

A STORY OF AUSTRALIA

Convict Settlers

Australia is unique in that most of its first European settlers were convicts. Britain used to send its convicts to America but after the American colonies declared their independence in 1776 they refused to accept them. Convicts then had to be kept in Britain in the gaols and on old ships (hulks) moored in rivers. The numbers kept mounting so that a new place had to be found for them. In 1786 Britain decided to send them to New South Wales, the land Captain Cook had claimed for Britain in 1770. As the possessor of a great empire, Britain also had an eye to the commercial and strategic advantages of having a base in this part of the world. Historians argue about how much this new colony was just a solution to the problem of convicts and how much a strengthening of Britain's empire.

The first governor was Captain Arthur Phillip, a firm yet humane man. He was responsible for bringing the First Fleet of eleven ships safely to the other side of the globe. He took great care over the feeding and welfare of the convicts and very few died on the voyage. When starvation loomed in the early years of the colony, he put the whole settlement, including himself and the military officers, on the same ration. It was his determination and vision that saw the colony through its perilous first years. Australia's National Day, 26 January, marks the anniversary of the landing of Phillip at Sydney Cove.

The hard work of the early settlement was done by the forced labour of the convicts. They were flogged if they did not work to their masters' satisfaction or if they ran away or got drunk. If they again committed a serious crime, they were sent to a remote settlement or hanged. But, from the first, convicts and ex-convicts found new opportunities in this strange colony. The military officers used their time to make money by trading. They employed convicts and ex-convicts to assist them. Soon some of the assistants were setting up in business on their own as merchants. Other ex-convicts got a good living as farmers, tradesmen, shop and pub keepers. Ex-convict women were prominent amongst these businesspeople and enjoyed more freedom than married women in England. Convicts and ex-convicts also occupied professional positions; they were lawyers, architects, engineers, newspaper reporters and editors, and school teachers.

Governor Lachlan Macquarie (1810-1821) is remembered with great affection because he treated reformed convicts as if they had never offended. He invited rich ex-convicts to government house and expected the free settlers to accept them as equals. *When they complained he told them to go elsewhere!* He was a great builder using the services of an ex-convict architect Francis Greenway. The convict barracks and St James' Church, two of his buildings, still stand opposite each other in Macquarie Street, Sydney.

After Macquarie's time Britain tried to remake the colony to ensure that convicts were properly punished and that they did not live too well, but it never succeeded in shutting off all the opportunities. *How could it prevent the convicts from being much better fed than most had been at home?* The government

eventually decided to stop sending convicts here. The convicts stopped coming to mainland Australia in 1840 and to Tasmania in 1853. Western Australia received convicts at its own request from 1850 to 1868. More than 160,000 convicts were transported to Australia.

Instead of the convicts, Britain sent free working men and women to Australia, paying most of the cost of the voyage since it was so expensive to come so far. Then in the 1850s, with the discovery of gold, there was a rush of people from all round the globe who were happy to pay their own fares. The convict and ex-convict element in the population rapidly diminished. The children of the convicts had always been free.

From the 1850s the colonists were governing themselves and wanting to build prosperous and respectable societies. The colonists became ashamed of their convict past and did not talk about it, though the rest of the world did not forget Australia's strange origins. From about the 1960s, after years of shame and denial, Australians began to be proud of their convict past and many people are now pleased to find a convict ancestor.

By embracing their convict past, Australians have shown that they believe that this is a better place than the old world; people driven to crime in Britain could make a fresh start here. Australians have also become a people who don't care much about a person's family background or past behaviour; you are judged by what you are now. *A nation grown from convicts can't be fussy about origins!*

A Harsh Country

Very little of Australia is fertile country. It is hostile environment for humankind. *People still get lost in the bush or die of thirst in the outback; bush fires come up to the boundaries of great cities and even, as in Sydney, burn within them.* The Aboriginal people had learnt to manage and live in this environment though they too could suffer in hard times of drought and their population had to remain small.

Australians are reminded of the difficulties of their country by the stories of the hardships and disasters of explorers and pioneers.

