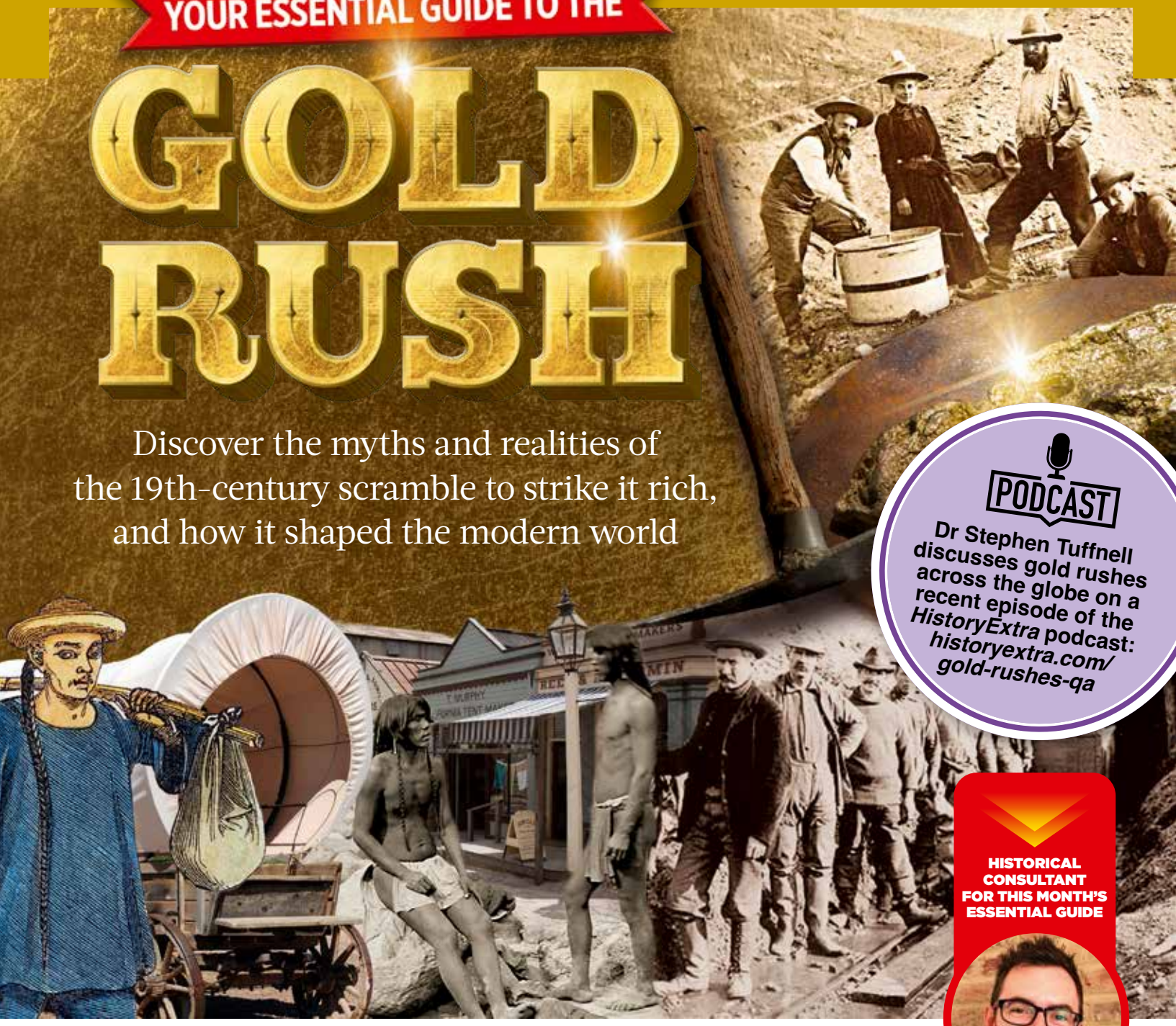
YOUR ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO THE

GOLD RUSH

Discover the myths and realities of the 19th-century scramble to strike it rich, and how it shaped the modern world



PODCAST

Dr Stephen Tuffnell discusses gold rushes across the globe on a recent episode of the *HistoryExtra* podcast: historyextra.com/gold-rushes-qa

HISTORICAL CONSULTANT FOR THIS MONTH'S ESSENTIAL GUIDE

DR STEPHEN TUFFNELL is associate professor of modern US history at St Peter's College, University of Oxford. He is the author of *Made in Britain: Nation and Emigration in Nineteenth-Century America*, published in 2020 by University of California Press.

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EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT THE GOLD RUSH

Dr Stephen Tuffnell answers key questions about the gold fever that spread across the globe during the second half of the 19th century

Q: What makes a gold rush different to other periods of ongoing gold mining activity?

A: The allure of gold has driven people to mine, refine and smelt it to create artefacts, jewellery and exchangeable objects for centuries. But what makes a gold rush different to other, more general periods of gold mining is really to do with the scale – the speed and pace – of the mining that takes place. The gold rushes of the 19th century stand out for that reason, and they were also notable for triggering huge transfers of population, which in turn resulted in the large-scale transfer of goods, capital, property and ideas.

The 19th-century gold rushes were also gold rushes because people thought of and experienced them as such. At the height of the California gold rush, for instance, the *New York Herald* described the public mind as having been set on the "highway to insanity". People became obsessed with the search for gold, so I think that makes the 19th-century gold rushes quite different from earlier periods of gold mining.

Q: What were the most significant gold rushes of the 19th century?

A: We tend to think of the California gold rush as the template for the great gold rushes of the 19th century, but I think it's best to think of this as a period of interconnected gold rushes taking place around the world, beginning with California in 1848 and ending with the Yukon gold rush roughly 50 years later.

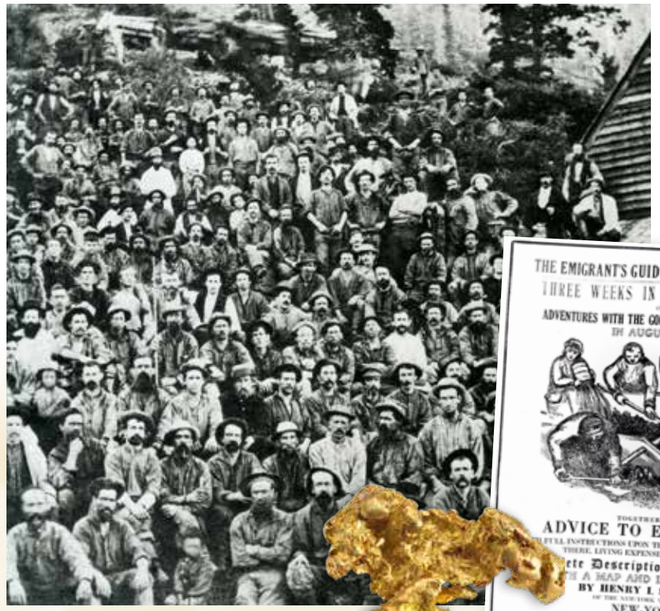
In the US, Nevada and California remained in a state of near-constant gold discovery, while Colorado, Wyoming and Montana experienced almost 40 gold rushes over the course of the period. Further afield, there was the Victoria gold rush in Australia from 1851, followed by gold rushes in five different New Zealand provinces – Nelson, Otago, Marlborough, Canterbury and Auckland – from 1857.

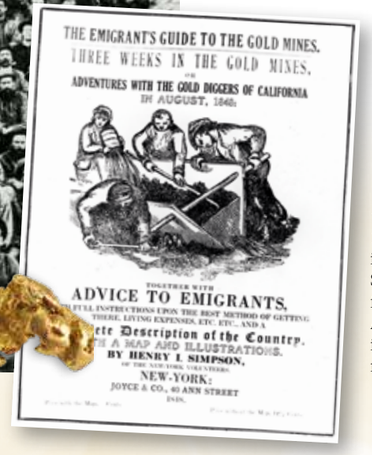
But gold rushes were not limited to North America and the southwest Pacific. The discovery of gold in the Ivalo River in Lapland triggered a gold rush to the region in 1868, while there was also a major gold rush that began in the Boer republics of southern Africa in 1886. There was even a small gold rush in Scotland, when Robert Gilchrist – a Scottish miner who had just returned from Australia – found gold on the Isle of Arran in 1869. After the Yukon gold rush in the 1890s, gold mining became much more capital-intensive and corporate.

ABOVE: **Miners at work during the Yukon gold rush – often thought of as the last great gold rush of the 19th century**

LEFT: **A large group of California 'rushers' in 1852, four years after gold was found near the town of Coloma**

BELOW: **A guide aimed at prospectors heading to California, boasting "a complete description of the country"**





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Q: Is it a coincidence that many of the areas that experienced gold rushes had seen a great deal of white European settlement and colonisation?

A: It is absolutely not a coincidence; the story of the gold rushes is fundamentally a story about white settler colonialism. The transformation of global trade and communication in the middle of the 19th century, particularly under the influence of the British empire, made it easier and cheaper for people to travel further distances, which in turn enabled these great battalions of gold rushes to move around the world.

Much like today, the economy of the 19th century was a mineral economy, and I think that's significant as well. The new systems of transportation that were emerging during this period depended on fossil fuels, while new methods of communication – such as the telegraph – required copper, so the search for minerals was important.

In places like Britain, these searches became highly systematised, with institutions such as the Geographical Society and the Geological Society sending out teams of explorers to locate and map mineral deposits, which in turn enabled the search for gold to take place. In the battle of resources between empires, gold soon started to take centre stage.

ABOVE: **An c1830 painting of a copper mine in Camborne, Cornwall. The search for minerals such as copper came to be more systematised as the 19th century went on, which also helped the search for gold**

RIGHT: **A man rides a cart at a Michigan copper mine, 1875. Having ready access to vast reserves of minerals was vital in the 19th-century global economy**

Q: Were gold mining camps really as lawless as they are often depicted in popular media?

A: Yes and no. They could be incredibly violent places – whether that's down to the use of firearms or otherwise – but they weren't completely lawless. In California, for example, committees were formed to police behaviour in the goldfields, electing representatives that shaped laws and customs. And when there was violence, some of it was retributive: 'claim jumpers' – people who stole somebody else's mining rights or attempted to take over a mine for themselves – would be publicly hanged in a symbolic demonstration of the rules that governed gold rush society.

There are important distinctions to be made, though. What happened in California, where the American state was very absent for a large part of the gold rush phase, was quite different from what happened in places like Australia and British Columbia, where there was a very visible state presence for the whole period.

