

# The British Colonization of Australia, in Relation to Genocide

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At the height of its power, the far-reaching British Empire had commandeered resources (both human and natural) on nearly every continent, and utilized its monopoly on naval power to extend His Majesty's domain, while keeping existing colonial holdings in check. Although such imperialistic strategies were beneficial and just to the British, native peoples saw them as an invasion. On the “Island Continent” of Australia, especially, the native Aborigines watched their traditional lands, family members, and way of life disappear, as the number and density of English settlers increased. Frequent raids and displacements at the hands of settlers took their toll, and it was not until 1990, in fact, that the Aboriginal peoples of Australia were given official status as a self-determining group (Tatz, 1999:9).

## INTRODUCTION

The original peoples of Australia, commonly referred to as “Aborigines”, are believed to have migrated to the island-continent by sea from other islands in the south Pacific between 24,000 and 60,000 years ago, possibly landing on the northern shore, near what is now known as Cape York (Tatz, 1999:6). A complex culture and religious system amongst the some 500 aboriginal tribes existed, as well as a sophisticated social networks and technologies.

Although no modern writing system existed, a pictograph system was widely used to communicate ideas, primarily at religious locations, as seen at Uluru (Ayers Rock, in English), which still stands today. Tribal histories and legends, as well as religious teachings were passed down for thousands of years through respected storytellers. Such men were, as in many tribal cultures, responsible for maintaining the oral tradition, and

were frequently called upon for advice and guidance by members of the community.

In terms of their mode of production, early Australian communities were nomadic, following seasonal game and water patterns across the predominantly arid heartland of the continent (Tatz, 1999:7). However, native peoples were forced to adapt to the 18<sup>th</sup> century "British Invasion" as it were by becoming cattle herders, something they became quite good at with the help thousands of years of experience with the rugged land and its natural co-inhabitants (Daunton, 1999:263).

Clearly, the aboriginal peoples were by no means the ignorant, uncultured, and backward "savages" white settlers made them out to be. In fact, the rich oral myths and creation stories collectively known as the "Dream-time stories" demonstrate that a highly creative, thoughtful, and complex civilization existed, and had been alive and well at the time of European contact. The fact that between 250,000 and 750,000 humans inhabited the land indicates that its people were well adapted to its natural conditions and were able to prosper, even in the harsh desert climate.

## BRITISH DISCOVERY/EARLY COLONIZATION

Prior to captain James Cook's emergency landing at Botany Bay near present day Sidney in 1769, Australia was only minimally explored by Europeans, none having set foot on its eastern and southern coastlines until that time (Moorehead, 1966:99). The Dutch preceded Cook in 1606, naming the island-continent "New Holland", as it was called until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was renamed Australia.

Upon encountering the local people for the first time, Cook and his men noted that they were not "graceful south sea islanders with golden skins such as [those] encountered

in Tahiti”. They were described as having “half-closed eyelids... great bottle noses, pretty full lips, and wide mouths”. Because of their unusual physical characteristics and unique social behaviors, the British explorers assumed they were Godless, disgusting, stupid, and to a greater or lesser extent, less than human (Moorehead, 1966:101).

## THE PENAL COLONY

The penal colony founded at Botany Bay (the site of modern Sydney) in 1788. It consisted of predominantly common criminals, debtors and political dissidents, most of whom were charged only with defaulting on debt and other small crimes.

Lord Richard Bligh, grandson of William Bligh of the HMS Bounty mutiny in 1789, became the “Commissioner for Crown Lands”. This position made him the effective governor of the growing colonies, though his official mandate was limited to mostly “overseeing the orderly development and distribution of land” to colonists (Daunton, 1999:261). During his reign as colonial governor out of Sydney, Bligh took on an active role as a minister of the Crown, dedicating himself to mitigating white encroachment on native lands and racial violence.

In 1847, just over sixty years since the opening of the Australian frontier, a group of agrarian vigilantes began a reign of terror against Aborigines and whites who sympathized with them in the townships of Umbercollie and Carbucky. Their actions included many native slaughterings and intense harassment/terrorism on the part of white victims. Bligh was alarmed by the violence and lawlessness, and thus began a lengthy but ultimately successful search for the perpetrators (Daunton, 1999:265-66).

