

Benjamin Mountford, Stephen Tuffnell, eds.. *A Global History of Gold Rushes*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018. 336 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-96758-8.

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Commenting on the Australian gold rush that had dawned in 1852, the Scottish journalist R. H. Patterson praised the "vast and sudden spread of civilised mankind over the earth" that it had engendered, "making deserts and waste places bloom, [and] cities to rise amid the solitude." [1] Patterson and countless contemporaries were acutely aware of the global implications of gold rushes, which transformed California as well as Australia, and extended to Alaska, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa, among many other regions, between 1848 and 1910. Despite this, few historians have treated these events in a comparative perspective. A rare exception was Douglas Fetherling's *The Gold Crusades* (1997), which provided a comprehensive synthesis of the many local studies that had been produced up to that time. Another, focusing only on the midcentury rushes in California and Australia, was David Goodman's *Gold Seeking* (1994). Since then the norm has reverted to articles and monographs that speak to relatively narrow national or regional historiographies. This is at least somewhat surprising since, as the preface to *A Global History of Gold Rushes* notes, globalization has been such a pervasive meme over the past two decades. With this book, which emerged from a conference at Oxford University in 2015, Benjamin Mountford and Stephen Tuffnell offer a corrective to this ten-

dency by inviting eight scholars to join them in considering gold rushes as a site for the mobility of "goods, people, and ideas" in the second half of the nineteenth century (p. 7). Although the result is more fragmentary than Fetherling's synthesis, it displays a more sophisticated understanding of global connections and ventures into new territory including financial speculation, technology, geology, and racial politics. Perhaps also indicating the book's Oxford origins, several of the essays build in useful ways on James Belich's influential arguments about settler societies in *Replenishing the Earth* (2009).

One echo from Belich that resonates in several of the contributions concerns the boom-and-bust nature of most of the gold rushes. Elliott West notes that California's isolation necessitated the fast-paced development of industry and agriculture in the new state within a decade of 1848, which in turn provided safe landing for the thousands of miners who never struck it rich. Cassandra Mark-Thiesen describes the locust-like descent of mining companies on the Gold Coast in 1900, followed by their swift departure when the "jungle boom" quickly fizzled (p. 165). And Ian Phimister provides an overview of the many companies that engaged in what one contemporary called "bogus financeering and ... charlatan engineering" as shareholders sought fortunes in South

Africa and Western Australia in the 1890s (p. 154). In all these cases, the authors stress that prospectors and investors were not the only ones to suffer from such frenetic grasping after gold. Arable land in California came at the expense of forests and wildlife that formed the basis for Native American subsistence, leading to a decline in their numbers by as much as 90 percent. In her essay on the less well-known rush near Nome, Alaska, Bathsheba Denuth recounts deforestation and depletion of salmon from mercury poisoning—and also, like West, identifies gold as perhaps the only commodity with high enough profit margins to enable miners to meet the steep expenses that the region's isolation imposed.

Besides the movement (or extinction) of people and wildlife, many of the essays in *A Global History of Gold Rushes* trace the migration of ideas, ranging from racism to engineering. Mae Ngai charts the emergence of Chinese exclusion in California (the result of local political grandstanding more than animosity among miners), then follows this to Australia and South Africa—where in each case it borrowed from earlier justifications, but also reflected local political contexts. Goodman discusses the movement of land policy from Georgia, where gold served as a pretext for confiscating Cherokee property in the 1830s, to Australia in the 1850s. And Tuffnell locates mining technology in the context of "transnational professionalization" with a distinctively American accent (p. 243). As with booms and busts, such transfers of ideas were not victimless: Cherokees and Chinese bore the brunt of racist laws, while the environment suffered from each new technological breakthrough—as Andrew Isenberg shows in a fine-grained analysis of the spread of hydraulic mining from California to New Zealand and British Columbia.

For the most part, *A Global History of Gold Rushes* assumes rather than argues why, exactly, so many people and so much money chased after gold during the half-century after 1850. In other

words, a stand-alone essay or substantial consideration in the introduction of the rise of the international gold standard would have been very helpful. Another qualm concerns the claim about the gold rushes' transformative nature. Transformation is a relative term, and with just a few exceptions—Goodman on Georgia and Ngai, briefly, on Borneo—this book treats its subject as a big bang with virtually no prehistory. Although smaller in scale, gold mining conjured comparable movements of people to Brazil in the eighteenth century, Indonesia during the decades surrounding 1800, and Siberia in the 1840s; and financial speculation in Latin American gold mines in 1825 (almost none of which turned a profit) was one of the prime factors in the first stock market crash of the nineteenth century. More generally, the moral categories that enabled Anglo-Americans to make sense of what was going on in California and Australia dated even further back, to northern European views of the Spanish Conquest and its aftermath. And the gold standard, finally, aided Britain's rise to economic dominance during the century before 1850, which goes far to account for the international scramble to acquire that metal (and thereby catch up with Britain, if possible), once improved technology made that possible. Leaving aside these concerns, however, this collection moves the study of migration, finance, and technology forward in consistently strong essays that are as readable as they are informative.

Note

[1]. "Gold and Social Politics," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 94 (1863): 507.

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