



## IKC101 Indigenous Cultures, Histories and Contemporary Realities

### Module 2: Indigenous Histories

#### Topic 1: Invasion and the Colonial Frontier Period

Module 2 investigates Indigenous histories since the time of invasion, when Indigenous land was colonised by Europeans. Week 4 begins in 1770 when Englishman Captain James Cook first mapped the east coast, and gives an overview of the period until about 1890.

This topic is study towards achieving the following **outcomes**:

- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the diversity of Indigenous Australian cultures both past and present
- be able to critically analyse post-colonisation policies and practices and their impact on Indigenous communities and families;
- be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of a range of contemporary issues which impact upon Indigenous peoples and communities;
- be able to demonstrate skills in research and effective communication.

This topic is divided into the following **sections**:

- Thinking about Australia's history of colonisation
- European views of Indigenous people at the time of invasion
- Initial contact
- Disease
- The colonial frontier
- Resistance

#### **Checklist**

- ☐ Read *Module 2 Week 4*
- ☐ Complete the *Required Readings/Viewing* × 4
- ☐ Read *Optional Readings* × 1
- ☐ Complete *Learning Activity* × 1 and Post on your Forum.



## Thinking about Australia's history of colonisation

### Key idea

History is not a series of agreed 'facts' but is open to interpretation and argument, and the telling of history itself changes over time as we ask new questions about the past.

For much of the period of non-Indigenous settlement in this country, Australia's history has been told as triumph over difficult odds, a wild country tamed by intrepid explorers and the hard work of settlers, a civilisation built in a wilderness, a Commonwealth established peacefully and rationally.

Before the advent of Aboriginal history as a distinct discipline in the 1970s, twentieth century histories of Australia wrote Aboriginal people out of the national story, considering Indigenous Australians to be of marginal importance to the colonisation of the country. The attitude of historians was summed up in a school text of 1917, which expressed the conviction that there was a "good reason" why the "dark-skinned wandering tribes" should not be included in histories of Australia, as "they have nothing that can be called a history... Change and progress are the stuff of which history is made: these blacks knew no change and no progress, as far as we can tell". While the anthropologist might study Aboriginal peoples, the historian had different priorities, with it being "his business to tell how these white folk found the land, how they settled in it, how they explored it, and how they gradually made it the Australia we know today" (Murdoch, 1917, quoted in Attwood, 2005, p.16).

From the 1970s non-Indigenous and Indigenous historians began to question this story; they were influenced by Indigenous politics and activism and began to talk to Indigenous people about their version of history, to see Australian history as having different sides.

In the past 20 years, however, Australia's history as it pertains to Indigenous people has been highly contested, in what is commonly called the History Wars. Some non-Indigenous historians, and some politicians, have felt that Australian history is now too bleak, and not triumphant enough (Macintyre & Clark, 2003). Much of this debate has focussed on the extent of violence which occurred on the 'frontier', as white colonist progressively took over more and more land across the continent, and in particular the question of massacres. Settler Australians often find it difficult to accept that violent dispossession was part of the foundation of the nation.

From an Indigenous perspective, Australia's history is one of invasion, war, displacement and social destruction.

### Reflection

- Does Australia's history have to be one version or the other? Is it both?
- Were you taught 'one version' or another?



## European views of indigenous peoples at the time of invasion

### Key idea

The Europeans who came to Australia already had ideas and theories about Indigenous peoples and these often clouded their ability to understand the peoples they met.

In 1770 Captain James Cook landed in Botany Bay, home of the Eora people, and claimed possession of the East Coast of Australia for Britain. According to European international law at the time, there were only three ways that Britain could take possession of another territory:

- If it was uninhabited the territory could be claimed and settled.
- If the territory was already inhabited, permission could be sought from the inhabitants to use or purchase some of their land.
- If the territory was already inhabited, Britain could take over by invasion and conquest. But the original inhabitants would still have rights after such a war of conquest.

