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A Denovan Monster Meeting.

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Story outline

PROSPECTING PARTIES AND CHINESE IMMIGRATION.

WDC Denovan, along with many others, was involved in many meetings, sometimes called monster meetings, with upwards of 1500 miners present. The topics were similar, covering miners rights and Chinese Immigration, working and mining conditions. An example is this meeting in July 1854

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A monster meeting July 8 1854
Adelaide Observer (SA : 1843 - 1904) Sat 19 Aug 1854 Page 5

On Saturday afternoon, July 8, about 3 o'clock, a monster meeting, convened by placards signed "W.D.C. Denovan," was held in front of the Criterion Hotel, when some 1,500 persons assembled.

The meeting was called together for two objects, viz, to take into consideration the necessity of prospecting parties being sent out in search of a new gold-field, and also to discuss the question of Chinese immigration. The speakers addressed the people from the balcony of the hotel, and most of the camp officials and the principal storekeepers of Bendigo were present.

Mr Burall having been duly appointed to preside, he proceeded to introduce the first subject for discussion, namely:-

PROSPECTING PARTIES.

The Chairman said that in the placards calling the assemblage it was designated a monster meeting, and he hoped it would prove so. The point they had first to determine was, whether or not it was desirable to send out prospecting

parties a distance of some ten miles from Sandhurst to endeavour to discover a new gold-field.

He most decidedly thought they required some improvement in the state of things, to bring back those smiling and cheerful countenances they used to have in the more prosperous days of Bendigo. When he was in Melbourne it had been suggested that funds should be raised to pay the expenses of prospecting parties, and he believed that a similar feeling existed at Bendigo. Mr Panton had sent out a prospecting party, and he (the Chairman) had supplied them with provisions, and he had every hope that their efforts to discover a new gold-field would be crowned with success.

The Chairman concluded by calling upon Mr Denovan, who moved the first resolution, which was to the following effect:-

"That under existing circumstances, seeing that the wealth and importance of the district depend upon the productiveness of the diggings, and that the yield of this field has considerably decreased, it is desirable that the surrounding country should be well prospected, to discover any gold deposits not hitherto struck."

His motives might be questioned, but, conscious as he was of the integrity of his whole conduct since he had been in the colony, he only felt it necessary to say that the object he had in view was to benefit the people of Bendigo. He considered the resolution a very important one, when it was borne in mind that the actual earnings of the diggers did not average more than £4 a week per man. In a population of 80,000 or 100,000 souls it was not too much to expect that a sufficient number of enterprising men might be found to search for a new gold-field.

The days were gone by when they got an ounce, or even half - an ounce to the tub, and it was therefore necessary to send out prospecting parties. A number of friends had come forward to support the movement, and it was the duty of the diggers to act in concert with them. They ought to look to the future. There was a large population on the diggings, one half of whom, were hardly earning enough to give them bread. Provisions were selling at almost famine prices, and it was necessary, on that account also, that something should be done to give the diggers remunerative wages for their labour.

It was to the interest of all classes to support the object of the movement now before the meeting. He had waited that morning on Mr Panton, who received him with his usual kindness, and expressed himself willing to do anything to further the interests of the diggers, and he had already sent out a prospecting party. The diggers should join with the other classes on the mines in this matter. They had power, interest, and wealth to back them. Mr Denovan concluded a long speech,

during the delivery of which he was much cheered, by calling upon the diggers to come forward with their contributions. Mr Mackay seconded the resolution.

When examined before the Select Committee appointed last year to enquire into the management of the gold-fields, he had recommended that some inducement should be held out to parties, to prospect the country, by giving those who discovered new diggings an additional extent of ground. This suggestion, though embodied in the report of the Committee, was ignored by the Council in the passing of the Bill, and thus the Government benefited most largely by the discovery of new gold-fields, and contributed nothing towards it.

Mr Denovan was entitled to the thanks of the public for bringing forward this subject, and he was very happy to second him on this occasion - the more so, seeing that on other questions he (Mr M) differed very widely from him. He fully concurred in the present movement, now that it was to be carried out in a proper manner, by having a committee of management and officers in whom the diggers would have confidence; but he repudiated the idea of the diggers giving their money to one man, as had been proposed at the former meeting.