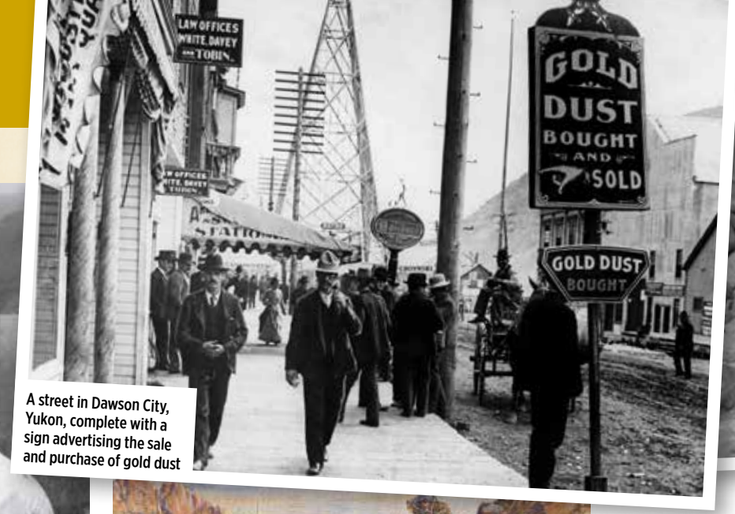
Australia, in particular, was very concerned about the importation of American violence into gold rush life. We can see this in how quickly the colonial authorities clamped down on the Eureka Stockade, an 1854 rebellion in which a group of miners in Ballarat, just outside Melbourne, attempted to overthrow the local government and form a republic. And of course, the land in Australia was owned by the Crown and granted to the miners by licence, which meant there was a more coherent system of governance regarding claims in the first place.

The violence witnessed in some of the camps was partly down to the composition of gold rush societies. Some of the first miners to join the California gold rush were people who had jumped ship: if you were to have visited San Francisco Harbour in 1849, you would have seen the rotting hulks of around 600 merchant ships, whose crews had fled to the goldfields. And they took with them a very aggressive type of ▶

"IN THE BATTLE OF RESOURCES, GOLD STARTED TO TAKE CENTRE STAGE"

The battle of the Eureka Stockade, fought between rebel miners and the colonial authorities in Ballarat, Victoria, resulted in 27 deaths

Collaborating with fellow prospectors, rather than going it alone, often ended up proving more cost effective



A street in Dawson City, Yukon, complete with a sign advertising the sale and purchase of gold dust

Mohave warriors in Arizona, c1871. The California gold rush, which saw prospectors passing through indigenous territory, sparked tensions between the Mohave people and the US government, leading to a war in 1858–59

◀ crew culture, which revolved around gambling and acts of violence.

There were also frequent clashes between the early California gold rush migrants and those who arrived from the east coast later on, who tended to be much more middle class and brought with them a whole set of values about how society should be governed. The vigilance committees that began to form in San Francisco during the early 1850s – which sought to root out so-called criminal gangs and bring about a sense of order – were a visible manifestation of that.

Q: What percentage of miners actually made any real money from their activities?

A: Very few. During the California gold rush, the typical miner earned around $1 a day, which made things difficult when their lodgings might have cost as much as $3 a day. This is why lone prospectors were soon replaced by groups of people working collaboratively; it was more cost-effective to be part of a company.

Of course, some people did get very rich. One of the most famous examples is a Scottish miner named James Brookmire, who, in 1848, sold his farm in Pennsylvania and went to California. Four years later he returned to Pennsylvania with $15,000 in gold dust – the equivalent of more than $575,000 today.

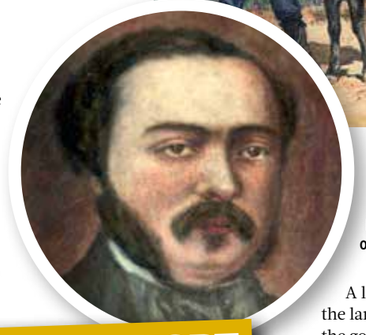
People like Brookmire were few and far between, and most people were only making enough to live – but it was the hope that they might one day get lucky that drove them on.

Q: Was there much money to be made in subsidiary economies?

A: Definitely. I think the real money was made by the people who were supplying the gold rushes: both in the metropolitan areas where prospectors were leaving, and then in the societies in which they arrived.

"IT WAS THE HOPE THAT THEY MIGHT ONE DAY GET LUCKY THAT DROVE THEM ON"

Outfitters providing mining equipment in, say, a town like Independence, Missouri, before people set off on the Overland Trail to California, raked in a lot of money because they were able to convince miners that they needed a lot of unnecessary equipment – equipment that they couldn't even really carry over vast distances. Offering board and lodging to gold miners could be quite lucrative, while businesses that were part of the travel industry – such as the steamship companies – profited too.



ABOVE: **US prospectors heading west could find themselves weighed down by heavy equipment they didn't necessarily need**

LEFT: **William Leidesdorff made a fortune out of his investments in San Francisco land**

A lot of money was also made in the land speculation that accompanied the gold rushes, with the early movers who bought up city plots in places like Melbourne, San Francisco and Denver, Colorado, seeing their land gain enormous value. A famous example would be someone like William Leidesdorff, who, in 1846, invested $2,000 in San Francisco land. By 1855, the value of his original investment had risen to $27,000 (the equivalent of nearly $1m today).

Q: What was the impact of gold rushes on indigenous populations?

A: What was considered by many to be the greatest piece of luck in US history was the greatest disaster for the country's indigenous population. The native population of California – mainly comprising the Yuki, Nisenan and Konkow peoples – numbered about 150,000 in 1848. It had already seen a drop of around 50 per cent since Spanish settlement in the 17th century, but that was nowhere near the cataclysmic drop in numbers that occurred during the gold rush. In the six years after 1848, the indigenous population shrank by around two thirds, and by 1880, it had fallen to just 16,000.

In part, the decline was brought about by the destruction of the native foodways and lifeways that had offered indigenous communities a high standard of living. During the gold rush, the topsoil was removed from the land, the rivers were polluted, and there was a collapse in fish populations. The gold rush also brought contact diseases that they hadn't experienced before, like measles, which contributed to the high mortality rate.

But more significant than that, I think, was the direct assault that took place on indigenous Californians by the California state government. In the Round Valley, for example, there were government-backed militias that went out to 'hunt' indigenous people. The customers of some of the early California banks could even take out bonds and invest in these militia groups, which were paid according to the number of people that they killed.

It was a slightly different story in southern Africa, where the capital and labour-intensive nature of corporate mining meant that the solution to controlling costs was to employ people as cheaply as possible. Overwhelmingly, they turned to black African labour, with recruiters sent out across the region to hire workers from indigenous communities. In order to 'control' the workforce, the white mining authorities built compounds where they could house the labourers and ensure they worked out their contracts. Soon, the authorities began to introduce laws that restricted their movements even further, laying the early foundations of apartheid.

The advent of gold mining was destabilising to black societies, and contributed to some of the revolutions that were already taking place in southern Africa, as groups like the Zulu and others fought one another for control. By 1910, the recruiting system was bringing black labourers from as far away as Mozambique and the Congo, with about 200,000 people arriving in the gold mines each year.

INTERVIEW: ELLIE CAWTHORNE
WORDS: CHARLOTTE HODGMAN

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Black, white and Chinese labourers in a southern African gold mine during the late 19th or early 20th century. Workers were hired as cheaply as possible, and often housed in compounds

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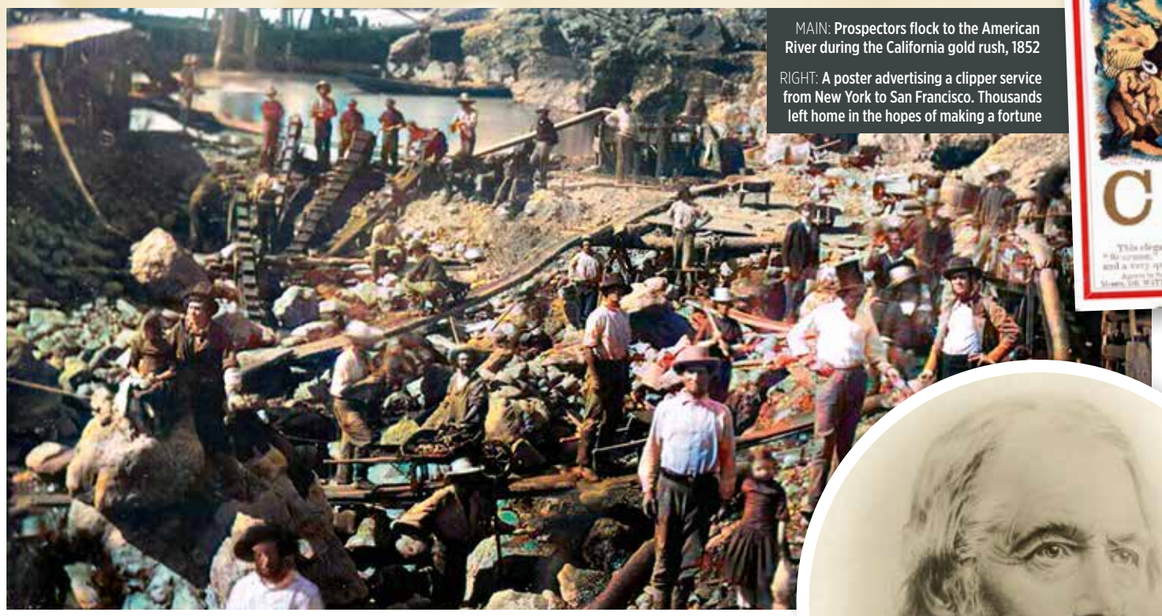
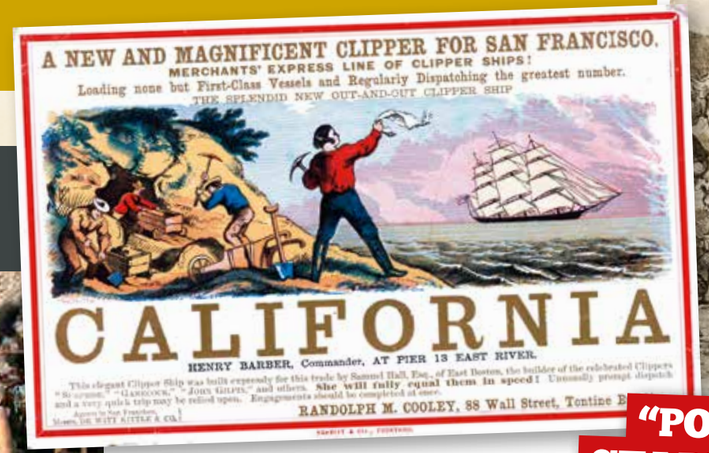


MAIN: Prospectors flock to the American River during the California gold rush, 1852

RIGHT: A poster advertising a clipper service from New York to San Francisco. Thousands left home in the hopes of making a fortune

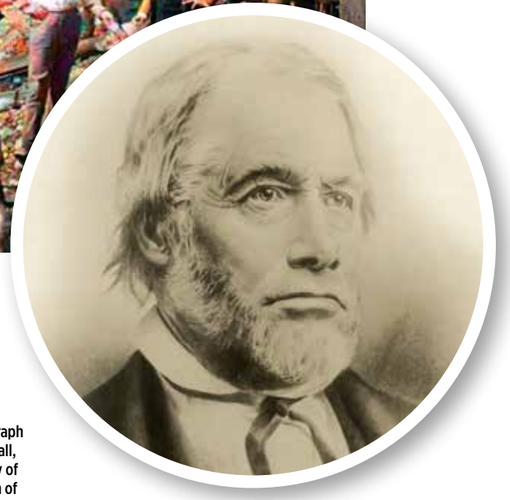


ABOVE: Gold seekers travelling west by land faced a gruelling journey that could take at least six months

BELOW: A San Francisco street depicted during the gold rush. By 1870, the local population had ballooned to nearly 150,000, from 36,000 in 1852

GOING WEST

One man's chance discovery would put California firmly on the map – and change the course of US history



RIGHT: A photograph of James Marshall, whose discovery of gold in the town of Coloma saw 'rushers' descend on California

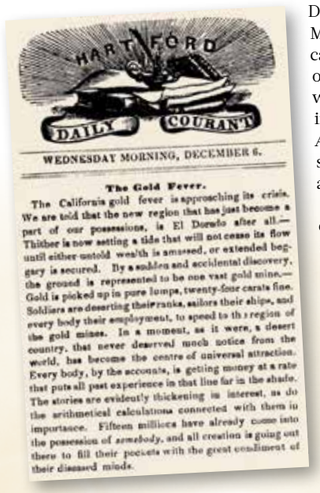
BELOW: An article in the *Hartford Daily Courant*, a Connecticut newspaper, discusses the gold fever of 1848

They say that all that glitters isn't gold. But the tiny pieces of metal that a carpenter named James Marshall spotted glistening in the sun on 24 January 1848 certainly were gold – and their discovery would change the course of American history.

