



AUSTRALIA

EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT



Australia's first group of European migrants arrived in January 1788. They came on a fleet consisting of two warships, three supply ships and six ships which carried the main group, almost 800 convicts. Governor Arthur Phillip was in command. When the fleet reached the planned destination of Botany Bay, Governor Phillip was disappointed to find that it was not suitable for settlement. So the fleet continued a few kilometers up the coast to an inlet Cook had named Port Jackson. Here Phillip found what he described as 'the finest harbour in the world'. On its shore, at a place he named Sydney Cove, Phillip established the first European settlement in Australia.

The main reason for a British settlement in Australia was to provide a place of punishment where convicts could be sent. Phillip's task was to establish such a settlement and make it self-supporting as soon as possible, so that the British government would not have to pay large amounts of money to keep it going. This was an enormously difficult job for several reasons:

The people who were to build the settlement were convicts. Generally they were not good workers and very few of them had any knowledge of farming or carpentry - the two skills most needed in the new colony.

Unlike Aborigines, who lived well off the land, the new settlers did not understand the Australian environment. Nor, in the early years, did they have much success in finding fertile land or growing enough food to feed the whole settlement.

The new convict settlement at Sydney Cove was very isolated. The nearest European settlements were in the Dutch East Indies and at the Cape of Good Hope.

It would take up to 18 months to get news to Britain and back.

Because of these difficulties the first British settlement in Australia was lucky to survive its early years. The supplies they brought with them ran out, the first attempts at farming failed and while waiting more than two years for a second fleet to arrive from Britain, Phillip's small band almost starved. It took some years before the British penal colony was successfully established on the edge of Sydney Cove.

Aboriginal people and European settlers

From the European point of view, the establishment of a settlement in Australia is the story of an adventurous voyage to an unknown part of the world, and a heroic struggle to overcome difficulties and survive in a hostile environment. This is why the day when the British flag was first raised at Sydney Cove, 26 January 1788, is celebrated now as Australia's national day. From the Aboriginal point of view, however, the coming of Europeans is seen completely differently. European settlement was an invasion. The spread of European civilisation throughout the continent was a conquest which led to the near destruction of Aboriginal civilisation.



The British government and Governor Phillip had good intentions towards Aboriginal people in 1788. Despite this, relations between black and white people at Sydney Cove soon deteriorated. Some of the reasons for this were:

Although British authorities had good intentions towards Aboriginal people, they nevertheless intended to take their land. From the European point of view, Aboriginal people did not really 'own' the land. The Aboriginal people, on the other hand, considered the land to be theirs, and saw European settlement, which quickly began to rob them of their hunting and fishing grounds, as an invasion they should resist.

Just as the Europeans had no respect for Aboriginal land ownership, they also had little understanding or respect for Aboriginal culture. Most Europeans at that time considered their civilisation to be superior, and thought that Aboriginal people were backward and in need of help.

Misunderstanding existed on both sides. The Aborigines had no knowledge of European customs and values. They did not understand the European idea of ownership. In the beginning, they were willing to share food and knowledge about the land with Europeans. In return they expected the settlers to share their tools, animals and other food with them. Of course there was conflict when they tried to do that as Europeans saw things differently.

The deliberate ill treatment of Aboriginal people, the terrible impact of European diseases and the introduction of alcohol all contributed to a breakdown of Aboriginal society. When their tribal lifestyle was destroyed, the Aborigines came to live on the edge of European settlement, begging and taking up the worst European habits. Europeans saw this as evidence of their backwardness. On the other hand, if Aborigines took up weapons to defend their land, they were seen as evil savages who needed to be taught a lesson.

Pemulwuy

Many Aborigines fought to resist the spread of white settlement. One of the first leaders of this resistance was Pemulwuy, a member of the Botany Bay tribe. He organised Aborigines living in the Sydney area to make attacks on European settlers and their property. In 1790 Pemulwuy killed Governor Phillip's gamekeeper, a man he believed to be responsible for mistreating Aborigines. In retaliation, Phillip ordered his soldiers to capture or kill six people from Pemulwuy's tribe. In doing this, Phillip was acting brutally and against British law. Such an action was uncharacteristic of Phillip, but it showed that he did not believe that Aboriginal people had to be treated according to the same laws as Europeans.

