LEARNING MADE EASY

2nd Edition

Australian History

for dummies
A Wiley Brand

Discover the events that shaped the nation

Grasp the impact of Indigenous culture and colonisation

Appreciate Australia's great scientific and sporting feats

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Historian

Australian History

2nd Edition

by Alex McDermott

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READERS OF THIS BOOK SHOULD BE AWARE THAT, IN SOME ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT

ISLANDER COMMUNITIES, SEEING IMAGES OF DECEASED PERSONS IN PHOTOGRAPHS MAY CAUSE SADNESS OR DISTRESS AND, IN SOME CASES, OFFEND AGAINST STRONGLY HELD CULTURAL PROHIBITIONS. THIS BOOK CONTAINS IMAGES OF PEOPLE WHO ARE DECEASED.

Australian History For Dummies®

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FIGURE 21-1: Cathy Freeman lighting the flame at the Sydney 2000 Olympics.

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, I've taught history, studied history, written history, talked and listened about it with all sorts of different people, learning all the time. What's struck, and stayed with me through this whole time, is just how big the for good history is. And good history, in my own frankly biased opinion, generally involves helping people answer some of the really compelling questions. Questions like, who are we, really? (And, sure, are we even a 'we'?) And how did we come to be as we are now, today? History can be as small as what's happened over a few decades on one neighbourhood street, but no matter how small its immediate subject matter, if it's good history, it can't help but relate back some sort of answer for the big questions too. The reason there's a history profession at all is because there's enough folks who want to know the answers to these questions, and want their kids to know, and their friends, relations and various others to think and ask these questions too.

Now, obviously there is no one final, finished ultimate set of answers to these questions. That's the beauty of history for me — with every year and decade that passes, from one generation to the next, our view of the past changes. In this sense I like to think of history as one great big ongoing conversation between the past and the present. And the conversation keeps changing and evolving and shifting as the society it's in keeps changing with it. At the heart of this changing, ever-shifting conversation though, is the need in us to tell each other the basic story, as clearly and as well as possible. And providing that story is what this book is all about.

About This Book

At first glance, Australian history appears to be nice and neat and compartmentalised, doesn't it? There it is, most of it fitting into the last 230+ years (aside, of course, from the 50,000 years or more of Indigenous Australian history that preceded it, but we'll get to that). So it can be positively weird just how often bits of it get sliced, diced and served up as completely different dishes. 'First contact' history gets separated out from Gallipoli, say; the conscription controversy of World War I and the Vietnam War might get placed in separate boxes; convicts are set aside from the rise of colonial towns and cities; and it's all completely separate from the Great Depression. From the Tent Embassy and Gough Whitlam's 'It's Time!' election win in 1972, to John Howard, Julia Gillard, Asylum seekers, Carbon tax and Same Sex Marriage since the 2000s.

Okay, this separation isn't always a bad thing — they're all good topics worthy of being teased apart in isolation. But it can be useful — not to mention interesting! — to also have them available to a reader in one easily accessible, easily readable volume, and this is where the *For Dummies* books shine.

You might want to read the whole of Australian history from go to whoa — from first Indigenous arrivals to practically just last week. With this book, you can do that. Or, this month, you might want to find out what caused separate, self-sufficient colonies to federate into a nation but, next month, be wondering exactly how a supposed convict hellhole managed to create a 'workingman's paradise' within 70 years of first settlement. You can dip, you can skip, you can crossreference — jump from one item to another as you see fit. The book is designed to work the way you want it to.

Foolish Assumptions

In writing the book, I've been making some assumptions about what you as a reader might be bringing to the book. I've been assuming that you want to know more about Australian history, and that some or all of the following might apply to you:

- You might have done some Australian history at school, but in a hodgepodge sort of way. At different points of your schooling, you might have bumped into convicts, bushrangers, Gallipoli and other different topics. These interested you at the time but you weren't quite sure how they all fitted together, and what else there was to know about.
- Alternatively, you might have *hated* history at school and tried to ignore it as much as possible. But you've always suspected that the actual history of the place might be a darn sight more interesting than what school history did to it, and wondered what that history might look like.
- You might be entirely new to Australia and keen to get inside the head of the country, and understand what makes the place tick, and how it came to be this way.

I've also used a few conventions in this book to make the information easy to get to and understand:

- *Italics* for terms or words that might not be immediately understandable (and I follow the italics up with an explanation in brackets like this one).

