

PART ONE

*Global Transformations in the
Age of Gold*

Seeking a Global History of Gold

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NOTHING SET THE WORLD IN MOTION like gold. Between 1848 and the turn of the twentieth century, the global rush to find and extract the precious metal from the earth in previously unimaginable quantities inspired a dramatic burst of movement and energy, affecting the course of world history. In California, and then across the Pacific Rim and parts of Africa, gold discoveries and the rushes that followed birthed new territories and states; triggered short-term booms and busts; provoked violent conflict with local indigenous and other resident communities; sparked entrepreneurship of all kinds; reordered production, trade, and labor; exposed humankind's capacity to alter the natural world; and created new hierarchies of difference and disconnection. These transformations took place on a global stage, as capital, people, and raw materials connected distant areas of the world in a spontaneous, contagious search for gold.

Contemporaries agonized over the frenetic energy, social dislocation, and runaway growth triggered by gold rushes. In doing so, they reached for the strongest natural metaphor they knew: the powerful, unsettling threats of diseases, fevers, and epidemics. From California, one correspondent was "suddenly attacked with violent, extraordinary symptoms," explaining that it was "a temporary fit of delirium brought on by a new epidemic—the yellow or gold fever."¹ As Sydney's working men began leaving for California, one resident complained in June 1849 that the townspeople had been "completely bit by the yellow fever."² Gold fever was said to infect naive greenhorns; rage across prairies, oceans, and continents; and ravage town and city alike through depopulation. "Fever" captured the connected nature of the phenomenon many people found themselves in but also the widespread anxiety produced by gold rushes and the sense that irrationality propelled them. Like

illness, gold mining was a gamble: luck rather than the diligence or virtue of the individual determined the outcome. But this was part of the allure and kept many miners at work. "A man never knows when he is going to pick up the rarest nugget in the world," wrote one Klondiker. "I MAY find it tomorrow, and I probably will not find more than a few cents. And I am likely to find our shaft full of water."³ Gold seemed to offer equal measures of promise and peril. "The touch of unlimited gold dissolves society into its elements, produces a total disorganization, the effects of which defy conjecture," reflected Melbourne's *Argus* in 1849.⁴

It was little wonder that gold rushes left contemporaries delirious: the second half of the nineteenth century was convulsed by repeated, overlapping gold rushes. California in 1848 and Victoria in 1851 were just the beginning. Between them, the western American states of Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana experienced forty gold rushes. Nevada and California, meanwhile, remained in a state of near-constant gold discovery. In Australia, between 1851 and 1894, there were twenty-eight rushes. In the decade beginning in 1857, five of the New Zealand provinces—Nelson, Otago, Marlborough, Canterbury, and Auckland—experienced gold rushes. In 1868, gold was discovered on the bed of the Ivalojoki River in Lapland, triggering a rush to the region that only peaked in 1872. After the Witwatersrand gold rush began in 1886, geologists scoured Southern Rhodesia (where a rush began in the fall of 1890) and the Gold Coast (where there was a period of gold rushes between 1877 and 1900) for the next bonanza. The Klondike gold rush (1896–99) in Yukon Territory was just the latest of a series of gold rushes in present-day Canada, following the rush to Fraser River, British Columbia, in 1858.

As the earth yielded its riches, gold production raced upward. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the annual world output of gold ranged between 10 and 20 tons. After the strikes in California and Victoria, this figure had leapt to 180 tons, and by the turn of the twentieth century it had reached 450 tons per year.⁵ Put another way, in the fifty years between California and the Klondike, more gold was mined from the earth than in the previous three millennia.⁶ In 1902, after visiting gold mines in the Transvaal, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), India, the Malay Peninsula, Australia, New Zealand, New Guinea, Canada, the United States, and Mexico (and acknowledging his desire to one day visit gold mines in Russia, China, Japan, Korea, the Dutch East Indies, Hungary, and South and Central America), the *Economist*'s respected mining correspondent James Herbert Curle calcu-

