

WAS AUSTRALIA SETTLED OR INVADED?

Each Australia Day the question is raised, whether Australia was settled or invaded. It is a vexed question that should be approached historically rather than ideologically.

Over more than 5000 years prior to 1788, Australia was quite probably the only inhabited continent that never experienced wars of conquest or invasion. Any inter-tribal conflicts were highly ritualised affairs that never involved the conquest and subjugation of others. All Aboriginal tribes controlled their population and sustainably managed their land, so there was just no economic imperative to conquer and dispossess others.

However, in the rest of the world over this period, imperialism and colonialism became embedded as norms. The Egyptian, Assyrian, Chinese, Mogul, Roman and other empires regularly rose and fell. Then with the opening up of the Americas in the 1500's, various European countries competed to become the world's dominant economic and colonial power.

The 1600's then marked the beginning of a period of extraordinary social and technological change in Europe. 'The Age of Enlightenment' created the modern method of scientific investigation, paving the way for the Industrial Revolution that began in the mid-1700's.

This scientific questioning also created seismic changes in philosophic thought, leading to the Protestant Reformation, then the American and French Revolutions. All of these movements were founded on ideas of individual choice, human equality, and democracy.

Conflicting imperatives therefore operated when the British arrived in Australia in 1788. On one hand Britain wanted to become the dominant economic and colonial power in the world. On the other, it also wanted to be at the forefront of civilized thought and action. This was especially so in relation to the treatment of native people who, apart from being the subjects of 'scientific inquiry', were now regarded as equal human beings.

This duality of purpose was highly evident in the people chosen by Britain to be respectively the Governor and Lieutenant Governor of the New South Wales colony. Captain Arthur Phillip was a man of the Enlightenment and his Letters Patent from the King charged him to treat the Australian natives with 'amity' and the rights of British citizenship.

But the Admiralty Lords also knew that the interests of Empire had to be protected if the natives proved to be recalcitrant. So Major Robert Ross was appointed as second in command. Ross was every inch a man of Empire. He had fought in the American Indian Wars in the 1750's when General Amherst had used smallpox as a biological weapon. So, Ross knew well how to deal with recalcitrant natives. Ross' Letters Patent therefore charged him with protecting the colony against any incursion by the natives and gave him supreme power over Phillip in matters of war. So, both bases were covered. It was to be peaceful invasion, or else.

This dual intent also extended down to free settlers. Some were imbued with the vision of Empire. Others simply saw the opportunity for a better life. Settlers were sold the myth of Terra Nullius and invited to go and peacefully settle this vast empty land – *“Oh, except for a few wandering natives, but you can also secure your immortal soul by civilizing and Christianising them”*.

The first two British arrivals in the Templestowe area of Melbourne’s Yarra Valley graphically reflect this invasion versus settlement conundrum. Major Charles Newman arrived in 1837 and like Major Robert Ross was every inch a man of Empire. From his turf block hut at the Yarra-Mullum junction, Newman shot with murderous intent at any Aboriginal who dared to try and traverse ‘his’ land. It is therefore a travesty to refer to Major Charles Newman as the first settler in Templestowe. He was quite clearly an invader.

In 1840 the second person to arrive in Templestowe was my own great-great grandfather, John Chivers. A haulier and lay preacher, he simply wanted to build a better life for his young family. John had initially thought he would bring Christianity to the natives, but on establishing close friendship with them, he soon appreciated that they already had a legitimate religious framework to their lives.

John learnt the Woiwurrung language along with his two sons, who grew up immersed in daily tribal life. Countless stories have been passed down our family about these times, as well as the stories passed down the Aboriginal families we have known. Having access to and feeling pride in our rich Australian Aboriginal heritage is something we all can and should strive for. It is a crucial part of our identity as Australians.

Settlement versus invasion is therefore a false dichotomy. In the end analysis we can take neither credit nor blame for whatever good or evil our forefathers might have done. We are only responsible for what we do in our own lifetime.

This has two implications. First, we must openly acknowledge the sins of the past, but free from any imputation of racial guilt. Second, we must continue redressing any present-day disadvantages that have been inherited from the past. Equal Opportunity is the cornerstone of a truly just society.