On putting an end to such violence, he asserted the British colonial empire's

rejection of violent conquest and human exploitation. Although colonization was known at all levels of government to disrupt and sometimes destroy local ways of life, the doctrine of imperial mercantilism in Europe was, at least at some level, benign, at least in the eyes of the imperialist state. While the active destruction of life, culture, and habitat was not explicitly a motivation of British rule, it did breed a de facto (by “unwritten law”, or by custom) sense of racial and cultural reification and essentialism, especially on the part of small landowners and white indentured servants.

In brief, the term “reification” denotes the way in which potential or active dispensers of genocide tend to “make real” a despised group's undesired qualities. More simply put, reifications are symbols. For example, in the context of Nazi Germany in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rich, big-nosed Jew was portrayed in many pieces of anti-Jewish propaganda.

In the Australian situation, a common reification of an Aborigine might be his grass hut or a skinny, savage-looking person. Similarly, an essentialism can be conceptualized as a stereotype that a persecuting group of people applies to all members of a persecuted group. To Australian whites, the Aborigine was seen as someone who was skinny, dark-skinned, and did not adhere to the “civilized” lifestyle and religion practiced by Europeans.

In some ways, negative de facto attitudes about “the other” can be far more dangerous and long-lived than de jure (written laws) laws and institutions because such official entities can be town down as quickly as they arise. Public attitudes, on the other hand, take years, decades, or even centuries to correct themselves.

## ESTABLISHED COLONIAL AUSTRALIA

As a result, the situation in Australia produced a form of genocide marked not by large scale, systematic murders of native peoples, but rather by a constant, and prolonged push to send the remnants of their culture and physical existence further and further away from the “cultured and Christian” public eye (Brock, 1993:7). Under the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Article II, the harms inflicted upon them can be said to have consisted most prominently of:

II(b)- Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

II(c)- Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

II(d)- Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

II(e)- Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.(Power, 2002:62)

To begin, let us examine the first set of cases, involving the forced migration of children, as per II(e) of the 1948 Convention.

Along with industry and “civilization”, the British colonials also brought their religion with them and proceeded to begin campaigns of conversion. Force was condoned, and even encouraged if such ignorant “heathens” as the Aborigines did not convert on their own. Few did. One of the most well-known and most extreme of the Anglican missions was the Native Training Institution at Poonindie, popularly known as the “Christian Village”.

Poonindie was established in 1850 by Mathew Hale, Archdeacon of Adelaide, another missionary establishment. With the help of the colonial government, Hale sought

to establish a church and religious boarding school in an attempt to convert and reform Aborigine children, and thus to “undo” their seemingly primitive and deviant upbringings (Brock, 1993:24-25).

On paper, at least, the institution was to be, in the words of Hale, a place where natives “were in isolation, industrial education, as well as the usual schooling; marriage, separate dwellings, hiring and service for wages; gradual and progressive moral improvement based upon Christian instruction, Christian worship, and Christian superintendence”. In reality, however, the situation was quite different. What the archdeacon failed to mention in his writings was that the children who attended his reform school did not attend voluntarily.

Instead, Anglican missionaries scoured the surrounding countryside in South Australia for any and all native children between what they deemed “between the ages of five and ten years of age”. More disturbing still, Hale's ideas were not original. As early as 1843, round-ups were executed at Adelaide, the location of his original clerical post (Brock, 1993:22,26).

Such abductions and forced migrations are a clear and indisputable demonstration of how little respect white missionaries gave to the Aboriginal family unit and community. To them, the native peoples of the continent were so backward and primitive that they might as well have been living on their own with no infrastructure whatsoever.

This kind of mentality was convenient for whites, allowing them to rationalize their cruel behavior by arguing that children were being abducted for their own good. Contradictory rationalizations like these were a vital component in Australian white society, and was pervasive throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, making the practice of

forced assimilation and land-grabbing a guilt-free endeavor.

In a similar vein, the forced ousting of entire Aboriginal communities from their tribal hunting and gathering lands paralleled the plight of children, both in terms of its modern legal definition as genocide, and terms of its rationalization (Hinton, 2002:45). Across the Island-Continent and Tasmania, natives were driven out of their ancient lands by settlers who considered them racially and culturally inferior savages, who did not know how to use the land “properly” (i.e, Did not farm it using European methods) and thus did not deserve to utilize it.