Britain did not follow any of these processes in Australia. They did not formally declare war. And although they were well aware that Australia was inhabited, the British Government ignored this fact and proceeded as though it were settling an empty land. They did so on the newly developed belief that land occupied by 'hunter gatherer' societies could be deemed to be ownerless. The legality of this action, even according to European internal law at the time, was questionable. Later, in the nineteenth century, this action was justified with the development of the legal concept of *terra nullius* (Borsch, 2001).

The British set sail from England at a time when ideas of 'the noble savage' were in circulation. The idea of the noble savage was about people who were found to be living in a natural state, untouched by the corruption and degeneration brought about by industrialization, urbanization and 'progress'. Explorers could travel the world looking for these 'untouched' people who lived as nature, and god, intended. They would live simply off the land, their tools and implements might be unsophisticated but they would have a natural grace and dignity which would set them apart from Europeans. Noble savage imagery often included a critique of European society.

The writings of Captain James Cook can be seen to be influenced by this idea:

From what I have said of the Natives of New Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched People upon Earth; but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans, being wholly unacquainted not only with the Superfluous, but with the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe; they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquility which is not disturbed by the Inequality of Condition. The earth and Sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for Life. They covet not Magnificent Houses, Household-stuff, etc.; they live in a Warm and fine Climate, and enjoy every wholesome Air, so that they have very little need of Cloathing; and this they seem to be fully sensible of, for many to whom we gave Cloth, etc., left it carelessly upon the Sea beach and in the Woods, as a thing they had no manner of use for; in short, they seem'd to set no Value upon anything we gave them, nor would they ever part with anything of their own for any one Article we could offer them. This, in my opinion, Argues that they think themselves provided with all the necessaries of Life, and that they have no Superfluities. (Wharton, 1893, Chapter 8, Australian Natives).

Cook's journals were edited and changed before they were originally published, and the idea that Aboriginal people were happier than Europeans was removed.

The change was more in keeping with the other idea about human difference that was popular at the time, and it was far less romantic and positive. The 'stadial' or 'four stages' theory of history suggested that human societies progressed in four distinct phases. Human development was thought to start from the point where people would live in a so-called "state of nature", with little or no human society, hunting and gathering for their food. As societies developed, they passed through stages of being pastoralists, tending for herds of animals, then to agriculture, and finally trade based societies, leading to a pinnacle of human development in the societies of Europe. As economic arrangements and forms of livelihood developed, so too did political arrangements, cultural and artistic pursuits (Williams & Marshall, 1982).

This more negative view meant that when other Europeans met with or read about Aboriginal people they did not necessarily have such positive views as Captain Cook had. They might instead see Aboriginal people as without agriculture, and hence without any system of government, and living a so-called "primitive" life. This negative view of Indigenous people tended to be more common, but as Captain Cook's writing shows, it was not the only way to see things.



## Initial Contact


### *Key idea*

Both Europeans and Indigenous peoples were initially wary but also curious about each other however this soon gave way to suspicion and violence.

Governor Phillip's instructions on first settlement in 1788 had been to maintain peaceful and friendly relations with the native inhabitants. For several months after the establishment of the penal settlement, the British administration was frustrated by its inability to engage with the 'natives'. Governor Phillip resolved to have some Indigenous people captured, to be introduced to British ways of living and act as go-betweens between the British and Indigenous people.

Within two years, seventeen British convicts and soldiers had been murdered or wounded by Indigenous people, often when out on exploration or foraging trips. In 1790 date, Governor Phillip resolved to send out a punitive expedition:

... [H]is excellency informed me that he had pitched upon me to execute the foregoing command. ... [W]e were, if practicable, to bring away two natives as prisoners; and to put to death ten; that we were to destroy all weapons of war but nothing else; that no hut was to be burned; that all women and children were to remain uninjured, not being comprehended within the scope of the order; that our operations were to be directed either by surprise or open force; that after we had made any prisoners, all communication, even with those natives with whom we were in habits of intercourse, was to be avoided, and none of them suffered to approach us. That we were to cut off and bring in the heads of the slain; for which purpose hatchets and bags would be furnished. And finally, that no signal of amity or invitation should be used in order to allure them to us; or if made on their part, to be answered by us: for that such conduct would be not only present treachery, but give them reason to distrust every future mark of peace and friendship on our part.