Marshall wasn't searching for precious metal on that winter's day. He was working on a new sawmill in the small Californian town of Coloma. Yet he instantly knew what he had found. "It made my heart thump, for I was certain it was gold," he later reported. It's little wonder that Marshall's heart skipped a beat, for the flakes that he spotted in a streambed adjacent to the American River would spark one of the most extraordinary events of the mid-19th century. It was an episode that would make some people fantastically rich, inflict misery on others, and transform life on America's western seaboard for good. We are, of course, talking about the California gold rush.

In the 21st century, news of Marshall's find would race round the world faster than a prospector could say "gold fever". Back in 1848, however, it was a far slower process. In nearby San Francisco – then a small port-town – whispers that there were large quantities of gold lying on the banks of the American River were initially greeted with scepticism.

Yet, slowly but surely, excitement grew – stoked by men like Samuel Brannan, a local storekeeper with a sharp eye for a business opportunity, who paraded through San Francisco holding aloft a vial of gold obtained from Sutter Creek. By the summer, three-quarters of the town's male population had abandoned their shops and businesses for the gold mines popping up along the American River.


HARTFORD DAILY COURANT

WEDNESDAY MORNING, DECEMBER 6.

The Gold Fever.

The California gold fever is approaching its crisis. We are told that the new region that has just become a part of our possessions, is El Dorado after all.—Thither is now setting a tide that will not cease its flow until either untold wealth is amassed, or extended beggary is secured. By a sudden and accidental discovery, the ground is represented to be one vast gold mine.—Gold is picked up in pure lumps, twenty-four carats fine. Soldiers are deserting their ranks, sailors their ships, and every body their employment, to speed to th region of the gold mines. In a moment, as it were, a desert country, that never deserved much notice from the world, has become the centre of universal attraction. Every body, by the accounts, is getting money at a rate that puts all past experience in that line far in the shade. The stories are evidently thickening in interest, as do the arithmetical calculations connected with them in importance. Fifteen millions have already come into the possession of *somebody*, and all creation is going out there to fill their pockets with the great condiment of their diseased minds.

PAVED WITH GOLD

During the autumn of 1848, Marshall's discovery began to cause a hubbub on the east coast of America. One Californian letter writer in September that year informed the *Philadelphia North American*, rather smugly: "Your streams have minnows and ours are paved with gold."

Yet despite such gloating, many east coasters couldn't shake their suspicions that the news coming out of San Francisco was a case of west coast hyperbole. All that changed in December 1848 when, in his State of the Union address, no less a personage than US president James Polk confirmed that gold had indeed been found in California.

"The accounts of abundance of gold are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service," Polk observed. In a stroke, he fired the starting pistol on a full-blown – and global – gold mania.

Before Polk delivered his address, prospectors had already been descending on the Californian goldfields from Oregon, Hawaii, Mexico, Chile and Peru. Now they were joined by men from nations as far-flung as Britain (including a contingent of Cornish tin miners), France, Germany, Ireland, Australia and China. But around half came from the US. Thousands upon thousands of American men left wives, children, businesses and workplaces behind and headed west in search of their fortune. In doing so, they participated in one of the most significant migrations in US history.

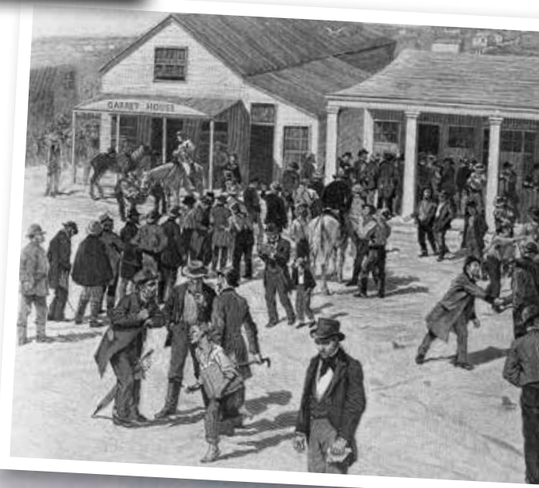
"POLK FIRED THE STARTING PISTOL ON A FULL-BLOWN – AND GLOBAL – GOLD MANIA"

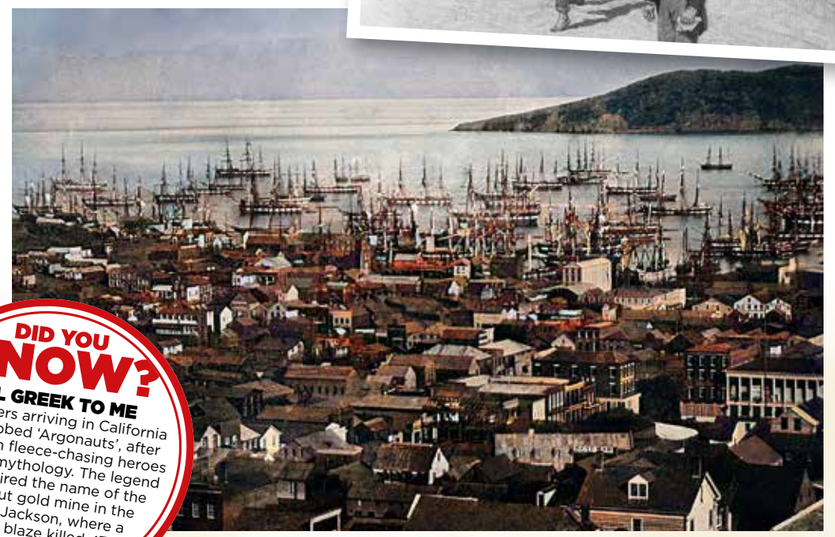
Less than 10 years before Mr Shufelt wrote these words, California was a sparsely populated corner of the North American continent, consisting of 150,000 Native Americans, and a few thousand "Californios", descendants of Spanish and Mexican settlers. As for San Francisco, it had been a tiny town of just a few hundred people. The California gold rush changed all that. By 1852, San Francisco had become a city of just over 36,000. By 1870, that population had ballooned to nearly 150,000. And San Francisco wasn't the only place to be transformed by the tide of humanity that was washing up on its shores. Towns like Bode, Hangtown, Sucker Flat and Murderers Bar were popping up ▶

RISKING EVERYTHING

Some climbed aboard covered wagons pulled by mules and ventured across America's vast hinterland, a journey that could take more than six months. Others boarded steamers and set off on mammoth voyages that took them to America's west coast via the tip of South America, or they disembarked at Panama and journeyed across its jungle. Between many would-be prospectors and the goldfields lay the Sierra Nevada mountains, where some perished at the hands of extreme cold or searing heat.

One of those to make the journey was a Mr Shufelt, who boarded the steamer *Panama* in New York City along with about 200 fellow fortune hunters in May 1849. In a letter to his cousin, Shufelt wrote: "I have left that that I love as my own life behind and risked everything... I want to make enough to live easier and do some good with, before I return."





Ships seen filling San Francisco harbour in 1851. Some prospectors travelled from as far afield as Europe

DID YOU KNOW?

ALL GREEK TO ME

The rushers arriving in California were dubbed 'Argonauts', after the golden fleece-chasing heroes of Greek mythology. The legend also inspired the name of the Argonaut gold mine in the city of Jackson, where a huge blaze killed 47 miners in 1922.

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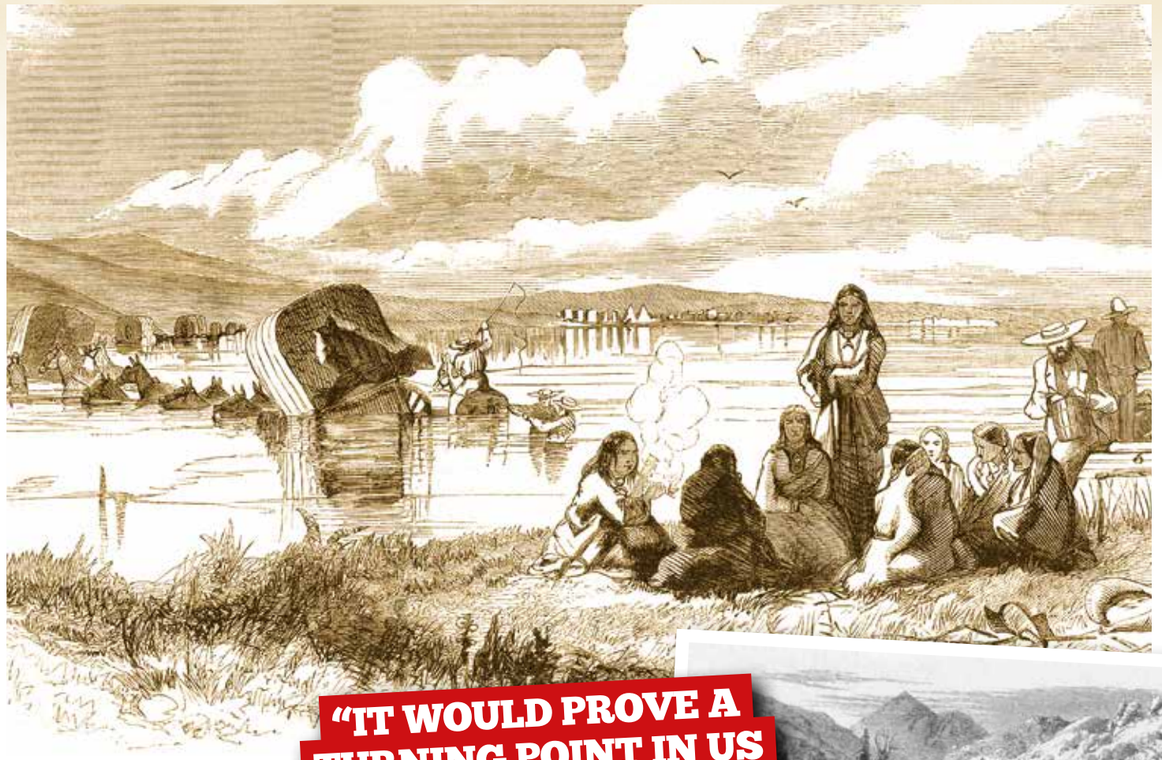
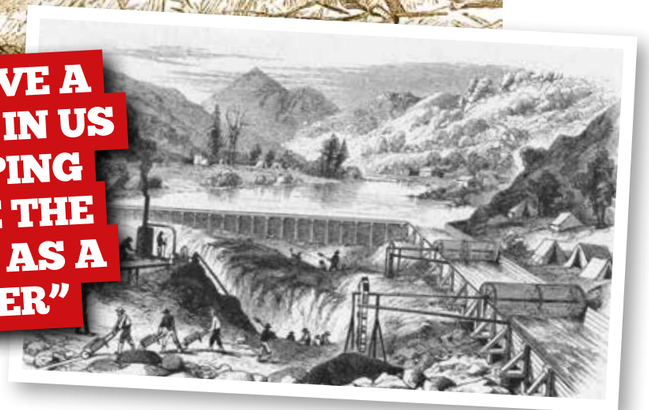




"IT WOULD PROVE A TURNING POINT IN US HISTORY, HELPING SUPERCHARGE THE NATION'S RISE AS A GLOBAL POWER"

◀ in every nook and cranny near the goldfields. Dots on the landscape grew into sprawling, unruly, ramshackle towns.

