

## NEW ZEALAND PROSPECTORS AND THE KIMBERLEY GOLD RUSH

At our meeting of 7 June 2000, before the launch of the book *Old Halls Creek: a town remembered*, Dr Cathie Clement spoke on the topic of 'New Zealand prospectors and the Kimberley gold rush'. Cathie has been undertaking research into the gold rush, when spare time permits, for many years. During that time, with the objective of eventually writing a book on the rush, she has pooled research material with Peter Bridge of Hesperian Press. More recently, Kimberley Society member Athol Farrant has been helping with the huge task of searching for information in the 1886 newspapers from all over Australia and New Zealand.

The research has shown that the most eager of the New Zealand prospectors were in the Kimberley months before June 1886, when the rush began. The general public, on the other hand, only started to read news items about the Kimberley in the second week of April. With unemployment levels high throughout the islands, hints of the existence of an extensive new field caused considerable excitement. It was clear, however, that this was not a poor man's field. With a big rush anticipated and supplies scarce, intending prospectors were urged to take provisions sufficient for six months. Many ignored this advice and paid heavily for their folly.

On 21 April the *Otago Daily Times* (Dunedin) summarised items of Australian news relating to the Kimberley. *The Age* (Melbourne) had published a telegram in which the Government Resident at Derby stated that professional diggers were predicting one of the biggest rushes in years. They were also said to be predicting a definite future in reefing. When the telegram was sent, five parties were down from the fields. With each one having brought some gold, more than 400 ounces were in Derby. No one mentioned the time taken to win the gold.

Within weeks, hundreds of people were preparing to leave New Zealand. In Wellington, where saddlers were hurriedly filling orders for money belts and diggers' bags, it was noted that the great expense involved in any large number of prospectors reaching Kimberley would have a serious affect on New Zealand's economy. People also pointed out that plenty of good ground remained untried in New Zealand, and that it would be much cheaper to prospect there.

On 3 May, at Dunedin, where several keen prospectors waited to board the *Waihora* for Melbourne, a Perth telegram confirmed that the goldfield lay three hundred miles inland. Undaunted, or perhaps unable to visualise country so different to their own, the prospectors sailed. Their names and their fate remain unknown.

The day before the *Waihora* left Dunedin, the first notices for direct passages from New Zealand ports to Kimberley appeared in Auckland. Thomas J Allen advised that a vessel would leave for Derby on or about 11 May. Captain A L Edgar offered

freight and passage on a fast steamer sailing for Cambridge Gulf and Derby on or about 20 May. Such notices were speculative and often disappeared without the vessel concerned having sailed. Captain Edgar did eventually sail the barque *Rapido* to Cambridge Gulf, landing 70 men and 6 horses there on 10 September 1886. By that time the rush was almost over and, on attempting to leave the Gulf for Fremantle, he ran the barque aground.

In the meantime, people had continued to leave for the Kimberley. First hand information was rare, and, when it did arrive, it was stale. A balanced but positive letter written at Derby on 1 April reached Donald Sutherland's brother-in-law in Dunedin a month later and was published on 6 May. Another second hand report told of a Derby storekeeper buying 84 ounces of gold from a party of two. Readers were also advised that the heat was intense, water scarce and the difficulties of reaching the place enormous.

Any rationality that might have come from the cautions was likely to have been dispelled by a Perth report that began circulating on 17 May. It told of John Slattery having found a 29-ounce nugget and, more importantly, of 2000 ounces of gold having reached Derby prior to the s.s. *Otway*, the ship that brought this amazing news, leaving King Sound.

Realism and romance were inextricably interwoven. Because of this, even in the sixth week of publicity, accurate visualisation of the Kimberley was impossible. Diggers with Californian experience, and to a lesser degree those who had worked in New South Wales and Victoria, may have read between the lines of the more graphic reports. If so, they surely had an edge on those who had never been to or beyond the New Zealand fields. With "Kimberley fever" raging, facts were prized less than visions of the wealth that reputedly lay in the red soil of that distant land. Hundreds of New Zealand people, mindful of the 2000 ounces of gold said to have reached Derby, were still anxious to secure passages to the Kimberley.

The research to date indicates that around 800 would-be prospectors left New Zealand for the Kimberley. More than 200 of these men arrived off Derby on the s.s. *Triumph* on 23 July 1886, causing a great commotion because the vessel had a suspected case of scarlet fever aboard. Other came in via Wyndham. Most of these diggers joined the procession of people making their way to Halls Creek with their wagons, drays, wheelbarrows and swags. Some just took one look at the port and opted to return with the ship on which they had arrived.

The Kimberley gold rush turned out to be a "storekeeper's rush" and, because the shipping companies promoted it so heavily in New Zealand, it cost the people from there dearly. Their experience was summed up by George Hales, a *Triumph* passenger, who went to the rush with friends named Partridge, Delamain, Stack and

Blake. The last of these men, Blake, lost his hand in a gun accident at Halls Creek. In summing up the rush, Hales wrote:

I don't think I have yet told you my opinion of the fields. I will do so. There are no alluvial fields worth the name. There is a certain amount of alluvial gold, but even if there was a sufficient constant supply of water (which there is not) not more than £3 a week could be obtained & that is too little for such an out of the way place where provisions must always be very dear. There are a few rich reefs but they are very thin & faulty. A man named Carr Boyd took 1100 pounds of stone to Ballarat to be tested. This may possibly be very rich but it is picked stone. A reef would have to be very rich to return good profit. The cartage of crushing machinery to the ground would be very expensive, it would be very difficult to provide a constant supply of water & firewood would have to be carted some miles over very rough country. The locus in quo is composed of very rough hills of loose friable granite & quartzites. There is no formation & the ground is very faulty. The most of the quartz from the reefs is rotten. To make a gold field will require a large amount of capital & I am thinking that capitalists will be very chary about investing their money in a place 300 miles from nowhere, & Carr Boyd (to put it mildly) is more likely to set Melbourne men against the field than otherwise. The storekeepers (who created the first rush) will endeavour to create another after the wet season. They have very large stocks & a very small market & will naturally wish to promote business. I don't suppose it will be necessary to warn fellows against a second rush. [Mitchell Library, MSS 688]

Hales and other New Zealand prospectors regretted their participation in the rush. Mr D N Hunter returned to Wellington after four months convinced that the so-called goldfields were 'a delusion and a snare'. He and three experienced West Coast diggers had succeeded in obtaining only 11/2 ounces of gold after three weeks' diligent search. Others like Edward Browne (founder of Browne's Dairy) and William Edward Routledge did well for themselves. But their good fortune came from leaving the Kimberley and settling in Perth.

No doubt, as the research continues, many other fascinating stories will be unearthed.