



# *The Eureka Flag's* **Strange Bedfellows**

The Eureka flag was first flown at Bakery Hill in Ballarat on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1854 at the monster meeting that was called by the Ballarat Reform League. The League had been formed as a consequence of the conflict between the British colonial authorities in Victoria and miners who had poured into Ballarat from all corners of the globe to find their fortune. Refugees from the failed 1848 revolutionary wave that swept Europe, Chartists from England who despaired about meaningful change occurring in England, freed slaves from North America, failed miners from the 1849 Californian gold rushes and fortune seekers from the British Empire (a colossus where the sun never set) rubbed shoulders with Australian born miners.

They lived in a massive tent city that had sprung up almost overnight on the traditional lands of the Wadawurrung people. On that fateful day over half of Ballarat's population (over 10,000) attended a meeting at Bakery Hill that had been called by the newly formed Ballarat Reform League to debate the contents of a four page handwritten manifesto of democratic principles and demands that had been drawn up by the League. These demands can be condensed into five points:

1. Full and fair representation
2. Manhood suffrage
3. No property qualifications for members of the Legislative Council
4. Payment of members
5. Short duration of parliament

Living in a tent city poses many challenges. One of the most important challenges is finding your way about. Businesses within the miner's tent city in Ballarat solved that problem by creating banners which flew over their tents, indicating the services they provided.

If you needed bread, you'd look for a banner which denoted a bakery. If you needed medical attention, you'd look for banners over doctor's tents. The Ballarat Reform League understood the importance of having a flag that symbolised their principles and demands as a practical way of letting their supporters know where meetings would be held. The Southern Cross was chosen as a symbol of a new beginning free of the class divisions, inequalities and oppression that had been imported into the Australian colonies, from the old world.

The Southern Cross was chosen as a symbol of a new beginning for a very good reason. Over 90% of people who were on the Ballarat goldfields had been born overseas. Before settling into their tents at night (free of the 21<sup>st</sup> century distractions) they looked at the stars. This Southern Cross does not appear in the Northern Hemisphere it only appears in the Southern Hemisphere. Homesick, frightened, angry, the Southern Cross denoted a fresh start in a new land – free of the oppression of the old lands and old way of life.

On that fateful day on the 11<sup>th</sup> November 1854, the monster meeting at Bakery Hill endorsed the formation of the Ballarat Reform League and the principles and demands of the League, endorsing the Eureka Flag as the symbol of their struggle.

When the Stockade was overrun on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1854 by British troops and Victoria Police, the Eureka Flag was ripped off the flagpole that had been erected in the stockade and the victors danced on the flag as it lay in the dust. The Eureka Flag was used as evidence in the Eureka trials in the Supreme Court, Melbourne in 1855. The government failed to convince a jury of the rebels' peers that the 13 rebels (who had been charged with High Treason) were guilty of the heinous crime of fomenting rebellion against Queen Victoria. The Eureka Flag was given by the Victorian Supreme Court to John King, one of the soldiers who tore down the flag, as a reward for his actions.

The Eureka Flag disappeared from sight until a copy was seen during the 1891 Shearers' Strike in Queensland. Over 600 shearers on horseback marched through Barcaldine to celebrate the first May Day publicly celebrated in Australia on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1891. The original Eureka Flag was occasionally displayed at Victorian Methodist Church fetes by the King family. The Eureka Flag had become a cause of consternation and shame for most Victorians and Australians. When the King family attempted to gift the Eureka Flag to the State Library of Victoria in the 1890s, they were rebuffed. It ended up in a drawer in the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery (now the Art Gallery of Ballarat) until it was rediscovered by the Eureka Youth League (a branch of the Australian Communist Party) in the art gallery in the 1950s. Previous Art Gallery Directors had cut pieces of the Eureka Flag (some pieces still pop up at auction sites) and gave them to important gallery visitors until the flag was rediscovered in the 1950s. The restored original Eureka Flag now rests in the Ballarat City Council run Eureka Centre in Ballarat.

The Eureka flag was adopted by the Builders Labourers Federation in Victoria in the 1970s. The Builders Labourers Federation slapped a green / black ban on plans for McDonald's to redevelop Bakery Hill as a site for a McDonald's restaurant. The deregistered Builders Labourers Federation morphed into the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union which, despite numerous attempts by Coalition governments to ban the flying of the Eureka flag, continues to use the Eureka flag as a symbol of resistance and continues to fly it on building sites around Australia.

The Ballarat City Council continues to have a love hate relationship with the Eureka flag. Although the council uses the Eureka flag as their symbol, they have never flown the Eureka flag (not even during the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations in 2004) on the main flagpole at the Ballarat Town Hall. The Eureka flag has become a symbol for many businesses and community organisations, especially in the Ballarat region, but few, if any, organise or support celebrations on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December. The only exception is Ballarat Trades Hall, the second oldest Trades Hall in the world which has a proud tradition of using the Eureka flag as its symbol and supporting Eureka celebrations on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December.

One of the strangest bedfellows that has clambered on the bandwagon is the emerging Australian white supremacist movement. They have attempted to use the Eureka flag as a symbol of white nationalism in Australia. Unfortunately, they don't seem to realise the Eureka Rebellion, and its flag, was a multicultural revolution which incorporated people of all races, colours and religious persuasions. Of the 13 men tried for High Treason in 1855 for their participation in the Eureka Rebellion in 1854, two were black, one was a freed slave from New York (John Joseph who was acquitted by an all-white jury), one was a Jew and only one of those tried for High Treason was born in Australia.

The latest strange bedfellow that is trying to adopt the Eureka flag as their symbol are some of the elements involved in the current anti-vaccination, anti-lockdown struggles. If there is one group of people that would have been aware of the necessity for people observing quarantine rules, it's the Eureka rebels. Plagued by illnesses that have largely disappeared due to extensive vaccination programs – cholera, diphtheria, measles, polio, smallpox, typhoid and a host of other diseases. Seeing many of their fellow passengers die at sea or being left at the Portsea quarantine station at the heads of Port Phillip Bay, they would have found it strange, very strange, to see the symbol they created, fought and died for used in this way.

The Eureka flag is not just a symbol of opposition, it is much much more. It is a symbol of hope, unity and rebellion with a purpose. A purpose that is encapsulated in the Eureka Oath:

*“We swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other and fight to defend our rights and liberties.”*

The keyword is 'WE' – people of all races, all colours, religious persuasions. To allow elements within society to use the Eureka flag to divide not unite us, to allow institutions that use the Eureka flag to promote their financial interests without paying their respects to the ideas that underlie the Eureka struggle, is a tragedy. In a world where power and wealth is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, in a world where nationalism is once again rearing its ugly head, it is time those people and institutions who remember and understand the principles the Eureka Rebellion is based on and what the Eureka Flag stands for to stand up and be counted.

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