In fact Phillip's soldiers failed to find Pemulwuy or any of his tribe. Despite two expeditions to Botany Bay (carrying, as Captain Tench recorded, 'ropes to bind our prisoners with, and hatchets and bags, to cut Aborigines easily kept clear of the soldiers. During his remaining time as Governor, Phillip failed to capture Pemulwuy, who continued to lead attacks on settlers all around the outskirts of Sydney.

In 1797, during a fight with soldiers and settlers at Parramatta, Pemulwuy was wounded and captured. Within a short time, however, he escaped and resumed leadership of his people. Then, in 1801, Sydney's third Governor, Philip Gidley King, offered a reward for Pemulwuy. He also cleared all Aboriginal people from the edges of European settlement and told them that there would be no more friendly relations until Pemulwuy was recaptured.

Finally, in 1802 Pemulwuy was shot dead by two settlers. His head was cut off and sent to Governor King.

The Europeans rejoiced at Pemulwuy's defeat but so too did some of those Aboriginal people whose tribal life had already broken down. They wanted to return to an existence on the edge of European settlement where they had begun to rely on handouts. In the long run, of course, Pemulwuy's resistance failed. The tribes around Sydney were unable to stop the white invasion or the destruction of their tribal lifestyle. The Aborigines had no weapons to match European guns. Nor could they organise themselves in sufficient numbers to oppose the continuing spread of settlement as more convicts and settlers arrived.

Ultimately, Aborigines were able to keep control over their land only in those parts of Australia where few Europeans wished to go. Nevertheless, it would be remembered that there were many Aboriginal leaders like Pemulwuy, in different parts of Australia, who fought a heroic resistance against the invasion of their land. And when the fighting ceased, other Aboriginal leaders took up the long political struggle to achieve a rightful place for Aboriginal people in modern Australian society.

Terra nullius

A land belonging to nobody!

On 23 August 1770 Captain Cook landed on a small island off the northern tip of Australia and claimed the whole of eastern Australia for Britain. During his voyage up the east coast he had landed only at two places: Botany Bay and Cooktown. He knew nothing about the vast inland. However, Cook did know that Aborigines inhabited the land all along the coast because he had seen them, or at least their fires. How, then, could he now say that all this territory belonged to Britain?

Indeed, how could the British government act as if this land belonged to them? How could Britain decide, in 1788, to send its convicts to form a settlement on the land of the Eora tribe without asking them? How, after 1788, could the British government keep, give away or sell not only Eora land but also that of nearly every other Aboriginal tribe in Australia? The simple answer to all of these questions is that the British did not consider Aboriginal people as the rightful owners of this land. New South Wales, as Cook had called it, was regarded as terra nullius. This is legal term, a Latin expression which means 'land belonging to no one'.

According to the European view, Aboriginal people may have been on the land first but they did not own it because they did not use the land or show ownership in the same way as Europeans did. Thus Europeans felt free to settle anywhere in Australia, ignoring Aboriginal rights to land they had occupied for thousands of years.

The spread of European settlement

Captain Cook had claimed most of eastern Australia for Britain in 1770. Very quickly, however, Britain extended its claim to cover the whole of Australia. Despite this, most early settlements were on the coast, the only part of Australia Europeans knew and could easily get to by sea transport. It would take most of the 19th century for Europeans to find out what the vast inland of Australia was like. To learn about the inland, explorers made long and dangerous expeditions into the unknown from the handful coastal settlements. As the explorers returned with reports of what they found, white settlement gradually spread inland. Settlers were keen to go wherever the explorers found land suitable for farming. Later in the 19th century, Europeans began to expand even into the infertile parts of the country, looking for gold or other valuable minerals.

