



Two articles from an Australian perspective:

- ☐ Belonging to the Commonwealth
- ☐ Black Lives Mater & always should have



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Belonging to the Commonwealth

- an Australian perspective

Joy Schultz

Joy responded to ET 2.2 from Brisbane, Australia.

Audrey Osler's reflection on 'Empireland' [ET 2.2] resonates with me. It is true **"the empire's legacy is with us today"**. She also mentions that at school the history she learned was British history. This was much the same for me in Australia.

As a fifth generation Australian and an ardent republican, I think that Australia will remain in the Commonwealth when we inevitably replace the British monarch with our own Head of State. Such is the admiration for the Queen, this will not happen for now.

This partly reflects my upbringing as a British subject until 1984, and the continuing cultural, social and sporting ties that we have with Commonwealth countries and as part of the Anglo-sphere.

A re-writing of Australian history accounting for myths, such as the 3 I outline, has **kept legacy of Empire very firmly in the national consciousness of Australians**.

Australia - 3 Myths ...

Myth 1: Captain James Cook discovered Australia in 1770.

Is this true? His statues are splattered with red paint every Australia Day. What about the Dutch – and New Holland? What about the French? What about the people that had been living here for 60,000 years?

Myth 2: Australia was "Nobody's land".

This was justified in international law at the time - discovery and occupation allowed Britain to claim ownership. Aborigines were seen as nomads and did not "use" the land, and therefore did not "own it".

The myth of 'nobody's land' was overturned by the Mabo decision of the High Court of Australia in 1992. This led to a push for land rights which has not yet been fully resolved.

Recently there have been many inquiries into "stolen children", uneven incarceration rates, and a greater acceptance of the wrongs done to them, including an Apology to the Stolen Children in Parliament. Activists are still working on constitutional rights to a "Voice to Parliament".

Myth 3: The shadow of the "convict stain".

Australia was one of the earliest colonies settled by Britain. It was used as a convict destination after the loss of the American colonies.

For their descendants, there was a stigma, and people denied their convict past, playing down the crimes as misdemeanours – as many of them were. Many were professional people and political prisoners. They went on to be nation builders.

About 20% Australians have some convict ancestry (70% of Tasmanians). It is now something of a celebration to find a convict in one's ancestry.



This legacy is exacerbated each year on 26th January - **Australia Day** – which represents both the celebration of European settlement and the dispossession of Country.

My own experience of empire came firstly from family history. My maternal great grandfather was a German who was recruited by a British company to work on a sheep station on the Darling Downs, west of Brisbane. This was the 1860s, when land had long been cleared of Aborigines, and other workers had gone to the southern gold rushes. After working long enough to pay back the costs of shipping his family here, he was able to buy a small piece of land near the town where I was born. His descendants became prosperous and active citizens, but during the first World War (though they had inter-married with non-Germans) they were forced to *“become more British than the British”*. My mother was a lover of British royalty, and that influenced my youth.



Australia Day - Protest in Sydney



Australia Day - Sydney Opera House

The other factor was my awareness that, despite the former (separate and self-governing) British colonies having federated in 1901 to become states of the Commonwealth of Australia, there was no such thing as an Australian citizen. Until 1949, anyone born in Australia was simply a British subject, and Australians travelling overseas were issued with British passports. However, from 1949 until 1984 Australians were both Australian citizens and British subjects. Our Governors-General and state Governors were either British lords or military officers. I was born a British subject, sang God Save the King at school, and at the picture theatre. However, **I never felt myself to be anything other than an Australian.**



The year 1949 was also the year that the British Commonwealth of Nations was reconstituted as the Commonwealth of Nations. While Commonwealth Day is still marked in Parliament, there is no public holiday and I doubt if it means anything to many Australians. Since the end of World War 2, Australia has become a much more multicultural society. Many migrants have come from countries without a British background and probably have little knowledge of the Commonwealth.

Also, after Australia sent troops to the Boer War and both world wars, some Australians were upset when Churchill refused to send Australian troops home when requested after 1942 when we were being bombed by the Japanese. My own father, who had trained in a militia unit to protect Australia itself, enlisted in 1942 to fight the Japanese in New Guinea. I was born after that and he did not see me until the end of the war.

Australians were also upset after Britain joined the European Economic Community in 1973. For example, the effects were devastating for Tasmanian apple growers and butter factories around the country. We were able to eventually build solid markets in Asia.

