

IN THIS CHAPTER

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- » Examining the effects of colonisation on Australia's Indigenous peoples
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Chapter **1**

Understanding Indigenous Australia

The Aboriginal people of Australia are said to be the custodians of the world's oldest living culture. Indigenous Australians — Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders — have worldviews that focus on the interconnectedness between people and their environment, and the bonds they have with each other. They are also an important part of the Australian story. Modern Australia can't be understood without also considering the significance of its Indigenous peoples and their cultures in that story.

The colonisation of Australia devastated Indigenous people and cultures — populations were decimated, traditional lands and means of self-sufficiency were taken, and government policies aimed at assimilation legitimised the taking of Indigenous children from their families so they could grow up as 'white' Australians. But, although this was a difficult period, the story of how Indigenous people — and their cultures — survived is inspiring.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of Australia’s history through Indigenous eyes, covering how government practices were able to control the lives of Indigenous people, even up until recent times, and what they did to defend themselves, their rights and their country. This chapter gives you a quick look at the breadth of contemporary Indigenous culture and political action that celebrates their very survival. And it also looks briefly at how Indigenous people are tackling some of the major challenges they face today — lower levels of literacy, higher levels of unemployment, higher levels of poverty and poorer health than other Australians.

Understanding these aspects of Indigenous history and cultures enables you to gain a greater insight into who Indigenous people are and what their cultures are like, what issues they face today and some of the solutions being employed to meet these challenges.

Indigenous Cultures: Then and Now

More than 500 different Aboriginal nations existed at the time the British colonised Australia — possibly up to one million people in total. They had lived on this land for over 65,000 years, adjusting to dramatic changes in the environment and landscape. The arrival of the British in 1788, however, had a fundamental impact on Indigenous cultures. Over the next century, as colonies spread far and wide, Aboriginal people were separated from their traditional lands, affecting their ability to care for their country, support themselves and their families and practise traditional ceremonies. But Indigenous cultures were resilient and, even in the face of such overwhelming change, they still adapted.

Today, Indigenous people live across Australia in communities in urban, rural and remote areas. Although they were once considered by non-Indigenous Australians to be a dying, inferior race, their increasing populations and continuing cultural practices show that contemporary Indigenous cultures are vibrant and still very much alive. Chapter 2 outlines the initial decline and later growth of the Indigenous population since colonisation, as well as the cultural protocols of how to address Indigenous people in different areas of Australia.

Ancient traditions

Indigenous cultures across Australia had strong connections to their traditional land. They relied on it to provide them with everything they needed to survive — food, shelter, tools and medicine. And they needed each other as well. Nations were divided into *clans*, which were large extended families, perhaps as small as 30 people in some cases. In such small groups, everyone had to pitch in and people were very reliant on each other.

These circumstances gave rise to cultural values that focused on this interconnectedness. Through complex totemic systems, Indigenous people were reminded of their connection with nature, each other and their ancestors. They also believed in respect and responsibility for country, and respect for the wisdom and authority of Elders. Chapter 4 delves into traditional practices and beliefs, and Chapter 23 describes some of the cultural sites that remain important for Indigenous peoples today.

Diversity, diversity and more diversity

Although Indigenous cultures around Australia shared many values and had similar worldviews, great diversity was also present, explained to a large extent by the vastly different environments and climates across Australia. Indigenous communities living by the ocean had different ways of life, different technologies and different practices from Indigenous communities living in the middle of Australia in arid desert areas. However, across the country, large gatherings of several clans took place for ceremonial purposes, and trading routes spread across the continent. See Chapter 3 for more on cultural diversity, in both traditional and contemporary contexts.



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Indigenous cultures have remained strong and vibrant across Australia. Even in contemporary forms — using new technology or incorporating aspects of other cultures — they maintain a strong connection to traditional practices. Chapter 25 examines, and debunks, some of the myths that have developed over the years about Indigenous people.

Contemporary painting, singing and dancing

Art, song and dance were key aspects of traditional cultural practice, mostly engaged in for ceremonial purposes, and they retain a central position in contemporary cultures.

Indigenous art has become a worldwide sensation, with some pieces attracting prices in the tens, even hundreds of thousands of dollars. This industry hasn't, however, translated into wealth for the artists. Chapter 16 looks in detail at some of the successes in the Indigenous art world.