The first great barrier the Sydney settlers faced was the mountain range only fifty kilometres to the west – the Blue Mountains. This is not so much a mountain range as a great table-land cut into deep valleys. Explorers trying to get through it would go up the valleys and then face sheer cliffs. In 1813 three men, Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson, got across by going up to the plateau and following the ridges. The road and railway across the Blue Mountains still follows their route.

Beyond the mountains was good open country suitable for sheep and cattle. But soon the explorers were into dry and desert country. They had trouble finding water and carrying enough food to survive. The German-born explorer Ludwig Leichhardt disappeared while trying to cross the continent from east to west in 1848. *Some traces of his expedition have been found but where Leichhardt died is still a great mystery. The novelist Patrick White, who*

won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1973, based his most famous novel Voss on Leichhardt and his explorations.

In 1860 Burke and Wills set out from Melbourne to cross the continent from south to north. They led a large, well-equipped expedition but they still struck disaster and died. Burke and Wills were not experienced bushmen. Only very late did they seek and accept help from Aboriginal people. Other explorers took Aboriginal guides and took care to stay on good terms with the Aboriginal people on their route. Often they were following Aboriginal paths and Aboriginal directions. But the failure of Burke and Wills, though easy to explain, can't easily be forgotten. Their story has inspired great writing and art. It remains a symbol of a country that can destroy you.

After the explorers came the first settlers or pioneers. Even when they had large tracts of good country they faced great difficulties. The climate in Australia is very uncertain. After drought can come flood. Even if the seasons are good, the prices for wheat or wool might fall. Going broke or starting again from scratch are regular Australian experiences on the land. People battle on, and 'a battler', a man who survives even if he does not prosper, is an admired figure. Women too have been honoured for their part in pioneering, often keeping the business or farm going when the man was away, or died.

The tradition of mateship – of helping each other out – owes a lot to the harshness of the country. It was strong among the working men who travelled through the outback doing the work of shearing or droving. But it became also the practice of settlers to help each other out in difficulty, which is still done in country areas when volunteers fight bush fires.

In the driest continent, storing and moving water has required great effort. Gold was discovered in Kalgoorlie in Western Australia in the 1890s in semi-desert country. The miners had to use the wind to separate out the gold from the soil they had dug. Mining could only become a settled industry if there was a regular water supply. The government engineer Charles O'Connor designed a scheme to dam water near Perth and pump it over 500 kilometres to the goldfields, then the longest pipeline running uphill in the world. The critics said the scheme would fail. It succeeded but not before O'Connor, worn down by work and criticism, had taken his own life.

To revitalise Australia after World War II the Australian government developed a bold scheme to catch the waters of the Snowy River before they flowed quickly to the sea in eastern Victoria; divert them to flow inland for irrigation along the Murray and Murrumbidgee rivers, and as they fell into the rivers generate electric power. It was a massive undertaking which took over twenty years to complete. Most of the workers were new migrants to Australia. The Snowy Mountains Scheme is a lasting legacy of their contribution.

Diggers

Except for small-scale battles between settlers and Aboriginal people, Australia has been a remarkably peaceful country. There have been no civil

wars or revolutions. It is strange, then, that it has a very strong military tradition and that the ordinary soldier, the digger, is the national hero.

The first settlers were very loyal to the British Empire. As a European outpost on the edge of Asia they also felt they were in danger, especially after Japan became a great power. They needed the Empire and its great fleet to defend them. Australia fought with Britain in both World Wars to keep the empire strong and so protect itself.

Australian soldiers entered World War I in 1915 with an attack on Germany's ally, Turkey. They were part of a large contingent of British and French troops but the Australians and New Zealanders were given their own sector of the Gallipoli peninsula to attack. They were put ashore in the wrong place and had to scale almost perpendicular cliffs under enemy fire. They got up the cliffs and dug in. This was acknowledged as an amazing feat of arms. Australians at home took tremendous pride in their soldiers. The soldiers had laid to rest the doubts that British colonists had gone soft in sunny Australia or were infected with bad convict blood or were too ill-disciplined to be good soldiers.

