

A Brief History of Australia

Portuguese and Spanish mariners may have charted the east coast of Australia in as early as the 16th century, but they preferred to concentrate on India, East Africa, and Southeast Asia. It was the Dutch, however, that eventually explored the continent. Helped by better sailing ships and greater knowledge of global wind systems, in 1616 the Dutch sailor Dirk Hartog followed a new southern route across the Indian Ocean to where he landed on an offshore island of Western Australia, becoming the first known European to set foot on Australian soil. The British soon followed.

In 1768, Captain James Cook left England on a three-year expedition to the Pacific that also took him to Australia. Cook landed at Botany Bay on the eastern coast. He charted the region and named it New South Wales. It was he and his staff, including the botanist Sir Joseph Banks, who later supported settlement in Australia. Cook's two additional voyages in the 1770s added information on the Australian landmass and cemented Britain's claims to the continent. At this point, the Aboriginal people resisted the influence of the white settlers, and numerous cultural clashes followed.

Australia was portrayed as a remote and unattractive land for European settlement. However, it had some social and strategic value for a nation with rising crime rates and commercial interests in the Pacific and East Asia. Because of overcrowding in the British jails, prisoners were sent to penal settlements in Australia.

Britain moved quickly after the American Revolution ended in 1783 to establish its first settlement in Australia, since it could no longer ship British convicts to America. By the mid-1800s, Britain had sent more than 150,000 prisoners to two colonies, which formed the early territories of New South Wales and Western Australia. Approximately 20 percent were women, and about one-third were Irish, the majority coming from the poorer classes of British towns. Most of the convicts were poorly educated and illiterate, and because they were unskilled and unaccustomed to the rigors of colonial or prison life, the convicts were an exceptionally difficult population with which to build a new society. British officers were granted large tracts of land, and convicts were assigned to them as laborers. Later, land grants were extended to enlisted men of the corps and to released prisoners who had completed their terms. Beginning in 1793, free settlers began arriving. A strong economy began to develop.

Some Aboriginal people were assimilated into white settlements, while others assisted settlers as guides, trackers, and stockmen. But the frontier, as it moved across the country, was generally a place of tension and sporadic bloodshed. In Tasmania and elsewhere the struggle became a full-scale land war, to which colonial authorities responded with declarations of martial law. On many occasions Aboriginals were deliberately killed by settlers or police. Police actions were often called 'dispersals'. The last recorded massacre was in the Northern Territory in 1927, when policemen shot 17 Aboriginals.

From the 1820s to the 1880s, Australia underwent major processes that laid the foundation for its present society. Among these were the establishment of new colonies along the coasts, the expansion of sheep and cattle raising in the interior,

and the discovery of gold and other minerals in the eastern colonies. With new immigrants and the growth of the capital cities, each of which served as the major port for its region, the Australian colonies began to agitate for more control over their governmental systems. By the mid-1850s each of the four eastern colonies refashioned its governmental system and gained control over its land policy. The new systems vested power in a cabinet or council of ministers responsible to the legislature and provided a popularly elected assembly as a part of that legislature.

Meanwhile, Aboriginal communities began to be destroyed on a large scale. In principle, the official colonial policy throughout the 19th century was to treat the Indigenous people as equals, with the intention of eventually converting them to Christianity and European civilization through schools for Aboriginal children. Such acts, however, stressing good intentions, were infrequently supported and always under-financed. In fact, moving from a policy of protection to one of punishment was typical of the early colonial government.

The culture clash between whites and Aboriginals was especially severe on the frontier. In the 1830s and 1840s, as the frontier pushed inland, some Aborigines were employed on sheep stations, and others were used for police patrols, but even some active church efforts to serve and educate the Aboriginals didn't stabilize race relations. White settlers poisoned and hunted Aborigines and abused and exploited Aboriginal women and children.

Forced to survive on even scantier supplies of food, the Aboriginals were steadily reduced in number. By the 20th century their traditional lifestyles were confined to the Northern Territory, Queensland, and New South Wales. Not until the 1950s did their population begin to inch back to its pre-European level and the federal government begin to review and correct past treatment.

Federation of the Australian colonies came late and without the display of nationalism that characterized similar movements elsewhere. The idea of unification appeared as early as 1847 in proposals by Earl Grey, Britain's colonial secretary. In the 1850s John Dunmore Lang, a Scottish Presbyterian cleric in New South Wales, formed the Australian League to campaign for a united Australia. Conferences among colonial governments in the 1860s also considered closer cooperation and unification. With the formation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867, British officials began to expect a similar effort among Australians. No plan, however, received serious attention, due to the intense rivalries among colonial societies.

The constitution of Australia, which became effective in 1901, is based on British parliamentary traditions, and includes elements of the system in the United States. The head of state is the British sovereign, and the head of government is the Australian prime minister, who is responsible to the Australian Parliament. All powers not delegated to the federal government are reserved to the states. Central to the history of Australia in the 20th century has been the development of both a national government and a national culture. Commonwealth governments quickly established a protective tariff to foster internal development, designed procedures for setting minimum wages in industry, and preserved the white immigration policy. Nevertheless, Australians tended to retain their old colonial identities, and the political parties at the national level tended to be loosely defined.

History of Australia—Questions:

1. Define the underlined terms in the handout
2. What did the British originally use Australia for? How many were sent there? What percentage were women?
3. How did the aboriginal people react to the white settlers?
4. What was the official policy in the 19th century for the treatment of the aboriginal people? How did they try to do this? What actually happened to the aboriginal people?
5. When was the Australian commonwealth established? How was it governed?