

BRIGHT FINE GOLD

by Mark Derby



When gold was discovered near the Tuapeka River in 1861, thousands of people flocked to Central Otago. Almost overnight, whole towns sprang up in remote spots where no one had lived before. The miners came from many different places, but they all shared the same hope: to get rich. This never happened for most people, and they moved on. But for a time, Otago was home to a unique community.

GABRIEL'S GULLY

The Otago gold rush began with a man named Gabriel Read. An experienced miner, Read spent ten days **prospecting** in Otago's back country. One day, just on dusk, he spotted gold in his pan. It was, he said, "shining like the stars in Orion on a dark frosty night". The place – at the time just a creek bed in an unremarkable valley – became known as Gabriel's Gully.

Read's find, in May 1861, sparked a frantic response. Men from New Zealand and overseas poured into the area. At the time, the only town anywhere near Gabriel's Gully was the quiet port settlement of Dunedin. Over the next few years, Dunedin became New Zealand's biggest city as thousands of miners passed through on their way to the goldfields.

Gabriel's Gully, 1864



BOOM AND BUST



Otago in the 1860s

Other than in Dunedin, there were few roads in Otago. Miners had to follow rough tracks to reach Gabriel's Gully. Once there, they lived in tents or shacks, creating an instant "canvas town". A few miners even lived in caves. The landscape was rugged and isolated, and the weather was harsh, especially during winter. There was no wood for fuel, and it took weeks for much-needed supplies to arrive by wagon.

By Christmas 1861, there were nearly ten thousand prospectors in and around Gabriel's Gully. Many had come from the gold rushes in Australia and California. These experienced miners were usually the first to find gold. They were among the lucky few. Most men lived in hope.

The gold at Gabriel's Gully was soon worked out, but the following year, there was a new **strike** near Cromwell. Again, thousands of men raced along dangerous mountain tracks to reach the Dunstan field, where the work began all over again. This cycle of boom and bust was repeated many times.

Getting Gold

Otago's gold was mostly alluvial, which meant it came from the rock and sand in riverbeds. Some of the very first arrivals simply plucked nuggets from mountain streams. More often, prospectors spent long days shovelling gravel from stream beds into metal pans or wooden cradles. These simple tools were used to separate the gold dust from the worthless stones and sand.

Once the "easy" river gold had been taken, miners were forced to extract it from hard rock. This required a lot more effort, such as building long **sluice boxes**. It also meant bringing in plenty of water, sometimes from many miles away. Later, huge mechanical sluices were built. These had powerful hoses that could wash away whole hillsides. Equipment like sluices was expensive and usually owned by companies that employed miners on a wage. By 1900, the digger with his metal pan and shovel was a distant - and romantic - memory.



A mechanical sluice



Raniera Erihana

Before Pākehā came to New Zealand, Māori had no use for gold. Later, many Māori joined the gold rushes. Some had success on the West Coast, where they were already skilled at finding pounamu.

Raniera Erihana (also known as Dan Ellison) joined the rush to the Tuapeka goldfield in 1861. The following year, gold was discovered in the Shotover River. Erihana headed for Skippers Canyon, near present-day Queenstown, with two friends and his dog. The story says that one day, the dog fell into the fast-flowing river and became stranded on a shingle beach on the other side. When Erihana swam over to rescue the dog, he noticed gold dust clinging to its coat. That day, Erihana and his friends collected more than 11 kilograms of gold dust from cracks in the rock walls. It was worth 1,600 pounds, a huge amount of money at the time. The spot of this lucrative find was later named Māori Point.

BLACKSMITHS AND BOOTMAKERS

Soon after miners began working a new goldfield, shopkeepers would arrive with their horse-drawn wagons loaded with supplies. They set up big, wooden-framed tents and sold essential things such as food, tools, and clothing. Later a canvas town might attract blacksmiths, butchers, bakers, and bootmakers, some of whom established their businesses in more permanent buildings made

from wood or stone. Most of the more successful mining towns went on to have pubs, banks, churches, theatres, schools, and newspapers. Women came to work in these towns, often as barmaids, teachers, and cooks. Many of them married miners and stayed to raise families. Domestic life was difficult on the goldfields, which were usually in the middle of nowhere.