As Mr Shufelt recalled in one of his letters: "We hired an ox team to carry our baggage and started for this place then called Hangtown, from the fact that three persons had been hung here for stealing and attempting to murder. We pitched our tents, shouldered our picks and shovels and with pan in hand sallied forth to try our fortunes at gold digging."

The thousands who converged on California in the late 1840s and early 1850s were there for one reason: to strike gold. But how many achieved it? Were they being sold a genuine shot at untold riches, or a pipe dream?

At the height of the gold rush, the military governor Colonel Richard B Mason dispatched a report back to Washington in which he claimed that two miners on Weber Creek had gathered $17,000 in gold in seven days, and that six miners with 50 Native Americans had garnered 273 pounds of the precious metal.

There's little doubt that staggering amounts of money was liberated from the rivers and creeks of California as the gold rush raged. Some $600m was found between 1848 and 1860 – that's the equivalent of tens of billions today. From 1848–51, the amount of gold coinage in circulation across the US jumped 20-fold.

A DESTRUCTIVE IMPACT

Yet those who returned home from California rich beyond their wildest dreams were in the minority, and they became even less numerous as more and more people arrived to compete over ever-diminishing reserves of gold. And, while the image of the lone prospector panning for nuggets may have been true of the early days of the gold rush, soon the majority would be engaged in back-breaking work for somebody else. By the 1850s, the sieve and wash basin had been replaced by vast hydraulic mining operations that washed away entire hillsides, and enormous quantities of explosives that blasted other hillsides into oblivion (*see page 46*).

Such practices wreaked havoc on the environment. The California gold rush has been described as a vast international stag party that came in and trashed the landscape. With 12 million tonnes of earth dug out for mining purposes, huge dams constructed, water supplies diverted from farms to mines, and vast amounts of mercury introduced to California's river system, the state continues to bear the scars of the gold rush today.

The impact on the region's Native American population was even more catastrophic. Racism was rife in the mining communities of California, and its indigenous population was all too often the target. They had their land forcibly seized from them, they were routinely sold into slavery, they were hunted down and murdered by vigilante groups – all sanctioned, often encouraged, by the authorities.

Peter Hardeman Burnett, who served as the first elected governor of California from 1849–51, openly advocated the wholescale extermination of the state's Native American population. With 120,000 dying of disease, starvation and murder during the gold rush, it was a wish that was so nearly realised.

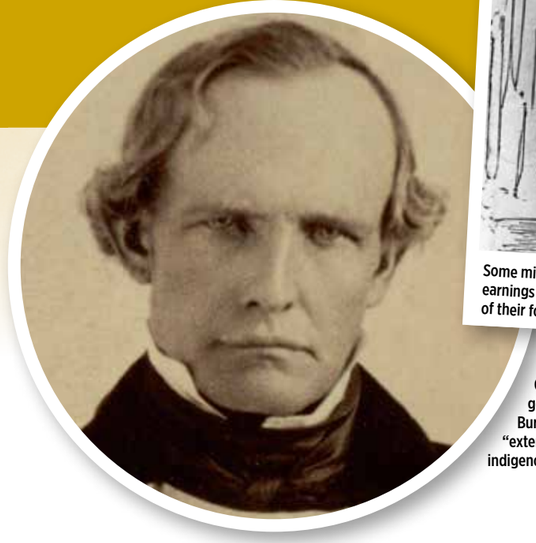
While the California gold rush was devastating for Native Americans, it would prove a turning point in US history, helping supercharge the nation's rise as a global power. Just over a week after James Marshall discovered gold near Coloma, Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in which it ceded California to the United States. It was a remarkable twist of fate. Within a few years, that newly acquired parcel of land had become an economic powerhouse, triggering a massive boom in farming and trade, helping inspire the building of a transcontinental railroad and persuading millions of white Americans that it was their manifest destiny to settle all of America, sea to shining sea. By the end of the 19th century, America's economy had outgrown Britain – with no little help from Marshall's fateful discovery.

There were many losers in the California gold rush. There were winners too, whether they were Cornish miners or New Yorkers with a get-rich-quick dream. But the biggest beneficiary of all may have been America itself.

WORDS: SPENCER MIZEN

TOP: **Some prospectors travelled back inland during the Colorado gold rush (1858–61); here, a wagon crosses the Platte River while a group of indigenous women look on**

BOTTOM: **Dwindling reserves of gold led mining companies to develop increasingly more destructive extraction methods**



California's first elected governor, Peter Hardeman Burnett, openly advocated the "extermination" of the state's indigenous population

Some miners gambled away their earnings – or were scammed out of their fortunes by con artists

Prospectors often had to put up with dirty and unsafe lodging houses when they arrived west

HARD GRAFT

Law and order was certainly lacking in California's goldfields

"There is a great deal of sin and wickedness going on here: stealing, lying, swearing, drinking, gambling and murdering." These words, penned by a prospector called Mr Shefult in a letter to his cousin, paint a vivid picture of life on the front line of the California gold rush.

Mr Shefult may have been horrified by what he witnessed, but he could hardly have been surprised. Take thousands of young men and ask them to live cheek by jowl in a series of sprawling, ramshackle communities in which alcohol flowed as freely as the nearby American River and law enforcement was notable only by its absence, and you've hardly got a recipe for virtue and propriety.

As the number of prospectors swelled on America's west coast in the late 1840s, so did the brothels, gaming houses and saloon bars required to service their needs. Bandits, claim-jumpers and professional scammers preyed upon those desperate to make their fortunes. Prospectors walking around with gold nuggets in their pockets (there were, after all, no banks in which to deposit your newfound wealth) proved easy pickings for opportunistic thieves.

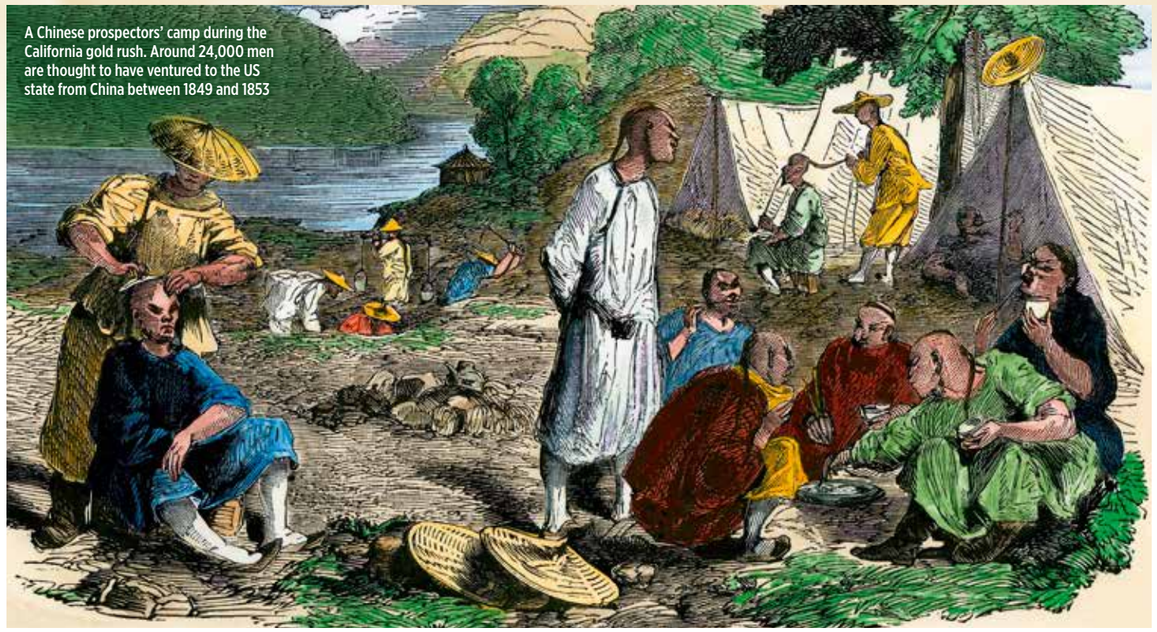
Many of those who arrived in California at the height of the gold rush were already severely weakened and malnourished by the treacherous journey across the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Yet for many, life in their new home was about to get even tougher. They slept in tents, ad hoc accommodation, even on the decks of ships. They often saw the price of food and supplies sky-rocket as traders cashed in. And when they waded into the freezing waters of California in search of precious metal, they were often confronted with hours of arduous labour, digging dirt and moving rocks.

As the amount of gold in the river beds of California diminished, and more prospectors arrived on the scene, competition grew more intense – and violent. Men fought over the rights to pan particular parcels of the goldfields; others sprinkled flecks of gold around a riverbank and then sold the rights to it for an exorbitant price, claiming they'd struck gold there; vigilante groups meted out summary punishments, often targeting immigrants.

The California gold rush may have dangled the carrot of extraordinary riches in front of those willing to grasp the opportunity. But, as Mr Shefult observed in his letter to his cousin, it also showed "what a poor frail being man is, how liable to disappointments, disease and death."

California's booming economy helped spur on completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869

ALAMY X3, GETTY IMAGES X4



A Chinese prospectors' camp during the California gold rush. Around 24,000 men are thought to have ventured to the US state from China between 1849 and 1853

CHASING THE AMERICAN DREAM

Being a prospector during the California gold rush was by no means plain sailing, but non-white arrivals had it especially tough

When picturing a "forty-niner", one of the treasure seekers who travelled to California in search of gold and glory, your mind might conjure up a sun-burned white man with a tangled beard and a gold pan dangling from his hand. While almost 80 per cent of prospectors were white east coasters, thousands of newcomers to California also poured in from across the globe.