Indigenous songs were one of the most fragile parts of Indigenous cultures, being some of the first things that were lost with colonisation. Today, however, Indigenous people are strongly engaged with music — particularly country and western music! Younger Indigenous people have also embraced hip-hop music and rap as a way of expressing their views and aspirations. Indigenous dance has emerged as a

leading contemporary Indigenous art form, blending traditional dancing with more modern styles. Indigenous dance companies have flourished around Australia. See Chapter 17 for some of the best of Indigenous Australia's musicians and dancers.

Old and new ways of storytelling

Indigenous cultures have a storytelling tradition, and Indigenous people have embraced new ways of getting their message across. Indigenous playwrights, theatre directors and filmmakers have also employed Indigenous actors to tell Indigenous stories. Indigenous people have also set up their own national radio service and television service, both complementing the many regional radio and television services set up by Indigenous communities. See Chapter 19 for more on the development of these media, as well as the establishment of the National Black Theatre, one of Australia's first political theatres.

Although Indigenous cultures originally had an oral tradition with no written languages, Indigenous storytellers have now turned their hand to the written word. For a long time, Indigenous people had stories written about them by white anthropologists, linguists, historians and writers but, since the 1970s, Indigenous people have had an increasing desire to tell their own stories themselves. Since then, Indigenous writing has crossed over into many genres, including crime novels and women's popular fiction. Chapter 18 covers Indigenous writing and publishing in detail.

And they can kick a ball!

Australia's Indigenous peoples lived hunter-gatherer lifestyles. This meant they spent a lot of time moving and had a nutritious, balanced diet. It was a way of life that kept people strong and healthy. Perhaps because of this traditional way of life, Indigenous people have excelled as athletes. Across many sports — but especially football and athletics — Indigenous people have made a sizeable contribution to Australia's sporting prowess. Sportspeople are good role models for Indigenous young people and often work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as mentors, assisting with building confidence and self-esteem, and encouraging young people to be active, fit and healthy. You can find more information on leading Indigenous sportspeople and the work they do in Chapter 20.

There Goes the Neighbourhood

Understanding contemporary Indigenous cultures and worldviews is largely reliant on understanding how Australia's Indigenous peoples have been treated during the country's comparatively brief European history.

Lieutenant James Cook (later Captain) claimed the eastern coast of Australia for the British in 1770. At the time, the agreement among the large, powerful colonising countries such as Britain, Spain and France was that lands such as Australia, populated only by natives who were seen to be inferior, could be claimed by the colonial power that found them first. This was known as the *doctrine of discovery*. (Chapter 5 examines this concept and some of the European explorations that led to it.) Indigenous people could have had no idea that, after 1770, their world would change as it did.

The takeover begins

In 1778, the First Fleet arrived in Sydney Cove and established a penal colony. The settlement was designed to assist with the problem of overcrowding in British prisons — grown worse since the American revolution stopped prisoners being sent there — and to establish a claim to the territory against other colonial powers, especially the French. With the establishment of the colony, life for Indigenous Australians would never be the same again. Chapter 6 explores the ramifications of this first colony.

The colony spreads

The colony at Sydney Cove soon spread. The colony needed agricultural industries such as wheat, sheep and cattle to survive, and for that it needed land. The British eventually set up colonies around the country, including:

- » Van Diemen's Land, which became known as Tasmania
- » Port Phillip District, in what is now Victoria
- » Moreton Bay, near what is now Brisbane
- » Adelaide, in South Australia



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The impact on Aboriginal people of the establishment of these colonies was profound. One of the initial problems for them was the effect of the diseases brought by the British. Aboriginal people had no immunity to smallpox, colds, flu and measles, and populations were decimated as these diseases spread. Chapter 7 looks in detail at the impact of this expansion.

Loss of land

As the colonies were established and spread out from their initial boundaries, Aboriginal people were pushed off their land. They also lost their livelihoods — their ability to feed and shelter themselves and their families — and cultural

practices were disrupted. This led inevitably to conflict — often violent conflict — as Aboriginal people resisted, as best they could, the attempts to dispossess them of their land. Although this resistance (mostly setting fire to buildings and infrastructure, and killing stock), did stall the expansion of the frontier in some places, eventually the colonists, with their superior firepower and increasing numbers, gained the upper hand.