lated that gold mining added roughly £70 million annually to the world economy.⁷

An enormous and eclectic band of writers have added almost as many pages. Gold rushes were as much cultural watersheds as they were economic. At the mines, in the rare pauses between the swish of the pan, the crunch of the shovel, and the crash of the battery, one might have heard the furious scratching of pens and pencils on paper. Contemporary diarists, journalists, boosters, and administrators (as well as many others) recorded the awe, excitement, dread, and frustration of the dogged quest for gold. An incredible total of 285 emigrant's guides, cheap literary melodramas, and pamphlets about gold rush California and travel to the goldfields had appeared in print by 1860.⁸ Less than a decade after the beginning of the rush to Victoria in southeastern Australia, books on that gold-rich British colony had been published in German, French, Swedish, Norwegian, and Italian, alongside the numerous English-language volumes being printed in London.⁹ From mid-century, the rushes to California and Australia captured the attention of political economists around the world. California gold relieved specie shortages on the world's money markets, created large reserves of local investment capital, and increased prices worldwide.¹⁰ Leading economic minds, including Richard Cobden, Michel Chevalier, Karl Marx, and Louis de Launay, pondered the effect that increased gold supplies were having on monetary policy, wages, trade, and speculation.¹¹ Gold had been venerated as an object of pure value across human history, but in no other century did it sit at the center of so many heated public debates over its cultural, political, economic, and even religious significance. Each rush encouraged a flurry of academic, popular, and personal writing—technical, celebratory, and anxious—widely accessible and familiar to historians.

The historical scholarship that followed has accreted in thematic layers: contemporaneous technical volumes and firsthand narratives; late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century national, regional, and economic histories; and postwar, revisionist, social, and cultural studies.¹² Broadly speaking, many of the early regional and nation-centered histories reinscribed the blind spots of the published travel accounts and memoirs used as their empirical spine. Still, some historians were cognizant of the gold rushes' global resonances and violent dispossessions. William Parker Morrell's book *The Gold Rushes* (1940) was the first monograph to set the rushes of the middle to late nineteenth century within the framework of a *longue durée* global history of gold mining that began in the ancient world. Morrell's scope

impresses, but his focus fell especially on the post-1848 rushes, which he deemed “gold rushes proper,” since although men had traded and hoarded gold for millennia, “only in modern times has the thirst for gold inspired vigorous peoples to seek it out by hard labour in the waste places of the earth.”¹³ More recently, social and cultural historians have read painstakingly against the grain of Euro-American records to retell the story of the gold rushes from the perspective of racially and nationally diverse migrants, and on the terms of those indigenous communities whose land (Morrell’s so-called waste places) was invaded.¹⁴ Since the 1990s this growing body of social history has been invigorated by insights from comparative, transnational, and global historians whose careful unpicking of the cross-border circulations of migrants and economic and commercial exchange has begun to reveal the extent of entanglement between the series of explosive, short-term gold booms of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ This historiographical trajectory has returned us to a recognition that contemporaries living through the gold rushes understood and experienced them as inherently transnational events, and gold mining as an increasingly global enterprise. “There is a certain freemasonry among mining men,” Curle reflected in *The Gold Mines of the World*. “One can learn, if he only meets the right people, the inward and true position and value of every mine in the world.”¹⁶

In this spirit, *A Global History of Gold Rushes* brings together historians of the United States, Africa, Australasia, and the Pacific world to explore the global history of the gold rushes. Across the chapters that follow, we seek to emphasize the global and transnational dimensions of the rushes as they were experienced in various parts of the world and, in turn, to investigate the role of the rushes themselves in shaping the broader course of nineteenth-century global history. The remarkable series of events depicted in these pages present historians with a striking opportunity. How, we ask, might we address the historical diversity of the gold rushes’ global impacts and the unevenness of their effects? How did the rushes accelerate the pace of global connection and magnify its disruptive impacts? In what ways were the gold rushes entangled with one another, and how did they influence one another’s development? How might these entanglements enhance our understanding of the way particular transnational circuits, connections, and exchanges operated? How did contemporaries manage and mediate these long-distance connections and exchanges? In what ways did local towns, cities, and ports operate as transaction points of global connection? What distinguished a gold rush’s global impacts from its imperial ones?

Only a collaborative effort, drawing on the expertise of a variety of regional specialists, can come close to answering many of these questions. The chapters in this volume, our addition to the rich and fascinating pile of accumulated gold rush history, are driven by a collective endeavor to do just that. Without committing the volume to a particular view of the overall shape and structure of the global history of gold rushes, we seek to open a number of windows onto the connection points, technologies, laborers, and capital that connected gold rushes around the world—and to trace their human, environmental, and economic impacts. In this opening chapter, we have chosen to focus on several characteristics that tie together the nineteenth-century gold rushes: the accelerated mobility of goods, people, and ideas caused by overlapping rushes; the redistributive power of “gold rush gateways”; the transition from alluvial to capital-intensive, corporate mining; and the shift in technologies and labor regimes that accompanied these thickening transnational networks. Acting in tandem with these processes of global connection and redistribution were a series of powerful countercurrents: of the destruction of indigenous communities; of the erection and policing of material and mental frontiers from threatening “others”; of the protracted consolidation of capital and elaboration of class hierarchies; and of the rapid but long-term loss of ecological sustainability. At the heart of this book, then, is the paradoxical power of gold rushes to both connect and divide, to enrich and impoverish, and to create and destroy.