The date of the landing at Gallipoli (25 April) is the unofficial national day; it is called ANZAC day after the initials of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. It now honours all those who have died in war. It is a military celebration only in a limited sense. It does not honour victories – the Gallipoli campaign was a failure; it honours the qualities of the ordinary soldier: his mateship, endurance, his humour in the face of adversity. One individual soldier on Gallipoli has come to stand for all the qualities, John Simpson who worked in the field ambulance. He acquired a donkey and was allowed to work on his own carrying the wounded back to the shore. He and his donkey were killed one month after the landing. There are statues to Simpson and his donkey at the War Memorials in Canberra and Melbourne.

After withdrawing from Gallipoli the Australian soldiers fought on the western front in France. Here they acquired the name diggers allegedly because a soldier said to an officer 'we are not soldiers we are diggers' – because they spent so much time digging and repairing trenches. John Monash became the commander of the Australian forces. He was one of the most creative generals in the war and the only Australian general who has come close to having heroic status. He carefully planned advances to ensure his men were well protected and with his care and with the dash and daring of his troops he won great victories in the last battles against Germany. Monash was a part-time soldier and a Jew; before the war he had been an engineer.

In World War II Australians fought first in the desert of North Africa. They withstood a long siege by the Germans and Italians in the town of Tobruk. The enemy called them the 'Rats of Tobruk' because they were cornered and scavenging for food, but they held out in appalling conditions and adopted this name for themselves. The siege confirmed that these soldiers had the fighting spirit of the World War I diggers; the soldiers themselves knew they had a great tradition to live up to.

After Japan launched its war in the Pacific the Australian soldiers came home. But before these battle-hardened troops could arrive, the defence of Papua and New Guinea fell to a limited number of regular soldiers and to young conscript soldiers poorly trained and equipped. Their battlefield was the jungle and the way to the enemy was up a steep muddy trail known as the Kokoda Track. The Australian troops did stop the Japanese advance and the Kokoda Track has joined Anzac Cove on Gallipoli as a place of pilgrimage.

When the Japanese took the great British base at Singapore, 15,000 Australian troops were among those taken into captivity and to work on the Thai-Burma railway. One of the sharpest Australian memories of the war is the cruel treatment meted out to these men by the Japanese. Many died but Australians looked after each other better than the other captives and made less distinction between officers and men. The hero of this dreadful captivity was a doctor, Edward 'Weary' Dunlop, who protected his men at the risk of his own life and who ran the makeshift operating room that helped keep men alive.

Australian soldiers off the battlefield had a tendency to be larrikins, as Australians term it. Yet in recent years they have gained a high reputation as peacekeepers. This can be explained because they are regular soldiers under tight discipline, not volunteers for a particular war, but retaining their Australian character and style. They get closer to the people they are protecting; they are less likely to look down their noses at a poor peasant or slum dweller; everyone must be treated as an equal and given a fair go; they will pitch in and help out in rebuilding communities.

Economy and Politics

The first British settlers came to Australia just as Britain was changing rapidly into the first industrialised country in the world. Australia became a prosperous country very quickly because it could grow wool to supply the English woollen mills. The wool industry provided work at high wages in the bush and in the cities, which processed and exported the fleece. Then in the 1850s the discovery of gold gave Australia a new source of wealth and attracted people from around the world. Gold gave ordinary men the chance to become rich. Some did though most made not much more than wages and were soon looking for work again. Gold digging soon shifted into a business organised by companies.

The goldfields are remembered as the great democratic moment in Australia's past. Men of every sort were digging and calling each other 'mate', the term that would eventually be used everywhere. At the Ballarat goldfield in 1854 the gold diggers staged a large protest at the harsh way the government officials ran the gold field, especially the collection of the licence fee to dig for gold. They called for the end to the licence and a democratic and republican government. A small group built a stockade on the Eureka mining lead and flew their rebel flag with the Southern Cross on it. The government officials sent soldiers to attack the stockade on the morning of 3 December 1854 and the diggers were soon overpowered and about 30 killed. The

gaining of democratic reforms would have happened without the Eureka rebellion but over the years it has become a symbol of protest and popular rights.

After the first gold rushes were over there was a great struggle in the 1860s to take land away from the big men who ran sheep and cattle (the squatters) and open it up as farms for the workingman. The political battle was won but farming did not make much inroad into the squatters' territory. The farmers faced a difficult environment and, until the railways were built, were far from markets. The opportunity to earn high wages in the cities always made a hard life on the land for little reward unattractive.