His excellency was now pleased to enter into the reasons which had induced him to adopt measures of such severity. He said that since our arrival in the country, no less than seventeen of our people had either been killed or wounded by the natives; that he looked upon the tribe known by the name of Bideegal, living on the before mentioned peninsula, and chiefly on the north arm of Botany Bay, to be the principal aggressors; that against this tribe he was determined to strike a decisive blow, in order, at once to convince them of our superiority and to infuse an universal terror, which might operate to prevent farther mischief. (Tench, 1788, p.207-208).

As more settlers arrived and British exploration and settlement spread, contact between Indigenous and British people increased. The British hunger for large tracts of land to graze stock and grow crops motivated harsh actions against Indigenous people. Murder, violence, rape, poisonings, capturing, physical removal, all occurred along the line of contact - the colonial frontier.

### **Reflection**

The extract quoted above give information about European thoughts, actions and motivations.

- What might Indigenous thoughts, actions and motivations have been?
- Why don't we have many insights into Indigenous thoughts and actions of the time?

### **Required reading**

#### **The Wiradjuri nation**

Charles Sturt University is primarily based on Wiradjuri country. This reading gives an account of the 'frontier' period in this region:

- Read, P. (1988). *A Hundred Years War: The Wiradjuri People and the State*, (Chapter 1: The First Cycle: 1813-1850, pp. 1-28), Canberra: Australian National University Press. Available via [eReserve](#).

### **Optional reading**

Watkin Tench was in the army that arrived with the First Fleet and his writings provide useful insights into the time and the British perspective.

- Tench, W. (1788). Chapter VIII: From the Fleet's Arrival at Botany Bay to the Evacuation of it; and taking Possession of Port Jackson. Interviews with the Natives; and an Account of the Country about Botany Bay. In *A narrative of the expedition to Botany Bay*. eBooks@Adelaide 2006. Available at <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/tench/watkin/botany/chapter8.html>





## Disease

### *Key idea*

Indigenous people were not immune to many European diseases and up to half the Indigenous population died as a result of these new diseases.

The common, contagious illnesses we are familiar with today, all arose from Europeans living in extremely close proximity to animals. Smallpox is originally from rodents. The various influenzas (the 'flu') are shared with pigs (swine flu) and birds (bird flu). Measles diverged from a virus in cattle. Over many thousands of years, Europeans had shared these diseases with their animals and those humans who did not die developed immunities. The Indigenous people of Australia had no immunity and introduced diseases such as smallpox and measles killed half, if not more, of the original population. Diseases that have impacted on Indigenous people include measles, chickenpox, whooping cough, mumps, scarlet fever, diphtheria, tuberculosis, influenza, pneumonia, typhoid fever, venereal disease and leprosy. In many cases, the diseases spread faster than the British (Campbell, 2002).

Introduced diseases had devastating effects on many Aboriginal groups before they came into contact with Europeans. Some populations were halved or virtually wiped out. The severity of disease caused both personal suffering and crises in community organisation and leadership. This meant some groups were already in a weakened position when Europeans arrived in their territory. As communities were displaced they suffered from starvation or severely depleted diets. From the later in the nineteenth century, government policies meant Aboriginal people were denied the medical care that was becoming increasingly available to the settler population (McCallman et. al, 2001).

The colonies differed considerably. People in the south-eastern areas of Australia were badly affected by smallpox, whilst northerners seem to have had greater immunity because to this disease, possibly because they had already encountered it via earlier Macassan visitors.



