The most important goldfield in the Commonwealth: celebrating at Tennant Creek in 1936

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The group of photographs above appeared in Melbourne’s *The Argus* newspaper of 10 August 1936. It depicts residents of the small Northern Territory gold mining town of Tennant Creek participating in or observing celebrations to mark the production of 100,000 Pounds worth of gold over the previous 18 months. The first image is of listeners to a special radio broadcast from Prime Minister Joseph Lyons two days earlier that the newspaper claimed the goldfield’s ‘entire population’ heard. Tennant
Creek, the Prime Minister asserted, was ‘the most important goldfield in the Commonwealth’.  

_The Argus_ flew the unnamed photographer with one of its best-known journalists, J D Balfe, over 5200 kilometres to witness the celebrations in what was still widely known as Australia’s ‘dead heart’. Never before, it said, had an Australian newspaper undertaken such a long flight in the time available. The trip from Melbourne took almost 30 hours with stops at Broken Hill, Farina, Oodnadatta and Alice Springs before Tennant Creek came into view on 7 August.  

_The Sydney Morning Herald_ also flew a photographer and reporter to Tennant Creek while the popular _Walkabout_ magazine sent one of its writers there. 

Approximately 600 people, including about 60 Warumungu Aborigines, lived in and around the town, which was situated close to the Northern Territory’s geographic centre. The surrounding country was rugged and desolate, covered with spinifex grass and sharp edged rocks. Hundreds of mine workings were observed from the air, as were the homes of miners and their families: tents, bough huts and gunyahs. Nearby were the 51-year-old stone telegraph buildings, which before a gold rush started in the early 1930s provided the area’s only permanent habitation for white people. Almost every building in the town itself was of corrugated iron. As Balfe left his aeroplane, he met some of Tennant Creek’s inhabitants. Many were well sun tanned and ‘gigantically muscled’. The pervasive red dust seemed to have penetrated their skins. They came from various parts of Australia and the world during a period

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1 _The Argus_, 10 August 1936.  
3 _Ibid_.  
when the difficult economic situation made them believe that the arduous journey and primitive living conditions after their arrival where better than remaining where they were.\textsuperscript{5}

While Aborigines camped nearby, festivities commenced on the evening of 7 August when white miners burned bonfires on hill tops, launched bright rockets into the still black night and told stories of past adventures and fortunes made and lost. Miners and their families attended a dinner at which they sat at trestle tables consuming saveloys and beer. Among the guests were well known figures. John Shaw, who only six months before had walked all the way from Darwin, now had a mining lease worth thousands of Pounds. The blind William Weaber was one of the goldfield’s first prospectors. The Reverend John Flynn, the Presbyterian minister known as ‘Flynn of the Inland’, had devoted much of his life to the needs of the Australian outback’s non-Aboriginal inhabitants. The author Ion Idriess, whose books on the Australian inland had a very large readership, was especially pleased to be with the miners at their time of triumph. Local Aborigines performed a corroboree in which, Balfe wrote, ‘terrifying in war paint and feathers lined over their bodies in fantastic patterns’, they danced ‘for over two hours until overcome by exhaustion’. Despite their apparent enthusiasm, Balfe noticed that few were in good health and some ‘were in a pathetic state of emaciation’. There was an evening ball on a concrete platform without a roof. The celebrations closed with a football match on a rough, hard and spinifex-covered oval.\textsuperscript{6}

According to Balfe and the other media observers, the events just described captured the imagination of people all over Australia. Those celebrating must have felt that their efforts were not in vain. Balfe further believed that the ‘goldfield’s

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{The Argus}, 10 August 1936; \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald}, 8 & 10 August 1936.

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{The Argus}, 10 August 1936.
future promises to be as spectacular as its beginnings’. The un-named *Sydney Morning Herald* correspondent marvelled at the miners’ abilities to discover gold in such an isolated and desolate area.\(^7\) Many Tennant Creek residents were aware of gold’s special place in Australia’s history. Balfe and others commented that Tennant Creek’s gold rush provided a return to the glamour and adventure associated with earlier Australian gold rushes,\(^8\) a view that the historian Geoffrey Blainey later strongly supported.\(^9\) More than any other gold mining area in the 1930s, a time when gold prices increased, Tennant Creek was the location of Australia’s ‘Depression’ gold rush yet one along the lines of those that started in the 1850s. It was largely for those reasons that newspapers and politicians gave it so much attention, far more than its significance in terms of gold production warranted. In battling against a harsh environment in their search for gold, pioneers in *The Argus* photograph fitted an attractive stereotype.

However, other less immediately obvious elements also warrant attention. Although not obvious at the time, the gold rush was in its final stages and a much longer period was beginning in which mining companies gradually and steadily replaced the small prospectors, a similar situation to many previously discovered Australian goldfields. From its beginnings in 1932 until the 1936 celebrations, the Tennant Creek goldfield’s history was as much about political and social battles as it was mining. When prospectors and their families moved to the field they demanded both recognition and assistance from the Commonwealth authorities that administered the Northern Territory. They successfully called for large subsidies, crushing facilities, better communications and roads, a hospital, a school, an improved water

\(^7\) Ibid; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 1936; *The Sun*, 10 August 1936.
\(^8\) *The Argus*, 10 August 1936.
supply and, most significantly, the removal of the local Aboriginal reserve. The organisations formed to pursue their aims were sometimes strongly ideological.¹⁰

The Prime Minister’s rhetoric that Tennant Creek was ‘the most important goldfield in the Commonwealth’ is best understood in the context of a nation slowly emerging from its worst peacetime crisis. Viewed in that context, it suggests a range of interpretations.