In many places, Aboriginal people found themselves pushed to the margins of towns and forced to live on specially designated reserves. In some cases, Aboriginal people were able to live on their traditional lands on pastoral stations and were given very basic rations, in exchange for work for the station owner. See Chapter 8 for more on this uneasy alliance.

And children taken too

As the colonists got the upper hand, they attempted to assimilate Aboriginal people into European cultural ways. They believed that one of the most effective ways to do this was to remove Aboriginal children from their families and bring them up away from them and their culture, sometimes placing them in institutions, other times adopting them into white families. This also affected Torres Strait Islander people, after missions were established in the Torres Strait in the late 1800s and as Torres Strait Islanders began to settle on the mainland.

All states and territories had laws that permitted the removal of Indigenous children from their families. Some people administering the policy genuinely believed that removing Indigenous children from their families would give them a better life. Despite those good intentions, the practice often had devastating consequences for the children taken away and the families they left behind. Chapter 9 examines this painful issue in detail.

Fighting Back

From the very start of the colonisation process, Aboriginal people resisted the infringement of their rights to their lands and the impact on their communities and cultures. Over the years, Aboriginal communities continued to assert their rights to their lands and to protest their unequal treatment. Torres Strait Islanders soon joined them.

The right to be equal

When the British established their colony at Sydney Cove, they transported their laws as well as their people. Although it was asserted that the laws and their

protections applied equally to Aboriginal people and colonists, in practice this wasn't the case.

Not only were Aboriginal people's rights to their lands denied, but they were also rarely offered protection from frontier violence. They were subject to regulations about where they could live, who they could marry, and whether and where they could work. They weren't entitled to the same wages as other workers doing the same jobs. In most places, they couldn't vote.

Aboriginal people sought to challenge these restrictions, petitioning governments and even the British Crown. A key focus of their advocacy was equal treatment — particularly the rights to own and farm their own land and to have the same rights to citizenship as other Australians. Chapter 10 covers some of the more notable examples of Indigenous people's claims to citizenship rights, and some of the early organisations set up to fight for them. That chapter also lists some of the Indigenous leaders who emerged throughout the fight for the right to be equal.

Changing the playing field

By the 1960s, Indigenous communities around Australia were experiencing third-world conditions. Many Australians — black and white — believed that this was unacceptable. As a result of a decade-long grassroots campaign, over 90 per cent of Australians voted in 1967 to change the Constitution to empower the federal government to make laws for Indigenous people. At the time, people genuinely believed that this change would herald a new era of non-discrimination, because people thought that the federal government would act in a way that would benefit Indigenous people. Although reality later proved this assumption wrong, the vote was a significant moment in Australia's history, when such a large majority of Australians believed that the improved treatment of Indigenous people was important for the country. Chapter 11 looks at the referendum in more detail.

'We want our land back'

Land rights have been a key focus for Indigenous political movements ever since 1788. The land rights movement gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s. Several land rights regimes were set up — in the Northern Territory and New South Wales, in particular — though aspirations for a national scheme never eventuated. These schemes were set up by governments under different legislation and varied in terms of how they established land councils and the provisions they made for the return of land to Indigenous people. Rights to land were also given a boost in 1992, when the High Court of Australia recognised that, in some circumstances, Indigenous people could claim a 'native title' right to their traditional land. See Chapter 12 for information about the land rights movement.

Reconciliation, practical reconciliation and intervention

Governments still struggle to work out how to address systemic problems of Indigenous disadvantage. In the early 1990s, a national agenda of reconciliation was established that sought to, over a ten-year period, consult with Indigenous people about the best ways they could work together to overcome Indigenous disadvantage. This was replaced by a subsequent government with a program of ‘practical reconciliation’ that, it said, would focus on the areas of health, housing, education and employment. This approach didn’t produce tangible results, however, and, in 2007, the federal government began a policy of intervention in the Northern Territory, where it sought to impose further change in the communities.

To date, no significant inroads have been made into reducing the difference between the disadvantaged circumstances of the broad Indigenous community and the living standards of other Australians. Chapters 13 and 14 examine the political response to this socioeconomic divide.

‘Sorry’ — and then what?