In addition to the idea of indigenous inferiority in the use of natural resources was the accompanying notion that civilized mankind's inevitable progress was hindered by their refusal to abandon their traditional ways of life at the drop of a hat. “How dare they stand in the way of progress,” many colonists doubtlessly asked. This strict concept of “modernity” as a method toward a single end, like the colonization itself, was a product of the rise of industry in the West. During this new age of science and technological development, it became commonly believed amongst members of the “civilized” societies that progress and change were both inevitable and necessary. They also believed that their ways were the only true road to progress, and thus any diversion from the “true path” as they saw it was a direct attack on modernity itself. (Hinton, 2002:48) Thus the destruction of place and people was not only condoned, but even elevated to the heights of moral virtue and responsibility.

The British expansion from the coastal areas, mainly in the provinces of South Australia and New South Wales, acts and policies that can be considered genocidal continued to transpire, and increase in frequency as settlers pushed farther and farther into

the interior of the island-continent. There, as in most other areas of European colonization, the Australian natives experienced a predictable increase in abuses, most commonly in the form of direct slaughter and/or physical abuse from angry vigilantes in the countryside (II(b) of the 1948 Genocide Convention) and direct legal policies which were designed to limit the possibilities of reproduction through “tainting” interracial marriages and pregnancies (II(c) of the Convention agreement).

The earliest incarnations of genocidal behavior occurred in the South Pacific in a manner not unlike those in any number of other preindustrial areas on the brink of colonization by a foreign European power. In a predictable, regimented, and mechanical way, colonial hubs like Sydney at Botany Bay and Adelaide in South Australia developed and expanded rapidly, mirroring the industrial modes of production that fueled their founding in the first place.

At first, colonists were few and far between enough to keep social antagonism at a minimum; soon, however, greed inspired land-hungry farmers and livestock herders to challenge native peoples for their own lands. Occasionally, violence was instigated by uprooted Aborigines, but though they considered their traditional stomping grounds sacred and essential, the vast majority of bloodshed was on the hands of white settlers.

One of the most infamous of these white attacks on innocent natives occurred during the late summer and early fall of 1848, in and around the towns of Caribuck and Umbercollie, mentioned briefly above in relation to Royal Governor William Bligh. This months-long rampage was incited by only three men, all of whom were soon caught and punished with lengthy prison terms. Several so-called “copy-cat” crimes of a similar nature ensued as word of the violence spread throughout Eastern Australia. The three men

at Carbucky and Umbercollie had failed to achieve their mission of driving away native Australians and their sympathizers, but a new precedent was set, that led to several more acts of terror in the coming months and years (Daunton, 1999:265-66).

## Command and Control

Race related acts of violence between whites and their black counterparts were relatively rare, from a historical perspective. At first glance, this fact may seem to suggest that a benevolent, generally tolerant relationship between people of European and Aboriginal decent existed. In contrast, we instead find that, although an occasional random act of kindness happened, the majority of the white population was generally intolerant. North American style slavery did not exist on the shores of the Island Continent, but only because it had been forbidden by British law since the 1830s. Instead, a socially oppressive white society “made the best” of the situation by creating an intense system of dependency from which native peoples had little chance but to comply with.

The Australian Government's system of “Aboriginal management”, or more correctly, oppression, began in the 1870s with the introduction of province-wide rationing programs (Rowse, 1998:17) and continued well through the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, Aboriginal peoples were not completely on equal legal footing with whites until 1992 (Hagen, 1999, “The Mabo and Wik High Court Decisions”, Para. 1).

An integral part of the British mission to destroy the native culture of Aborigines was the nation-wide “welfare” rationing system. In many respects, rationing policy can be seen as even more destructive to the traditional native lifestyle than the ongoing Christian missionary campaign. In many ways, religion could be faked and acquiesced to whites,

while retaining religious tradition secretly. Rationing, in contrast, was inescapably a heavy blow to their cultural identity.

The official policy of rationing of food, supplies, and hunting/farming lands may or may not have started as an essentially benign act, but by the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had led to a grand and far-reaching ethnocide, or the destruction of a people's cultural identity (Hinton, 2002:59). From behind the veil of “benevolence and goodwill”, leaders of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (a division of the Australian government), and foreign officials, were able to rationalize their unjust treatment of blacks in order to maintain control over them.