This was the reason why that meeting was a failure, and not because the people of Bendigo were indifferent to the subject. People did not like giving their money to parties in whom they had no confidence, and especially to hand it over to one person, even if he was the most respectable man in the community.

The resolution was then put and carried.

Dr Allison moved the second resolution:-

"That the following Committee be appointed to devise means of fitting out prospecting parties, and taking such measures as may seem necessary for the thorough prospecting of this district, and that this Committee meet on or before Thursday next, the 13th instant. The Committee to consist of Messrs Panton, M'Lachlan, Vallentine, Tierney, Roche, E N Emmett, Bayne, M'Alpine, Mowbroy, Allison, Smith, Walker, Wallach, Haycock, Macpherson, James Skene, Denovan, Mackay, Dixon, Bell, Wall, and Haverfield."

Dr Allison delivered a short but effective speech, in which he called upon the meeting to do as his countrymen did, viz, put shoulder to shoulder, come forward in a spirited manner, and carry out the project.

Mr Denovan had made some allusion to stepping into a coach and going to Melbourne, but he hoped some rich diggings might be discovered, so that they could send him down in a coach-and-six. (Cheers.) He trusted that one of the

specimens exhibited at their contemplated local exhibition would be a large nugget from some new diggings.

Dr Wall seconded the resolution, expressing his belief, that unless some new gold-fields were discovered, they might as well all leave the Bendigo.

The resolution was then put and carried. Dr Roche came forward, and said that he had a piece of interesting news to give the meeting. He had just seen two nuggets, one weighing 54 ounces, and the other 49 ounces, which had been found four feet from the surface, about nine miles from the Camp, at Sandhurst. (Loud cheers.) They would, however, be sorry to hear that he was not going to tell them where it was that the nuggets had been found. (Laughter.) He could not do so, for the best of all possible reasons, that he did not know himself - (laughter) - but he hoped he soon would, and then he should inform them.

He had, himself, been a digger, but it was only for six hours, during which time they divided a penny weight and a-half between four; he then became sick of digging, and turned to physicking the people. (Laughter.) He had resided now for about two years on Bendigo, and took a great interest in its inhabitants. He had, in connection with Mr Panton and others, sent out a prospecting party, supplying them with provisions, although not paying them wages; and he hoped, in a short time, to put them on the lay of some good diggings. (Cheers.)

It was to the interest of such men as himself to try and benefit the diggers, for he and others lived on them. He had to say to the bachelors, let them come forward and subscribe to the movement, so that a rich field might be discovered, where they could get plenty of gold, which would enable them to get married; he, himself was going to be married. (Laughter.) They could not marry whilst they remained poor, because the girls, as they knew well, had no money. (Loud laughter.) Dr Roche concluded a most humorous speech by calling upon the Irishmen present to subscribe to the movement.

Mr Dixon then moved the third resolution:- "That Mr Panton be requested to act as President, Mr Vallentine as Treasurer, and Mr Haverfield as Secretary." Mr Armstrong seconded the resolution, which was carried.

Mr Denovan moved the fourth resolution, and Mr Mackay seconded it:- "That subscription lists be immediately opened, and that the meeting be invited to come forward and contribute liberally to the undertaking." A collection was at once made, and the sum of £24 subscribed.

The Chairman then declared that the meeting, so far as it had been convened with respect to the question of prospecting parties, was dissolved.

A meeting then took place to consider the second object of the assemblage, namely:-

THE CHINESE QUESTION.

Mr Burall having been again moved into the chair, called upon the meeting to preserve order, and to give every one a fair hearing.

Mr Denovan came forward, and said that after conferring with his most sincere friends, it was not his intention to bring before the meeting any definite proposition with regard to the Chinese; and he would tell them his reason for doing so.

They had just had a meeting, in the objects of which all classes had very heartily combined; and as, amongst many now present a considerable diversity of opinion existed upon the Chinese question, he did not think it right to enter too deeply into the subject; he would therefore confine himself to a few remarks. He wished to explain his conduct, as a great amount of abuse had been heaped upon him through the press; he had been called bad names; had been described as urging the diggers to break the law. The reason he objected to the Chinese was, on account of the thousands already in the colony, and the numbers more who were on their way to it. He should object to any people coming in immense quantities, whether English, Scotch, Irish, American, or from any other nation.

