

Peter Lalor



Portrait of Peter Lalor

Biography

Peter Lalor, an Irish migrant, cemented his place in Australia's history as the charismatic leader of the Eureka Stockade rebellion. He later became an important politician in Victoria and continued the fight for the rights of miners and the common working class.

Born: 5th February 1827, Raheen, Ireland
Died: 9 February 1889, (aged 62) Richmond, Australia
Spouse: Alicia Dunne (m. 1855–1887)
Children: Anne Lalor, Joseph Lalor

Early Life

Lalor was born in Raheen, Ireland in 1827 and was the younger brother to eleven siblings. His father, Patrick, was a politician, and his brother, James Fintan, was also very active in Irish politics. At this stage of his life, Lalor was uninterested in politics. He went on to study in Dublin and became a civil engineer. There was political unrest in Ireland and a famine which saw many people flee the country. Lalor and his brother Richard left Ireland and travelled to Victoria, Australia in 1852.

Arrival in Australia

Once in Australia, Lalor and his brother worked on the construction of the Melbourne-Geelong railway. They also worked as wine, spirit and provisions merchants. Attracted by the gold discoveries, Lalor set out for the Ovens diggings in 1853. His brother returned to Ireland. In 1854, Lalor decided to go to Ballarat in search of gold and staked a claim on the Eureka lead. During this time, tensions were rising on the goldfields because large licence fees were being imposed.

Eureka Stockade

In 1854, Lalor joined the Ballarat Reform League whose primary objective was to oppose the miner's licence and introduce Chartist reforms including voting rights for all men. At an assembly of miners, on November 30, 1854, following a massive 'digger hunt', Lalor became the leader of the Eureka uprising. In the absence of the Reform

League's regular leaders, Lalor stepped forward and proclaimed "Liberty". He rallied the miners, called on them to arm themselves for battle and encouraged them to swear an oath, "We swear by the Southern Cross, to stand truly by each other, and fight to defend our rights and liberties". The rebellious miners then built a stockade.



Illustration showing miners swearing allegiance to the Southern Cross

On December 3, 1854, the police and military attacked the stockade. Lalor was seriously wounded in the left arm, resulting in its amputation. A warrant for Lalor's arrest was issued, but he was taken from Ballarat and hidden by his supporters.

He went into hiding for several weeks and fled to Geelong where he was taken care of by Alicia Dunne. A reward was offered for information leading to Lalor's arrest; however, public sympathy was in favour of the miners and the heroic Lalor, and it was revoked in March 1855.

Politics

Following Eureka, Lalor was elected to the Victorian Legislative Council in 1855 to represent Ballarat. He went on to serve in the Legislative assembly in 1856. Lalor generally advocated for the miners, gave political support to a national education system, the protection of local industry, and immigration. When he wasn't serving, Lalor focused on private business and worked as a land and mining agent and as a director of mining companies. Lalor became Speaker of the Legislative Assembly in July 1880. He was elected unanimously to the position of Speaker and served until he resigned September 1887.

Death

Lalor died February 9, 1889. A requiem mass was held in Melbourne, where he was buried. A statue of Lalor was also erected in Ballarat and several institutions are named after him.

Lalor has a significant place in history, and the Eureka Stockade has become Australian legend. The violent uprising is perceived by many as the event that kick-started democracy in Australia. It demonstrated the courage and determination of the diggers and their willingness to defend their rights.

