

## Dryblowing in Coolgardie, c1894



### Description

This is a black-and-white photograph taken by Roy Millar on the Coolgardie gold fields of Western Australia. It shows a prospector using a dryblowing machine to separate gold from the earth. The dryblowing machine is surrounded by evidence of digging and various prospectors' tools including a shovel, pans, sieves and an axe. A drystone wall structure is front left and in the cleared area in the background is a hut with a fenced-off yard. The photograph is captioned: 'Roy Millar, Photo Dryblowing in Coolgardie WA'. It measures 25.3 cm x 18.3 cm.

### Educational value

- This asset relates to different methods used to extract alluvial or surface gold - these methods are based on the principle that the metal has a high specific gravity (it is heavier, and so is left behind when the lighter earth is sifted or washed away).
- It depicts only pans and sieves - because water was so scarce, some techniques practised in Australia's eastern states could not be used to recover gold in Western Australia; the water races or sluices seen on some earlier gold fields were completely out of the question at fields like Coolgardie.
- It features dryblowing, which was a technique used to separate gold from 'dirt' - it used wind action rather than water and was common on the eastern gold fields of Western Australia because of their particular lack of water; dryblowing was a dirty, dusty, inefficient, time-consuming and difficult way of finding gold; prospectors worked with no protection from the extremes of the weather; reworked with today's modern methods of extraction, such old diggings can still yield payable gold.
- It shows a man operating one of the sophisticated machines available on Western Australia's eastern gold fields for separating gold - it contained a screen on a frame so that when the frame was shaken vigorously, the heavier particles



Categories: Gold

in the soil fed into the top moved down through the screen or mesh; this 'shaker' was combined with a blast from the bellows at the base to help blow dust away; the machine in the photograph is a Western Australian designed and made dryblower; Lorden and Banfield of Fremantle manufactured Steve Lorden's invention in which the sieving and pumping were activated by rocking the handles.

- It invites speculation on the difficulties of transporting equipment to the gold fields - mining equipment, like everything on the fields prior to the 1896 opening of the railway line, would have had to be brought in by camel train, horse or bullock teams from the distant coast; this particular item would have come from Fremantle about 600 km away, but sometimes goods were landed at Albany or Esperance Bay, which were nearer; the cost of transport added considerably to the cost of living in Coolgardie.
- It is an example of the work of Roy Millar - Millar took numerous photographs depicting life in the gold fields in the 1890s; he held an exhibition in Coolgardie in 1894.
- It includes structures that appear to have been made from materials available locally - tree boughs were commonly used to roof sheds and huts and provide shade structures; the stones in the structure to the left might have come from a quartz reef mined for gold.
- It shows one of the reasons why the Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme was needed - gold mining on a large scale needs regular supplies of water for the extraction process and for the infrastructure of a mining community; the Coolgardie scheme, designed by C Y O'Connor, was completed in 1903.

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**Creator** Roy (William Roy) Millar, photographer, c1894

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