In early 1848, around the same time that the first cries of "gold" rang out in California, there were only around 157,000 people in the region. Of that number, 150,000 were Native Americans, 6,500 were of Spanish or Mexican descent and the rest – only a few hundred – were recent European settlers. As news of the gold seeded in California's valleys spread via ships, though, people began to flock to the region.

The early wave of prospectors heralded not from other areas of America – Americans who wanted to leave their lives behind in search of riches faced a long and dangerous trek across the country to reach California – but from territories easily accessible to the shoreline by boat, such as Hawaii, Mexico, Peru and – significantly – China.

A huge proportion of prospectors originating from overseas were young Chinese men – around 24,000 arrived between 1849 to 1853. Many came from the country's southern coastal provinces, which were wracked by instability following the Taiping and anti-Manchu rebellions. California held the promise of riches and new opportunities for themselves and their families.

When they arrived, though, the reality of life in the mining outposts often failed to match their expectations. Non-Europeans in general were often regarded with suspicion – for instance, although California had actually been part of the Mexican empire until 1848, the Mexican prospectors that moved in during the gold rush were treated as foreigners. A small number of African-Americans were also drawn to the territory: while many arrived as enslaved people, they used the money they amassed in California to buy freedom for themselves or other enslaved people.

ABOVE: **Western and Chinese miners pose for a snap at Auburn Ravine, north of Sacramento**

LEFT: **A black prospector searches for gold at Spanish Flat, located in the appropriately named El Dorado County**

GETTY IMAGES X4, ALAMY X4

VIOLENCE AND VITRIOL

As more people arrived in the region and competition for gold claims intensified, anti-immigrant feeling ignited. In 1850 a monthly tax was briefly introduced that only applied to foreign miners, who were forced to give $20 a month (equivalent to around $500 today) to the state so they could be allowed to search for gold.

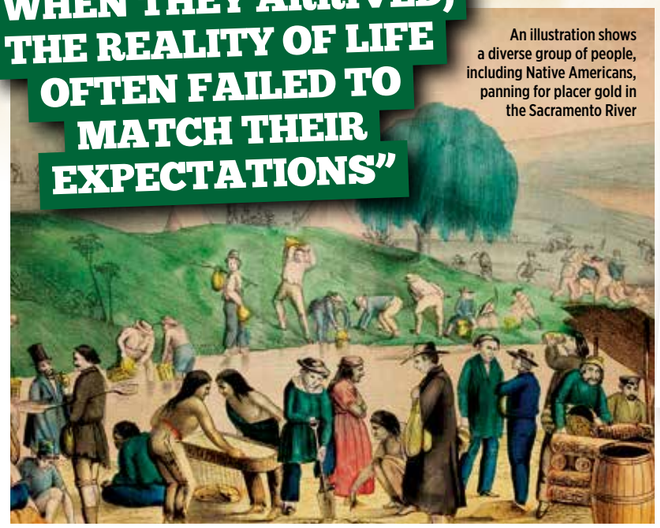
Lots of the vitriol was directed towards Chinese migrants in particular. The Foreign Miners' Tax was replaced by a tax that targeted Chinese labourers. As well as being penalised by the state, they were constantly at risk of violence. Samuel Bowles, a traveller to California, wrote: "To abuse and cheat a Chinaman; to rob him; to kick and cuff him; even to kill him, have been things not only done with impunity by mean and wicked men, but even with vain glory."

However, despite the injustices that awaited them, Chinese men continued to set sail for California. This only stopped in 1882, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was brought in – the first immigration law in America's history to specifically target one nation.

Although most of the Chinese prospectors planned to return home to share their riches and tales of adventure, for many there was no option but to stay – between the extortionate taxes and being muscled out by territorial white prospectors, they hadn't made enough money to pay for their passage home. Some got creative and looked for employment off the goldfields: the towns that sprang up across California created thriving industries that needed workers to sustain them. Working in laundries was a popular choice – perhaps because, according to legend, some lucky laundrymen would pluck out specks of gold hiding in the miners' dirt-encrusted clothes. Others became restaurateurs or shop owners.

As the gold rush came to a close, many Chinese prospectors took jobs building the railroads, and 'Chinatowns' cropped up across California, where people could buy familiar dishes and attend traditional temples. The new communities who had been first attracted to California by the lure of riches continued to fight against the odds and forge new and better lives for themselves in America, long after gold fever burned itself out.

WORDS: RHIANNON DAVIES



"WHEN THEY ARRIVED, THE REALITY OF LIFE OFTEN FAILED TO MATCH THEIR EXPECTATIONS"

An illustration shows a diverse group of people, including Native Americans, panning for placer gold in the Sacramento River

Some new arrivals, such as these Chilean emigrants in San Francisco, faced violent vigilante attacks

Male and female prospectors working side by side at Auburn Ravine, 1852

THE GOLDEN GIRLS

Men weren't the only people to seek fortunes way out west in California

Although the majority of prospectors were men, some women did up sticks and relocate to California in search of riches and adventure. In 1849, for instance, 700 women stepped onto the dock at San Francisco's harbour – out of 40,000 total passengers.

Some were determined to work in the goldfields, like Louise Clappe, who wrote: "I have become a mineress; that is, if the having washed a pan of dirt with my own hands, and procured therefrom three dollars and twenty-five cents in gold dust... will entitle me to the name." However, her first foray into gold panning wasn't quite what she'd dreamed of: "I wet my feet, tore my dress, spoilt a pair of new gloves, nearly froze my fingers, got an awful headache, took cold and lost a valuable breastpin, in this my labor of love."

Other women sought employment in the mining boomtowns that cropped up around the region, be it behind the bar, cooking for hungry miners, or working in brothels. Some American women's journals explicitly encouraged "moral" young women to head out to California, to provide a calming presence and curb the wild appetites of the male gold hunters.

Women were a visible presence in California's boomtown communities

GOLD FEVER GOES GLOBAL

California wasn't the only part of the world to witness a gold rush. From southern Africa to Alaska, prospectors searched – and found – the precious metal in abundance

VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA (1851–69)

In 1885, when visiting English journalist George Augustus Sala dubbed it "Marvellous Melbourne", Victoria's capital was enjoying a boom. Here was a growing southern city that was reputedly the world's richest – at least until a financial crash in 1893 brought an abrupt end to an era of brash boosterism.

To understand the swagger of so many Melburnians at this time, it helps to go back to 1850. This was the year when pastoralist, politician and financier William Campbell (1810–96) discovered gold on the station, or landholding, owned by his brother-in-law, Donald Cameron.

It wasn't the first time gold had been discovered in Victoria and the two men didn't immediately make the find public for fear of a gold rush impacting on their work as livestock farmers, but Campbell would subsequently be awarded a cash prize for being the first man to discover gold in Victoria.

By 1851, the genie was out of the bottle. As reports of further discoveries circulated, gold fever took hold. The scale of what happened is revealed in the growth of Melbourne. Between 1851 and 1854, its non-indigenous population shot up from 29,000 to 123,000. A vast tent city, Canvas Town, grew up in South Melbourne.

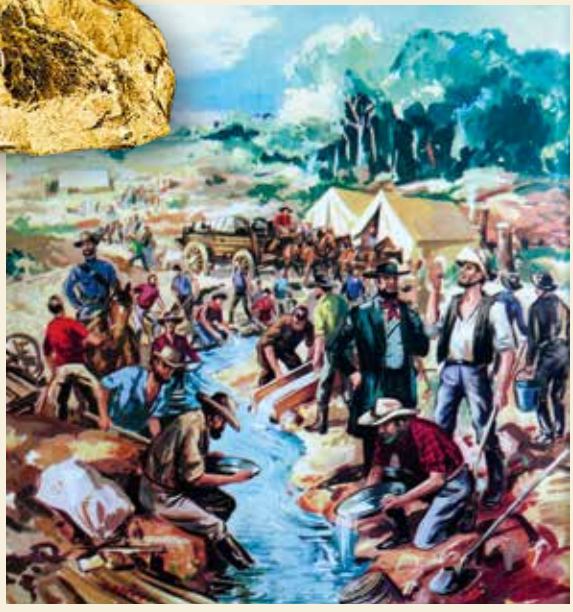
At first, the gold was so plentiful that it was said nuggets could be picked up off the ground at the Mount Alexander goldfield. Then there was alluvial gold in creeks and rivers, relatively cheap to recover by panning. As these deposits ran out, mining took over in earnest.

It wasn't just Victoria's economy that was transformed. Gold from the colony also generated sufficient inflation to reduce Britain's debt burden.

RACISM AND REBELLION

And yet gold brought problems too. In 1854, tensions over the way the nascent industry was administered, especially the cost of mining permits, bubbled over. On 3 December, the battle of the Eureka Stockade, fought between miners and the Victorian authorities, ended with 27 people dead. Subsequently, 13 rebel leaders were tried for high treason, but acquitted. The wider Eureka Rebellion has come to be seen – erroneously, some historians think – as key to the establishment of Australian democracy.

The gold rush revealed ugly racism. It's been estimated that as many as one fifth of Victoria's miners were Chinese. In 1855, Melbourne's *Argus* newspaper dubbed the Chinese an "invading army". There were anti-Chinese riots, most notably the 1857 Buckland riot, when Europeans attacked a larger Chinese population. The roots of the White Australia policy, which restricted non-European immigration in the early 20th century, lie in these years.



Australia experienced several gold rushes in the 19th century; in Mount Alexander, Victoria, it was said nuggets could be picked up off the ground

Around one-fifth of Victoria's miners were of Chinese origin, such as these labourers depicted at work in the Western Freehold Mine, Ballarat

GETTY IMAGES X2, ALAMY X2

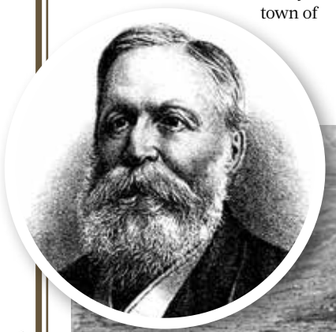
OTAGO, NEW ZEALAND (1861–64)

On 8 February 1861, Tasmanian gold prospector Thomas Gabriel Read (c1825–94) disembarked from the *Don Pedro II* at Port Chalmers, a settlement on Otago Harbour in New Zealand's South Island. A restless veteran of the Californian gold rush, he had travelled to what was then a remote locale after hearing rumours of gold being found in nearby Mataura, Southland.

Read was right to act on his hunch. On 23 May 1861, he found gold "shining like the stars in Orion on a dark frosty night" in the bed of a creek, a spot now known as Gabriel's Gully. In June, a letter published in the *Otago Witness* outlined his discovery. By Christmas 1861, as many as 14,000 prospectors had arrived to try their luck, including those deserting dwindling Australian goldfields.

A second discovery, near the modern-day town of Cromwell, in 1862 encouraged further hopefuls, as did a strike on the banks of the Shotover River, a spot now named Arthurs Point after prospector Thomas Arthur. In 1864, there were 18,000 miners working in the region – some of whom went on to try their luck during the later West Coast gold rush (1864–67), which provided the backdrop for Eleanor Catton's Booker-winning novel *The Luminaries* (2013).

