

RAFFAELLO 'GREAT WORKS'

The legacy of an Italian revolutionary to the history of Australia

by Angelo Cipullo

Angelo Cipullo was born in 1948 in Monterotondo near Rome. He studied at the University of Rome graduating in 1975 with a degree in Geological Sciences. He moved to Sydney the same year to take up a teaching fellowship in the School of Civil Engineering at the University of New South Wales, where he was awarded a Ph.D degree in 1984. During his distinguished professional career in both private practice and government positions in Australia, Hong Kong and USA, he was also commissioned to work in Africa for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. History is a passion which he has nurtured all his life. He and his wife now reside in Adelaide.

The reason behind the rather personalised title of this article will become clear after the following historical outline.

In 1851 gold was discovered in the creeks and gullies surrounding the present day site of Ballarat, a country town some seventy miles west of Melbourne. This discovery attracted many people from many parts of the world, all of them in search of a 'quick fortune'. Since much of the State of Victoria was Crown Land, gold could not be mined without permission and a system of licences was introduced. Struggling against bankruptcy and believing that many gold miners, locally known as 'diggers', were wealthy, the colonial government doubled the cost of the licence in early 1854 and the police intensified their inspections of the goldfields with what became known as 'licence hunts'. The miners had to pay their dues on demand and were harassed by police officials, yet they had no voice in the administration of the goldfields. It was not long before the miners organized themselves and revolted against what they felt was a harsh and oppressive government. At a meeting on 29 November 1854 the Ballarat Reform League was formed and its new flag, devised as a symbol of resistance, and hoisted up a tall flagpole was described by Carboni:

There is no flag in old Europe half so beautiful as the 'Southern Cross' of the Ballarat miners, first hoisted on the old spot, Bakery-hill. The flag is silk, blue ground, with a large silver cross, similar to the one in our southern firmament; no device or arms, but all exceedingly chaste and natural.¹

Next, pointing to the flag, Peter Lalor led the 500 or so diggers in proclaiming a solemn oath:

We swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other, and fight to defend our rights and liberties.

On 2 December, 1854 they marched to the Eureka gold field, erected a stockade of piled-up logs and lengths of timber and let the new flag fly high above the camp: this is known today as the Eureka flag. The goldfields government Commissioner believed the local police camp to be in danger and sent for reinforcements. At about 3.30 on the morning of Sunday, 3 December at least two hundred and ninety well-armed troops attacked the stockade where about only one hundred and twenty miners were spending the night. A brief but bloody battle ensued:

Coarse cries and oaths came from the police, soldiers and rebels alike- cries of fear, of pain; shouts of rage, threats and screams of horses, the crackling roar of weapon fire. Men fell, bleeding!²

It was all over in a matter of minutes and when the firing died down five of the troopers and thirty miners lay dead among the ruins of the stockade, and a legend was born! In Australia's history the revolt of the Eureka Stockade stands as the great example of courage and resistance to authority and it has come to be regarded as a milestone in Australian democracy. The daily events, the role of the 'diggers' and the uprising have all become part of Australia's popular culture and mythology. The only full-length eyewitness account of the battle at the Eureka Stockade, the events that preceded it and its aftermath, published in Melbourne one year after the uprising, was written, to 'set the record straight' by none other than an Italian revolutionary, his name: **Raffaello Carboni**, the title of his book: **The Eureka Stockade**.

Raffaello Carboni was born in Urbino on 15 December 1817.³ After a year at the University of Urbino, Carboni went to Rome in 1838 where he found employment at the church of Santa Trinità dei Pellegrini. The church was then a centre for foreign travellers and Carboni learnt French, German, Spanish and took lessons in English from the Very Reverend W. Vincent Eyre, vice-rector of the English College. In Carboni's own words: 'It has cost me immense pains to rear my English up to the mark; but I could never master the language to perfection'. Seminary studies were not for him and when he left he was engaged as a clerk in the Torlonia Bank by the Prince Alessandro Torlonia himself. As young Italian intellectuals became inflamed by Austrian oppression in the north and French interference in Italy at large, he joined the republican-inspired movement *Giovine Italia* founded by Giuseppe Mazzini. He was a soldier in the rebellions of 1848 and in the Roman campaign of 1849 when he was wounded three times. During a subsequent self-imposed political exile he travelled to Paris, Berlin, Malta, Cologne, Frankfurt and Hanover but spent most of his time in London where he taught languages as a member of the College of Preceptors. While in London in the summer of 1852 he was attracted, like many others, by articles, particularly those of the *Illustrated London News*, on the gold discoveries in Australia and promptly set sail for Melbourne where he arrived late that year.

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 Raffaele } nato 15: Xbre 1817.
 Som.^{co} } notte all'ore 3 2 della scorsa
 (Crescentino) } di notte Fig.^o di Biagio Carboni,
 di Dr. Girolama Fiorabanti, sua
 Mog.^o della P.^o di S. Sergio, Com.^o Tom.^o
 Gambucci della P.^o di S. Prodi Camp.
 Cavallo, Mad: la Sapi, Com.^o, Batterso
 il Sig. Dr. Bestomi

Extract from the parish register recording Carboni's birth.