Leaders appealed to whites' fears about Aboriginal difference, casting them as inferior, Godless heathens who should be “cleared out” to make way for “superior” European culture. To do this, many argued, blacks must never be allowed to “taint” the superior white race, either by cultural or sexual exchanges (Noyce, 2002). Rationing was key to this an essential cornerstone to this mission.

Though lawful slavery had been banned in the British Commonwealth/Empire since the 1830s, Anglican missions did much to reduce native peoples to nearly the same status, at least as long as they were confined to the mission lands. This system was not “perfect”, however. Inmates were typically allowed to leave once adulthood was reached at the reeducation camps, and adult farm workers frequently moved away if extended family could be contacted for support.

Rationing, coupled with the rapid and consistent gobbling-up of land by more and more white farmers and ranchers, created an almost universal situation in which Aboriginal communities had to sacrifice their heritage and beliefs in order to survive

(Bernt, 1977:150,153). The basic theory behind this policy was to not only make blacks subservient to whites, but also to thwart resistance to their oppression by making them unwilling to “bite the hand that fed them”. The theory worked chillingly well, as documented by the historical rarity of black-on-white aggression during this time (Brock, 1993:22).

At the time of its inception, the rationing program existed only in Central Australia, and was restricted to foodstuffs only. In fact, the extent of the program only went as far as providing natives with an annual feast in honor of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria's birthday (Eras of Elegance, 2003). The program grew larger over the decades, however, and a century later, farming and miscellaneous equipment was frequently doled out as well in all provinces (Brock, 1993:27).

There was no law or legal precedent banning Aboriginal people from shopping at white-run shops and general stores, but the abysmal wages earned by men in manual labor (to which blacks were usually confined) prevented families (overwhelmingly patriarchal and nuclear by this time) from having left-over money after purchasing other necessities, like clothing and baby supplies. Wages for women who worked in the various domestic professions were even worse. To add insult to injury, there were no laws that protected non-whites from employer abuse and fraud. As a result, it was not uncommon for white employers to cheat their black employees, either by not paying them enough, or not at all (Bernt, 1977:147). What existed on the Island Continent during most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was a system of legal discrimination, not unlike the “Jim Crow” policies of the United States during this same period (from the mid 1800s to the 1960s).

Across time and space, the rationing of food, medicine, and sanitary products took

a heavy toll on the health and well-being of this persecuted people. Their slow, and calculated weakening and destruction was clearly a prime case-study of II(c) of the 1948 Convention, which explicitly forbids action or inaction by a government that is designed to result in the starvation and deprivation of a group.

The far-reaching extent of the governmental rationing program came, either by accident or design, at the expense of quality and quantity. The cause of this inefficiency and apparent lack of interest was that the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) wanted to both “provide for” the Aboriginal population, and to minimally effect the tax burden of white citizens at the same time (Noyce, 2002). When faced with the realization that both could not happen at the same time, DAA chose to minimize it's support.

As a result of this apparent apathy towards them, Aboriginal communities saw a steep decline in the health of their populations. Foodstuffs were nutritionally poor, typically consisting of bread or grains, preserved meats, and beans. Occasionally, fresh meat, dried fruits, and nuts were distributed, but only on extremely rare occasions (perhaps once or twice a year). Vitamin deficiencies in A, C, D, Iron, and Calcium were the most common, as dairy products, fruits, and vegetables were in perpetual short supply.

As a consequence, mothers and children were the most severely effected. Children were commonly born underweight or deformed, and often experienced abnormal growth patterns (Berndt, 1977:147,148). Black mothers, unable to maintain a healthy diet and reasonable workload, had miscarriages at rates much higher than those of their white counterparts. In the 1960s, a government program was created to educate mothers on proper maternal care, as well as to provide them with access to better food and health

services until their children reached six years of age. Unfortunately, this “under six” program was under manned and under funded, just like the system of control that led to its creation in the first place (Berndt, 1977:147). While not a great success, this program can be seen as a first step (albeit a feeble one) toward a general awareness among white Australians of the problems facing their dark-skinned neighbors.

In tandem with indirect social control, via domination of natural resources, Parliament began to give increased legal backing to popular white fears about Aborigines in the 1930s. Through a series of actions, native exclusion and marginalization was increased. Epitomizing this trend was the 1934 general mandate, which forbade sexual or marital relationships of any kind between whites and blacks, in an attempt to preserve the “genetically superior” white European race in Australia. As a consequence, it was popularly assumed that the Aboriginal race would naturally die off as a result of it's inherent “inability” to cope with what they saw as sacred and inevitable “progress”. Like the prior ration related legislations, the control of a group's reproduction through restrictions on marriage was clearly a violation of the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide that was to commence less than two decades later.

