



Eureka Flag

Video Transcript

CHRIS TAYLOR:

For centuries revolutions have changed the world –the French revolution, the Russian revolution, the sexual revolution and even more recently the computer revolution all big events that altered the way we live.

Australia had a revolution once, didn't even last 30 minutes, and still debatable just how much it changed us and both sides of the political spectrum claim it as their own. But you know what, it was our revolution, and it gave us a symbol that still resonates today.

That National Treasure, now has pride of place in the Art Gallery of Ballarat in Victoria.

This is the Eureka Flag, or what's left of it. I never really realised how big it is and because of its fragility it needs to be kept in very controlled lighting conditions here.

Now in 1854 this flag flew above a bunch of disgruntled miners when they staged an anti government uprising on the goldfields of Ballarat. History tells us they lost the battle. Legend tells us they set Australia on the path to democracy. But what exactly was it that they were fighting for?

When gold fever hit Victoria in the 1850s, men flocked there from all over the world to make their fortunes from the earth. But there was a price to pay in advance, regardless of how much gold you found. It was 30 shillings a month which was about twice an average weekly wage. The gold field commissioners called it a mining licence. The miners called it an unjust tax on labour.

But one thing was clear, no licence, no mining. Licence crackdowns by police were frequent and often brutal.

Pre-unions, the diggers were at the mercy of autocratic and often corrupt authorities.

On November 29th 1854, the diggers gathered at a spot known as Bakery Hill, hoisted the flag and swore an oath, to stand truly by each other and fight to defend our rights and liberties. The Southern Cross became a symbol of defiance, the Eureka Flag against the Union Jack.

The events of the next few days are commemorated in the National Heritage listed Eureka Stockade gardens in Ballarat. When military reinforcements were called in from Melbourne, the miners built themselves a crude stockade. Now nobody's exactly sure where it was, but we think it was probably somewhere 'round about here. It wasn't much more than a huge ring of mining timbers piled up, but it gave the disenfranchised diggers a sense of purpose and it also got right up the noses of the authorities.

At dawn on December 3rd less than a hundred and fifty diggers were inside the stockade when government forces stormed it. The revolution was over in less than half an hour. It claimed 38 lives, 33 miners and five soldiers.

American writer Mark Twain called the Eureka Rebellion the finest thing in Australian history, another instance of a victory won by a lost battle.

When 13 miners were tried for treason this flag was presented as evidence against them – obviously not very compelling evidence because they were all acquitted. Later that year the mining licence was replaced by a miner's right, which among other things meant that they could vote. The big question now was which way would they vote.

As Director of the Art Gallery of Ballarat, Gordon Morrison is the custodian of the Eureka Flag.

GORDON MORRISON

You actually find that there are these two different viewpoints, right from the very start. There's the people who think that the diggers were real downtrodden workers, the sort of working class, but there's also a very strongly held viewpoint that they were – they were really the insipient businessmen of the – of the community. They were after their gold, they really resented the taxes.

CHRIS TAYLOR:

To some, the Eureka rebellion was the cradle of Australian democracy, to others it was simple a middle class tax revolt. Sometimes the significance of an historical event is not what happened, but what we like to believe happened. It's all about deciding where history stops and where the legend starts. Whichever way you choose to look at it, the Eureka Rebellion is regarded as a defining moment in Australia's history. That makes the flag that flew above it, a National Treasure.