Yet for all this was a comparatively short-lived gold rush, over almost as soon as it had begun, it left its mark. Some of the grandest buildings in Dunedin, the second-largest city on South Island, were built during this period. The goldfields also funded the foundation of New Zealand's first university, the University of Otago, which began to take in students in 1871. And, a reminder that life goes on after the circus has left town, the *Dunedin* began its working life in 1881. This was the world's first steam-powered gold dredge, built to work the gravel beds of Otago's Clutha River, extracted 530kg of the shiny stuff.



Gold was discovered in Otago by Thomas Gabriel Read (*inset*), a veteran of the California gold rush. The area of the Tuapeka goldfields (*main*) where Read made his breakthrough was later dubbed 'Gabriel's Gully'

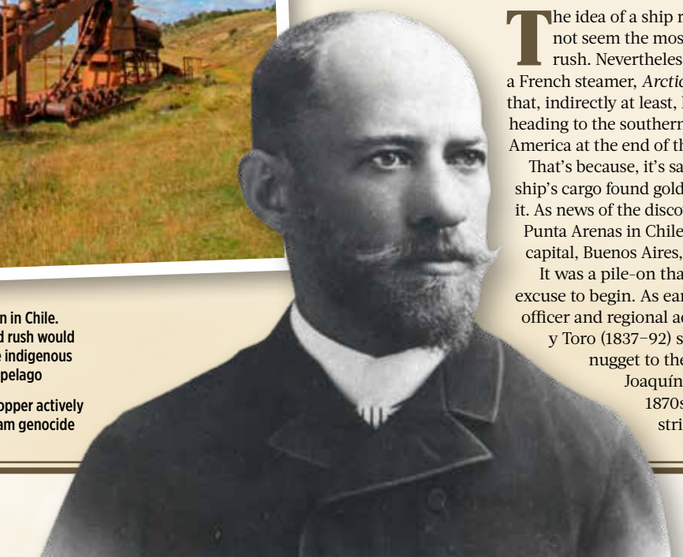
A statue in the Allum Street Settlers Park, Johannesburg, commemorates famed prospector George Harrison – although he may not have been the first to discover gold in the area

"PRETORIUS SWIFTLY PAID OFF HENRY AND HAD HIM ESCORTED OUT OF THE COUNTRY"

An abandoned gold dredge in Tierra Del Fuego, an archipelago that is split between Argentina and Chile

LEFT: **An Selk'nam woman in Chile. The Tierra Del Fuego gold rush would prove devastating for the indigenous people living on the archipelago**

RIGHT: **Prospector Julio Popper actively participated in the Selk'nam genocide**



WITWATERSRAND, SOUTHERN AFRICA (1886)

From the perspective of European settlers, the folklore of the indigenous peoples who lived on the plains of the southern African *highveld* called to mind El Dorado. This was a term initially used by the conquistadors to describe a South American tribal chief who supposedly covered himself in gold dust during an initiation service, but which later came to mean a lost, gold-rich empire.

As events in 1886 proved, the idea of an African El Dorado wasn't entirely fanciful. This was the year when George Harrison found gold at Langlaagte, now a suburb of Johannesburg. Although he sold his claim for just £10, Harrison had discovered part of the 60-mile "golden arc" that extends from Johannesburg to Welkom, an area rich in low-grade lode deposits.

History sometimes claims Harrison as being the first to find gold in the area, but that ignores the claims of, among others, Welsh mineralogist John Henry Davis, who found gold at Pardekraal farm, Krugersdorp in 1852. This was then part of the South African Republic, a Boer (Dutch for farmer) republic in southern Africa. Politician Andries Pretorius (1798–1853), fearful the discovery might destabilise the young nation, swiftly paid off Henry and had him escorted out of the country.

THE WRATH OF RHODES

Pretorius was right to be worried. The discovery of what turned out to be vast reserves of gold led to thousands of fortune hunters arriving. An already fraught situation was complicated by tension between the British and the Boers, tensions fuelled by colonialist adventurers such as the mineowner and business magnate Cecil Rhodes (1853–1902).

It was Rhodes, partly motivated by his loathing for South African Republic president Paul Kruger (1825–1904) and partly by resentment at Boer control of lands rich in natural reserves, who organised the so-called Jameson Raid (29 December 1895–2 January 1896). This saw British colonial administrator Leander Starr Jameson (1853–1917) lead a force of 500 men employed by Rhodes' British South Africa Company over the border from Rhodesia in a bid to spark an uprising by British expatriate workers. It failed miserably and was a personal catastrophe for Rhodes, who was replaced as prime minister of Britain's Cape Colony. The ill-feeling generated was a big factor in the outbreak of the Second Boer War (1899–1902).

The growth of Johannesburg was also the result of the gold rush, which within a decade grew from a dusty mining village, Ferreira's Camp, to become the largest settlement in southern Africa.

ABOVE: **Workers from the Witwatersrand Gold Mining Company, c1880s. The area was found to be rich in lode deposits, trapped deep underground**

RIGHT: **A newspaper illustration depicting the aftermath of the Jameson Raid, which partly stemmed from resentment over Boer control of gold reserves**

TIERRA DEL FUEGO, CHILE & ARGENTINA (1883–1906)

The idea of a ship running into trouble may not seem the most obvious catalyst for a gold rush. Nevertheless, it was the grounding of a French steamer, *Arctique* in Patagonia in 1884 that, indirectly at least, led to hordes of prospectors heading to the southernmost reaches of South America at the end of the 19th century.

That's because, it's said, a team sent to rescue the ship's cargo found gold in the sand and mud around it. As news of the discovery made its way back to Punta Arenas in Chile and then to Argentina's capital, Buenos Aires, a gold rush started.

It was a pile-on that had been waiting for an excuse to begin. As early as 1870, Chilean navy officer and regional administrator Óscar Viel y Toro (1837–92) sent a locally discovered nugget to the Chilean president, José Joaquín Pérez (1801–89). In the 1870s, several further small strikes were made in the area.

Back in the mid-1880s, the press compared the findings to those made in California and Victoria. Bucharest-born adventurer and engineer Julio Popper (1857–93) was among those who flocked to the region, and found gold dust at San Sebastián Bay in Tierra Del Fuego. The gold rush also encompassed Chilean islands south of the Beagle Channel, but the amount of metal found began to decline from the middle of the 1890s.

More widely, beyond fuelling the growth of Punta Arenas, today a port city of more than 100,000 souls, the gold rush arguably did little to improve the area's economy. And for one community in particular, it was a disaster. The Selk'nam genocide was perpetuated against indigenous people who lived a nomadic life on Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego. Those who oversaw the systematic hunting, abduction and rape of the Selk'nam included Popper, now remembered not as a brave pioneer but as a brutal southern conquistador.

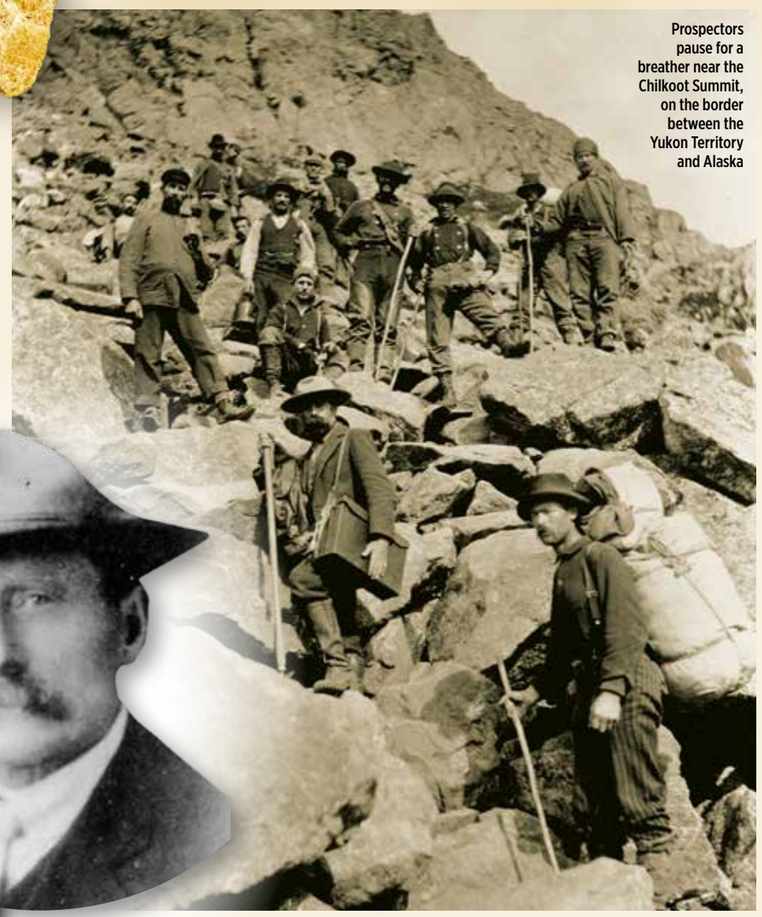
YUKON TERRITORY, CANADA (1896–99)

If you're going to have a gold rush, it should be an organised free-for-all. This at least seems to have been the attitude of the Canadian authorities when, in 1896, gold was discovered at Rabbit Creek in the Yukon by a party that included US prospector George Carmack (1860–1922), his wife Shaaw Tláa aka Kate (c1857–1920), and Kaish aka Skookum Jim (c1855–1916) of the Tagish First Nation, whose role in the find may have been downplayed at the time over fears an indigenous person's claim would not be recognised.

As news of the find spread, notably via Seattle and San Francisco when newly rich prospectors headed south on steamers, thousands went off in the opposite direction, with most travelling via the Alaskan ports of Dyea and Skagway. The Klondike gold rush was underway. But those who were ill-prepared soon hit a snag. If prospectors were to access the wilderness, the Canadian authorities decreed, they had to carry a year's supply of food to prevent starvation. In all, a typical hopeful's equipment and provisions weighed close to a tonne.

Despite this, as many as 100,000 people tried their luck, including the author Jack London, whose adventure novels *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906) drew on his experiences. However, the difficulties involved in travel – mountains and a freezing climate added to the difficulties – meant that most didn't arrive until the summer of 1898. Few made their fortunes.

All these people needed feeding and watering, and they wanted to be entertained when they weren't working. Boomtowns sprung up, including Dawson City, which stood at the confluence of the Klondike and Yukon rivers. In 1898, its population reached 30,000, up from 500 in 1896. As so often in gold rush histories, indigenous people paid a high price for the dreams of others. In the Yukon, the Hän people who lived around Rabbit Creek were moved to a reservation and many perished.



