criteria for selection? Or do they try to include all views?

My intention in this article is to examine how interpreters respond to changing interpretations of history, through an examination of interpretation at heritage sites associated with the Gold Rushes of the nineteenth century. My focus is on the development of 'edgier' interpretation of the Gold Rushes, which follows the trends of historical recent research and how this enables visitors to better connect with the heritage of the Gold Rushes. Three case studies are considered. They are Sovereign Hill and the Mt Alexander Diggings in Victoria, Australia and the Otago Goldfields Heritage Trail in New Zealand. In choosing these cases, I have aimed for a mix of contrasting perspectives, considering a well – established and successful attraction in Sovereign Hill, new initiatives in the Mt Alexander Diggings and the Otago Goldfields Heritage Trail and instances where interpretation is either lacking or has deteriorated.

'An edgier history of Gold'

In 2001, the historian David Goodman used the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Australian Gold Rushes to call for the making of an 'edgier' history of gold. Goodman was critical that,

Historians have ... tended to look back on the gold rushes with general satisfaction. It is hard not to be impressed by the extraordinary figures of population increase, of gold exported, of cities and civic cultures being built. The story of the sleepy pastoral colony transformed into a booming world centre is an attractive one. Gold created cities, industries, a nation.¹⁰

However, he argued,

We would make a mistake if we wrote our histories of gold only in that voice. People at the time did not always know or believe that progress would be the outcome of the gold discoveries. Writing hopes and fears into the history of the gold-rush era will more accurately convey the uncertainty and anxiety which the mid-nineteenth-century gold rushes provoked in Australia ... We need to recover a sense of the gold rushes as dangerous, edgy events with unpredictable outcomes.¹¹

Goodman's provocative piece was part of a collection entitled, *Gold: forgotten histories and lost objects of Australia*. As the title suggests, this volume included a range of alternative perspectives

⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 2-9; S. Macintyre and A. Clark, *The history wars*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003. Windschuttle claimed that historians over-exaggerated violence against Aborigines in the early nineteenth century. Howard has consistently claimed that certain historians peddle a biased negative view of Australian settlement.

⁹ D. McCannell, *The tourist: a new theory of the leisure class*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, 1st pub. 1976; E. Cohen, 'Authenticity and commoditization in tourism', *Annals of tourism research*, Vol. 15, pp. 371-386; Lowenthal, *op. cit.* (note 4); L.K. Richter, 'The politics of heritage tourism development: emerging issues for the new millennium', in D.G. Pearce and R.W. Butler (eds), *Contemporary issues in tourism development*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 108-126; G. Waitt, 'Consuming heritage: perceived historical authenticity', *Annals of tourism research*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2000, pp. 835-862.

¹⁰ D. Goodman, 'Making an edgier history of Gold', in McCalman et al, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 23 & 34.

on the Gold Rushes, including the experiences of the Chinese, Aborigines and women, destitution and failure, environmental change and artists' (rather than the conventional writers') representations.¹²

Such 'edgier' views of the Gold Rushes are not confined to this collection. Following the 1963 publication of the seminal histories by Blainey and Serle, the Gold Rushes became a major feature of Australian heritage tourism, but almost disappeared from writings on Australian history.¹³ However, in recent years a range of historians have engaged in new perspectives on the Gold Rushes, challenging the conventional interpretations and as Goodman suggested, writing an 'edgier' history.¹⁴ It is notable that such new perspectives have been skilfully incorporated into two recent popular histories of the Gold Rushes.¹⁵

These major changes in the historiography of the Gold Rushes present significant challenges for interpreters working at Gold Rush sites. If historians are making an 'edgier' history, are interpreters following suit, making an 'edgier' interpretation? Are interpreters moving away from a conventional view based on economic and engineering progress, towards interpretations emphasising risk, danger, Aborigines, Chinese, women and children, alternative records (such as drawings, paintings and theatre) and global connections?

Interpreters may feel themselves caught between two camps. A group of historians are pushing a series of revised views of the Gold Rushes. Should these alternative perspectives be included in the interpretation provided at Gold Rush sites and attractions? Or should they be dismissed as political partisans peddling 'bad history'? How much consideration should be given to visitors and their expectations and knowledge of history? In the case of the Gold Rushes, the historians' new 'edgier' interpretations need to be carefully incorporated into the interpretation provided for visitors, for it may allow better connection and understanding, but it may result in alienation.

