

'Life, Death & Gold in the Whipstick' by Ian Belmont

Review by Jim Evans

With its striking cover of a painting by Edwin Stockqueler of the Australian Gold Diggings, Ian Belmont's story of Raywood and surrounds, contains a plethora of descriptions, obituaries and stories, written in the 1860s and later, by correspondents of the day, describing life in the goldfields of Bendigo's Whipstick, centred on Raywood, Neilborough, Sebastian and Myers Creek.

The author's note expresses sympathy for the reader as the story started from a small cemetery, then grew somewhat large – to 117 pages in total. However, this work has much to offer, not only the residents in the Whipstick area, but to all those interested in the history of the goldfields. As noted historian Bev Hanson wrote in the preface to the book, it is the 'dash' that is most revealing – the years between the date of birth and date of death.

Belmont has drawn on the files of the Bendigo Advertiser for accounts of 1863 conflicts with Hugh Glass on the Sebastian field, Raywood becoming a new borough in hard times and the selection era in the Terricks. The contents range from the first people, the pastoralists, the description of the Whipstick, with its gold rush and Raywood. The surrounding places, Sebastian, Woodvale, Neilborough, with its beautiful original name – Elysian Flat - are given separate short histories. Tandarra, Mologa and Dingee are also given space.

Raywood is given regal treatment with many fine black and white photographs of hotels and churches, plus the schools, railway station and stores. Famous people such as athlete Jack Donaldson (the Blue Streak) and of course Hugh Victor McKay are given special reference. Ian Belmont has collected obituaries and stories of the older residents ranging from Mrs Jane Draper, Mrs Lillian Dale, Mr Edward Nucella Emmett, Mr William Gunn, Mr John Heffernan, Mr Sebastian Schmidt and Mr Harry Teague. Tragic events such as train accidents, fires and drowning are dealt with in separate sections of the book. The opening of the railway is also given prominence. Industry too is not neglected with articles on the eucalyptus distilleries and the Kamarooka charcoal burning pits.

In the final stanza to his book, Ian Belmont writes of John Shay, 'A Grave Man'. The rhythmic of shovel on stone is the perfect requiem to a hard-working man. "I don't hold with backhoes," John Shay says, letting fly a shovelful of earth as an exclamation. "I will be buried here with my wife. My son will most likely dig my grave for me. I only hope he doesn't use a backhoe."

There is an excellent bibliography and index in Ian Belmont's 'Life, Death and Gold in the Whipstick'. Ian can be contacted by email on info.graves@gmail.com

Readers may also contact the Bendigo Historical Society for further information.