Bank of New South Wales Cromwell
18687



Little Biddy of the Buller

There were only a few women goldminers in New Zealand. One of them was Bridget Goodwin, who was born in Ireland and came to New Zealand in the 1860s with her friends Bill and Jack.

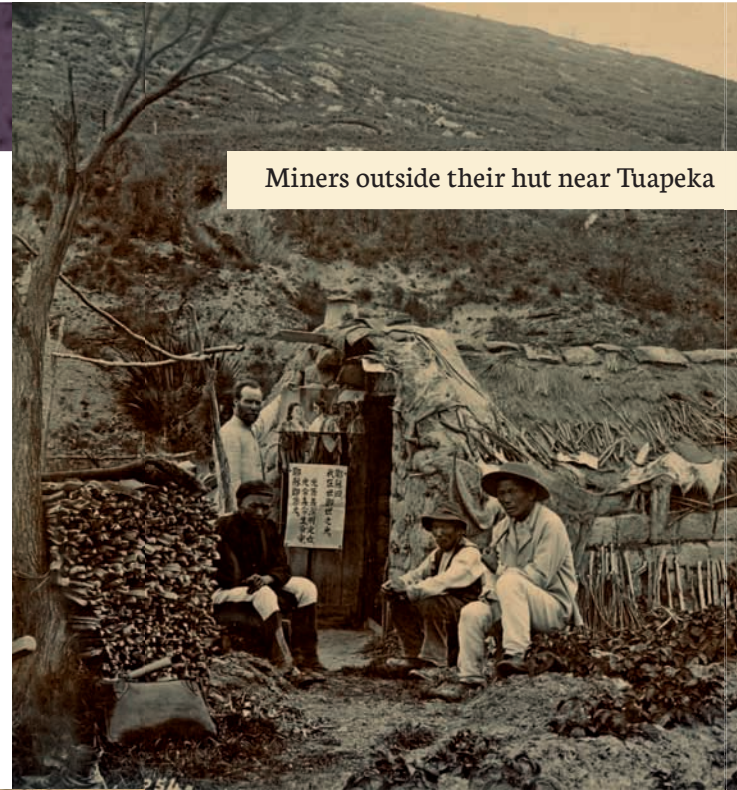
Goodwin was known as Little Biddy because she was only around 4 feet (1.2 metres) tall, yet she worked as hard as anyone. The three friends mined mostly in the Buller River on the West Coast, often standing in cold water all day as they shovelled gravel into their sluice box. They lived together in a hut near Lyell, now a ghost town in the Buller Gorge.

Little Biddy couldn't read or write, and she liked to smoke a pipe. She was well liked by her neighbours because she was generous to both visitors and strangers and she kept her hut spotless. Bill and Jack both died before Little Biddy. In spite of her hard life, "Little Biddy of the Buller" lived to be eighty-six years old.