It has generally been argued that visitors to Gold Rush sites are keenly interested in learning and authenticity.¹⁶ As such, interpreters may have the advantage of working with a highly motivated

¹² McCalman et al, *op. cit.* (note 2).

¹³ G. Blainey, *The Rush that never ended: a history of Australian mining*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1963; G. Serle, *The Golden Age: a history of the colony of Victoria 1851-1861*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1963. An exception in this period was W. Bate, *Lucky city: the first generation at Ballarat, 1851-1901*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1978, though it must be noted this dealt with just one goldfield.

¹⁴ Recent studies taking new approaches and rejecting earlier interpretations include those of 'poor' goldfields (S. Lawrence, *Dolly's Creek: an archaeology of a Victorian Goldfields community*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000; B. McGowan, *Australian ghost towns*, Melbourne: Lothian, 2002; A. Mayne, *Hill End: an historic Australian Goldfields landscape*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003); environmental change (D. Garden, 'Catalyst or cataclysm? Gold mining and the environment', *Victorian historical journal*, Vol. 72, No. ½, 2001, pp. 28-44); the Chinese experiences (W. Frost, 'Migrants and technological transfer: Chinese farming in Australia, 1850-1920', *Australian economic history review*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2002, pp. 113-131); national identity (W. Frost, 'Heritage, nationalism and identity: the 1861-2 England Cricket Tour of Australia', *The international journal of the history of sport*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2002, pp. 55-69); Gold as an economic and social 'energiser' (W. Bate, 'Gold: social energiser and definer', *Victorian historical journal*, Vol. 72, No. ½, 2001, pp. 7-27) and comparisons between Victoria and California (D. Goodman, *Gold seeking: Victoria and California in the 1850s*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994; I. Tyrrell, *True gardens of the Gods: California-Australian environmental reform, 1860-1930*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁵ R. Annear, *Nothing but Gold: the Diggers of 1852*, Melbourne: Text, 1999; G. Hocking, *To the Diggings! A celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the Discovery of Gold in Australia 1851-2001*, Melbourne: Lothian, 2000. Hocking text is particularly important as the first to reproduce a wide range of Gold Rush paintings in colour.

¹⁶ G. Moscardo and P. Pearce, 'Historic theme parks, an Australian experience in authenticity', *Annals of tourism research*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1986, pp. 467-479; I.J. Brown, 'Mining and tourism in southern Australia', *Industrial archaeology review*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1989, pp. 55-66; M. Evans, 'Historical interpretation at Sovereign Hill', *Australian historical studies*, Vol. 24, No. 96, 1991, pp. 142-152; W. Frost, 'A pile of rocks and a hole in the ground: heritage tourism and interpretation of the Gold Rushes at the

audience, though they have to be careful for that audience may have high levels of existing knowledge. However, it has been recently argued that visitors to Gold Rush towns are more interested in 'seeing' than 'learning' and may only regard the historic sites as background for general tourist activities such as relaxing with family and friends, eating in cafes and looking at shops.¹⁷ If this is the case, interpreters have a much more difficult job, especially in regard to presenting new interpretations of the Gold Rushes.

Sovereign Hill

Sovereign Hill is an outdoor museum recreating the Gold Rushes. It is located at Ballarat, 120 kilometres west of Melbourne. It opened in 1970 and is owned and operated by the Ballarat Historical Park Association, a not-for-profit community organization. It is one of the largest regional tourism attractions in Australia, attracting about 500,000 visitors per year and employing over 300 staff.