THESE INCONGRUOUS BATTALIA

Gold rushes were events of great human migration. In 1849, reflecting on “The Californian Movement,” the London *Punch* made light of the prevailing excitement: “Everything that will float—and a great deal that will not—is being advertised for California” (figure 1.1).¹⁷

By any estimation, the scale of gold rush migration remains remarkable. Gold rushes dramatically accelerated demographic expansion.¹⁸ In 1848, California’s non-Indian population was around 14,000; it soared to almost 100,000 by the end of 1849 and to 300,000 by the end of 1853.¹⁹ Across the Pacific, in Victoria, the population grew from 77,000 at the start of the gold rushes in 1851 to 411,000 just six years later.²⁰ Some 30,000 (mainly Californians) flocked to the British Columbian mainland after the discovery of gold in 1858.²¹ Thanks largely to the gold rushes, New Zealand’s non-Maori

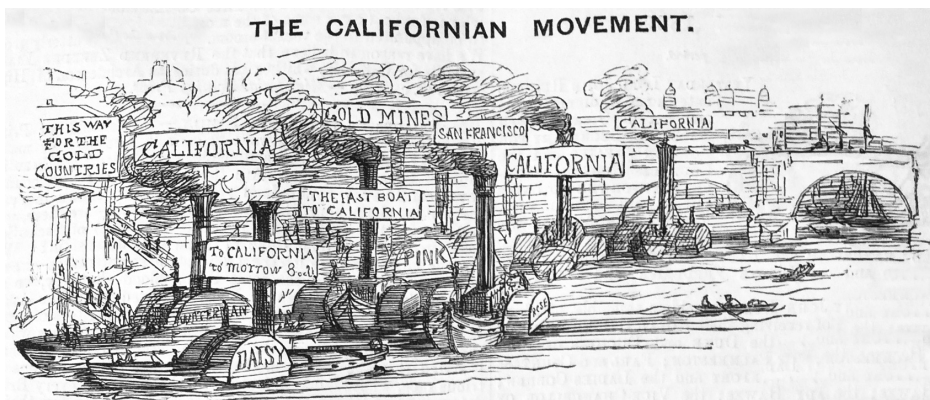


FIGURE 1.1 “The Californian Movement,” *Punch or the London Charivari* 16 (1849): 52. Ballarat Mechanics’ Institute.

population almost doubled in the years 1861–64, from 98,000 to 171,000.²² The lure of quick wealth in diamonds and then gold transformed the Transvaal’s 1879 white population of 40,000 into 119,000 by 1890, and 420,000 by 1911.²³ From 1897, the last great rush to the Klondike triggered a similarly remarkable influx—perhaps 100,000—to the remote Yukon region. By the time the “average Klondiker” arrived in the region, he had traveled more than twenty-five hundred miles and devoted a thousand dollars to transport and supplies.²⁴

As alluvial gold mining became an increasingly capital-intensive process, many goldseekers returned home or else settled in the gold countries, where they played an important role in the making of settler colonial societies. A minority simply kept rushing. “I have spent the best portion of my life in chasing after gold which has unfitted me for any other occupation,” one veteran wrote home from the Pacific Northwest in 1858, “and to throw away the present chance appears to me like sacrificing all my past years of toil.”²⁵ The sequential nature of the gold-seeking experience during the nineteenth century enabled a cohort of global goldseekers to follow the gold trail around the Pacific and beyond. After hearing rumors of gold’s discovery in Australia, Daniel and Thomas Heald sailed from the California goldfields to the British colony of Victoria, arriving in the port city of Melbourne in April 1853. As soon as July, their dreams of fortune had soured considerably. From the gold town of Bendigo, Daniel reported that “there is a grate [*sic*] many California boys here that wish themselves [*sic*] back,” concluding that “this is no plase [*sic*] for a man that has lived in the States.”²⁶ Down on cash and luck, the

brothers rejoined the flow of migrants who moved between Pacific goldfields and left almost exactly a year later, for Peru, after hearing “great talk . . . about there being rich gold mines” in that South American country.²⁷