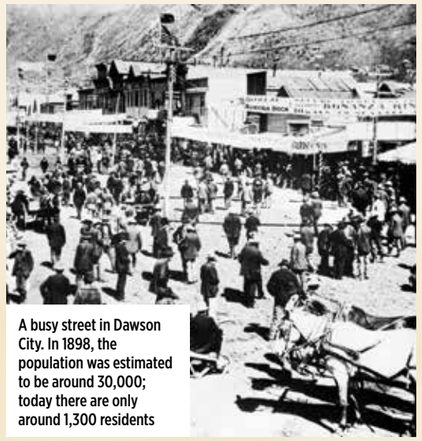
Prospectors pause for a breather near the Chilkoot Summit, on the border between the Yukon Territory and Alaska

US-born George Carmack has traditionally been credited with discovering gold in the Yukon

"AS SO OFTEN IN GOLD RUSH HISTORIES, INDIGENOUS PEOPLE PAID A HIGH PRICE FOR THE DREAMS OF OTHERS"

The Klondike gold rush saw increased traffic down the Yukon River, leading to the launch of new sternwheelers to cope with the demand

Gold dust was considered legal tender in Dawson City. Here, a man pays for goods in a local store by pouring his stash of dust onto the counter



A busy street in Dawson City. In 1898, the population was estimated to be around 30,000; today there are only around 1,300 residents

GETTY IMAGES X7, ALAMY X3

NOME, ALASKA (1899–1909)

They were dubbed the "Three Lucky Swedes" for good reason. In September 1898, Norwegian-American Jafet Lindeberg (1874–1962), and two American Swedes, Erik Lindblom (1857–1928) and John Brynteson (1871–1959), found gold at Anvil Creek. The discovery led to the foundation of the Nome mining district and made the men's fortunes.

Over the course of the winter, news of the trio's find spread and a familiar pattern asserted itself as thousands of prospectors headed for the area. These included many who, hoping for better luck across the border, abandoned the Canadian Yukon. By the summer of 1899, Nome's population had grown to at least 10,000 people. A tent city eventually spread for tens of miles along the coast of the Bering Sea.

In part, this was because a notable feature of the Nome gold rush was that much of the metal was found in beach sands on the coast, and initially recovered using panning. Later on, as gold became increasingly more difficult to find, larger companies with the capital to invest in machinery took over sifting the sands.

Those trying their luck had to contend with Alaska's brutal climate. Because of ice, the beaches could only be worked in the summer and the local police were charged with shooing off those who didn't have adequate shelter as winter began to bite. As for prospectors working at local creeks, they had to battle the permafrost and some even heated the ground with steam to make it workable.

Despite a distinct lack of harbour facilities, Nome City boomed and the town's population briefly included Wyatt Earp (1848–1929) of OK Corral fame, who became the co-owner of the Dexter Saloon (and, it has to be added, brothel). It's a time in Wyatt's life briefly touched upon in the 1994 biopic starring Kevin Costner, although Nome was more fully immortalised on screen in *The Spoilers* (1942), starring Marlene Dietrich, Randolph Scott and John Wayne.

WORDS: JONATHAN WRIGHT

A prospector weighs out his friend's share of gold dust in their cabin in Nome, c1900

ABOVE: **Prospectors panning for gold on the beach at Nome, c1899**

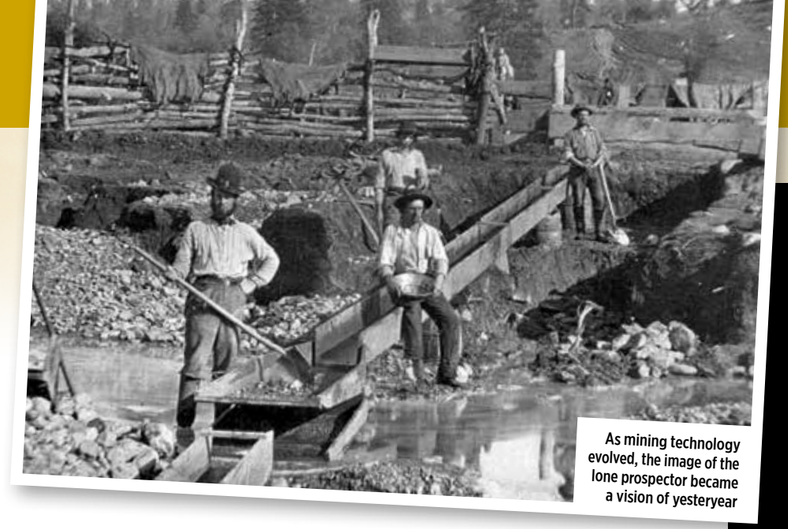
BELOW: **A public artwork in Nome commemorates the "Three Lucky Swedes" who struck gold in 1898**

ALL THAT GLITTERS

We examine some of the mining methods used by prospectors during the California gold rush

When James Marshall discovered gold by the American River in early 1848, it sparked an outbreak of gold fever that would last for decades. Thousands of people from all over the globe flocked to the area in the hope of striking it rich, bringing with them a range of mining techniques and experience. The first miners relied on 'panning' methods, swirling the river water in a pan so that the heavier metals sank to the bottom while lighter sediments washed to the back, but before long, simple machines like 'rockers' were also introduced, capable of processing larger volumes of gravel and water.

Although these rudimentary methods remained in use, more intensive techniques would emerge during the 1850s, such as hydraulic mining, which used jets of water to wash gold-bearing deposits from riverbanks into sluices, and building bypass canals, which gave miners access to gold in riverbeds.



As mining technology evolved, the image of the lone prospector became a vision of yesteryear

KEY NUMBERS

$3
The price that prospectors in some mining camps could expect to pay for a single egg, as merchants cashed in on the thousands of people flocking to the area to seek their fortunes

13
The number of prospectors who died trying to cross Death Valley to reach the goldfields in 1849

300,000
The estimated number of gold rushers who had arrived at the California goldfields by 1854

21
The amount, in tonnes, of gold coins and nuggets (belonging to prospectors of the California gold rush) on board SS *Central America* when it sank off the coast of South Carolina in 1857

$36,000
The amount allegedly made by businessman Samuel Brannan in just nine weeks by selling picks, pans and shovels to prospectors heading to the goldfields

$200m
The value of gold dug out of the Sierra Nevada mountains in California between 1849 and 1852 – equivalent to around $5.5bn today

ARRASTRA
Mules could be used to power basic mills known as arrastras, capable of crushing ore to release the precious metals within.

MANUAL LABOUR
Resources and tools were scarce and expensive, so many jobs in the goldfields – at least during the early years of the California gold rush – were done by hand.

CHANNELLED RIVER

ARTIFICIAL CANAL

RIVER

ORE

DRY RIVER

ENCAMPMENT
Basic living quarters, often in rag-tag constructions made from wood and canvas, meant that fires were common, and saw many perish in freezing winter conditions.

PAN
Usually made of sheet iron and around 12 inches in diameter, the pan was partly filled with dirt and held under water. Swirling motions would help separate the dirt from the gold contained within it, which would be left at the bottom of the pan.

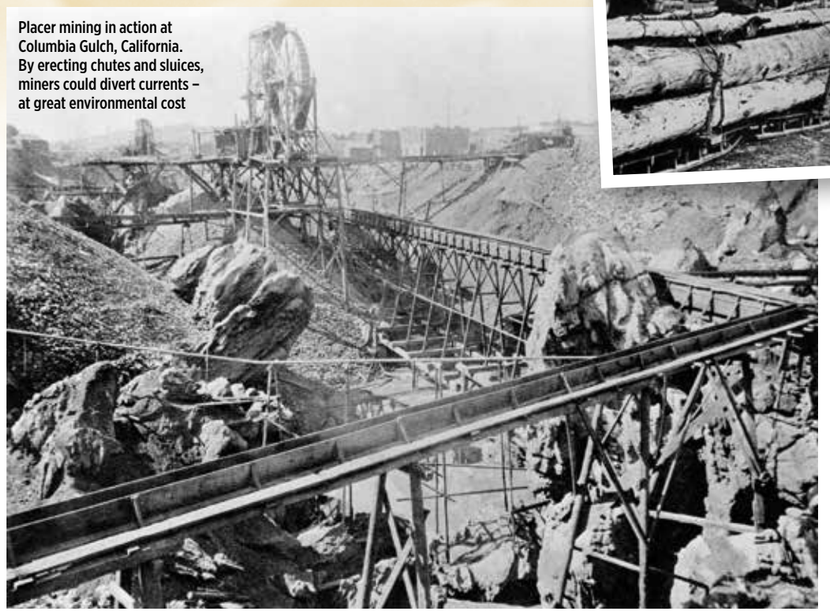
LONG TOM
One alternative to using pans was to place the dirt in a device called a long tom, into which water would also be poured. Holes in a sheet of iron beneath the dirt would allow the muddy water to be washed away, leaving behind nuggets of gold. Riffles (barriers) at the bottom would also catch the fine gold that passed through the holes.

EXPOSED RIVERBED
Diverting rivers enabled prospectors to gain easier access to black sands, where heavier gold was deposited from upstream by spring meltwaters. The practice also gave gold-hunters the ability to regulate the flow of the water.

SLUICE BOX
Water could also be channelled through canals, where riffles (barriers) along the bottom of devices known as sluice boxes would catch the gold and let other materials pass through – as seen in the circled image.

RETURNED WATER
Once the water had been used to search for gold, it was channelled back into the river from which it came.

SOL90 IMAGES X1, GETTY IMAGES X2, ALAMY X1



Placer mining in action at Columbia Gulch, California. By erecting chutes and sluices, miners could divert currents – at great environmental cost

LEFT: **Another image from Columbia Gulch shows reservoirs used for mining placer gold**

RIGHT: **A view of the Yuba River, California. In 1878, debris was piled so high in parts of the river that water covered the tops of pine trees along its banks**

TOP: **A dogsled team hauls lumber destined for the mining industry in the city of Dawson, Yukon**

BOTTOM: **Lode miners seen hard at work below ground in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia**

THE PRICE OF GOLD

Dr Stephen Tuffnell shines a light on the staggering cost that intensive mining practices inflicted upon the natural world

Gold mining is the work of dismantling the landscape. And it came with colossal costs to the environment. "Nothing but flood and fire is so ruthless as the miner," wrote one miner from Yukon's Bonanza Creek in 1898.

Mining birthed a host of industries with a voracious appetite for the earth's natural resources. From city-building and commercial agriculture to logging and hunting, from iron working to steam transportation, gold rush societies deforested their local areas, decimated animal populations, and quite literally turned the earth inside out. But the transition to industrial mining accelerated the pace of that destruction to an unprecedented degree.

DIMINISHING RETURNS

Ironically, geology determined the environmental toll. Whether via placer mining (in which the rock surrounding the gold has eroded) or lode mining (in which the gold is encased in solid rock), miners and engineers devised novel methods for recovering gold that consumed significant quantities of natural resources.

Most rushers sought placer gold in the form of fine flakes (and occasionally nuggets) deposited in streams and riverbeds. Their preferred tools may have been picks, pans and shovels, but they left nothing to chance. They worked hard to regularise the unpredictable environment. Using tonnes of lumber, teams of miners dammed creeks and streams, diverted currents with chutes and sluices, and placed unbearable pressure on local ecosystems. And it was hard work. After just two years at the mines in California, one miner reflected that "this country wears a man out very fast."

But, after a remarkably short time, the accessible placer gold was itself exhausted. As the nuggets became fewer and smaller, more costly technologies were devised to extract the fine gold in profitable quantities. Soon, the picks and pans of the prospector gave way to the machines of industrial mining. In California, this transition had already occurred by 1853, just five years after the rush began.