Sovereign Hill places a great deal of emphasis on authenticity.¹⁸ Nearly all its buildings are reconstructions closely based on period photographs and drawings. It has a large number of staff and volunteers in costume and a small team of actors portraying real historical characters. Groups of school-children dress in period costume and experience lessons based on those of the 1850s. Research by Moscardo and Pearce found that such attention to authentic detail was highly appreciated by visitors.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Sovereign Hill's approach has attracted criticism. Goodman argued that it has discouraged historians from researching the Gold Rushes, for 'the creation of Sovereign Hill ... only confirmed a sense that interest in the gold rush was mostly for children and tourists'.²⁰ Furthermore, Sovereign Hill and similar museums were commonly criticised for focussing their attention almost entirely on the quest for exact reconstructions of the outward trappings (clothes especially) of the past.²¹

The quest for authenticity pushes Sovereign Hill towards an 'edgier' interpretation. Its Chinese village, symbolically located on the other side of the diggings to the main town, is populated with Chinese characters (typically played by local university students). This emphasis on the Chinese fits in well with the multicultural nature of schools' curricula and the growing numbers of Chinese tour groups. Indeed, it is the requirements of these visitors which are driving some of the edgier interpretation. To satisfy the increasing numbers of Chinese tour groups, Sovereign Hill has constructed the Woah Hawp Canton Mine.²² This is based on the case of a group of Chinese miners who engaged in underground quartz mining, an instance which challenges the orthodox interpretation that the Chinese were mere sojourners. Interpretation is provided in English, Mandarin and Cantonese. At the instigation of a Melbourne primary school, students of that school dress in Chinese costumes and conduct a procession through the main street of Sovereign Hill. In

Mount Alexander Diggings', in R. Black and B. Weiler (eds), *Interpreting the Land Down Under: Australian heritage interpretation and tour guiding*, Golden USA: Fulcrum, 2003, pp. 204-218.

¹⁷ M. Cegielski, B. Janeczko, T. Mules and J. Wells, *The economic value of tourism to places of cultural heritage significance: a case study of three towns with mining heritage*, Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 2001. The towns were Burra, Charters Towers and Maldon.

¹⁸ Brown, *op. cit.* (note 16); Evans, *op. cit.* (note 16); Davison, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 168-176. For a different perspective on the effectiveness of interpretation at Sovereign Hill see J. Garton Smith, 'Learning from Popular Culture: interpretation, visitors and critique', *International journal of heritage studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3/4, 1999, pp. 141-2.

¹⁹ Moscardo and Pearce, *op. cit.* (note 16).

²⁰ Goodman, *op. cit.* (note 14), p. x.

²¹ *Ibid.*; Lowenthal, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 102; E. Gable and R. Handler, 'Deep Dirt: messing up the past at Colonial Williamsburg', *Social analysis*, Vol. 34, 1993, pp. 3-16; D. De Lyser, 'Authenticity on the ground: engaging the past in a California Ghost Town', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 89, No. 4, 1999, pp. 602-632.

²² A. Kyi, 'Recreating the past: the development of the Woah Hawp Canton Exhibit', unpublished paper presented at the *Real, not imagined: the Chinese in colonial Australia Symposium*, University of Melbourne, 2003.

turn, the Sovereign Hill staff playing nineteenth century characters are encouraged to yell out abusive and derogatory comments at the 'Chinese'.

In the main diggings, some characters are deliberately played as seedy, dishevelled and even drunk. Careful direction is needed here, for there is a tendency for some actors to play their characters for laughs, also an issue for Colonial Williamsburg in the USA.²³ The introductory video at the visitors centre tells the story of two young diggers. One succeeds and eventually becomes a prosperous businessman. In contrast, the other dies young, drowned when his mineshaft floods.

However, some representations are more difficult. Sovereign Hill has no Aboriginal characters, despite the abundant evidence of their involvement in and interaction with the Gold Rushes. Sovereign Hill has been concerned that portraying Aboriginal society in rapid decline would be too confronting and upsetting for most visitors. On the other hand having Aboriginal characters without considering such issues would be seen as sanitising history.²⁴

Nor are there visible non-British Europeans characters at Sovereign Hill. For a while, one of the actors played the part of a young Gypsy woman. In a lively and popular performance, this character picked pockets, shouted abuse and was chased by the police. However, despite her popularity, it was decided to drop this character as historical research did not find evidence of any Gypsy women on the Goldfields. The dancer Lola Montes is also portrayed in the famous incident where she horsewhipped a local newspaper editor. However, while Montes claimed to be Spanish, she was actually Irish, and it is significant that the actor who plays her does not attempt a Spanish accent.²⁵

