# Introduction

ALISON BASHFORD AND STUART MACINTYRE

Australia's history has unfolded on vastly different scales, temporal and geographical. It has a human history in 'deep time' – an Indigenous history of perhaps 50,000 years – that continues to the present. This temporal expanse confounds both the conventional chronology of human history, measured in far shorter periods, and the geological eras to which deep time normally refers. It is sometimes comprehended by Aboriginal Australians not as a past at all, but as what has become known as the 'Dreaming', in which 'before' and 'after' are indistinct.[1]

Modern Australian history, by contrast, is foreshortened. The colonisation and settlement of the Australian continent by the British took place as part of economic and population growth that marked the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries out from any preceding period in world history. Colonial Australia was a product of the late Enlightenment and of the age of revolutions that hit its stride – for better and for worse – in a century of accelerating agricultural, industrial and demographic change.

Australian history has also unfolded on geographic scales that are both global and local. On one hand, the human past has taken place on a large and geologically old island. In this way, Australian 'national' history doubles as the history of one of the planet's continents. The island's location in the southern hemisphere partly explains its foreshortened modern history. From the early seventeenth century Portuguese and Spanish ships accidentally encountered, and sometimes actively explored, the west coast on journeys elsewhere, and the Dutch journeyed along the far south-east coast. In the process Van Diemen's Land was named and, for two centuries, the continent was known by the English as New Holland. At about the same time, fishing and trading expeditions by Southeast Asians began, and gradually turned

[1] Deborah Bird Rose, 'Hard Times: An Australian Study', in Klaus Neumann, Nicholas Thomas and Hilary Ericksen (eds), *Quicksands: Foundational Histories in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999), pp. 2–19.

Introduction

into seasonal visits, beginning a centuries-long regional connection between communities along and within the Torres Strait and present-day Indonesia.

Australia's eighteenth-century history is deeply connected to the British and French exploration of the Pacific. Behind this was an Enlightenment-inspired desire for knowledge of the natural and human world, strategic ambitions in an era of European wars that extended to their overseas empires, and commercial forces that increasingly linked Pacific, Atlantic and Indian Ocean trade. In all three regions convicts, settlers and slaves were moved across the seas. Out of that history, in one small cove on the south-east of the Australian continent, British colonisation and settlement began. Even there and then, at the beginning of 1788, connections and encounters were simultaneously local and global. Aboriginal people and British officers and convicts watched one another warily, their histories meeting.[2] And, to the surprise of all, two French ships entered and anchored in Botany Bay, their officers and crew exchanged compliments with their British counterparts and six weeks later sailed on.

First encounters between cultures took place over many generations as the Australian frontier moved inland from coastal settlements. Europeans tended to produce long accounts of these meetings.[3] But in what ways, and through what knowledge, do we assess and make claims about Aboriginal experience of such encounters – and, even more difficult, Aboriginal history before them? How is Australian 'prehistory' to be incorporated into Australian national history? Through colonial history is one answer, as empirically correct as it is politically challenging. Another is through material culture, the analysis of which is the work of archaeologists. In the opening chapter to this volume, archaeological knowledge is set out, telling Australian 'deep time' history through environmental changes and analysis of remaining material culture, from ancient human occupation to the mid-1600s. This chapter summarises the current archaeological consensus about human migration into and within the continent, across great climate changes and different environments that prompted technological developments. Surviving traces of material culture tell us a lot. And for more recent times, there is much more than mere traces. Extensive rock art sites in the Northern Territory depict the visiting 'Macassan' fishing boats, for example. Life-scale humans and animals were engraved into the sandstone on which Sydney is built, common enough to form part of many Sydney residents' awareness of Aboriginal history. In

2  Maria Nugent, *Botany Bay: Where Histories Meet* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005).
3  Shino Konishi, *The Aboriginal Male in the Enlightenment World* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012).

Introduction

addition to such graphic communication – there was no written language through which pre-contact Aboriginal people told their past – history was communicated orally. Part of this storytelling concerned the occasional visits of seaborne strangers. Some of these accounts appear in the second chapter, offering a different mode through which Indigenous history is brought into the present.

One way or another, almost everything about the history of the Australian colonies was about land. Late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century convicts who would never have been landowners had they stayed in England, Scotland, Wales or Ireland, were granted, bought and sometimes just took land in the new colonial world after serving their sentences. Property laws and policies regulating the control and then release of crown land into private hands were attempts to bring to order what was sometimes an extra-legal, ad hoc occupation. This was the case from the earliest decades in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land right up to the 1830s, when pastoralists 'squatted' on large runs of crown land. Whole new colonial ventures – the colony of South Australia in particular – were executed on pre-planned visions of land settlement, ownership and use that would promote suitable forms of sociability. Pressure for land reform remained a constant political conversation between different interest groups throughout the century.