MINING UNDER PRESSURE

If you've ever held your thumb over the end of a hose pipe to increase the pressure of the jet, you understand the technology of hydraulic mining. Under the same principle, miners fired high-powered jets of water at mountainsides and riverbanks to wash gold-bearing deposits into sluices. Though simple, the technology was so effective that it spread rapidly around the world and was soon utilised in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Arctic.

Hydraulic mining was a massive, resource-intensive undertaking. Some hydraulic systems used as much as 800,000 gallons of water per day, fired from hoses at speeds of 100mph. Forests were cleared to make the flumes through which the gold bearing gravels were transported. According to the California State Agricultural Society, by 1870, one-third of the timber in the state was already gone – almost all that deforestation occurred in the sugar pine forests of the Sierra gold country. Large reservoirs and 6,000 miles of ditches were constructed to supply water to the hoses that washed out thousands of acres of valleys.

What was left behind was more moonscape than landscape. As one observer described it in 1868: "by no other means does man so completely change the face of nature than by this process… Hills melt away and disappear under its influence… The desolation that remains after the ground, thus washed, is abandoned, is remediless and appalling." Observing the same destruction in Australia, one writer found the landscape "irredeemably hideous". Although these people wrote of the cosmetic transformation they witnessed, they had intuited that the price of untold mineral wealth had been paid by nature.

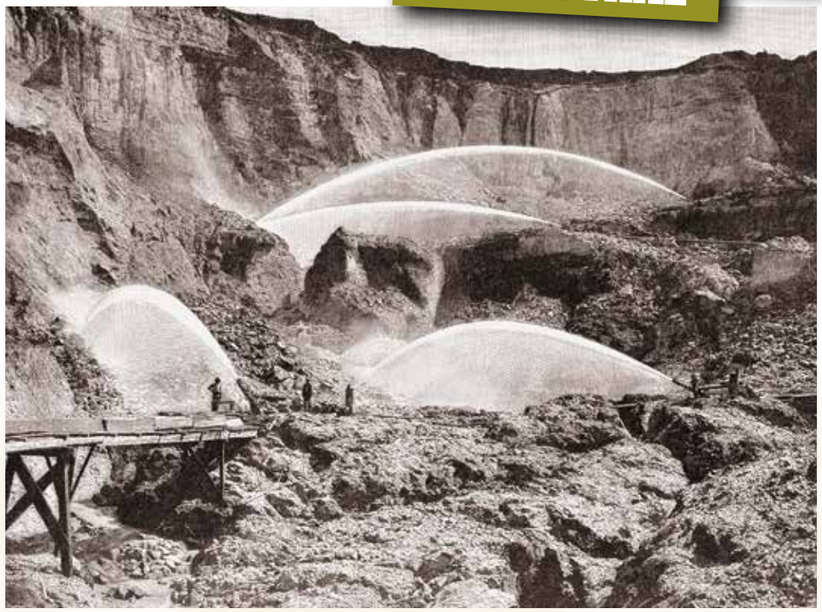
Thousands of tonnes of debris travelled through the sluices and was deposited downriver. In the valleys of the Bear, Yuba and American rivers, that debris was piled so high in the riverbed that the tops of pine trees on the banks were submerged. By 1878, on stretches of the Bear River in California, the river's bed was higher than the surrounding landscape and held in place only by artificial levees. Elsewhere, levees burst, and an estimated 40,000 acres of farmland were flooded with a stew of mud, sand and gravel known as "slickens".

Slickens were laced with toxic mercury used to trap gold in the sluices. Most hydraulic mines used about 20 tonnes of mercury per mile of sluices. To sustain this, by 1870 California mined one-third of the world's mercury, about 2 million pounds a year.

It was a toxic industry. Above ground, workers roasted the mercuric sulphide ore (cinnabar) to extract elemental mercury – the odourless, colourless vapours escaping the furnace were lethal. According to one visitor in 1863, at New Almaden, the state's largest quicksilver mine, vapour from the furnace had denuded the mountainside of trees. Workers were described as "cadaverous". As mercury washed into waterways it was converted into methyl mercury and entered the food chain, concentrating, in amounts deadly to fish and humans, through biomagnification.

Early conservation movements sprang from the impacts. But this wasn't environmentalism as we know it today. For opponents of industrial mining the key question was not how to restore destroyed environments, but how to preserve them for future exploitation.

"THE ODOURLESS, COLOURLESS VAPOURS ESCAPING THE FURNACE WERE LETHAL"



Miners used jets of water to wash gold-bearing deposits from mountainsides – as seen here in North Bloomfield, California

A WORLD TRANSFORMED

Gold miners often conceived of their work as an elemental struggle between man and nature. Through that struggle, they hoped to transform gold's value into all kinds of other valuable things: food, homes, businesses, and more wealth. They left behind an earth unrecognisably transformed by the industrial processes of realising those promises; the value of the earth itself was merely instrumental in their pursuit.

DR STEPHEN TUFFNELL is associate professor of modern US history at St Peter's College, University of Oxford, and the author of *Made in Britain: Nation and Emigration in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of California Press, 2020)

DR STEPHEN TUFFNELL ON STUDYING GOLD RUSHES TODAY

Between the clash of pick and pan was the furious scribble of pen on paper

We live in a world of gold. From the smartphones in our hands to the James Webb Space Telescope, it underpins our connected world. In fact, gold is so central to modern human endeavour that one third of all the gold ever mined has been taken from the ground since 1950.

Gold rushes have entered the popular imagination in a way that most historical phenomena have not. The bearded, heroic miner is an emblem of national character around the world. "If the Gates of Hell were hinged with gold," one Scottish rusher wrote in 1857, "a Yankee would go there and take them."

But through careful research, focus has recently shifted from tales of national progress to the vibrancy, diversity and mobility of gold rush societies. Popular national myths are giving way to an appreciation of them as an interconnected phenomenon taking historians, not quite to the Gates of Hell, but to all parts of the globe.

The earth-moving gold rushes that struck between 1848 and 1898 were profoundly unsettling events: they redirected patterns of global migration, birthed new cities and expanded the reach of settler empires. They were also profoundly destructive of indigenous polities, and many of the world's "wild places" are in fact gold rush landscapes, violently transformed by industrial excavation. These were the hallmarks, not only of gold, but of the wave of imperial globalisation that simultaneously broke upon the world in that extraordinary 50-year period.

Curiously, in the fevered culture of rushing, the gold itself can seem relatively unimportant. Recent research shows that these were cultural events as much as economic and technological ones. Between the clash of pick and pan was the furious scribble of pen on paper. To immerse oneself in the outpouring of artworks inspired by the rushes is to see vividly the anxieties and utopianism with which contemporaries viewed their upheavals. Satirists mocked imaginary treasure-seekers flying to the diggings using jet packs. Safely ensconced in their parlours, readers pored over salacious tales of fallen women and bawdy, violent men. Anxious observers fancied that those struck with gold fever might even devour the earth itself in their endless pursuit of the precious metal.

These responses tell us a great deal about the dual nature of gold rushes. For some they promised great wealth and liberation, for others, they brought far greater perils of uncontrolled passions and dispossession.

We must continue to grapple with that duality. As the world transitions to a low carbon economy, the demand for gold and rare earth metals will rise – and with it pressures on the environments and communities where they are found. Examining anew the dramatic transformations set in motion by the rushes may help us navigate this momentous shift.

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"The bearded, heroic miner is an emblem of national character around the world," says Dr Stephen Tuffnell

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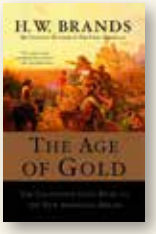
GET HOOKED

If we've whetted your appetite for the gold rush era, why not explore the topic further with our pick of books, podcasts and TV programmes?

BOOKS

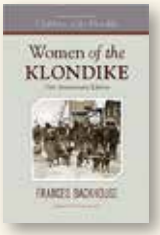
A Global History of Gold Rushes
Edited by Dr Benjamin Mountford and Dr Stephen Tuffnell (University of California Press, 2018)

Historians of the US, Africa, Australasia and the Pacific World tell the story of the 19th-century gold rushes from a global perspective – from their impact on migration, to the ways in which they affected the environment.



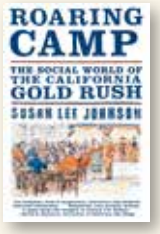
The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream
By Professor HW Brands (Doubleday, 2002)

Brands tells the story of the California gold rush through multiple perspectives – from adventurers John and Jessie Fremont to entrepreneur Leland Stanford.



Women of the Klondike
By Frances Backhouse (Whitecap Books, revised 2010)

Backhouse brings to life the stories of the diverse women – entrepreneurs, nuns, doctors, nurses, journalists, dancehall entertainers and more – who, for a multitude of reasons, became swept up in the rush for gold in the Klondike region of the Yukon.



Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush
By Prof Susan Lee Johnson (WW Norton & Company, 2000)

From the mines where the men worked, to the all-male households in which they lived, Johnson explores the dynamic social world created by the California gold rush.

ON THE BBC

BBC RADIO 4

▶ In Our Time: The California Gold Rush
bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05nxgdd
Melvyn Bragg and guests discuss the California gold rush of the mid-19th century, when a chance discovery of gold in the American River led to seismic demographic and economic changes.

BBC SOUNDS

▶ The Call of the Wild by Jack London
bbc.co.uk/sounds/series/p07snlvs
Actor Joseph Ayre reads Jack London's classic 1903 novel, which tells the story of one dog's survival during the Klondike gold rush.

BBC WORLD SERVICE

▶ Witness History: The West Australian Gold Rush
bbc.co.uk/programmes/p047k2tl
Claire Bowes presents an archive interview with Frank Gerald, recorded in 1937, who witnessed the discovery of gold in Coolgardie as a young man.

ONLINE AND AUDIO

▶ For podcasts, features, quizzes, interviews and more on the gold rush era, visit our website: *historyextra.com*

▶ Gold rushes: everything you wanted to know
Dr Stephen Tuffnell answers listener questions on the gold rushes that captivated the imaginations of prospectors in the 19th century. Listen at *bit.ly/3SFBhjz*

▶ Digging into the Klondike gold rush
Delve into the history of the Klondike gold rush, a whirlwind of mining activity that brought more than 30,000 prospectors to Yukon Territory. Listen at *bit.ly/3EkEkt8*

▶ Anti-Chinese prejudice: from gold rushes to exclusion laws
Prof Mae Ngai reveals how 19th-century gold rushes helped shape racist attitudes towards Chinese people living in the west. Listen at *bit.ly/3McI02a*

WATCH

The Luminaries
(streaming on Netflix)

Murder, love, intrigue and twists of fate beset two astrally connected settlers at the height of New Zealand's 1860s gold rush in this drama based on Eleanor Catton's 2013 novel.

Operation Gold Rush
(streaming on Apple TV+)

Historian and broadcaster Dan Snow leads a team of adventurers on an epic journey across the Canadian wilderness, following in the footsteps of the 19th-century Klondike gold rush.

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