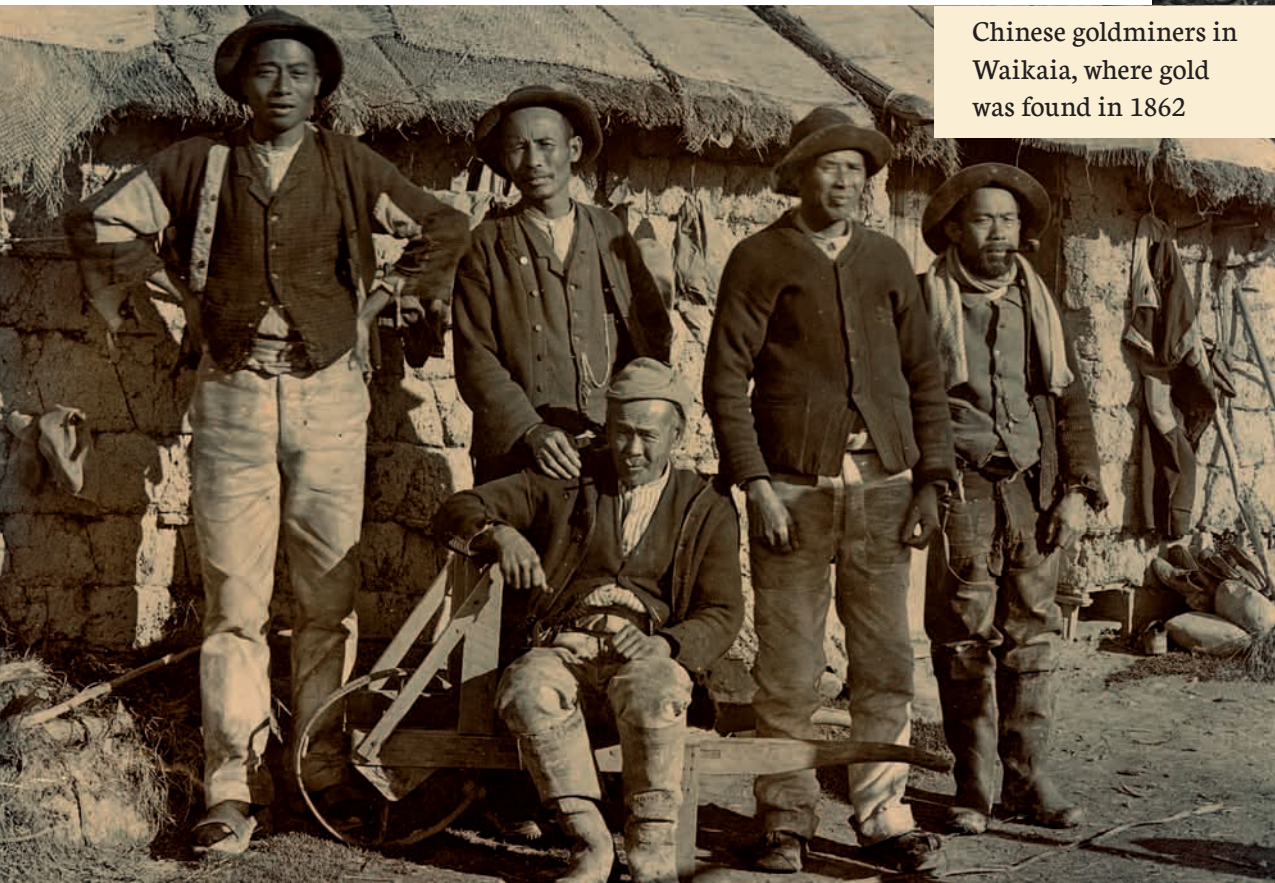
THE NEW MINERS

By 1865, a new gold rush was happening on the West Coast. As the population of Otago plummeted, hundreds of Chinese miners were encouraged to come and rework the Otago goldfields. These miners, who were mostly from southern China, called New Zealand Sun Kum Shan or the New Gold Mountain. It was a place to get rich before returning home.

Most of the Chinese didn't speak English, and they preferred to build small stone houses away from the other miners. They often had their own shops, run by their own people. Working patiently through the piles of rock left behind, some Chinese miners were rewarded with gold, but many remained poor and far away from a home they never saw again.