In 1947 it was agreed by the self-governing nations of the Commonwealth that each nation would be free to define its own citizenship. It wasn't until 1962 that the Menzies' government amended the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 to enable all Indigenous Australians to enrol to vote in federal elections. The war, the EEC, migration and the fight for indigenous rights all combined to influence the vote on the Australian Citizenship (Amendment) Act 1984, which abolished the status of British subject. **Thus, at the age of 42, I could get a passport that did not classify me as a British.**



I expect the awareness of imperial history to evolve, but Commonwealth awareness is not overtly evident, apart from the Commonwealth Games. Arguments for Australia to become a republic will publicise the historic role of the monarchy, but, other than the Queen, the royal family are treated like celebrities.

Whether we are all aware of it or not, Commonwealth countries share many links outside of government.

We play sports that are not played as widely as others, such as cricket, netball, bowls and rugby sevens. We share a common cultural identity through many Commonwealth-wide non-governmental organisations. Our legal and political institutions are largely based on the British models - but, although our federal system follows Westminster, it also took on aspects of the United States in having a House of Representatives and a Senate, plus a written Constitution.

In the end, all countries need allies, and those that speak the same language and have long-standing cultural similarities are likely to share common values, whatever paths they individually follow.

Joy Schultz, March 2022



Some notes on the 3 Myths

Myth 1: Cook was simply the captain of a ship part-funded by the Royal Society, following directions from the British government. His statues are now splattered with red paint or graffiti on Australia Day each year, mainly by those sympathetic to the indigenous cause.

The Dutch had sailed around the northern, western and southern coastlines of the so-called Great South Land from the early 1600s, but found Indonesia's spices more enticing. **Cook claimed the eastern coast of New Holland for Britain and called it New South Wales.**

It was the French who first mapped the whole coastline, and there remain many places with French names. French ships continued to visit before and after the establishment of the British colony, so it was just a matter of chance that the western half did not become part of the French Empire!

Myth 2: Australia was seen as “nobody’s land” and as justifiable in the international law of the time that discovery and occupation allowed Britain to claim ownership. We were taught the justification that the Aborigines were nomads and did not “use” the land, and in British eyes did not “own it”. They had merely occupied the continent for about 60,000 years. It was a culture of inter-relationships, such that people said “the land owns us”. There were between 300 and 600 nations across the continent, each made up of a number of clans within an inclusive territory, and had organised their lives through very complex laws and social relationships, well before the arrival of Europeans.

Interaction between Europeans and the indigenous people of Australia resulted for the most part in loss of “country” and language, disease, starvation, massacres, and removal of mixed-race children. For those who survived, missions were established, where they were trained for service and received some education, or they worked only for rations on cattle and other properties, lived in shanty towns on the edge of settlements and their lives ended in intergenerational poverty for most. As the convict era ended, Europeans were invited to come and take up land which had largely been cleared, and they felt entitled to take it.

After many years of activism by Aboriginal leaders and white supporters, **the myth of ‘nobody’s land’ was overturned by the Mabo decision of the High Court of Australia in 1992.** This led to a push for land rights which has not yet been fully resolved because claimants had to prove continual existence on claimed land. In recent times, there have been many inquiries into “stolen children”, uneven incarceration rates, and a greater acceptance of the wrongs done to them, including an Apology to the Stolen Children in Parliament. Activists are still working towards a recognition of their prior ownership in our Constitution, and a “Voice to Parliament” on indigenous issues.

Myth 3: For many years some Australians lived under the shadow of the “convict stain.” Australia was one of the earliest colonies settled by Britain, and was planned as a convict destination after the loss of the American colonies, which had soaked up the convicts produced by conditions resulting from the industrialisation of Britain. For their descendants, there was a stigma, and people denied their convict past playing down the crimes as misdemeanours – as many of them were. It is also the case that many were professional people and political prisoners.

The Tolpuddle Martyrs, forerunners of the trade union movement, were transported to Sydney. An architect sentenced for forgery, Francis Greenway, designed many of the most impressive buildings of early Sydney town and his face was shown on the first decimal \$10 note in 1966. Many convicts were political prisoners from Ireland, some of whom, after being emancipated, went to the Gold Rush of the 1850s and one, Peter Lalor led the Eureka Rebellion of 1854. Under the banner of “no taxation without representation”, he was later elected to the Victorian Parliament as part of an Electoral Act that mandated male suffrage in the lower house in 1856.