Issues of authenticity have tended to deflect attention from Sovereign Hill's success as a tourism business. No other heritage attraction operates on its scale in Australia. Most other historical reconstructions in Australia (typically called 'pioneer settlements') have struggled financially and Sovereign Hill is probably the only one which does not require subsidies to remain open.²⁶ It is also notable that no similar operation has been attempted in California, the location of the other great Gold Rush of the nineteenth century.²⁷

Success is related to size. Sovereign Hill is fortunate, in that apart from Canberra, Ballarat is the largest inland city in Australia. This has provided an advantage of an existing high visitor flow to the region and sufficient local support for the venture. In contrast, other pioneer settlements may have struggled due to being located in towns which were too small. The sheer size of its revenue stream has allowed Sovereign Hill to operate on a professional basis. Unlike most of its smaller competitors, it has paid interpreters on staff. Overall, it takes a strategic approach to business planning. One result of this is that it is one of the few heritage attractions in Australia which makes plans to counter potential declining visitor numbers due to changes in the attraction life cycle.

²³ Gable and Handler, *op. cit.* (note 21). Garton Smith, *op. cit.* (note 18) argued that this use of humour is a highly effective method of interpretation.

²⁴ In an attempt to resolve this issue, Sovereign Hill and the University of Ballarat have entered into a research project, 'Black Gold: a history of Aboriginal people and gold-mining in Victoria, 1850-1900' (I am grateful to Ian Clark for details of this project). This is an interesting illustration of how research intended initially to address interpretation and visitor issues may result in historical revisionism.

²⁵ Her real name was Maria Gilbert. Notorious as the former mistress of King Ludwig of Bavaria and composer Franz Liszt, she performed in the Gold Rush towns of California (1853-5) and Victoria (1855-6). Her scandalous behaviour and popularity draws comparison with a number of modern popstars. See Hocking, *op. cit.* (note 15), pp. 30-1 & 120-1. Older texts on the Gold Rushes either do not mention her, such as Blainey, *op. cit.* (note 13) or only briefly, such as in Serle, *op. cit.* (note 13), p. 363.

²⁶ J. Davidson and P. Spearritt, *Holiday business: tourism in Australia since 1870*, Melbourne: Miegunyah, 2000, pp. 263-8. W. Frost, 'The financial viability of heritage tourism attractions: three cases from rural Australia', *Tourism review international*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2003, pp. 13-22.

²⁷ W. Frost, 'Golden Anniversaries: festival tourism and the 150th Anniversary of the Gold Rushes in California and Victoria', *Pacific tourism review*, Vol. 5, No ¾, 2001, p. 152.

In order to keep visitors coming back, Sovereign Hill follows a strategy of periodically opening new features. In this way, change in content, approach and interpretation are ongoing (which is different to most other pioneer settlements). An example of a recent development which incorporated new approaches to interpretation was the Red Hill Mine. Sovereign Hill already conducts underground mine tours which are popular with visitors. The Red Hill Mine tour differs from these in three ways. First, it is an authentic reconstruction based on detailed drawings of an actual mine. Second, it tells a single story rather than simply providing general information about underground mining. The story is of how in 1858 a group of Cornish miners found the 2,207 ounce Welcome Nugget (at that stage the largest nugget ever found).²⁸ Third, direction and narration underground are provided by holographic images and recorded voices rather than live tour guides.

The story is one of astounding success, especially as the Cornish were only recent arrivals. However, the interpretation has an 'edgier' approach than just celebrating the enormity of their luck. Before the find, the miners are portrayed as tired, disillusioned and depressed. Poor conditions underground are taking a toll on their health (perhaps suggesting that our heroes will not live too long to enjoy their windfall). Much use is made of humour, but there is a dark edge to it.

Mt Alexander Diggings

The Mt Alexander Diggings is a series of linked Gold Rush sites at Castlemaine and Maldon (respectively 120 and 140 kilometres north-west of Melbourne). The Diggings comprise 33 sites, nearly all on government land. In 2002 part of the Castlemaine section was declared a National Park and the Victorian Government is currently preparing an application for World Heritage Listing.²⁹

Being more recent, the Mt Alexander Diggings is less developed than Sovereign Hill. It also has the following contrasting features:

1. It is a series of separated sites rather than one clearly bounded attraction.
2. It is not a reconstruction. Indeed, many sites are in ruins.
3. Most of its sites are in natural bushland (the Box-Ironbark Eucalypt forests peculiar to Victoria's Goldfields).