An early generation of Australian historians documented this history of land and the regulation of its tenancy, use and ownership. There was an emphasis on exploring and pioneering, after which scholars turned to analyse the struggle to wrest control from powerful large landholders known as 'squatters' as a principal theme in colonial politics and economic development. Historical and economic geographers contributed their own accounts of colonial land and agricultural practice.[4] This was one of the intellectual trajectories that produced a later generation of environmental historians who have productively combined the history of science with the history of settler societies.[5]

---

4  D.W. Meinig, *On The Margins of the Good Earth: The South Australian Wheat Frontier, 1869–1884* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1970); J.M. Powell, *The Public Lands of Australia Felix: Settlement and Land Appraisal in Victoria, 1834–91* (Oxford University Press, 1970). And later, social and cultural histories of land: Sharon Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania: Creating an Antipodean England* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); Richard Waterhouse, *The Vision Splendid: A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia* (Perth: Curtin University Books, 2005).

5  Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin (eds), *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies* (Melbourne University Press, 1997); Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2000).

Introduction

As in many contexts, evolving property law determined access to crown land and adjudicated between the competing claims of private holders. But in a settler colony more was at stake. Land raised the prior question of sovereignty: the state's claim to that territory in the first place. Earlier studies of land-taking and land reform have been rethought extensively in connection with the political and legal history of dispossession. That Britain initially claimed portions of the continent and then the whole continent – James Cook's claim of territory from Possession Island in 1770, Arthur Phillip's proclamation of sovereignty of the eastern half in 1788 and Charles Fremantle's declaration of possession of the western part of New Holland in 1829 – used to be taught as part of the natural order of things. This understanding of acquisition has not been held for many decades now. In its place is a new awareness of the substantial and protracted legal discussion over the nature and very possibility of those claims.[6] The claim to land was by no means clear or straightforward for historical actors at the time, especially during the 1830s, when pastoral expansion brought a major geographic reach into new territories of Aboriginal people. Land has been firmly reinstated as a subject of historical inquiry with a new Indigenous perspective. If 'colonial' Australian history used to signal a period, now it unmistakably signals the process of colonisation itself. It is no coincidence that Australian historians have been at the forefront internationally of analysis of the phenomenon of settler colonialism.[7]

Indigenous and settler relations across the century are the subject of a dedicated thematic chapter, and are explained in chapters on law, environmental transformations, population and health, and religion. The multiple means by which Aboriginal people defended land, moved into or were expelled from colonial social and legal systems; the ways in which they participated in or were kept out of a growing economy; the episodes of violence and attempts at conciliation – each of these aspects is examined, taking account of historical scholarship that traces the continuous history of Indigenous and settler

---

6 Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1987); Lisa Ford, *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australia, 1788–1836* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

7 Julie Evans, Patricia Grimshaw, David Phillips and Shurlee Swain, *Equal Subjects, Unequal Rights: Indigenous Peoples in British Settler Colonies, 1830–1910* (Manchester University Press, 2003); Bain Attwood, 'Settler Histories and Indigenous Pasts: New Zealand and Australia', in Axel Schneider and Daniel Woolf (eds), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. 5 (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 594–614; Heather Douglas and Mark Finnane, *Indigenous Crime and Settler Law: White Sovereignty after Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

relations throughout the century and beyond.[8] While a broad pattern is evident, the possibilities and experiences were determined by the specific laws and policies of each colony. The fact that the colonies were independent of one another in legal and political terms is perhaps nowhere more significant than it is with respect to the management of Indigenous Australians. They often found themselves caught between jurisdictions, in ways that settler Australians also sometimes did, but rarely where the stakes were so high.

If land is central to Australian political, legal and social history, so, too, the sea that separates the continent from elsewhere is a major theme of recent spatially informed histories. Geoffrey Blainey suggested in the 1960s how distance shaped Australian history,[9] but now connection and proximity claim as much attention. Notwithstanding the famous statement by Australia's first prime minister, Edmund Barton, that '[f]or the first time in history, we have a nation for a continent and a continent for a nation',[10] Australian colonial historians have become less interested in the progressive formation of the continent-nation and more interested in a historical perspective that looks outwards from Australian shores to its immediate global region.