The new gold discoveries inherited some of the characteristics of their predecessors and passed on new features to their successors. This phenomenon has probably been best captured by historians of New Zealand—from where goldseekers had traveled to California and Australia, and which subsequently drew in miners when gold was found in the later 1850s and 1860s. “The discoverer of Gabriel’s Gully” (the discovery that triggered the Otago gold rush), John Salmon explains, “was an Australian who had learnt his skill in California; the man who found gold in Cormandel had served his apprenticeship on the Sacramento River; the pioneer of the Aorere field had acquired his prospecting techniques in Victoria; the rush to Molyneux followed the finds of Hartley and Reilly from San Francisco.”²⁸ Commenting on the mid-century rushes, another historian of New Zealand, Philip Ross May, pondered whether historians of the gold rushes were “dealing not with Californian or Victorian or New Zealand colonists but with a variety of the genus Pacific Man whose habitat is no particular country but the goldfields.”²⁹

But who were the goldseekers? A century and a half of historiography and popular memory have depicted independent, Anglo-American prospectors as the agents of civilization’s expansion and the rugged tammers of wilderness. This larger-than-life figure was much mythologized and sentimentalized by historians searching the goldfields for the origins of nations and national characters. Even those who viewed the gold rushes as part of wider, global processes cast the gold digger in the heroic mold. For Morrell, the rushes were significant mostly as “a tale . . . of adventure, enterprise, and endurance in which the common man of British and American stock showed the mettle of which he was made,” from which “evolved a new type of self-reliant character.” Morrell hoped his history of the gold rushes, published in London in 1940, at “a time which makes demands on all the energies and the endurance of which those peoples are capable,” would not “be wholly inappropriate reading.”³⁰ Some four decades earlier, James Herbert Curle had reflected on the industrial and imperial predominance of “English-speaking people,” who then “produce[d] nearly seven-eighths of the world’s gold.” Although Curle lamented the rampant speculation and dishonesty that characterized parts of the mining industry—the City of London being the “canker at the root of all that is worst”—and was disappointed by the average miner, he was full of

praise for the managers, captains, and technical experts whom he believed were the real heroes of the gold rush story: "Is it a coincidence that the English-speaking people have secured *all* the countries richest in gold, or may we assume that when other countries are prospected and mined in a thorough way, they will yield far more gold than they do now? I think there is no doubt that this assumption would be the correct one. . . . But, even then, the energy to do this, the mining knowledge, and probably most of the capital required, would still be supplied by the English-speaking peoples."³¹ A much more recent study describes the rushers as "Crusaders," fleeing the constraints and failings of their own civilization on a great modern quest—a characterization that at least alludes to the trail of destruction their "adventures" left behind.³²

Heroic narratives of the gold rushes have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years, particularly as historians have begun to focus on the hitherto neglected presence of women, children, indigenous peoples, and other incoming minority communities. Yet, we ought to recognize that on the goldfields of the Anglo settler societies of the Pacific Rim, British, American, and other northern European miners did indeed predominate and should be placed within their own categories of gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality. As James Belich has recently argued, midcentury gold rushers might be understood as the last great outpouring of "crew culture," an amorphous, masculine Anglo collective identity that was redirected from the world of maritime work to the goldfields and helped to propel and consolidate Western imperial domination.³³ This collective identity was an "antitype," born of white men's negotiation of, and violent interactions with, the alchemy of peoples and migrants resident and laboring on the goldfields.³⁴ On the goldfields, then, the transnational phenomenon of "whiteness" found powerful expression, connecting Anglo miners and drawing the global color line with greater clarity and density.³⁵

For all the importance of the Anglophone majority, though (and of the other northern Europeans who joined them), few goldseekers and contemporary observers failed to be fascinated by the cosmopolitan nature of mining communities and by the relationships that developed between diverse groups of diggers in mining towns and camps. From 1848, the rush for gold drew in fortune seekers from across the globe. Such were the multinational origins of the goldseekers of California, writes the historian Malcolm J. Rohrbough, that "the common denominator," uniting them, "was that they came from all over the world."³⁶ From Mexico and the Hawaiian Islands; from Chile, Peru,