Conflict on the frontier

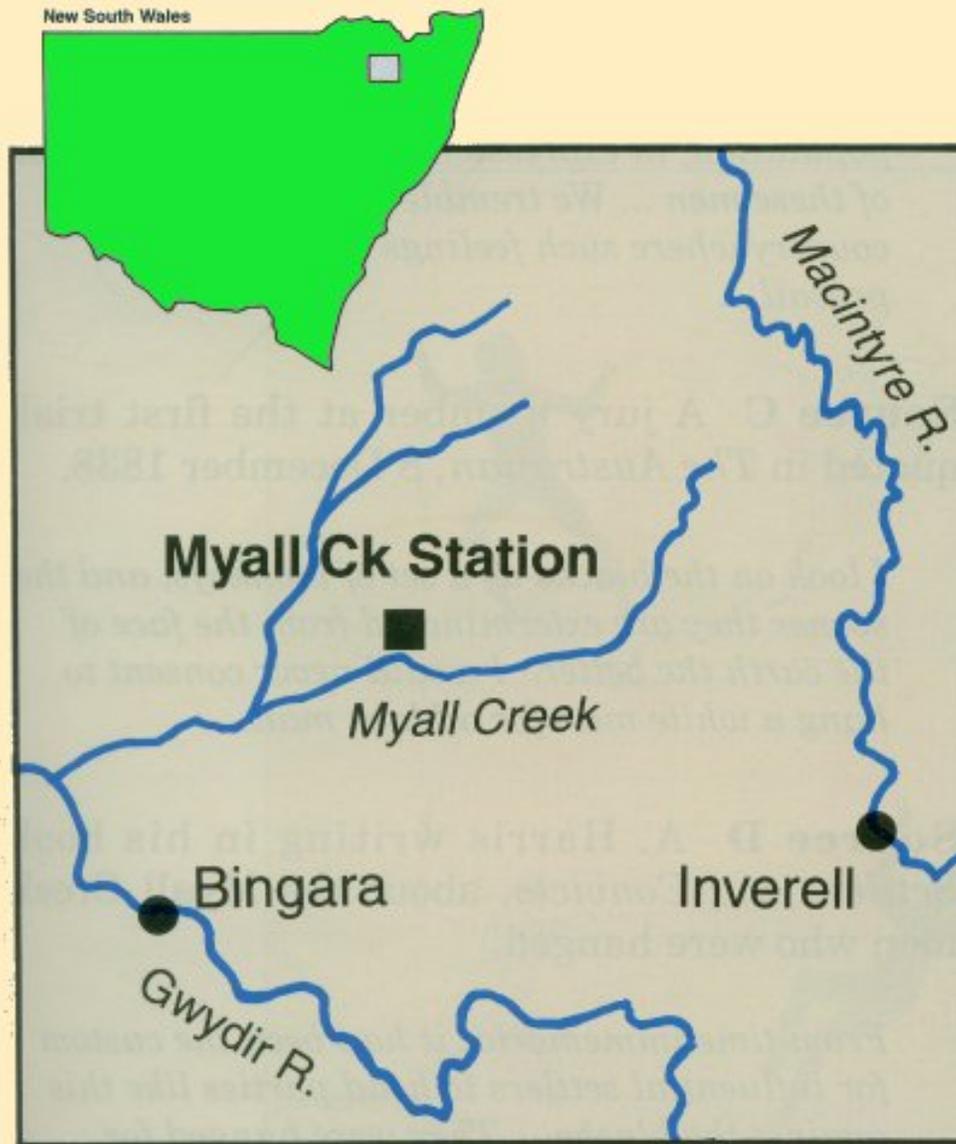
According to white history of Australia, the 19th century was when brave pioneers opened up the frontier and extended civilisation into a difficult and often dangerous country through much hard work, the settlers established the farms and mines which have given modern Australia much of its wealth. According to Aboriginal history, however, the frontier was where Europeans constantly pushed back Aboriginal civilisation. Often there was conflict at the frontier. As the settlers moved into such new tribal area, there was fighting as Aboriginal people tried to protect what was theirs.