Miners outside their hut near Tuapeka



Chinese goldminers in Waikaia, where gold was found in 1862



A miner with his wooden cradle on the banks of the Clutha River

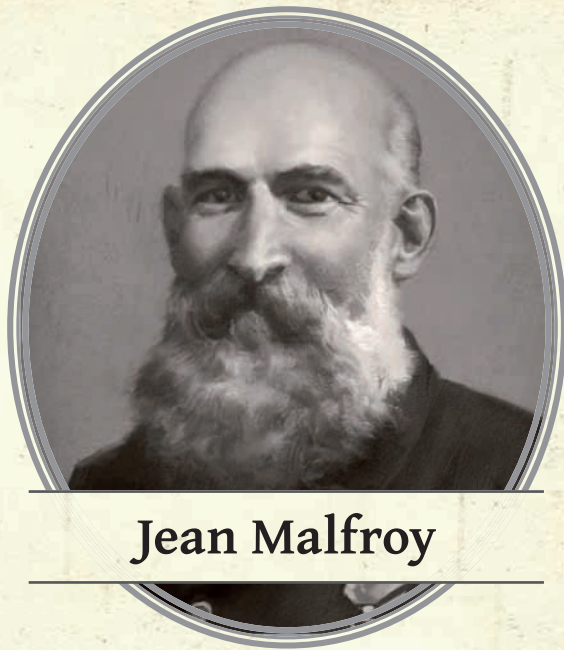


Ah Lum

Some Chinese miners became well-known in their communities. Ah Lum saved a British miner from drowning in the Shotover River, which made him something of a local hero. In 1909, he became a storekeeper in Arrowtown. As well as European supplies, his shop sold Chinese teas, medicines, salted garlic, pickled lemons, and shrimp sauce. Ah Lum's shop was said to smell "spicy and mysterious".

Ah Lum spoke English well, and he often interpreted for other Chinese. Sometimes he wrote their letters and banked their money. Each Saturday, he led a parade of Chinese miners through the streets of Arrowtown. They all carried vegetables they had grown for sale.

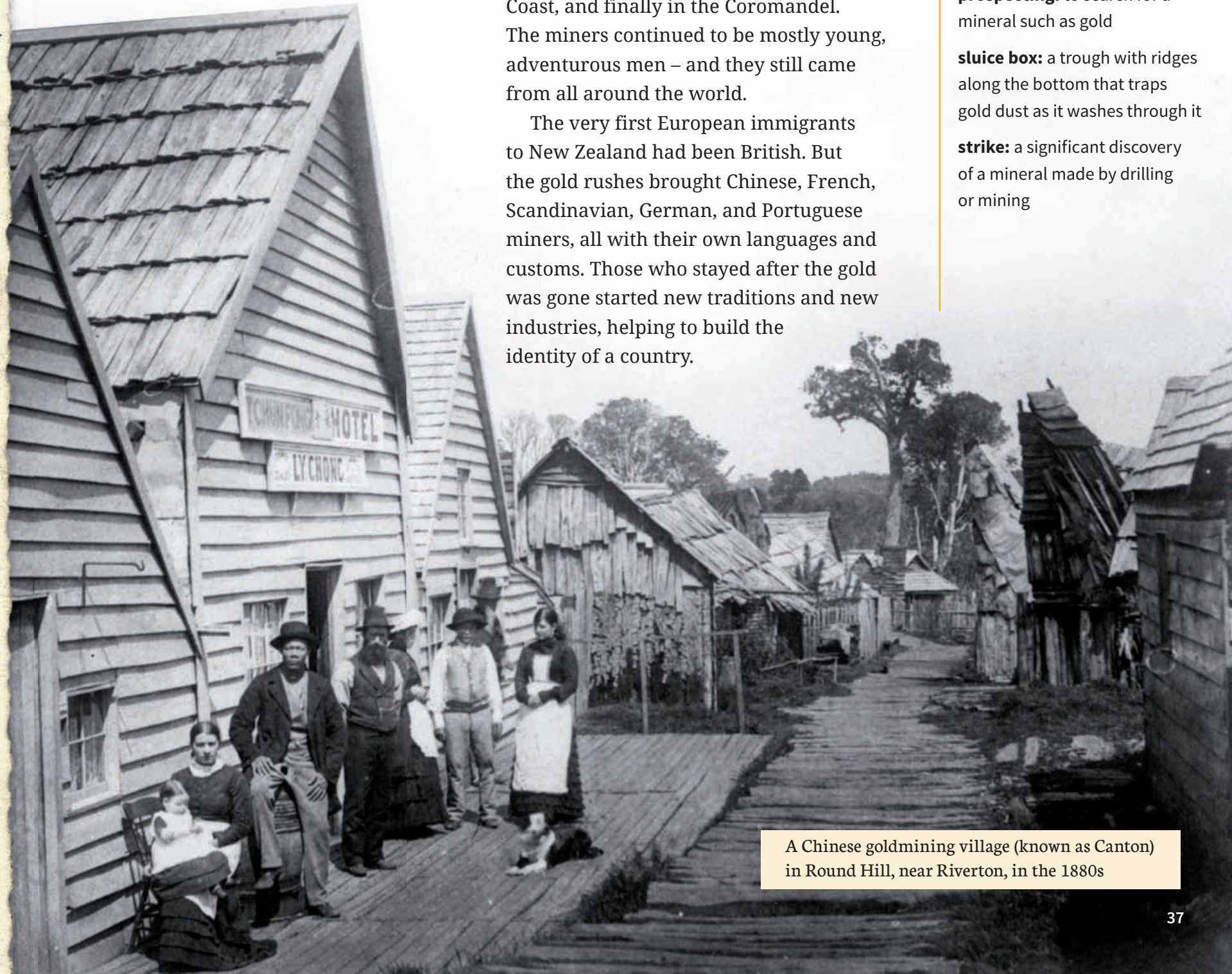
Ah Lum was tall, and he walked with his arms folded. He often wore a long embroidered smock and a small green cap, his long pigtail hanging down behind. Ah Lum's stone store still stands today on a hillside above the river at Arrowtown.