## The Colonial Frontier

### *Key idea*

Indigenous people and British settlers fought for possession of land.

### *Dispossession*

The timing, pace and extent of European encroachment varied enormously. Many parts of central, northern and Western Australia remained largely 'untouched' until the late nineteenth century. Organised Aboriginal resistance to the takeover of their lands continued in north-western and central Australia until the 1930s. There was not a single confrontation, but rather a series of violent engagements and massacres across the continent.

The intention and ultimate effect of the Frontier was to displace Indigenous people from, and dispossess Indigenous people of, their land. A repeated pattern of settlement involved parties exploring with stock and settling in an area. Stock caused damage to waterways and Indigenous food sources, displacing animals such as kangaroos. Felling of trees removed food sources in the plants themselves and the animals, such as possums, that lived in them. It also reduced the availability of resources such as certain types of wood, resins, string, medicines. The message that Indigenous people were not wanted on the land was very clear, with acts of violence and physical removal used.

Dispossessed Indigenous people, unable to support themselves adequately and often physically hunted, congregated at the edges of settlement towns, dependent on European charity. The loss of family and community members meant that not only were loved ones gone, but so were the holders of important knowledge concerning medicine, law and resources. Indigenous people, living in stressed circumstances, were exposed to exploitation and abuse. Indigenous people responded in a variety of ways to the destruction and ongoing erosion of their way of life; some suffered from despair and began abusing alcohol, others adapted and did what was necessary to survive.

In summary, the policies and practices of this era resulted in the:

- loss of land as spiritual base
- loss of land as an economic base and provider of food and medicinal resources
- massive loss of life (from an estimated population of up to 1.5 million in 1788 to approximately 150 000 by 1850)
- forced breakdown in social and cultural structures
- imposed identity and inferior status
- loss of mobility
- removal of children from their families
- socio-economic marginalisation
- political and legal powerlessness



## Resistance

### *Key idea*


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Indigenous people resisted British settlement, both physically and psychologically.

Aboriginal resistance to British occupation was immediate. Pemulwuy led counter-raids against settlers and ambushed exploration and foraging parties between 1790 and 1802. There seems to have been little understanding, or perhaps little acknowledgement, on the part of the British as to why Indigenous people in the area acted violently against them.

There are repeated incidences of lone, or pairs of, stockmen, and individual families in remote areas being killed by Indigenous people. European responses were generally not focussed on finding the individuals responsible but were often indiscriminate and excessive.

Typical of the response of colonial officials was the public order of Governor Grose in February 1796, in response to Aboriginal resistance against white settlement on the Hawkesbury River. The "frequent attacks and depredations" against the people settled on the Hawkesbury, called for them to "mutually... afford each other their assistance" whenever Aboriginal people were "lurking about their grounds" (Collins, 1798, p.458). So non-Indigenous people in these government documents



were encouraged to retaliate, they were not to kill indiscriminately or “wantonly” in the words of the time, but they were to subdue Aboriginal people who were fighting for their country. It is important, however, to think of resistance as not just violent responses to colonisation and dispossession, but as something more complex, involving intense and sustained psychological resistance too. Henry Reynolds explains:

*While conflict was ubiquitous in traditional societies territorial conquest was virtually unknown. Alienation of land was not only unthinkable, it was literally impossible... [People] certainly did not believe that their land had suddenly ceased to belong to them and they to their land. The mere presence of Europeans, no matter how threatening, could not uproot certainties so deeply implanted in Aboriginal custom and consciousness. The black owners may have been pushed aside but many refused to accept that they had been dispossessed (Reynolds, 1982, p.65).*

Reynolds here suggests that resistance was psychological, as well as physical; it was not just about fighting but it was also shown through the refusal of Aboriginal people to give up beliefs, the continued will to survive despite dispossession, to maintain connections to land and to culture and communities.