Black lives matter - and always should have

Phil Glendenning

When the First Fleet arrived in Sydney Cove in January 1788, Australia had a population of up to a million indigenous people whose presence stretched back for over 60,000 years. By 1900 that number had dropped to less than 100,000, prompting the Australian Human Rights Commission **to describe what had happened to the Aboriginal people since colonisation as genocide.**

For a long time, Black Lives did not matter in Australia.



The Black Lives Matter movement originating in the USA focused initially on police killings of African Americans. It soon expanded to address systemic racism particularly against the descendants of slaves and their fight for rights and justice. What we saw in the US resonates deeply with the experience of Australia's Aboriginal people which is just as shocking, yet attracts minimal international attention.

Australia's relatively small population of 25 million could explain a lack of global awareness about the situation of Australia's First Peoples — the US African American population is 43 million people; Australia's Indigenous population is just 800,000 — but it is deeper than that. In the US, African Americans make up about 14% of the population, and roughly 30% of the country's inmates. Indigenous Australians make up 3% of the inhabitants yet make up 30% of its prison population.



Indigenous Australians are four times more likely to be locked up than black Americans. It's an even more jarring in the youth detention system, where about 50% of all detainees are Indigenous.

A 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody has still not seen its recommendations acted on. Since it ended, 438 Aboriginal people have died in custody. No one has been convicted in relation to these deaths.

The reality is that many people still do not comprehend the impact that colonisation and dispossession have had, and continue to have, on First Nations People. Since 1788 land, language, culture and even children were systematically taken away, often violently. **The aim of these policies was to subjugate, erode and eventually erase the presence of Aboriginal people from Australian history.**

It is no coincidence that representatives of the National Party of South Africa visited Palm Island in Queensland before implementing the apartheid system. They wanted to see how to do it. (Palm Island was where Aboriginal people were sent after being forcibly removed from their ancestral lands).

Unlike similar countries with a history of colonisation - New Zealand, Canada, the US, Finland – Australia has never had a treaty with its Indigenous people to right some of these historic wrongs.

Phil Glendenning AM is the Director of the Edmund Rice Centre in Sydney.

He was co-founder of Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) and for 10 years was National President.

He is currently President of the Refugee Council of Australia.

In terms of health, there is still a 17-year gap in life expectancy between black and white Australians, and the Australian Government recently announced that those most at risk from the Covid virus included anyone over the age of 70, but if you were Indigenous you were at risk at 50 years of age. This is the face of systemic inequality.

Despite this, the First Nations Peoples of Australia recently offered the country a process to begin the healing of history.

The **Uluru Statement from the Heart**, developed by Aboriginal

leaders, calls for a Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution, a makarrata or treaty making process to right historical wrongs, and begin truth-telling about Australia's shared history.

This should be an international issue. After all, those who arrived in tall ships from Britain in 1788 to establish a penal colony in someone else's country, did so without the permission of the people who had

lived there for over 60,000 years. In so doing they ignored their King's instructions *"to occupy the lands and waters only with the consent of the native people"*.

Consent was not asked for and it has never been given.

Australia's First Nations Peoples are the custodians of the world's oldest living continuous cultures. They have survived. They have worked to restore land, language, culture and re-unite families with their children. This is an amazing human achievement that a reconciled nation and a world that values justice could revere and celebrate.



[Work on the Uluru Statement from the Heart. See video](#)



So, along with the marches and the protests, the time has come to implement the peace offering that is the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.

Then, Australia can join with the international community, and send to the dustbin of history the colonial lie that Black Lives do not matter as much as the lives of everybody else.

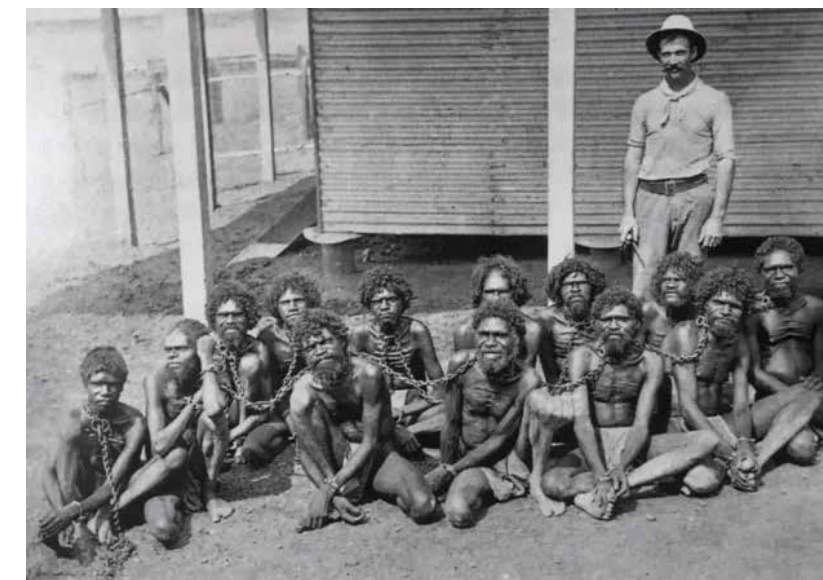
They do matter and always should have.