Interpretation is provided through a variety of media. The chief one is a guidebook – *Discovering the Mount Alexander Diggings* – a 95 page paperback sold through Visitor Information Centres at Castlemaine and Maldon.³⁰ Some of the sites have interpretative panels containing text and historic photos and drawings (though some deliberately do not, both to encourage sales of the guidebook and preserve the historic ambience). Tours with guides are available and are generally booked for groups rather than individuals. At some sites there are occasional open days, with guides, activities and recreations. Much of the interpretation has been developed by a local committee working with staff from government agencies, such as Parks Victoria and Heritage Victoria. The recent creation of a National Park is likely to result in a greater emphasis (and expenditure) on interpretation.

The wide variety of sites leads to a large number of interpretative approaches and topics. In a number of cases an 'edgier' interpretation is apparent. In particular, there is an emphasis on children and families, death and injury, Aborigines, Chinese and environmental change.

The Pennyweight Flat Cemetery was used between 1852 and 1857. Most of those buried here are children (and it is sometimes called the Pennyweight Children's Cemetery). The interpretation provided explains that children were particularly at risk in the early Gold Rushes, primarily due to

²⁸ Bate, *op. cit.* (note 13), pp. 86-9.

²⁹ Frost, *op. cit.* (note 16).

³⁰ Mount Alexander Diggings Committee, *Discovering the Mount Alexander Diggings*, Castlemaine: Mount Alexander Diggings Committee, 1999.

poor water quality. The Pennyweight Flat Cemetery is located right next to the main alluvial diggings in Forest Creek, but on land that was quickly judged valueless (and therefore available for burials) due to its rocky nature.³¹

At the Garfield Wheel, the story of the mine manager's children is told, including how one was injured by falling into the wheel (strangely this story appears on the interpretative panel and is expanded upon by guides, but is not mentioned in the guidebook). The Escott Grave, located in a lonely bush setting, contains the bodies of a widow and one of her daughters who died in 1856 and is used by the guidebook to emphasise that 'the story of women on the diggings is largely untold'.³²

Aborigines are emphasised at the Eureka Reef Walk. The guidebook presents a theme that before the Gold Rushes, the local Djada Wurrung people lived in these forests.³³ In particular there is a focus on a series of Aboriginal rock wells providing a permanent water supply. However, on a tour with two guides, one explained that they were built by Aborigines, whereas the other guide countered that he had heard that they were made by European miners to crush quartz (using a mortar and pestle technique). Furthermore, an excellent example of a miner's hut constructed next to an Aboriginal well was only rediscovered recently and provides a poignant example of dispossession. This was found too late for it to be included on the walking track or in the guidebook, but it is visited by some tour groups.

Chinese mining and agriculture is highlighted at Vaughan and Guildford, the latter claiming to once being, 'the largest Chinese township on an Australian goldfield'.³⁴ However, there is little to see at these sites and the interpretation is highly general. Concern about the limited knowledge of the Chinese in this area has led to a research project between the Chinese Museum in Melbourne and Melbourne and La Trobe Universities. Preliminary results indicate that Chinese mining and settlement was far more widespread and ongoing than previously thought.³⁵ The future challenge for interpreters will be in presenting the new interpretations arising from this research to visitors.

The Box-Ironbark forests which characterise this region are being increasingly recognised as a product of the Gold Rushes. Mining was a heavy consumer of wood, both as fuel and for construction. Box and Ironbark eucalypts coppice when cut and many trees in the area have been cut a number of times since the 1850s, resulting in rings of mature shoots around decaying stumps. The guidebook focuses on this, contrasting examples of coppiced regrowth near mines with one very large remnant uncut tree at Guildford.³⁶ The guidebook also quotes an 1855 newspaper report which warned of the dangers of deforestation, a contrasting perspective to the typical stories of reckless environmental destruction arising from the Gold Rushes.³⁷

In some instances the interpretation at the Mount Alexander Diggings is inadequate. The Beehive Mine site occupies an extensive area next to the main shopping street of Maldon. The site is dominated by a massive brick chimney built in 1862. However, when visited in 2001 and 2002 this site had no interpretative signage at all. In 2003 a few basic signs have been added, though they give little information.