Jean Malfroy

Jean Malfroy was a Frenchman who went to Australia with his father and brother to look for gold in the 1850s. There he learnt how to work with steam-powered machines to wash gold out of rock. Jean then came to New Zealand and worked on the West Coast goldfields as an engineer. He designed and built powerful pumps and other equipment for carrying water to remote goldmines.

Later, after the gold ran out on the West Coast, Malfroy worked as an engineer for the government. He was sent to Rotorua to find ways to use the natural steam and hot water in the ground. There he made many other ingenious machines, including a water-powered clock. Jean Malfroy spent the rest of his life in Rotorua. He helped to make it a world-famous tourist centre, encouraging other French people to travel there. He used the skills he learnt as a goldminer to develop another important New Zealand industry.



In the years after Otago, there were gold rushes in Marlborough, the West Coast, and finally in the Coromandel. The miners continued to be mostly young, adventurous men – and they still came from all around the world.

The very first European immigrants to New Zealand had been British. But the gold rushes brought Chinese, French, Scandinavian, German, and Portuguese miners, all with their own languages and customs. Those who stayed after the gold was gone started new traditions and new industries, helping to build the identity of a country.

Glossary

prospecting: to search for a mineral such as gold

sluice box: a trough with ridges along the bottom that traps gold dust as it washes through it

strike: a significant discovery of a mineral made by drilling or mining

A Chinese goldmining village (known as Canton) in Round Hill, near Riverton, in the 1880s

Bright Fine Gold

by Mark Derby

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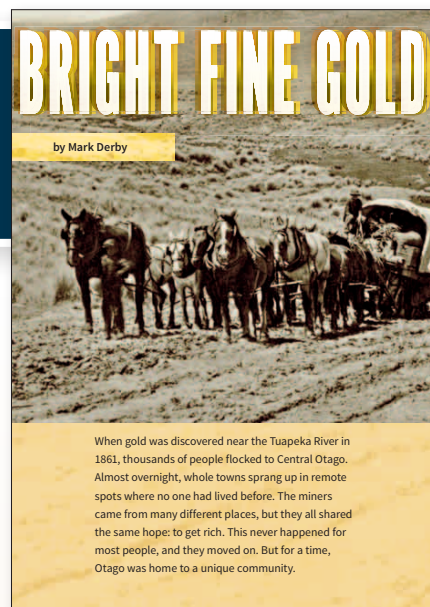
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