He thought it right that the authorities should take such measures as would either put a stop to the immigration altogether, or at least graduate it, so that it would not interfere with the interests of the resident population.

(A great deal of confusion here arose through a person in the balcony blowing a horn, but the interruption, through the interference of the Chairman was put a stop to.)

Mr Denovan then proceeded to say that when he heard that horn being blown to drown his voice, it reminded him of the Bastille, when the sound of the drums stifled the cries of the victims. He had no doubt that parties whose sores were about to be laid open would be very glad to interrupt him by blowing a horn. The average earnings of the diggers, as he had said, did not exceed £2 a week per man, and thus the resident population were doing scarcely more than earning their provisions.

How then were they to support an immense quantity of Chinese? They did not object to them because they wasted the water, but they objected to an influx of them, and as he had said before, some steps should be taken to put a stop to their coming, or to limit it in such a manner that it would not interfere with the vested interests of the colonists.

Did they think that, having left the old country as most of them had, on account of the large population that existed at home, that foreigners should come to this colony, and take away from them the benefits of their emigrating, just to suit the interest of the squatter or the merchant? They had already a large population on the diggings, but if that were increased, did they think provisions would remain at present prices?

There were thousands of Chinese in the colony, and thousands more were coming, the majority of whom would find their way to the gold-fields. He said his position was maintained in spite of all the efforts of petty scribbling. He reiterated the assertion he had made, that the digging population had a right to have their interests considered, and had cause to be afraid of the immense influx of Chinese. His conduct had been described as unmanly, it having called upon the diggers to drive the Chinese out of the colony.

Now, without admitting the charge, he would ask those gentlemen who at present felt such a wonderful amount of sympathy for the Chinese, if the English had not some time ago declared war against them, carried destruction into their country, and shot them down. Let them ask themselves if such was becoming to Britons? He asked them to consider what had been the conduct of the English in the African war, or in our war with India.

How came it, then, that such a feeling now existed for the Chinese? When did this love towards them commence? What talismanic influence had suddenly turned the hearts of the English towards the Chinese? The real meaning of all this sympathy, and the reason why the immigration of the Chinese is encouraged, was because certain persons wished to reduce the rate of wages, an effect which the presence of the Chinese had already caused. Mr Denovan concluded by remarking, that he would say no more until he had heard some one speak on the opposite side.

Mr Mackay then rose to move the following resolution:- "That this meeting asserts the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, among the diggers, and emphatically condemns the proposition made by Mr Denovan, to commit a breach of the peace, by driving the Chinese off the gold-fields; but, at the same time, as the Chinese have rendered themselves obnoxious, by their wastefulness of the water and their encroachments upon other diggers, doubtless through their ignorance of our language and customs, the authorities on the diggings should use their utmost exertions to prevent the mischievous and exasperating conduct of these foreigners." He hoped the meeting would grant him a patient hearing, as he had to enunciate sentiments opposed to the views of some of those assembled.

Mr Denovan, as well as the Chairman, had called upon them to give everybody fair play, and he appealed to themselves to follow out that recommendation. Only a few months ago he, like themselves, was a digger. Mr Denovan had taken a good deal of credit to himself with regard to the anti-gold

licence movement of last year. Now, he claimed their good will on the very same ground, as he was one of the chief promoters at the Ovens of a similar movement. Must it have not struck them that Mr Denovan sung a very different tune today to what he did on a former occasion? (Cheers.)

He was glad that the question was going to be discussed, as the people always suffered when public matters were not fully canvassed. He begged to quote the words of the immortal Curran, the countryman of many present, who had said that "Liberty was commensurate with, and inseparable from, the British soil; no matter under what sun or with what ceremonies the man had been devoted on the altar of slavery, the moment he touched British ground his chains fell from around him, and he stood confessed in the face of heaven, an emancipated man." (Cheers.)

