Gold made the second half of the nineteenth century. In those fifty years more gold was mined than in the previous 3000. The rushes were global, and they transformed populations and environments. English-speaking men were numerous on the goldfields, even though they were cosmopolitan and, especially, included many Chinese. Women’s work on goldfields is often sidelined, but was essential in providing services of all kinds (a theme which I felt deserved a chapter). Goldfields were also implicated in massive indigenous displacement, even as indigenous peoples participated in them, with varying degrees of willingness. The environmental transformations accompanying goldmining were far-reaching, and often wrecked indigenous economies. Most goldfields saw the progression from low-tech individual mining to corporate and technologically sophisticated processes. This volume is a tightly organised, illuminating discussion of many of these themes across the globe, and as such reinforces the point that no goldfield was exceptional. Much of the book emphasises the Pacific Rim goldfields. Elliott West suggests that it all began in California, and what happened there was the template for what followed. Gold was coincidental with the expansion of Anglo-American empires, and certainly secured the Pacific coast for the United States. There, as elsewhere, mining bore hard on indigenous communities, but made for explosive colonisation.

Three chapters critically discuss settler democracy. David Goodman emphasises that the general approach was to privatise mineral wealth. In Georgia, state governors in the 1820s sought to prohibit private mining or at least limit miners’ profits. Not surprisingly, intending miners objected. The Cherokee nation – even as legislators were devising their expulsion - asserted its own claim to the gold on its remaining land. The Georgia legislature simply expropriated the Cherokee lands, and allocated them to white men by ballot. Goodman then convincingly argues that Eureka, with its protests about mining licenses, was an individualist democracy which sought to privatise wealth and to minimise the responsibility of the individual to the collective – to take without contributing. Benjamin Mountford makes the point that discussions of goldfields ‘law and order’ begs the question, whose order, and whose law. California miners called themselves settlers; Native Americans would have seen them as invaders, and in any case it was a populist order which could shade into lynch law. White mining populism’s favourite folk devil was the Chinese, and Mae Ngai points out that the goldrushes – linked to globalization and empire – were the first time large numbers of whites had encountered Chinese in any number. Often, she shows, anti-Chinese language became an election winner just as the easy mining was ending. In Australia, however, prejudice became intense only later in the context of indentured Pacific and Asian workers in the north, and as Australian nationalism was constructed as a white nationalism.

A section on finance and economics includes an illuminating discussion by Ian Phimister on mining shares on metropolitan stock exchanges. Financial speculation was an integral part of every goldrush, and promoters’ optimism is nothing new. As well as metropolitan exchanges, mining shares drove infant exchanges in remote settler colonies. Cassandra Mark-Thiesen’s discussion of the Gold Coast is an excellent study of how remoteness and lack of information played into the hands of careless promoters, as well as a very careful discussion of labour relations, where the workforce included Europeans, Chinese, and Africans from near and far. Erik Eklund offers a wideranging discussion of company formation and labour relations in industrial mining. Steam allowed crushing to proceed around the clock, and labour relations were often tense (more research about hard rock miners as an international, and sometimes
militant, group of workers is invited). Unlike the Pacific rim, the Rand goldfields were corporate from the start because the gold was deep and in hard rock. The workforce hierarchies were thoroughly racialized and remained so, institutionalised in law in 1911. Eklund suggests that white labourism on the Rand was strongly influenced by Australian miners there.

Mining had a profound influence on the environment. As Andrew Isenberg shows, craters, tailings and toxic debris were the legacy of hydraulic mining. Deforestation was another cost; California lost a third of its timber by 1870. The legal framework was contested, because the fundamental questions were who benefitted and who paid. Stephen Tuffnell’s chapter deals with mining engineers, an international professional community with an international technical press, as well as connections with organisations like the Royal Geographical Society. Mining engineering was an international profession, and an imperial one. Even mining engineering is limited by the environment, as Bathsheba Demuth shows in her chapter on the Nome. The easy gold was on the beach, but once that was gone, extracting gold from tundra and permafrost was difficult. Again, massive environmental transformation resulted as water was heated and applied to the permafrost, as sluicing took hold, as forests were cut down and fisheries (essential to indigenous economies) massively diminished by habitat destruction.

This book is a welcome contribution, opening up agendas for future research in many dimensions of mining history, and reminding exponents of any one national mining history against undue exceptionalism.

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