Raffaello reached the goldfields of Ballarat soon after his arrival and worked there for nearly all of 1853, after which he took up shepherding since shepherds at that time were in short supply and hence well paid. He tells us a few things about his experiences:

One night lost the whole blessed lot of my flock. Myself, the shepherd, did not know, in the name of heavens, which way to turn. Got

among the blacks, the whole Tarrang tribe in corrobory, found natives very humane though. [Noted] the slender arms and small hands of their young girls, though the fingers be rather too long.⁴

After his experiences in shepherding and living with an Aboriginal tribe he succumbed to gold fever and returned to Ballarat where he stayed from Easter 1854 until the frightful morning of 3 December that year. Raffaello was known among the other miners with the nickname of 'Great Works' because he was always crying '*Cose Grandi!*', to underscore his passionate observation of events, laced with polyglot whimsy and occasional bombast. This aspect of Carboni's personality is evident in his form of address contained in a letter:

More et Consuetudine Romanorum Raffaello of the Ancient Roman Family de Carbonari Carbonis, who gave to Proconsuls under the Roman Republic (see Gibbons's or Niebuhr's *History of Rome*) ... To his respected W.H. Archer, Esqre, plenty of tin, heaps of gold dust, big lumps preferred of course.⁵

He was described as: 'a shrewd, restless little man, under the middle height, with reddish hair and red beard cut short, and small hazel eyes that had even a fiery twinkle beneath the broad forehead and rather shaggy eyebrows.'⁶ The following is Raffaello's own view of the unjust licensing system:

The incomprehensible, unsettled, impracticable ordinances for the abominable management of the goldfields, which ordinances are left to the discretion — that is the caprice — and to the good sense — that is the motto '*odi profanum vulgus et arceo*' — and to the best judgement — that is the proverbial incapability — of all aristocratical red tape: HOW TO RULE US VAGABONDS.⁷

At the invitation of Peter Lalor, the Irish leader of the Ballarat Reform League, Raffaello started attending the miners' meetings introducing himself as follows:

Myself, Carboni Raffaello da Roma; Member of the College of Preceptors (1850), Bloomsbury Square, professor, interpreter and translator of the Italian, French, Spanish and German languages into English or vice versa, late of 4, Castle-court, Birch-in-Lane, Cornhill, London; now gold-digger of Ballarat.⁸

He was an obvious spokesman for all miners of non-British origin. He spoke at the final, exasperated

meeting of the 'diggers' on 29 November with such fervor that he had to be led away from the platform by his own friends as he had launched into an 'inflammatory and suicidal rant'.⁹ He was also part of a small group that went to petition for the discontinuance of 'licence hunting'. Raffaello was put in charge of the foreign detachment and became a member of the central council of twelve miners. After drilling his troops on Saturday 2 December, Raffaello left the Stockade about midnight. At that stage there was confidence that a resolution could be obtained without bloodshed and nobody was expecting any assault from the military and the police. Raffaello slept in his tent which was very close to, but outside the Stockade. The noise of the assault of the British troops and police awakened him and he took shelter in his chimney from the erratic crossfire from both sides. In his book he gives a very accurate and vivid account of the battle, including the bayonetting atrocities which followed the taking of the Stockade. When the assault forces began to burn tents around the Stockade, he came out to protest, was arrested, then released, and spent considerable time helping the wounded. Later on that Sunday he was arrested again and later charged with high treason and tried together with other survivors. At the trial in Melbourne, eight police and military witnesses gave false evidence against him and the judge did his best



Raffaello Carboni, c1850.
Courtesy State Library of Victoria

to influence the jurors towards a guilty verdict. In Raffaello's own words: 'His Honour tried the patience of the jury'.¹⁰ Raffaello was acquitted and subsequently unanimously elected to the new local miners' court at Ballarat where he served for the following six months.

There is one source which says that Raffaello was cowardly at the Stockade: 'The fiery son of Mars skulked in his chimney inside the Stockade.'¹¹ Keneally maintains 'it is obvious from all the evidence that Raffaello's tent *was* outside the Stockade, and his services to the wounded were hardly those of a coward. Nor did any witness, hostile or not, accuse him of cowardice. In fact Raffaello himself [was] amused that the Crown [Prosecutor's] witnesses... paint[ed] him as a particularly fearsome rebel leader.'¹² Carboni himself admitted that once the diggers were caught between two fires, further resistance was useless and he was caught by a police inspector at pistol point and made prisoner as he was rushing towards his tent to rescue his books and papers.¹¹ Furthermore if there had been any perception that Raffaello behaved badly at the Stockade, his election to the very first miners court would have been unlikely.¹³