Farming did do well in South Australia on good land close to the sea and here the Australian tradition of inventing labour-saving devices for farming began. *In 1843 John Ridley invented the stripper, a device pushed by a horse through the crop which cut off and collected the heads of the grain. This ended the backbreaking work of harvesting by hand, which in Europe had required large numbers of people, men, women and children. In South Australia in the 1870s the Smith brothers invented the stump-jump plough, which enabled land that had only been roughly cleared to be ploughed. In Victoria in the 1880s a young lad, Hugh McKay, invented from bits and pieces the combine harvester, which stripped off the heads and then threshed out the grain.*

Australia enjoyed a long period of prosperity from the gold rushes until the 1890s. Wool was still the staple but manufacturing for local consumption (clothing, footwear, food and drink) and building were important parts of the economy in a society where cities had always been large. The living standard was the highest in the world. Australian workers were the first to enjoy an 8-hour working day. It was possible for working men in the cities to become homeowners in the suburbs, something unheard of in Britain.

Then depression and drought struck. Workingmen who, in good times, had built up strong trade unions called strikes to protect their wages and conditions and were defeated in disputes more bitter than Australia had seen. The workers turned to politics and in 1891 created the Labor Party whose first task was to restore and improve the workers' wages and conditions. There was a degree of sympathy from many middle-class people for the plight of the workers, for everyone believed that in Australia there should be no poverty and no harsh conflicts. This led to the creation of official boards and commissions which set wages and attempted to prevent strikes. The Commonwealth Arbitration Court in 1907 set a minimum wage so that a working man, his wife and three children could live in decent comfort (the Harvester judgement).

Around 1900 Australia became known as the social laboratory of the world. Political rights were widespread. Most men had had the vote since the 1850s; women then gained the vote, in South Australia first in 1894 and in the new Commonwealth in 1902. Governments were active in protecting wages and living conditions, giving help to farmers, and pensions to the old.

As the Labor Party grew, all other parties combined into a Liberal Party in 1910. This party has had many names. Between the wars it became the

Nationalist Party and the United Australia Party before emerging again as the Liberal Party in 1944.

One difference between the parties was that Labor was more ready to use the government to help the workers and small farmers while its more radical members wanted government to take over industries so they were not run for profit. The Liberals were suspicious of government and encouraged individual enterprise while the more radical wanted to roll back the level of government activity.

Despite these party differences, the amount of government activity in the economy in first seventy years of the twentieth century was very high. If wages were to be kept high, manufacturers had to be protected from foreign competition so that they could pay them. Farmers who sold their produce in world markets could only pay high wages and afford the high cost of manufactured goods if the government assisted in the marketing of their crops. The Country Party formed after World War I, at first wanted to reduce protection for local industry, but failing that, it argued that farmers, as the earners of export income, should get every possible assistance. In the 1980s the Country Party changed its name to the National Party. Usually it acts in coalition with the Liberal Party.

From the 1980s the Liberal Party decided that an economy protected in so many ways by the government should be opened up to the competition of the world market. The Labor Party resisted this move but in office in the 1980s it abandoned its policy and opened up the economy with Liberal support. It floated the dollar, cut back on tariff protection, sold off government enterprises and abandoned the central control of wages. Both major parties now see Australia's future in a global economy with prosperity depending on leaving industries to the discipline of the market.

Sport

Australia was noted and criticised for being a sports-crazy nation very early in its history.

The English were a keen sporting people but in Australia more people could watch and participate in sport. This was partly because people had more leisure time and earned more money and partly because the climate was good and there was plenty of open spaces to play in, even within the cities. What outsiders also noted was that nearly everyone followed the great sporting events. *You had to pretend to be interested even if you were not!*

The Melbourne Cup, starting in 1861, was the horse race with the richest prize. It was a national event. The day of the race was a public holiday in Melbourne and by the new invention of the telegraph the whole country could know the result and collect their winnings within a few minutes of the race being won. It is still known as the race that stops the nation. Many Australians count the years by the name of the horse that won the Cup. The great winners have become national heroes. Phar Lap, the most famous of them, won the Melbourne Cup in 1930 in the depth of the Depression. He started as favourite, won easily and made many people happy in dark days.