On the next two pages Phil offers a list of resources to stimulate our own thinking - and to use with students.

We have chosen three short videos to introduce the potential.

1. Archie Roach tells the story 'Took the Children Away'. It is his story. It is about the stolen generation, the children taken from their parents. He tells it in the most gentle manner. [\[Click on photo\]](#)

2. Stan Grant speech: ["My people die young in this country"](#). A moving introduction to the key issues about the Black experience in Australia.



3. Chapter 1: Restricted rights and freedoms in Western Australia.

Aboriginal people have faced discrimination for generations. Historically, control over Aboriginal people's lives in Western Australia was often enabled by laws that restricted their rights and freedoms.

This introduces the that history.

[\[Click on photo\]](#)



Learn More About Australia's First Nations People the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

What's it like to be an Aboriginal person in Australia today?

Many Aboriginal people often find themselves the only black person in the room, especially in Australia's cities. This resource helps people understand what that is like.

<https://www.abc.net.au/life/when-you-are-the-only-indigenous-person-in-the-room/10793748>

Support the Uluru Statement from the Heart

These organisations' websites offer detailed information about the Uluru Statement From the Heart and how people around the world can support it and the rights of Aboriginal Australians.

<https://ulurustatement.org>

<https://antar.org.au/campaigns/constitutional-recognition-0>

https://www.erc.org.au/constitutional_recognition

Resources for Teachers and Students

If you are a teacher or a student these online resources provide a comprehensive examination of **First Nations history and culture**, ideas for lesson plans, stimuli for discussion and ideas for campaigns.

<https://education.abc.net.au/home#!/topic/494038/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-histories-and-cultures>

<http://www.aboriginalstudies.com.au/teacher-resources>

<https://www.creativespirits.info/resources/>

<https://humanrights.gov.au/education/teachers/bringing-them-home-2017>

https://www.erc.org.au/resources_for_schools

Something To Watch

Stan Grant's "**My People Die Young In This Country**" Speech. This is a moving speech by well-known Australian journalist and former CNN anchor Stan Grant, a proud Wiradjuri man from south-west NSW, reflecting on what it was like to grow up black in Australia, racism and finding a way forward for all Australians.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eA3UsF8yyho>

Something To Listen To

Archie Roach's "**Took The Children Away**" is a poetic lament that outlines the story of the Stolen Generations, Aboriginal children taken away from their parents.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL_DBNkkcSE

Paul Kelly & Dan Sultan "**Every day I hear my mother's voice**", a song about combatting racism and resilience reflecting on the life of AFL footballer Adam Goodes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3OJ0kzSXQE>

Midnight Oil have released an album to promote the Uluru statement

See Website and You Tube "The Makkarata Project" - Midnight Oil

<https://www.midnightoil.com/the-makarrata-project-out-now/>

It includes new songs "First Nation", featuring Jessica Maubouy, and "Gadigal Land"; a reading of Uluru Statement from the Heart by prominent Aboriginal Australians and some great songs.

Take Action!

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation are a great resource for campaigning and taking action. Visit these sites for some great ideas:

<https://antar.org.au>

<https://antar.org.au/campaigns/reconciliation>

Something Special To Read

Bruce Pascoe's Dark Emu is a compelling challenge to conventional thinking about Aboriginal life in Australia. He details the Aboriginal economy and shows how Aboriginal societies were not simple hunter-gatherer economies but sophisticated, with farming and irrigation practices:

Pascoe, B. Dark Emu, Magabala Books, Broome, Western Australia 2018

Thomas Mayer has written two books on the development and understanding of the Uluru Statement, after spending two years travelling the country visiting Indigenous communities big and small. Some great ideas for action in both!

Finding the Heart of the Nation— *Journey of the Uluru Statement towards Voice, Treaty, Truth* - published by Hardie Grant, Sydney 2019

Finding Our Heart - *A Story about the Uluru Statement for Young Australians.*

