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Gold is not enough
By Harry Eyres
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There's meant to be something romantic about gold rushes. At least, the most famous of them, the great 1849 California gold rush, has generated one of the founding myths of the American Dream and of the modern entrepreneurial world.

I suppose it would be churlish to deny something "great" about this adventure: many of those who risked their lives trekking across the parching deserts, sweating in disease-ridden ports, or sailing round the Horn, were greatly daring and brave.

But the real capitalist pioneers were people like Sam Brannan, who fanned the flames of the Rush with the idea of cornering the market in shovels, or the nameless folk who sold water at \$100 a swallow to the desperately thirsty in the Nevada deserts.

The reality of gold rushes, even the great California one, tends to be less than romantic. A few find the easy gold and get rich quick; most come too late and struggle for slim pickings; as the gold gets more difficult to extract, technologies of ever greater destructive impact are used, which incidentally require greater capitalisation and the employment of miners not as romantic freelancers but as labourers often in conditions of virtual slavery.

This is the way things went not just in California but in most other places where gold has been found, including the Brazilian Amazon. Perhaps some would find this most recent and desperate of the great gold rushes romantic, though not the Yanomami Indians or others whose ancestral lands and rivers have been devastated by blasting and mercury poisoning. For a gripping first-hand account of the human and environmental costs of the Amazon gold-rush, George Monbiot's Amazon Watershed is strongly recommended.

I challenge anyone to find a romantic side to the subject of this week's column a project to blast away three mountains and more than a third of an ancient town in Transylvania to extract what's left of the gold of Rosia Montana, Romania's oldest recorded settlement. If this is a gold rush, it's 2,000 years too late.

The Romans extracted most of the gold of Rosia Montana, and used it to finance Trajan's wars. It probably wasn't a very romantic process even then. Ovid at least (in Ted Hughes' version) was unimpressed: "Man tore open the earth, and rummaged in her bowels./ Precious ores the Creator had concealed/ As close to hell as possible/ Were dug up a new drug/ For the criminal."

The combination of desperate greed and environmental destruction shocked the Augustan poets; but they hadn't ain't seen nothing yet. They hadn't seen refinements like hydraulic mining, which blasts riverbeds (and anything that gets in the way) to smithereens, or open-pit gold mining, the technique to be employed at Rosia Montana.

This is a truly infernal technology employed when the concentration of gold in the ore drops to minuscule proportions: it means that whole landscapes have to be pulverised to extract a few precious nuggets, and vast quantities of cyanide-laced tailings stored for decades at considerable potential risk to the environment.

The collapse of a tailings dam at Baia Mare in Romania in 2000 virtually destroyed life in the Tisza river and severely affected the Danube.

The scale of the proposed operation, involving the extraction of many million tonnes of ore per annum for 16 years, would be awesome even in the near-desert terrain where open-pit mining is usually employed. Here though we are talking about a well-populated region of wooded hills and green valleys, an idyllic landscape which would not look out of place in one of those paintings where Claude Lorraine imagined the bucolic beauty of the classical world.

The gravest, most irreversible threat is to an immensely significant archaeological site, the most important Roman mining complex in Europe, including temples, baths, dwellings, altars and graves, described by UNESCO as "a unique archaeological complex of Roman mine galleries". The mining company has invested £4m in a three-year archaeological investigation to record the riches of the site before its demolition, but many archaeologists reckon this is much too little and much too quick.

You could see the battle for Rosia Montana which has become the biggest civil society movement in Romania since the fall of the Ceausescus as a struggle between two opposing poles of human activity.

Archaeology takes infinite care and more or less unlimited time to learn about and preserve what is left of the past. Open-pit mining obliterates the past (aeons of geological and archaeological time reduced to rubble in hours), and ravages the present, in order to fuel some abstract future.

Perhaps the challenge for the Romanian government, which will ultimately decide whether the project goes ahead, is to imagine a sustainable future (eco-tourism, for instance) which does not rest on obliteration of the past and despoliation of the landscape. I think another Roman poet, Horace, should have the last word: “[it is] stronger to spurn undiscovered gold (better left where the earth hides it) than to force it into human use with a hand that plunders every sacred thing.”

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