Phar Lap was taken to the United States to race and died soon afterwards. *There is a long tradition that foul play was at work.* Phar Lap's body is in the Melbourne Museum and his great heart in the National Museum in Canberra.

Sporting was national in another sense. Australians became proud of themselves because of their achievements in sport and this was particularly so in regard to cricket. When the Australian cricketers first beat the English in England in 1882, the enthusiasm in Australia was immense. As a joke, an English paper said English cricket was dead, the body was to be burned and the ashes sent to Australia. The competition for "The Ashes" – the test matches between the two countries – is still the international sporting event in which Australians take most interest. *There was never a rebellion against England, but Australians showed they were better than the English by beating them at their own game.*

In 1932-33 the English tactics in the cricket tests created a crisis in the relations between the two countries. The English cricketers bowled at the body of the batsmen and were booed and abused by Australian crowds. Australian officials declared the English players were unsporting, the worst insult. The governments of the two countries became involved. Eventually 'bodyline' bowling was outlawed.

Donald Bradman was the greatest cricket batsman of all time. He was small and slight but amazingly quick on his feet, playing his shots almost like a machine. On his first tour of England in 1930 he broke nearly all the batting records. The team he led in England in 1948 is known as the 'Invincibles' because they did not lose a single match. Among all Australian sporting heroes, Bradman is the best known.

In the 1950s it was tennis in which Australia were world beaters. Here the chief opponent was not England but the United States and again a small nation gained in pride by beating a great one. Sedgman and McGregor, Hoad and Rosewall carried Australia to victories in the international competition, the Davis Cup. In the 1960s and 1970s two women players, Margaret Court and Evonne Goolongong, won all the great international competitions.

Australians invented one game of their own, Australian Rules Football, which was developed in Melbourne in the late 1850s. Its rules were a mixture of the rules of the various codes of football in England but perhaps with a local element. The Aboriginal people played a game of football and it may have been their games that influenced the Australian game to be open and fast, with long kicking and high marks.

Outcasts in other respects, Aboriginal people found a place in the wider society as sportspeople. The first Australian cricket team to tour England – in 1868 – was Aboriginal. They did quite well and after each match they gave a demonstration of 'native sports', the throwing of spears and boomerangs. Evonne Goolongong, the tennis player, was Aboriginal. Aborigines have been keen players of Australian Rules Football. They play bare foot on bare ground at their own settlements and at the highest level of the national competition.

Staging the Olympic Games has been a great boost to Australian pride. When Melbourne staged the Games in 1956, Australians felt that they were for this moment not a small isolated country a long way away from the great

centres of the globe. For the first time the world's athletes were gathering in the southern hemisphere. When Sydney staged the games in 2000 the nation was more self-confident. The opening ceremony displayed Australian cultural icons in a light-hearted way, Aboriginal culture was celebrated and an Aboriginal athlete, Cathy Freeman, lit the torch. The volunteers who assisted the smooth running of the games were another way that Australia demonstrated its character to the world. *When the Games were over, they were given the honour of parading through Sydney's streets.*

Nation

The founding population of Australia was made up of the English, Scots and Irish. They were different people with different traditions and had been in the past at war with each other. The Irish were the most distinct group, separated by their Catholic religion and their bitterness at rule by the English. In this new country the three groups mixed in with each other and did not live in separate communities. On the whole they did not want old-world disputes and bitterness to take root here. Both the Scots and Irish did not want the English to rule over them and the Church of England soon lost its privileged place in Australia. The Scots were prominent in education and business. The Irish, less well educated, took unskilled jobs but some flourished in small businesses *particularly in pubs and on farms*. Their lively spirit made its mark on the emerging Australian identity.

The six self-governing colonies of Australia came together in a federation in 1901. Before then a common sense of national belonging had already grown up. The feeling is caught in the motto 'Advance Australia Fair' and the song of that name written by Peter McCormick and first sung in Sydney in 1878. It is now the national anthem. The song depicts Australia as a young and free land, kept safe by the encircling sea, where there is opportunity for all.