Although such a view can be overstated, some coastal settlements were more connected to other colonial outposts altogether – Port Darwin and Singapore, New South Wales and New Zealand, for example – than to some of the colonies that eventually federated to become Australia. Indeed, rather than seeking antecedents to a 'national' history, some colonial historians now emphasise the legal distinctions between colonies, and even 'patriotic' cultural attachment to one colony over another.

The island continent of Australia has a most interesting part to play in the new 'oceanic' histories. If 'Australia' was the term that Matthew Flinders promoted early as the name for the continent, 'Australasia' was also commonly used, incorporating New Zealand as well as many Pacific islands that later became British crown colonies or protectorates: Fiji, Norfolk Island, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, Pitcairn Islands and New Guinea.[11] They

---

8 Bain Attwood and S.G. Foster (eds), *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2003); Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: A History Since 1788*, rev. edn (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2010); Lyndall Ryan, *Tasmanian Aborigines: A History Since 1803* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012).

9 Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966).

10 Edmund Barton, speech at Annandale, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 April 1898.

11 For the development of the term 'Australasia' see Philippa Mein Smith and Peter Hempenstall, 'Rediscovering the Tasman World', in Philippa Mein Smith, Peter Hempenstall and Shaun Goldfinch, *Remaking the Tasman World* (Christchurch: University of Canterbury Press, 2008), pp. 13–30.

Introduction

were linked to the Australian colonies as parts of the British Empire, and
through missions, trade and commerce. In passing administrative moments,
they moved into and out of Australian jurisdiction. Such a Pacific view of
Australian history is not new: the 1933 *Cambridge History of the British Empire*
devoted two chapters to it, 'The Exploration of the Pacific' and 'The Western
Pacific, 1788–1885'. As Benians noted in the latter, during the 1820s courts
in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land were empowered to rule on
offences committed by British subjects across the Pacific, not least since con-
victs were escaping in that direction.[12]

The imperial perspective that shaped that generation's scholarly interest
is now just one part of the Australian-Pacific story. More recently, coastal
China and the west coast of North America have also been incorporated
into Australia's transpacific history.[13] As contributors note here, during
the gold-rush decade of the 1850s and before the opening of the Panama
Canal, it was easier to travel from California to Melbourne than it was from
California to New York. Over the nineteenth century the Pacific was the site
of a great circuit of Chinese labour and commerce, and after the 1851 gold
rush the Australian colonies were key destinations. This defined a great deal
of subsequent colonial history, and indeed Australian national history after
1901. Australia's colonial history was also linked directly to the Pacific region
through the Islander labour trade that facilitated the Queensland sugar cane
economy from the mid-1860s. The presence of these Islanders is at once part
of the history of the Australian labour movement and the history of race in
the Pacific. It is also part of the history of Australia's own imperial ambitions.
While the idea of an 'Asia-Pacific region' was a product of the later twentieth
century, its colonial origins and dynamics lie here.

There has been considerable interest in the north coast of Australia,
not from the vantage point of the south-eastern metropolis, or even from
the administrative standpoint of South Australia (it was the Northern
Territory of South Australia from 1863 to 1911), but rather as a region linked
by trade and culture with Singapore, the Dutch East Indies and the Torres

---

12 E.A. Benians, 'The Western Pacific, 1788–1885' in J. Holland Rose, A.P. Newton,
E.A. Benians, with Ernest Scott (eds) *The Cambridge History of the British Empire,* vol. VII,
part 1, *Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 1933), pp. 325–64.

13 For example, Ian Tyrrell, *True Gardens of the Gods: Californian-Australian Environmental
Reform, 1860–1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Penelope Edmonds,
*Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities*
(Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010); Marilyn Lake, 'Chinese
Colonists Assert Their "Common Human Rights": Cosmopolitanism as Subject and
Method of History', *Journal of World History*, 21, 3 (2010): 375–92.

Introduction

Strait islands. The Torres Strait is in some ways the southern hemisphere's Mediterranean, a 'middle sea' that connected as much as separated the British settlements of Port Darwin and Singapore, as well as those of the Dutch and Portuguese empires. Here, on one view, is the long history of relations between Australians, Indonesians and Chinese people.[14] Similarly, the connections between colonial Australian history and the Indian Ocean have attracted recent analysis.[15] In a maritime world, and especially after the opening of the Suez Canal, the west coast on the Indian Ocean was the first Australian port of call for ships from Britain and Europe. Their route took them to India and Ceylon along the way, an intercolonial journey that brought mainly Europeans, but also some South Asians. In such ways, the oceans and the margins of colonial Australia have been incorporated into the historical account, accompanying longstanding analyses of interior explorations, transcontinental expeditions and vain searches for inland seas. Australian historians are now looking outwards as well as inwards, just as their historical actors did, to the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, and across the Torres Strait and Timor Sea.

