

# Goldfield life harsh: novel

BY CALEB CLUFF

DARRY Fraser's latest novel, *The Widow Of Ballarat*, is set in turbulent days following the Eureka uprising in 1854.

Her protagonist Nell Amberton is married to a brutish husband who subjects her to appalling violence and sexual assault as he demands a male heir – but not for long. In the first few pages a solitary gunshot changes Nell's life irrevocably.

What follows is a thrilling tale, part whodunnit, part history of a woman's tough existence in the colony of Victoria, part romance.

Darry Fraser says she relied heavily on original documents and the work of historians to ensure her writing was accurate, especially *Women of the Diggings: Ballarat 1854* by renowned local historian Dorothy Wickham, and *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* by Clare Wright.

She says as soon as she started her research, the angle of a woman's perspective was always going to be a strong choice.

"Those two books were really excellent resources," Ms



**OFTEN A HARD LONELY LIFE:** The Widow of Ballarat doesn't shy from the less-attractive aspects of a woman's life on the Ballarat diggings, including the brutish nature of men and their needs. Inset - Darry Fraser. **Image: ST Gill.**

Fraser says.

"I churned through both of those and they gave me that 'being in the moment' feeling with my character, especially as I was feeling the need to build a very

strong character for Nell and her children. Women on the Ballarat goldfields were extremely entrepreneurial and quite tough in their own right and that came through in these particular works."

Ms Fraser says the resilience and strength of the women on the fields was astonishing as they worked as diggers, mothers, carers and whatever else they chose to do in such a harsh surround-

ing.

She came to Ballarat last October to 'build the historical landscape around herself', visiting the Gold Museum Sovereign Hill and the former Museum of

Australian Democracy at Eureka. Those were fantastic places to visit, she says, and provide invaluable access to documents and relics from the time of the rebellion.

Darry Fraser says any violence in the book comes out of that research; it's not constructed.

"It's a strange thing to talk to people who are reading historical fiction for the first time and they say 'how could you write about that?'

"But in that time, I don't think people gave it any thought. It was just what went on, and if your luck happened to turn, then bad for you. I mean some of the people transported out here were completely and utterly deranged human beings. They weren't all out here for simply stealing a loaf of bread."

*The Widow Of Ballarat* is Ms Fraser's third novel, following *Daughter of the Murray* and *Where the Murray River Runs*. Ms Fraser will be available to talk about her novel at the Collins Bookstore in Lydiard Street, Ballarat on December 5.