From the 1880s a new popular Australian literature emerged. Henry Lawson and A B (Banjo) Paterson wrote verse and stories about ordinary life with a great respect for ordinary people. They brought tales of bush life to the city where most of the people lived. One of Paterson's verses *Waltzing Matilda* is an unofficial national anthem. Outsiders wonder at a nation that celebrates a tramp who steals a sheep and then kills himself rather than being taken by the police.

At the same time a group of young artists began to paint in the new impressionist way. They are known as the Heidelberg School because that village outside Melbourne was one of the places where they set up camp. At first, like the French impressionists, they painted every-day scenes and were not interested in pictures with a message. But then in the 1890s they reached for an art that would embody the nation. Arthur Streeton flooded his pictures with light; Tom Roberts painted shearers at work; Fred McCubbin depicted that regular nightmare, a child lost in the bush.

Australians had also become conscious of the need to keep out the people who seemed to threaten their new way of life. The colonies took

common action in 1888 to limit severely Chinese migration even though the numbers arriving were relatively small. The colonists, like most people then, believed that there were differences between races and that the Chinese were inferior, but they also did not want a society with deep divisions or where foreign outcasts worked for low wages and lowered the dignity of all labour.

The colonies had developed separately and, in the absence of a strong outside threat, it would be difficult to bring them together. It took two attempts. In 1889 the grand old man of New South Wales politics, Henry Parkes, issued a call for a strong new nation to be formed. He gave his speech at Tenterfield near the Queensland border. He managed to assemble a convention of all the colonies in 1891 and for a constitution to be written. But there was too much opposition to it, especially in Parkes's own colony of New South Wales and it lapsed. The Federal movement revived in 1893 and was run on a novel basis. The electors chose the members of the next constitutional convention and they voted at referendum on whether to accept the constitution it drafted or not. After two rounds of referendums the constitution was accepted. This was another sign of how progressive Australia was, basing the new nation on the wishes of the people. The first federal government was sworn in before a huge crowd in Sydney's Centennial Park on 1 January 1901, the first day of the new century. The prime minister of the new nation was Edmund Barton, who had led the movement for federation in New South Wales; his deputy Alfred Deakin had led the movement in Victoria and became the second prime minister when Barton retired in 1903. Henry Parkes 'the father of federation' had died in 1896.

Australia was now a nation but still within the British Empire. It did not acquire full powers over defence and foreign affairs until 1931. Though national feeling had grown, the sense of being British as well as Australian was still strong. Parkes had appealed to this feeling to bring the colonists together by saying that 'the crimson thread of kinship' ran through them all. Migrants still came overwhelmingly from Britain. The new nation also declared that it was to be a white; the exclusion of Chinese and other Asians was to continue.

World War II called into question Australia's British identity. The British Empire could not defend Australia against the Japanese and the government looked to America for assistance. After the war, to build up its population, Australia operated a large-scale programme to bring migrants from the countries of Europe, not just Britain. In 1951 the ANZUS treaty with the United States was signed. Still the Britishness of Australia did not disappear until Britain itself abandoned its leadership of the British Commonwealth by applying to join the European union in the 1960s. Australia was on its own. Already its trade with Britain had become less important; by 1967 Japan had become Australia's leading trading partner; most recently it is China.

The new migration programme worked well and the new migrants were giving a new variety and vigour to Australian life. In 1967 the dismantling of the White Australia policy began and in 1973 migration was placed on a totally non-discriminatory basis. Vietnamese, Chinese and Indians arrived and then migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa.

Australia became a nation of all the lands, one of the great successes of the modern world, for no nation, apart from Israel, has taken in such a high proportion of newcomers in such a short space of time. One in four Australians were born overseas.

The influence of Britain survives in Australia's institutions, in many of its values and of course in its common language – English. The formal ties with Britain have disappeared almost to nothing. The Queen still appoints the Governor General on the advice of the Australian prime minister. An attempt to make Australia a republic was defeated in 1999.

Aboriginal People

The success of Australia was built on lands taken from Aboriginal people.

The British government did not consider that it had to make a treaty with the Aboriginal tribes, who seemed to them to have no firm attachment to the land and did not cultivate it. In America and New Zealand it did make treaties with indigenous people.