Such an omission is particularly important given the location of the site. The Beehive Mine occupies a strategic site between the main street of Maldon and the Victorian Goldfields Railway terminus. The main street with its cafes and antique shops attracts 95 per cent of visitors, the railway with its steam trains attracts 30 per cent. However, the Beehive, located between the two

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28 & 36.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³⁵ I am grateful to Alan Mayne and Keir Reeves for sharing information about this project with me. At the time of writing Parks Victoria are negotiating to buy some private land, which includes the ruins of an 1850s Chinese village.

³⁶ Mt Alexander Diggings Committee, *op. cit.* (note 30), pp. 29-30, 54 & 56.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31; Garden, *op. cit.* (note 14).

most popular attractions in the town, only attracts 19 per cent.³⁸ Indeed, the Beehive in its current state operates as a barrier between the two attractions. Provision of appropriate tracks and interpretation is needed to link the sites, drawing visitors from the railway into the main street and vice versa.

Central Otago Heritage Trail

The Otago Gold Rushes commenced in 1861 and reached their peak in 1866. At that stage New Zealand gold production was approximately half that of Victoria.³⁹ Due to their proximity and an economic downturn in Australia, Otago was particularly attractive to Victorian miners. Their influence can be seen in the Otago towns of Bendigo and Wedderburn, the main street of Queenstown being Ballarat Street, mines such as the Young Australia Mine and a number of Ballarat and Bendigo Hotels.

The literature of the New Zealand Gold Rushes is sparse and shows no tendency towards the Australian 'edgier' interpretation. The most recent work on New Zealand by Jackson is a conventional economic history and a new collection of environmental histories of New Zealand does not cover the impacts of the Gold Rushes of the 1860s.⁴⁰ As such, New Zealand provides an instructive contrast to Victoria, for there is seemingly no pressure from historians to provide 'edgier' interpretations for visitors.

Otago provides a further contrast to Victoria, in that its Goldfields have other major touristic uses. Skiing and adventure tourism dominate. Queenstown may have started as a Gold Rush town, but that is no longer apparent or of much interest to its current tourists. This different emphasis is apparent at Arrowtown, 10 kilometres from Queenstown. It is a well-preserved Gold town, reminiscent of Maldon and it draws large numbers of tourists. However, most of these visitors are day-trippers from Queenstown and the main attraction is the shops and cafes. Essentially it provides a pleasant diversion for skiers. Heritage interpretation is given little priority in the main street. On my visit in 2002 I unsuccessfully sought information about a building signposted as the Ballarat Hotel from both the visitor centre/museum and the operators of the coffee shop in the building. The main alluvial diggings had been converted into an extensive car park and a mini-golf operation (a similar conversion of diggings into car park occurred at Columbia in California, however, the visitors to Columbia are still mainly interested in heritage). In recent years there has been a significant increase in wine production and tourism in the region, but marketing efforts to establish a visitor trail have tended to not link heritage and wine locations, despite their proximity.⁴¹

It is a peculiar feature of the Victorian Gold Rushes that they resulted in large and impressive towns⁴². In contrast the Otago towns are smaller, with lesser numbers of remaining heritage buildings. Perhaps only Arrowtown, St Bathans and Clyde retain enough character to be comparable to their Victorian counterparts. The larger centres of Queenstown, Cromwell and Alexandra retain little of the Gold Rush flavour, with later developments due to agriculture, tourism and hydro-electricity changing their character.

Despite these limitations there have been attempts to promote and interpret Gold Rush sites. In the 1980s the Otago Goldfields Park was established. Departing from the, 'traditional historic reserve concept' this consisted of, 'a wide range of scattered sites in both public and private

³⁸ Cegielski et al, *op. cit.* (note 17).