### **Conflicts and Massacres**

Violent confrontations were a feature of the ‘frontier’ as it moved across the continent. In Tasmania, the ‘Black War’ continued for over a decade and martial law was declared from 1828-1832 (Ryan, 2012). Guerrilla resistance continued into the 1890s, most notably by the Kalkadoon warriors of north-central Queensland and the Bunuba people, led by Jandamarra's warriors, in the Kimberley region in north-west Australia (Lowe, 1994).

### **Myall Creek Massacre**

One of most well-known massacres of the frontier period is the took place at Myall Creek in near Moree in NSW on 10 June 1838. Unlike many other similar events, this is well documented. Around thirty Wirrayaraay people, mainly women, children and older men, who were camping peacefully at the Myall Creek station were rounded up by 11 white stockmen and killed. Even more unusually, the stockmen who perpetrated the killing were put on trial for their actions. Seven were found guilty and hanged. You can read or listen to an interview with historian Richard Broome about these events [here](#).





## Required Reading

Ryan, L. (2008). Massacre in the Black War in Tasmania 1823–34: A case study of the Meander River Region, June 1827. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 10(4), 479-499. Available in the [library](#).

### Case study - Windradyne

Windradyne (also known as Saturday) was a Wiradjuri man who lived in the Bathurst region and was known to British authorities for leading guerrilla actions between 1823 and possibly as late as 1828. Thinking also about the first reading by Peter Read, consider the following.

- Episode 1 “they have come to stay” from *The First Australians* can be seen [here](#). The episode goes for 70 minutes (but well worth watching!)

The chapter below looks at several topics, placing Windradyne and other Indigenous leaders in the context of the society of their time, and considering how knowledge is evaluated in historical analysis:

- Foley, D. (2007). Leadership: the quandary of Aboriginal societies in crises, 1788-1830, and 1966. In MacFarlane, I. & Marks, H. (eds). *Transgressions: Critical Australian Indigenous Histories* (pp. 177-192). Canberra: ANU ePress. Available from [http://epress.anu.edu.au/aborig\\_history/transgressions/pdf/ch08.pdf](http://epress.anu.edu.au/aborig_history/transgressions/pdf/ch08.pdf)




## Learning Activity

Consider some of the different accounts of relations between Aboriginal peoples and the new settlers in Australia in the Required Readings and Viewings for this week. How much of this history were you already aware of?

Write a short (3-5 sentence) paragraph about what struck you most from the reading and **post this in your Forum**.

## References

- Attwood, B. (2005) *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History*, Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin.
- Borch, Merete (2001). Rethinking the origins of terra nullius. *Australian Historical Studies*, 32 (117), 222-239.
- Briscoe, G. (2003). *Counting, health and identity: A history of Aboriginal health and demography in Western Australia and Queensland 1900–1940*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Campbell, J. (2002) *Invisible invaders: Smallpox and other diseases in Aboriginal Australia 1780-1880*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Collins, D. (1798), *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, with remarks on the dispositions, customs, manners, &c., of the native inhabitants of that country. To which are added some particulars of New Zealand. Compiled by permission, from the MSS of*



*Lieutenant-Governor King, by David Collins Esquire, Late Judge-Advocate and Secretary of the Colony, Illustrated by Engravings, Vol. 1, London: T. Cadell, jun. and W. Davies.*

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McCalman, J., Morley, R., Smith, L. & Anderson, I. (2011). Colonial health transitions: Aboriginal and 'poor white' infant mortality compared, Victoria 1850–1910. *The History of the Family*, 16:1, 62-77.

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Karskens, G. (2009). *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

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Williams, G. and P.J. Marshall (1982), *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of Enlightenment*. London: Dent, 1982.

Wharton, W.J.L. (1893) *Captain Cook's Journal during his first voyage round the world made in H.M. Bark "Endeavour" 1768-71*. Adelaide: eBooks at Adelaide, University of Adelaide, 2010. Available at: <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/cook/james/c77j/>

**You have finished Module 2, Topic 1!**