Initially, the Aboriginal people often greeted explorers and early settlers with friendship and hospitality. Fighting began once the Aborigines realised that the newcomers meant to take over their land and all the resources. thus, in many parts of Australia there was open warfare for some time as Aborigines fought vigorously to defend themselves and their land. In such warfare Aborigines used guerilla tactics. They made surprise attacks on isolated settlers or speared sheep and cattle before disappearing back into the landscape. Where Europeans lived in small numbers, such tactics created widespread fear, and the settlers were sometimes defeated and forced to abandoned their farms. Once there were sufficient numbers of Europeans, however, they were able to organise groups of settlers or mounted police to hand down the Aborigines. On a number of occasions tactics included the massacre of innocent Aborigines who had taken no part in attacks on settlers.

Myall Creek: a massacre that made the news

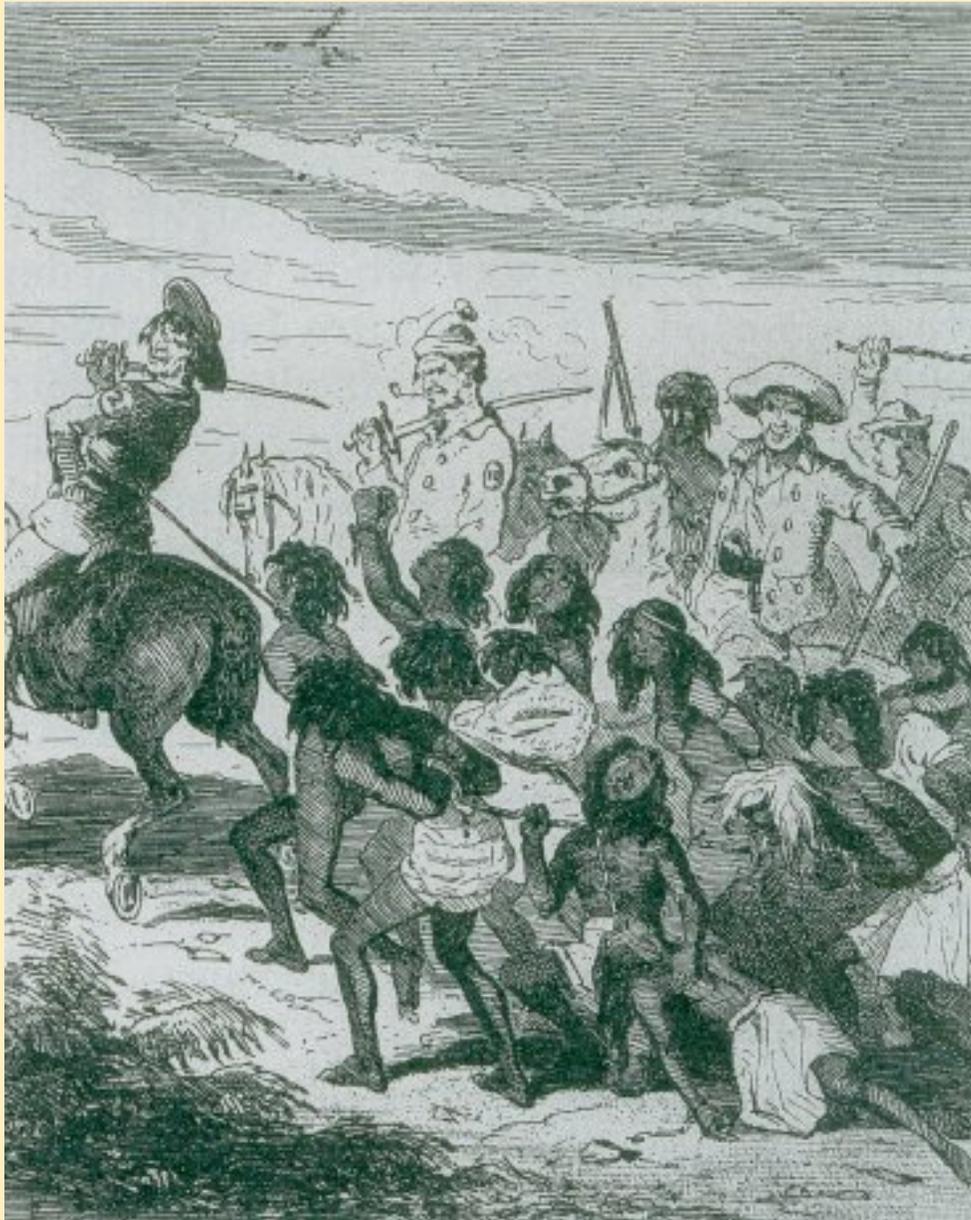
At various times during the 19th and early 20th centuries, groups of Aboriginal people were simply massacred by the settlers. Historians have only recently begun to write about these events and make them more widely known. nevertheless, there was one massacre in the 19th century which received widespread attention. Interestingly though, the event made headlines in some Sydney newspapers not so much because people were horrified at what had happened, but because it was the first time Europeans were hanged for murdering Aborigines.