Were they Englishmen? Did they wish to carry out those eternal principles of freedom associated with the British name? Did they wish, in the eyes of mankind, to be identified with, and to support that freedom of opinion and extension of public liberty which has distinguished the British from every other nation in the world? (Cheers.) Were they to ignore those principles by an unprovoked attack upon foreigners? If they turned out the Chinese what was to hinder them from carrying the principle further, and the stronger party turning round, and driving out the Americans, or eventually the English driving out the Irish and Scotch? (Cheers.)

At a former meeting Mr Denovan had proposed that the diggers should commit a breach of the law on the 4th of July. Now, whatever he might think of the intellect of the man, if he had only stuck to his resolution, he (the speaker), at any rate, should have had respect for him. (Cheers.) He was surprised to hear the man who had spoken so boldly at the former meeting sing so small on this occasion.

When he knew the diggers, they acted in a different manner. What they said they meant, and what they meant they did; but in what a contemptible position were they now placed, having bound themselves to an act which they shrank from performing. But what could they expect from a man who would propose to them a violation of the law?

When they returned to their homes, and common sense resumed its sway, they would see the folly and the wickedness of the act they were called upon to commit. In their hearing Mr Denovan had proposed a breach of the peace, and he could testify that the report which had appeared in the Bendigo Advertiser was correct, as he took notes on the occasion. (Cheers, hisses, and great confusion.) He appealed to them whether this was not the case. (Great cheering, and cries of "how much are you paid for it?")

He was independent of Mr Denovan, of the camp, or any part to the diggings, and he would appeal to them whether the correspondent of the Argus for the last

few months had not acted impartially. (Great cheering.) Had he not found fault with the camp when they deserved it? (Cheers.) Mr Denovan, when before the Police Magistrate, had denied the correctness of the report, or that he intended to take any measure against the Chinese!

Now what could they think of the man who so grossly prevaricated; was he fit to be a leader of the diggers? (Cries of "No, no," and cheers.) Was this man fit to be a public leader? - this gingerbread hero, Mr Denovan? (Laughter and great confusion.) If they had cause of complaint against the Chinese, why not have petitioned the Government first? Mr Denovan said that "the Chinese lowered the price of labour, and that they had been imported by squatters and capitalists for that purpose."

Now, that was not the case with regard to the greater number of Chinese on the gold-fields, who had paid their passage hither. He was aware that in New South Wales, and even in Victoria, the Chinese have been introduced to supply the demand for labour, but in that case the blame was not upon the Chinese, but upon those who had brought them here, and would the diggers wreak their vengeance upon the heads of unoffending men? Where the revenue of the country was employed for the introduction of Coolies and Chinese into the country, the people had a good right to complain, as was the case in New South Wales, where there was considerable agitation on the subject of Coolie Immigration.

But of what else were the Chinese accused? Wasting the water and encroaching upon the claims of other diggers; but was not that the fault of the Commissioners, who should have instructed the Chinese, ignorant as they were of our language and customs? But suppose they were blameable, would not the diggers proportion the punishment to the offence? If a man picked a pocket, they would not hang him; and if Mr Denovan talked nonsense they would not put him in a water-hole.

(Great confusion.)

Mr Mackay concluded by appealing to the common sense of the people of Bendigo to support his resolution. Dr Roche seconded the resolution, contending that if the Chinese had done anything wrong, they should first be told of it, before any measures were taken against them.

Mr Denovan then moved the following amendment:-
"That this meeting views with alarm the large influx of Chinese into the country, and calls on the Government to take such measures for stopping this immigration, or so to graduate it as not to interfere with the interests of the population."
Mr Denovan contended that his objections to the Chinese had not been answered.

Mr Armstrong seconded the amendment.

Mr Mackay did not object to the amendment, but would press that part of his resolution condemnatory of Mr Denovan's conduct.

The amendment and resolution were both put to the meeting, when the former was carried amidst great cheering and confusion. Dr Roche then came forward and said that he agreed with the amendment, but thought the original resolution should have been passed. The question involved was whether any violence should be used towards the Chinese, and he now appealed to them to hold up their hands in favour of using constitutional means to redress their grievances, and not to employ any violence against these foreigners.

The appeal was unanimously responded to.



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