In these ways the *Cambridge History of Australia,* Volume 1, is shaped by a distinct geographic sensibility. It is a world geography in which London no longer functions as the reference point it once was. This affects both nationalist histories that determinedly ignore London, and imperialist histories that see everything converging on the imperial metropolis. Even so, it remains a defining fact of Australian colonial history that New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland were each part of the British Empire, and developed within a nineteenth-century 'Greater Britain'. How these imperial ventures became self-governing polities, and how a distinctive settler colonial nationalism bore political fruit at the end of the century, is part of the history of Britain and also constitutes the history of Australia. British imperial politics and procedures were shaped by the Australian experience, first in its administration of the faraway colonies and then in letting them go. How should self-government best proceed in the nineteenth century after the disastrous American War of the eighteenth? What was 'free trade' inside this imperial economic system? Were Indigenous people British subjects or not? Such questions are longstanding,

14 Regina Ganter with Julia Martínez and Gary Lee, *Mixed Relations: Asian–Aboriginal Contact in North Australia* (Perth: UWA Press, 2006), pp. 122–39.
15 Heather Goodall, Devleena Ghosh and Lindi R. Todd, 'Jumping Ship – Skirting Empire: Indians, Aborigines and Australians across the Indian Ocean', *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, 3, 1 (2008): 44–74.

## Introduction

broached by the first generation of Australian academic historians and by
political historians of the British Empire since.[16] The Australian case has been
taken up strongly within discussion of the 'British world',[17] and as part of a
'new imperial history' with its close conceptual links to feminist and trans-
national history.[18]

Just why the British decided to send convicts to Botany Bay in particular
is perhaps Australian historiography's most enduring question; one that has
always foregrounded the movement of people, goods and ideas. Historians
once understood it largely in terms of a 'turn to the east' after the American
War, and debated various strategic and commercial reasons for colonising
the south-west Pacific. Revisionist histories, including the chapter here,
place it within a global history of convict transportation and slavery, link-
ing activity on the African continent to the American and European.[19] This
is followed by a chapter that explores the social history of that unlikely new
society over its first few decades. Historical analysis of the convict experi-
ence, of ordinary men's and women's social exchanges, leisure and messy
day-to-day negotiations comes after decades of more policy oriented schol-
arship that concentrated on the policies followed by governors, and the
changing systems through which they managed their convict charges and,
sometimes with greater difficulty, their officers. The place of the Australian
convict system in the history of penology has received considerable atten-
tion as well, with close analysis of the penitentiaries and the experiments in
carceral punishment, as well as the more typical practice of assigning con-
victs to free settlers and setting them to work as part of households and
farming ventures, or using them as labourers on public works. Convict

16  For example, John M. Ward, *Colonial Self-Government: The British Experience, 1759–1856*
    (London: Macmillan, 1976); Luke Trainor, *British Imperialism and Australian Nationalism:
    Manipulation, Conflict, and Compromise in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge
    University Press, 1994).

17  Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich (eds), *The British World: Diaspora, Culture, and
    Identity* (London: Frank Cass, 2003); Kate Darian-Smith, Patricia Grimshaw and Stuart
    Macintyre (eds), *Britishness Abroad: Transnational Movements and Imperial Cultures*
    (Melbourne University Press, 2007).

18  Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds), *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational
    Perspective* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2005); Zoë Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections 1815–45:
    Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester University
    Press, 2005). See also Ann Curthoys, 'Identity Crisis: Colonialism, Nation, and Gender
    in Australian History', *Gender and History*, 5, 2 (1993): 165–76.

19  For example, Ged Martin (ed.), *The Founding of Australia: The Argument about Australia's
    Origins* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1978); Emma Christopher, *A Merciless Place: The
    Lost Story of Britain's Convict Disaster in Africa and How it Led to the Settlement of Australia*
    (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2010); Alan Frost, *Botany Bay: The Real Story* (Melbourne:
    Black Inc., 2011).