## Progress Over Tradition

Furthermore, land policy was an important factor of great importance and consequence to native individuals, families, and communities. Since 1834, Parliamentary land charters did not recognize Aborigines as legitimate “stewards of the land” (Brock, 1993:11). On this front, little changed for almost a century and a half, when government administered “welfare settlements” were designated during the early 1960s (Berndt,

1977:57)

Most of these settlements were established in the dry, dusty interior of the Island Continent, commonly known as the “outback”, several near Alice Springs, Central Australia. The region is home to several sacred sites for northwestern tribes, and so many Aborigines in the western half of the country praised the settlements as an opportunity to return to their ancient homelands. On the other hand, the majority of persons who came to live there did not do so voluntarily, but were persuaded to do so, either by force or under duress ( Berndt, 1977:58).

Although “welfare settlers” were able to have greater control over their own lives and culture/religion, this freedom came at a high price. Left without regular supply rations, and faced with the difficulty of making a living in the barren outback (with much of their traditional skills lost to history), many people began to believe that perhaps, indeed, their race was incapable of dignity and self-sufficiency.

This common feeling of hopelessness and defeatism was pervasive in welfare settlement life, and led many to alcoholism pending the lifting of long-imposed sanctions against selling or otherwise distributing liquors to Australians of Aboriginal descent (Saggers, 1998:97,98). Ill equipped to address the problems caused by alcohol use, traditional Aboriginal society continued to degrade. Violence and domestic abuse increased, and their society and religious tradition was not designed to handle the promotion of proper drinking practices. This problem stemmed from the fact that alcohol of any significant volume was unheard of before the arrival of Europeans, and was exacerbated by the hard-drinking examples of nearby miners and backwoodsmen (Saggers, 1998:78).

In the decades since its widespread legalization, alcoholism is being addressed more and more by community leaders and educated ethnic spokespeople, albeit the presence of liquors remain a periodic problem. Unfortunately, the mistakes of the past have taken their toll on Aborigines as a whole, and their stereotypical “drunk wild-man” image significantly slowed progress towards ethnic equality.

## The Journey to Equality

While the fight is far from over, indigenous people have made great strides to secure their social and economic equality with Europeans since the 1960s. During the '60s, regional and national governments recognized their rights to self-determination/self-management, to be citizens, and to vote in elections (Saggers, 1998:98,99). More recently, in 1992, Aboriginal land claims were finally legitimized as a result of two High Court (equivalent of the US Supreme Court) cases, “Mabo and Others v. Queensland” (May, 1992) and “The Wik Peoples v. The State of Queensland, and Others”.

In these cases, the High court recognized the validity of Aboriginal land claims, and officially acknowledged that the British and later Australian governments had in fact taken the said lands without permission or just cause. The following year, Parliament passed the Native Title Act, which laid out official procedures for addressing and resolving Aboriginal land claims (Hagen, 1999).

## Conclusions

For as many as 40,000 years, the Aboriginal peoples of Australia lived in total or near total isolation from other societies and cultures until the first contacts with Europeans occurred during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Whites, primarily the British, saw this earth-

shattering event as a great opportunity for new expansion and a way to dispose of undesirable elements of society. For the indigenous population, however, the picture was far from rosy.

A constant and growing influx of colonists continued to encroach on traditional lands, bringing disease, violence, and oppression. Over the course of three centuries, native peoples have endured destruction and marginalization, both physically, in terms of loss of land and food, but also metaphysically, losing their cultural and religious identity under the steamroller of European and Christian “progress”. Though slavery never officially existed in the country, whites found other ways to force black subservience and religious conversion.

Over the last forty years, though, the outlook for Aborigines has begun to improve. They have gained recognition of their basic rights, and continue to push for a more ethnically tolerant and egalitarian society in Australia. Though much work still lies ahead, Aboriginal leaders and the native community as a whole have made great strides, no doubt much greater than anyone thought possible. The road ahead for Aborigines, and all Australians looks bright, but we must always be aware of what has happened, so that it might be recognized and prevented in the future. Another Aboriginal Genocide must not be permitted to occur.

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