and elsewhere in South and Central America; from Australia and New Zealand; from southeastern China; from Western and Eastern Europe—arrivals made their way to California to join California Indians, Californios, and those arriving from the East over land and sea.³⁷ In her vivid account *California, In-doors and Out* (1856), Eliza W. Farnham describes how she was struck by this cosmopolitanism. “Armies of men,” she noted, labored on the placers, “sustained through successive disappointments and fearful sufferings, by the hope which first drew them together. Among these incongruous battalia, are represented the homes and hopes of the world. Benighted Africa, despotic Asia, restless Europe, complacent America, sit down side by side in these treasure houses of nature.” The progress of this polyglot community assembled in the creeks and riverbeds of California, Farnham predicted, would resonate out across the oceans.³⁸ Subsequent rushes also attracted diverse minority communities alongside white miners. A visitor to British Columbia in the winter of 1858–59, for instance, would have stumbled across a motley crowd huddled together between Fort Langley and Fort Yale consisting of “ENGLISHMEN (staunch Royalists), *Americans* (Republicans), Frenchmen, very numerous, Germans in abundance, Italians, several Hungarians, Poles, Danes, Swedes, Spaniards, Mexicans, & *Chinese*.”³⁹ Four decades later, and farther north at the Klondike, a Canadian, American, and British majority toiled alongside miners from places as distant as Egypt, France, and Australasia.⁴⁰

Chinese miners alone constituted more than 25 percent of global gold rush migration.⁴¹ Had the same visitor moved from British Columbia to Victoria in 1859, he or she would have discovered upwards of forty-two thousand Chinese—roughly one in five men in the colony. Two decades later, at the Palmer River diggings in Queensland, twelve hundred miles north of Brisbane, he or she would have found seventeen thousand registered Chinese diggers and just fourteen hundred Europeans.⁴² The presence of such significant numbers of Chinese also speaks to the larger global and imperial drama of which the gold rushes were merely one, albeit compelling, subplot. By midcentury, Western intervention, lawlessness, overpopulation, and the impact of the Taiping and lesser anti-Manchu rebellions (and their suppression) had destabilized the southern coastal provinces of late Qing China. As word arrived of the fabulous riches available at the “Old Gold Mountain” (California) and the “New Gold Mountain” (Australia), through the western portals at Hong Kong and Amoy (now Xiamen), outward-looking and enterprising young men set out from their villages.⁴³ Ironically, it was the new

treaty port system imposed by the foreign powers that provided much of the architecture for the emigration of substantial numbers of Chinese.⁴⁴ While only a small proportion of the millions of migrants who left Guangdong and Fujian after the mid-nineteenth century made their way to the goldfields, the appearance of Chinese diggers (and the fear that more might follow) played powerfully on the economic and cultural anxieties of white miners.⁴⁵ The racism that developed toward minority communities on all the nineteenth-century goldfields usually found its most potent expression in a virulent, transnational Sinophobia, which inspired visions of a “White Pacific” and sped the erection of “great white walls” against Chinese migration.⁴⁶

None of the invaders—Western or Chinese—were arriving into unoccupied territories. The transnational circuits that converged on gold rush borderlands had catastrophic impacts on indigenous communities. While the appearance of goldseekers might present new opportunities for employment and trade, the miners and their followers also brought death and destruction through disease, violence, and environmental cataclysm. Recent scholarship has emphasized the enduring presence of indigenous people at the rushes and their contribution to the economic and social world of the mining camps. In one recent estimate, as many as four thousand California Indians worked in the central mines by the end of 1848—many of them because newcomers had shot or driven off game and ravaged traditional California Indian economies.⁴⁷ In Transvaal, these dynamics were less about persistence than the systematic exploitation of indigenous labor. The discovery of the Transvaal Main Reef in 1886 redrew economic patterns across the south African subcontinent. In this instance, the mines incorporated migrant laborers into a new industrial economy. Initially, black Africans migrated to the mines for limited wage employment, but under the combined pressures of colonial taxation, land dispossession, and ecological degradation, many black Africans had little choice other than to seek work in the new industrial centers surrounding Kimberley and Johannesburg.⁴⁸ By 1910, just twenty-four years later, the gold mining industry had created a coercive labor system that delivered two hundred thousand unskilled black workers annually to the mines from as far north as Central Africa (figure 1.2).⁴⁹

In California, as in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, indigenous knowledge was coveted by the gold-hungry newcomers—before subsequently being reclaimed as settler intuition. Across the Pacific, indigenous peoples assisted in many gold discoveries, labored in industries starved of other workers, and worked as guides and police. In New Zealand, Maori miners’ ability