Introduction

labour was central to commercial enterprise in the economic history of early Australia.[20]

The great social fault-line of early colonial society was between felon and free. This lingered even into the twentieth century, when convict origins were perceived as shameful elements in a family history (and convict-free origins the great source of South Australian pride). Tracing convict genealogies is now a pastime eagerly pursued. Yet the founding convict population did not, it turns out, leave an especially significant demographic legacy. The population growth in Australia from the initial 1,300 Europeans to around 4 million in 1901 was mainly due to the natural increase of free settlers on the one hand, and the large immigrations of the gold rush on the other.

The original penal system did leave a massive political legacy. The welfare of the convict population was state business from the beginning, and this meant that some of the major politico-legal questions of the nineteenth century were at the heart of Australian history: freedom, punishment, improvement, reform. It was a society created not just in the light of a late-Enlightenment science, but also in the crucible of modern political thought about the nature of individual rights, punishment and legal systems. This is why, for example, Jeremy Bentham's prolific output includes *Panopticon versus New South Wales, or, The panopticon penitentiary system, and the penal colonization system, compared*.[21] More or less at the same time and as a kind of antipodean response, the native-born politician William Charles Wentworth, a Cambridge-educated lawyer and son of a convict mother, pitched his bids for 'Australasia' – 'a new Britannia in another world' – in terms of anti-transportation, free emigration, elected assemblies, freedom of the press and trial by jury.[22]

Not a few of the convicts were themselves deeply schooled in just such aspirations, having been transported for political offences. They included the early 'Scottish martyrs' primed in the liberty, equality and fraternity of the French Republic. Tolpuddle martyrs, Chartists, Irish republicans and rebels from British North America all made up the mix of convict and emancipist

---

20 Kirsty Reid, *Gender, Crime and Empire: Convicts, Settlers and the State in Early Colonial Australia* (Manchester University Press, 2007); Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, *Closing Hell's Gates: The Death of a Convict Station* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008); Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2009).
21 Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon versus New South Wales, or, The panopticon penitentiary system and the penal colonization system, compared* (London: Wilks and Taylor, 1812).
22 William Charles Wentworth, *Australasia: A Poem Written for the Chancellor's Medal at the Cambridge Commencement, July 1823*, ed. G.A. Wilkes (Sydney University Press, 1982).

populations, working and politicking alongside the majority of convicts who were transported for theft.

The process by which liberal democracy was institutionalised in nineteenth-century Australia is an internationally significant one, and has engaged Australia's leading historians for many decades.[23] After responsible government was granted, electoral reform unfolded to dimensions that would have left Wentworth bewildered had he lived long enough to see his imagined free 'Australasia' turn into the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. He might have been able to understand the contest of free trade and protection that formed the political dividing line at the end of the century. But the world's first labour government in Queensland in 1899 (albeit a minority government that held power for one week) and the enfranchisement of women in South Australia in 1894 were not part of his New Britannia.

Movements to end transportation and allow self-government were well established by the 1840s. The process of self-government was invited by Britain itself but the form it took was largely determined by colonial politics. This was the work of a local, if deeply divided elite, including the wealthy 'emancipists' who sought controls over the new legislatures (that materialised differently in each colony) and a limited franchise. But there were radical democratic pressures in play as well. Chartist demands, strengthened by political activity on the goldfields over the 1850s, were realised rapidly: manhood suffrage was quickly introduced in several of the colonies, the secret ballot was instituted, the eight-hour day embraced, and the first labour member of parliament was elected as early as 1859 in Victoria.

Accompanying this trend towards democratic inclusion was a deliberate exclusion of others. It was Victoria and California – both gold-defined societies – that simultaneously implemented the earliest immigration-restriction acts, initially directed at Chinese gold seekers, merchants and labourers. In the Victorian case, regulations made entry into colonial territory increasingly difficult for Chinese, and later Indian and other 'coloured aliens'. These restrictions have been seen as formative of Australian society over the last half of the nineteenth century. Older histories of crude colonial racism have been extended in histories that investigate the active engagement of Chinese

23 J.B. Hirst, *The Strange Birth of Colonial Democracy: New South Wales 1848–1884* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988); Stuart Macintyre, *A Colonial Liberalism: The Lost World of Three Victorian Visionaries* (Oxford University Press, 1991); Alan Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia, A History. Volume 2, Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2004); Peter Cochrane, *Colonial Ambition: Foundations of Australian Democracy* (Melbourne University Press, 2006); Ann Curthoys (ed.), 'Indigenous People and Settler Self Government', special issue, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 13, 1 (2012): online.