The Myall Creek massacre took place on a sheep station in northern New South Wales at a time of conflict between Aborigines and European settlers. Local Aborigines had been accused of stealing sheep. As happened elsewhere on the frontier, white settlers reacted to to such events by hunting down Aborigines and inflicting their own punishments. At Myall Creek the Aborigines who were massacred had not been involved in sheep stealing. It was a group of women, children and elderly people who had been living on friendly terms with some of the European workers at Myall Creek station. they had no reason to hide or to expect violence from Europeans. But, on a weekend in June 1839, this group was suddenly attacked by a party of men on horseback, who simply rode uip and surrounded them. The horsemen were armed with swords and pistols. They tied the Aborigines together in a long line and led them away to a place which had been chosen for their execution. a total of 28 were murdered. A few were shot but many were hacked to death or decapitated with swords. The bodies were later burned.



Site of the Myall Creek massacre in
Northern New South Wales, Australia

William Hobbs, the manager of Myall Creek station, had been away when the murders were committed. On his return he discovered what had happened and decided to report the incident to authorities. At the time this was an unusual thing for a white person to do. Moreover, even though it was difficult to find witnesses to give evidence, the murderers were eventually charged with the crime and brought to Sydney for trial. Finally, after two trials and a great deal of controversy, seven men were found guilty of the murders and were hanged.



The Myall Creek victims. Drawing from an English journal, 1841

Newspapers of the time show that some people were horrified by the massacre. But there was also a great deal of public sympathy for the murderers. Many people believed that hanging was too severe a punishment, and there was widespread anger that white people should even be put on trial for killing Aboriginal people.



Aboriginal in Police custody, 1906

Friendship and good intentions

Historians now believe that up to 20,000 people died in various conflicts between Aboriginal people and Europeans during the period of more than 100 years it took for white settlement to extend across the continent. Of this 20,000, about 18,000 were Aboriginal people. Many thousands more Aborigines died from diseases introduced by the settlers or through being pushed off their land and the destruction of their culture. Nevertheless, many Europeans had good intentions toward Aboriginal people, despite the fact that they were invading Aboriginal land. Similarly, until Aborigines were forced into violent action to defend themselves, they often welcomed the first Europeans and treated them well. We can find many examples of friendship and co-operation between the two races in the 19th century.

The conviction of the Myall Creek murderers was one triumph for those whites who were determined to see Aborigines treated as equals before the law. It showed that there were many Europeans in the 19th century who who, when faced with clear evidence of injustice, acted with decency towards Aborigines. There were many Europeans with a humanitarian outlook toward the Aborigines. They viewed them as fellow human beings who should be helped rather than ill treated. Unfortunately although such humanitarian people were well intentioned, they often had very little understanding of Aboriginal culture.

Aborigines at the end of the 19th century

By the end of the 19th century it was apparent that the European invasion had had tragic consequences for Australia's Aboriginal people. The greatest effect was in the areas most heavily settled by Europeans. Here the Aboriginal population was vastly reduced and their culture and lifestyle, developed over thousands of years, was almost destroyed.



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