³⁹ K.E. Jackson, 'New Zealand and the Gold Rushes of the mid-nineteenth century', in D.O. Flynn, A. Giráldez and J. Sobredo (eds), *Studies in Pacific history: economics, politics and migration*, Aldershot UK: Ashgate, 2002, p. 88.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; E. Pawson and T. Brooking (eds), *Environmental histories of New Zealand*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁴¹ C.M. Hall, G. Johnson and R. Mitchell, 'Wine tourism and regional development', in C.M. Hall, L. Sharples, B. Cambourne and N. Macionis (eds), *Wine tourism around the world: development, management and markets*, Oxford, Butterworth Heinemann, 2000, p. 207.

⁴² Bate, *op. cit.* (note 14), pp. 18 & 20; Frost, *op. cit.* (note 27), p. 151.

ownership' providing a, 'representative cross-section of sites' from the Gold Rushes. As originally established the park contained 18 sites (though some were under development and lacked interpretative signage) with a further three sites to be opened in the future.⁴³

Around 2000, the Otago Goldfields Park was repackaged as the Otago Goldfields Heritage Trail. This consisted of 22 sites. Two sites were deleted, the Cromwell Chinatown flooded by a hydro-electric dam and Kawarau Gorge, proposed as a reserve, but instead developed as a small privately-operated pioneer settlement, taking advantage of its location on the main highway to Queenstown. Amongst the additions was the Arrowtown Chinese Settlement, though not the town itself.⁴⁴

Much of the interpretative signage along the Trail dates from the 1980s. Confusingly, while directional signs are branded Otago Goldfields Heritage Trail, interpretative signs are branded Otago Goldfields Park. Furthermore, the interpretative signs advise that further information on the Otago Goldfields Park may be gained at the local Visitor Information Centres. However, enquiries with Visitor Information Centres and the New Zealand Department of Conservation indicate that brochures on the Otago Goldfields Park have not been available to the public for at least ten years.

At Arrowtown, an archaeological dig resulted in a restoration of a number of Chinese buildings and the construction of a trail with interpretative panels. No comparable restoration or trail has been attempted in either Victoria or California. However, the signage clearly states that the project and its interpretation dates from the 1980s.

The interpretation at the Otago sites follows a conventional pattern (hardly surprising as much of it is nearly twenty years old). The emphases are primarily on mining machinery and economic impacts. In regards to 'edgier' topics, death and hardship do have some coverage, the Chinese are focussed on at Arrowtown, but environmental impacts, Maoris, women and families and connections with Australia and California are noticeably absent.

However, some change is still occurring. In 2004 the New Zealand Government announced a Chinese Heritage Fund as compensation for discriminatory laws in the nineteenth century. A major project of the fund will be the purchase and restoration of the Chinatown at Lawrence.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Over the last decade, historians have explored multiple perspectives of the Gold Rushes. Less interested in the contributions of the Gold Rushes to economic and national development, historians have opted for an 'edgier' approach. For interpreters at Gold Rush attractions and sites this presents a choice. They may either opt for a 'safer' conventional interpretation or a newer 'edgier' presentation. Following the first choice they risk being labelled reactionary, choosing the second they risk the charge of rewriting history.

At Sovereign Hill and the Mount Alexander Diggings, interpreters have attempted to incorporate these 'edgier' perspectives. Some topics, for example women, families and hardship, have been readily adopted. Others, such as Aborigines and Chinese, have proven more difficult, partly because they are still subject to debate amongst historians. The Otago Heritage Trail provides an instructive contrast. In its case, much of the interpretation provided was written nearly twenty years ago. Without the pressure of new historical approaches in New Zealand it has not had to be changed. It serves as a reminder that while historical interpretation is ordinarily dynamic, in some circumstances it may become atrophied and unchanging.

⁴³ New Zealand Department of Lands and Survey, *Otago Goldfields Park*, brochure, c1985.

⁴⁴ Otago Goldfields Heritage Trust, *New Zealand's Otago Goldfields Heritage Trail*, booklet, c2000.

⁴⁵ *Otago Daily Times*, 'Lawrence project will benefit', <www.odt.co.nz/cgi-bin/getitem?date=12Feb2004&object=GBL31U5683JL&type>, accessed 23 February 2004.