He returned to Ballarat after his acquittal especially to produce his account of the events, to exonerate himself and both the dead and survivors of the Stockade, to flay colonial authorities who contributed to the general inequities which prevailed on the goldfields and to depict the crimes against humanity committed on the fateful morning of 3 December and thereafter, including the unjust detention of prisoners, himself amongst them. He knew that his presentation of the events might be dismissed because of his Italian background as it was said: 'What business have these foreign beggars to come and dig for gold on British Crown Land?'¹⁴ Some early historians tended to blame events on foreign agitators and Raffaello was described as: 'a redheaded Italian who seemed to hate all authority because he had been brought up to hate the Austrians'¹⁵ More recent historians afford a more sympathetic attitude towards Raffaello's account. Comments on Raffaello's style range from 'commingled spredeagleism to 'a literary freak of extraordinary vividness and entertainment value' to 'it is impossible to deny him greatness as writer and 'historian'.¹⁶ In the introduction to a 1969 edition of the book the Australian historian G. Serle wrote: 'The more

work that is done on the subject of Eureka, the more reliable Raffaello's narrative proves to be. 'None of the facts he states from observation have been disproved'.¹⁷ There is now strong agreement among historians that, whatever could be said about Raffaello's idiosyncrasies as an eyewitness account, *The Eureka Stockade* reeks of truth.¹⁸ The writer Brian Fitzpatrick as early as 1947 said of the book: 'As an accurate account of the incidents which it describes, it merits being "prescribed" reading in every Australian school, and self-prescribed reading for every Australian citizen'.¹⁹

A number of important social changes and political improvements arose out of the event at Eureka. These included: abolition of the oppressive licensing fee, greater democracy for the diggers, the right to vote for political representatives and the realisation that all colonists had to be treated in a more civilised manner. As for the original Eureka flag, it is well documented that during the attack it was hauled down from a flag pole by trooper John King and brought in triumph to the Government camp where small pieces were allowed to be torn as souvenirs. The flag remained in the King family until 1895 when it was presented to the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery where it has remained to this day.

Raffaello Carboni sailed from Australia on 18 January 1856 on the French vessel *Princess Eugénie* and after three years of travel in the East he returned to Italy via London and Paris. His linguistic knowledge afforded him positions as official interpreter for the municipalities of Milan and Genoa. He took part in the *'Expedition of the Thousand'* during which Giuseppe Garibaldi gave him captain's rank. He subsequently worked in Palermo as interpreter and translator in the office of statesman Francesco Crispi and when promoted to the position of first grade sub-commissar of war he was also entrusted with the secret correspondence between Crispi and Lord John Russell. Soon after he became assistant to Ippolito Nievo but left Sicily following the premature death of the young writer. He travelled in Europe for a time and settled in Naples for reasons of health. He wrote and published a number of plays, libretti and grand operas but none was presented on stage nor was his music publicly performed. He returned to Rome in 1870 where he died at the Saint James' Hospital on 24 October 1870, unemployed and financially embarrassed.

In his death certificate he is described as 'unmarried' and 'man of letters'. The location of his grave is unknown.²⁰

And so Raffaello Carboni, known as 'Great Works' on the antipodean goldfields, remains unknown in Italy but is remembered 'Down Under' as having been a significant part of, eyewitness to and faithful reporter on one of the most significant events in the history of Australia.

NOTES

- ¹ R. Carboni, *The Eureka Stockade with an introduction by Tom Keneally*, Melbourne University Press, 1993. Pp 67-8.
- ² B. O'Brien, *Massacre of Eureka*, 1992, p 89.
- ³ The State Archives of Turin declare that he was born on 24 June 1820. However, the records in the register of San Giorgio parish, Urbino show that he was born at 3 am on 15 December 1817 and christened by Father Bertoni the same day.
- ⁴ R. Carboni, op. cit, p 9.
- ⁵ Cited in T. Keneally's Introduction, p xiii
- ⁶ W.B. Withers, *History of Ballarat*, 1870 cited by T. Keneally, op. cit, p x.
- ⁷ R. Carboni, op. cit, p. 14.
- ⁸ *ibid* p 63.
- ⁹ T. Keneally, op. cit, pp xii-xiii.
- ¹⁰ R. Carboni, op. cit, p 161.
- ¹¹ J. Lynch, *The Story of the Eureka Stockade*, p 13, cited by G. Serle in his Introduction to Raffaello Carboni, *The Eureka Stockade*, Melbourne University Press, 1969.
- ¹² T. Keneally, op. cit, pp xvi-xvii.
- ¹³ *ibid*, p xvii.
- ¹⁴ *ibid*, p xviii.
- ¹⁵ *ibid*, pp vii-ix.
- ¹⁶ *ibid*, p x.
- ¹⁷ G. Serle, op. cit, p xiv.
- ¹⁸ T. Keneally, op. cit, p x.
- ¹⁹ Cited by T. Keneally, *ibid*.
- ²⁰ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Edited by D.H. Pike, 1986, Vol 3, pp 352-353.