

### *Tales of Eureka: A Correspondent on the Diggings*

Professional and passionate storyteller Anne E. Stewart has woven Eureka into her vast repertoire,  
writes **Liz Gooch**

"I was there mister, when the shooting had finished, I came back to find me da . . . Ah mister, I gotta tell ya for a long time I had nightmares about that day and there was one image I couldn't get out of my head. Two fellas must have been right soused, cause they hadn't woken up until they were on fire and I saw them running from their tents, like human torches. Everywhere about me tents were burning. I watched wounded diggers being stuck with bayonets and I looked for the face of my father amongst them. In one place they had dragged more diggers to die, some of them were still heaving, and at every rise of their breasts, the blood spouted out of their wounds, or just bubbled and trickled away."

Some 150 years may have passed since the Eureka Stockade but disputes about the event still continue today. No one knows for sure whether any young boy actually experienced the above scene but for the story's author, Anne E. Stewart, the finer points of Eureka are not so important. It's the spirit of the event she wants people to hear about.

During the past 25 years, the Ballarat storyteller has travelled around the country, adding to her ever-growing collection of myths, legends and ghost stories. Now Stewart has thrown her creative energies into recreating the events that many say shaped Australia's history. "Not everyone knows what the story is. And as a storyteller I think it is important that the story be told," she says.

Stewart has written and recorded a radio series entitled *A Correspondent from the Diggings – Tales of Eureka*, which can be heard on ABC Ballarat. The stories are based on actual events but for each of the 20, four-minute episodes, Stewart adopts a different persona. Her characters include an indigenous woman, miners from around the world, the local priest and government officials.

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"Eureka, it's got it all," she says. "That's why I like it. It's passion, love affairs, and the other great thing about it is, here (in Ballarat) I can actually take people to places where it happened."

After reading numerous accounts of the uprising where about 22 miners died, Stewart didn't struggle to find inspiration. A librarian by trade, she wrote most of the series in the early morning while her children, aged 14 and 16, were still in bed.

"I loved it. I had so much fun doing it," she says.

After months of research, Stewart now feels rather moved when recounting her stories.

"It's made me more passionate about it," she says.

While the miners' courageous efforts are often discussed, Stewart, president of the Victorian Storytelling Guild, thought it was important the story of the women on the goldfields was told.

"Times were so hard for women," she says. "They'd bury babies and, giving birth, you might be in your tent . . . on your own. It was really tough."

She has told stories in schools, shopping centres and halls, but Stewart, 46, is most content plying her trade in the stillness of the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery. With its abundance of Eureka-inspired works, the gallery has provided the perfect backdrop. "I've been telling it here in front of actual artefacts and you can create a real sense of history," she says.

After growing up in Melbourne, Stewart has spent most of her adult life in Ballarat and the surrounding area. She travels anywhere for work and spends most of her time entertaining schoolchildren. She discovered the type of stories she wanted to tell during three years in the Northern Territory.

"That starts getting you thinking about Australia and the land and how we belong. That has been something that I've concentrated on - Australians' relationship to our land," she says. "I've lived with Aboriginal people and they go, well 'who are your people, what are your stories?' and that's what I've been trying to figure out for years." Her next project will focus on six little-known stories about Melbourne that celebrate cultural diversity.

Stewart's tales are largely influenced by life-changing episodes. One of her stories focuses on an East Timorese boy whose father went missing for 10 years during the 1970s. The catalyst for the tale was a trip to East Timor last year in memory of her brother, Tony Stewart, one of the five journalists killed in East Timor in 1975. She says it was like the first funeral for her brother.

"We came away with a great sense of joy really. The East Timorese people were so kind and generous to us," she says.

With her booming voice and captivating manner, it's easy to imagine an audience enthralled by Stewart's tales. After 25 years of storytelling, she knows what it takes to keep children entertained. And she doesn't shy away from the difficult task of performing before a teenage crowd.

"Not many people like to do teenagers but I'm mad enough to have a go at it," she says. "Some days you start and the whole class is throwing rulers and rubbers and . . . then in the end you've lulled them all in."

So how do you explain to schoolchildren the complexities of Eureka, a 150-year-old story that many adult Australians struggle to verbalise? According to Stewart, the story sells itself. "This is where men and women said 'this is unjust, you can't treat us like that'. I mean, that's pretty big stuff and being a storyteller, I love it!"

With her bubbly, enthusiastic nature, telling stories for a living comes naturally to Stewart. It may be an unusual occupation but it's one on which she thrives.

"It's kind of primal and universal," she says. "It's almost like I feel like I hypnotise them sometimes."