

‘The Diggers’ Ten Commandments, written at Ballarat by a digger’

Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 15970

Acquired 2015

The original ‘Miners’ Ten Commandments’ was written in California, by former miner James Mason Hutchings and published in his newspaper, the *Placerville Herald*, in June 1853. By August he had published it as a separate illustrated letter sheet, and before long the ‘Commandments’ had made their way to Australia, with the language altered for local conditions.¹

The identity of the writer of this undated Ballarat manuscript is unknown. A transcript held by the Library includes a few illegible words supplied from the earliest surviving Australian publication of the text, dated 1856.²

In March 1855, John Franklin Nash, of 42 Flinders Lane East, offered copies of ‘The Diggers’ Ten Commandments’ for sale, describing himself as the sole Melbourne agent, but no copies appear to survive in public collections. After arriving in Melbourne in September 1853, Nash engraved illustrations for the short-lived *Melbourne Illustrated News*. In July 1855, he co-published two issues of the *Melbourne Pictorial Times*. He later moved to Sydney and worked as an engraver on the *Sydney Punch*.³ Copies of the ‘Commandments’, perhaps the version sold by Nash, were bought by a gold miner in Ballarat on 19 July 1855 and sent home to Scotland with his letters.⁴

At an unknown date in the 1850s, the Ballarat Star newspaper office printed ‘The Diggers’ Ten Commandments’, ‘expressly for Ballarat’. Copies were priced at sixpence. In 1870, William Bramwell Withers, a long-time journalist on the *Star*, reproduced this text as an appendix to his *History of Ballarat*. He noted:

[It was] drawn up by some humorist or humorists in the early days of Ballarat, and was posted about the diggings for the behoof of all on the field. It lets a little light in upon the modes of thought, the customs, the amusements, and the phrases in vogue then, and which are only partially known to the later comers.⁵

A comparison of the Library’s manuscript and the Withers version reveals many minor variations in vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and word order. Both contain errors and omissions that alter the sense slightly. Commandment IX contains the most obvious difference in vocabulary. Where the Withers version has “Thou shalt not “blatherskite” about “new rushes” to thy neighbor’,⁶ the manuscript and a newspaper version of 1889 use ‘blariskite’.⁷ This transcription error suggests a close association between these versions. Neither word derives from Hutchings’ original, in which the text reads: ‘Thou shalt not tell any false tales about “good diggings in the mountains,” to thy neighbor’.

A man spake these words and said —
 I am a digger who wandered from my native
 home and came to dig for gold in a strange land and
~~in~~ the "Clapham" and behold I saw him and his
 witness and that from the beginning of his trunk to the
 end of his tail, his whole body has passed before
 me, and I followed him until his huge feet
 stood still before a Clapham store, then with
 his trunk extended he pointed to a Card-board
 basket upon a shingle as though he would say
 take and eat.
 The Ten Commandments
 1st Thou shalt have none other Gods but me
 2^d Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven
 image nor any likeness to a man made by
 stamping and whatsoever thou findest on the top
 above, or on the rock beneath or in a crevice among
 the rock for I am a jealous God, and will visit
 the Conspicuous round with my presence &
 visit him on my side, and when he decides against
 thee thou shalt have to take thy pick, and thy
 shovel, and thy "levy" with all thou hast, and
 go "prospecting" both north and south to find
 good diggings and there shalt find none.
 Then when thou hast returned to Lorrain thou

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