On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered a historic address in the federal parliament, where he apologised to Indigenous Australians for past wrongs committed by governments against them, particularly for the removal of children from their families. This apology was seen as an act of enormous symbolic importance. Since then, the Australian government has also endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which supports self-determination for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous people continue to fight for that right in practice by seeking to be centrally involved in the policies and programs that affect their community.

The extent to which the symbolic changes will facilitate changes in the actual lives of Indigenous Australians still remains to be seen. Chapter 15 looks at the ramifications of the apology and Chapter 22 looks closely at the current issues surrounding the concept of self-determination.

New Problems for an Old Culture

The impact of colonisation on Indigenous peoples was profound. Traditional ways of life were completely disrupted; the consequences of dispossession, segregation and racist policies left an unhappy legacy. This legacy is clear in the statistics,

showing that Indigenous people are much more disadvantaged in areas of health, education outcomes and employment. These statistics pose a challenge in the goal to create a level playing field for all Australians, with Indigenous communities themselves playing an active and effective role in trying to find solutions. Chapter 24 looks at some of the achievements of Indigenous people — those who were the first to break through the barrier of these disadvantages.

Breaking the cycle of poverty

Indigenous life expectancy is lower than that of other Australians, health poorer, home ownership levels lower and housing conditions worse than those of other Australians. Indigenous people also have lower levels of education and higher levels of unemployment than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Much has been done to try to remedy this situation. Indigenous people have set up their own medical services and are training to be nurses and doctors to address pressing health needs in their communities. Chapter 21 has more information on Indigenous health.

That Indigenous disadvantage won't be overcome without improving the education levels of Indigenous people is well understood. Literacy levels and school attendance rates are a key focus in this area. Indigenous people have developed special programs that help to engage Indigenous children with learning how to read and write, and innovative programs have been designed to improve the education of Indigenous adults.

Of course, a correlation exists between education levels and unemployment levels. Another barrier to entering the workforce for Indigenous people is the remoteness of some communities. These challenges around education and employment, and examples of effective programs that have been developed to address these issues, are also explored in Chapter 21.

Challenging the rules and regulations

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities had their own laws and governance structures. Some of these survive today. But, when the British colonised Australia, they imposed their rules and governance systems, with no recognition of the rights of Indigenous Australians.

British law was supposed to protect Indigenous people. In practice, it was a weapon that hastened their dispossession. It was also used to control Indigenous people by dictating where Indigenous people could live, the conditions of their employment, whether they could vote and sometimes even if they could marry. It also legalised theft of their land and removal of their children. Indigenous people

also came into contact with the criminal justice system, being targeted by the police, charged with offences that non-Indigenous people wouldn't have been charged with, and were more likely to be refused bail and given longer sentences compared with non-Indigenous people.

All this led to an overrepresentation of Indigenous people in prisons and to the charge that systemic racism exists in the criminal justice system. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody confirmed the bias in the legal system and made many recommendations.



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Very few of the recommendations made by the Royal Commission have been implemented, and Indigenous Australians continue to be overrepresented in prisons. Chapter 22 explores governance issues in the context of Australia's legal and political systems and Chapter 26 outlines ten key legal decisions affecting Indigenous people.

Setting up Indigenous enterprises

Indigenous people haven't stayed idle in the face of the problems that face their communities. Throughout this book are many instances of Indigenous people developing effective solutions to their own problems. One area in which Indigenous people are continuing to try to find new opportunities for their communities is in business and economic development. From ecotourism and cultural tours to partnerships with mining companies, bush tucker restaurants and Indigenous-owned holiday resorts, Indigenous people are finding new ways to try to enter the economy. This is an important strategy in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. You can find more detail about how this strategy is being implemented in Indigenous communities across Australia in Chapters 3 and 21.

Doing It for Ourselves

Despite such serious disadvantage throughout the history of Indigenous Australia, communities across the country have also had their successes in finding solutions to intractable problems. These solutions are often simple, like providing drying-out shelters or rehabilitation programs to deal with issues of alcohol abuse and violence, bilingual language models that assist in improving educational outcomes and night patrols that keep the peace in Indigenous communities. All along, Indigenous people have said that, if they had the tools to be able to deal with the issues within their own communities, they would do a better job than governments. Plenty of evidence attests that this is the case and Indigenous claims to the right to self-determination remain a central part of their political agenda. Chapter 22 looks at these issues in more depth.