

## Introduction

When Mark Twain sat down to record his global travels in 1895, after famously 'following the equator', he found the many strands of Australia's Eureka story irresistible. It was 'the finest thing in Australasian history', 'a revolution', 'a strike for liberty', 'a struggle for a principle' and 'a stand against injustice and oppression'. Ever the bold and uncompromising democrat, Twain placed the Australian rebellion in elite company, with 'the Barons and John', 'Hampden and Ship-Money' and 'Concord and Lexington'.

Twain was overwhelmed, like some commentators before him and so many after, by the wide range of narratives that Eureka contained, and illuminated.

Diversity of interpretations and interpreters was certainly on show during Eureka's most recent anniversary of significance, the 2004 sesquicentenary. Assorted representatives of the major political parties vied with any number of other groups – republicans, miners, bikies, artists, cartoonists, union members, rabid right-wing fringers, and more – to take command of the grand narrative. The Prime Minister at the time, John Howard, predictably censorious and typically out of touch with a changing Australia, refused to allow the Eureka flag to be flown atop Parliament House; by contrast, the ACT's then Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope, flew some 200 Southern Cross flags on just about every flagpole in the nation's capital.

This clash of interpretations a decade ago seemed somehow symbolically appropriate. As *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist John Huxley suggested at the time, Eureka is 'not so much history as many hundreds of versions of history'. Anne Beggs-Sunter, proud Ballarat resident and a devoted keeper of the Eureka flame and flag, served up a bigger slice of sesquicentenary creativity, likening our Eureka story to Norman Lindsay's magic pudding, 'capable of constantly being cut up, yet always able to renew and reinvent itself'.

Nothing has changed for the enthusiast today, except perhaps for the fact that opinions are now more sharply divided on a number of key issues. Questions abound. Has Eureka been blown out of all proportion to the actual events that took place in the early hours of that grim Sunday, bloody Sunday? Was it a massacre, or just another example of cautionary British justice at its Empire periphery? Was it Australia's first multicultural statement? Did the rebellion produce a cast of heroes and villains? Who 'owns' the Eureka story, the people or the pollies? Labor or the Coalition? The unions or the right-wing National Front? Where should the original Eureka flag permanently reside, and should it be treated as a sacred object? Should all Australians be familiar with the lofty sentiments expressed in the Charter of Bakery Hill? Is the Eureka story told too rarely today? Too often?

Perhaps most importantly: in 21st century Australia, has Eureka's significance suffered as a result of what one historian, Weston Bate, has termed its new 'five-star tourism' status, or is this simply the latest and most compelling evidence that (as Labor politician Andrew Leigh claims in these pages) Eureka is our nation's 'greatest story'?

Responding to these live and undiminished controversies of Eureka, its evolving narratives, the two editors of this volume last year hosted a symposium on the 160th anniversary of the rebellion. Supported by the Australian National University's Research School of Humanities and the Arts, and the Centre for the Study of Australian Politics, we asked some of Australia's best-known historians to take a fresh look at Eureka and, delighted with the results, we approached The Federation Press to consider publication.

We hope the book will stimulate renewed discussion of this milestone moment in Australian history.

*David Headon and John Uhr, editors*