The early governors were nevertheless told to ensure that the Aboriginal people were not harmed. Of course the taking of their land and the arrival of thousands of foreigners harmed them. This contradiction made it impossible for governments to effectively protect Aboriginal people.

Officially the Aborigines had the protection of British law, but it was extremely rare for white settlers on the frontier to be brought to court or punished for killing Aboriginal people. Occasionally the governors themselves authorised punitive expeditions against Aboriginal people who had speared settlers or taken sheep and cattle. In the second half of the nineteenth century in Queensland, when the settlers controlled the government, a force of native police was ruthless in killing Aborigines who resisted the taking of their land.

The Aborigines were not without friends. Some squatters were able to maintain good relations with them and employed them on their sheep runs. Missionaries attempted to convert them to Christianity but with only very limited success. Governor Macquarie (1810-1821) took a special interest in them, running a school for their children and offering them land for farming. But very few Aborigines were willing to move into European society; they were not very interested in what the Europeans had to offer.

There has been great debate about how many Aborigines were killed in the frontier battles. Many more Aborigines than settlers were killed. *A ratio often used is 10 Aborigines for every one settler. Working from this, historians have estimated that 20,000 Aborigines were killed overall. Others argue that this is much too high and that killings should not be assumed without good evidence.* Everyone agrees that the greatest killer of Aboriginal people was disease. The fall in population was immense, and where white settlement was dense, catastrophic. In Victoria an original population of 10,000 in the 1830s was reduced to a mere 1,907 in 1853.

After the frontier battles were over, Aboriginal people survived on the edges of society, taking casual work or begging; on the remote cattle stations they became the labour force (with no wages). Governments provided handouts of food and set aside small reserves in recognition of the great losses they had suffered. On some mission stations and reserves, settled communities began to emerge. This worried the governments for a growing proportion of the people on the reserves were mixed blood. Though full blood Aborigines were disappearing fast, it looked as if there would be an ongoing separate group of Aboriginal people.

In the years around 1900 the colonial and state governments moved to a policy of firmly confining Aborigines on their reserves or ensuring that they disappeared into the wider society. To manage this process they took away their civil rights. Aborigines could be told where to live, had to seek permission to marry, and could have their children taken from them. There has been a great debate too on the intent of these policies, particularly over the forcible removal of children from their parents. *Were mixed-blood children taken from parents so that they would marry white and hence colour would be bred out (which is how some administrators talked) or was this taking children from rough camps and giving them a chance in life?*

By the 1920s small Aboriginal groups were protesting at the policy of protection and in 1938, the 150th anniversary of white settlement, Aborigines staged a day of mourning in Sydney. Policy changed, but more because after World War II world opinion had changed; racism was condemned and the new United Nations issued its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the 1940s and 1950s Government policy changed to the assimilation of Aboriginal people and in the 1960s to the integration of Aboriginal people into white society. Their civil rights and the right to vote were restored to them.

The Australian people showed their willingness to see Aborigines become full members of their society when in 1967 they gave an overwhelming YES vote (90%) to a proposal to change the Aboriginal sections of the constitution. Aborigines were now to be counted in the census and the Commonwealth government was given power to pass laws on Aboriginal affairs.

However, just at this time, Aboriginal leaders, with the support of many white supporters, adopted a more separatist policy: Aborigines should own their traditional lands and on them maintain their traditional culture. The High Court in its 1992 *Mabo* decision restored unsold land to Aborigines if they had maintained their traditional ties to it. As a result Aborigines have become owners of vast areas of outback Australia. Here aspects of traditional society do survive. Aboriginal art and dance flourish and are widely admired in the broader community. But many of the Aboriginal people in these remote locations do not live well. *The lands, even if well managed, would not support them; they have become dependent on welfare. Their health is poor. Too many children skip school.*

In the wider society Aborigines now go to university and hold professional jobs. They inter-marry at a high rate with non-Aborigines. They are no longer all outcasts. But these successes are undermined by the plight of the traditional people on their

own lands. Here in the last thirty years things have got worse not better. There is now general agreement that welfare must stop; Aborigines must have real jobs; their children must be well educated. But if this happens can traditional culture survive? Will traditional people accept these new invitations to join the wider society?

This is the greatest dilemma facing Australian society.

John Hirst, 2007