- Sidebars for things that are interesting in their own right but are a little removed from the main point.
- The spelling of ‘Labor’ for the Australian Labor Party. Officially, the spelling was standardised by the party in 1912 to be Labor rather than Labour (although plenty of newspapers ignored this and kept spelling it the old way until after World War II ended in 1945). To make it simpler, I’ve spelt it the same way — ‘Labor’ — all the way through.
- The description of the main non-Labor political party as ‘Liberal’ for pretty much all of the 20th century. Even though the final reorganisation of the party into the Liberal Party we know today only happened in 1944, a non-Labor party acted like the Liberal Party, and really was the Liberal party, and sometimes even called itself the Liberal Party, ever since Alfred Deakin got the various liberal forces together under the one banner in 1909. Rather than change the name to reflect the various name-changes they went through over the next 30-odd years (which they did with irritating frequency), I’ve just chosen to call the lot of them Liberals and be done with it.

Icons Used in This Book

Along with the parts, the chapters and the sections in this book, something else should make your navigating through it a whole lot easier: Different icons placed at different points in the margin of the text to highlight some key things. I’ve used the following icons:

HISTORICAL ROOTS

The main events, decisions and actions in a country’s history don’t usually just happen — you can often dig up their causes and influences from the past. When I’ve done this for events in this book, I’ve labelled the information with a ‘Historical Roots’ icon.

IN THEIR WORDS

This icon, I confess, is a special favourite of mine. These are the moments in the book where I get to hand over the metaphorical microphone to the people who made Australia’s history and give them the chance to explain what they thought they were doing — or to contemporary commentators, to explain what Australia was thinking when these events happened. For all the explaining that an historian does (and I promise you I’ve tried to make it as clear and to the point as I possibly can) sometimes there’s just no substitute for getting the actual protagonists or observers to have their say on what was going on. When they do, it carries this icon next to it.

LIFE DOWN UNDER

This flags things in Australian history that go directly to explaining the distinctive society that we can recognise today as tellingly Australian.

REMEMBER These are the bits that, if books came with batteries, would flash and buzz ‘Important!’ when you got near them. These are the things that give an essential understanding of exactly how or why Australia has developed the way it did, and by keeping them in mind, you’ll never lose your historical bearings.

TECHNICAL STUFF This icon highlights further information, such as statistics, that can deepen your understanding of the topic, but aren’t essential reading. Read the information so you have some extra facts to impress your mates with, or feel free to skip it.

Where to Go from Here

The short answer to this, of course, is the beauty of a Dummies book — anywhere! Anywhere at all you darn well please. You can start at the start and motor along right through the various parts until you get down to the contemporary scene, or you can just jump to a point that explains what you really want to know about right now. If you want to see exactly what Australia did with its new federated nation powers after 1901, then Chapter 12 at the start of Part 3 is your next stop. If you want to see the colonial world that emerged in the wake of the massive gold finds of the 1850s, then Chapter 8 is a good place to start. If the very first years of convict settlement make you curious, head for Chapter 3, with the following decades of settling in and teething troubles also worth checking out in Chapters 4 and 5.

Remember that aside from the table of contents, you've also got an index that alphabetically lists the main events and subject areas. Using all this, you can go pretty much anywhere in Australian history without having to wait around to be told which parts should be considered before first, second and 23rd. It's there for you to read and use when you need it, as you see fit.

Part 1

Let’s Get This Country Started

IN THIS PART ...

Find out more about Australia's unlikely set of origins and why the highly problematic mix of Indigenous Australians and newly arriving British settlers was not one that spelt much in the way of recognition, respect or rights for the Indigenous peoples.

Discover why the new colony of Australia unexpectedly became a place to start again for the convicted criminals, soldiers and officials who arrived here.

Understand why by the time British authorities got around to noticing the widespread laxness in their convict colony, it was too late — the ex-cons had already established themselves as major players in Australian life.

Chapter 1

Aussie, Aussie, Aussie

IN THIS CHAPTER

» **Considering the realities of Australia's Indigenous and convict origins**

» **Seeing the transformation created by the discovery of gold**

» **Creating an 'ideal' society after Federation**

» **Getting knocked around by two world wars and a Great Depression**

» **Growing up and making changes with the baby boomers**

» **Opening up Australia's economy and its borders**

» **Seeing in the new millennium**

The first thing about Australian history that probably strikes you — aside from the very obvious exception of millennia of successful Indigenous adaptation — is that practically all of it is modern history. Getting your head around Australian history — what the big events were, and what the major forces shaping people's actions, reactions and various ideas were — means you also get your head around the major shifts and changes of the modern era. Australian history provides an invaluable window onto the flow of the modern era, while also being a pretty interesting story of the emergence of a distinctive nation in its own right.

The contrast between Australia being home to one of the longest continuing societies and most people thinking of

Australian history in terms of only recent events is one thing. But another striking thing about Australia is that it is a land and society of many more contrasts. The country was colonised as a place to punish people, yet being sent here often turned out to be the convicts' greatest opportunity. Australia was a place where British convicts were sent to be deprived of their rights, yet was one of the first places to bestow on men an almost universal right to vote (and, a few decades later, to almost all women). And, after Federation, Australia was set up as something of a 'new society,' yet was one that refused entry to non-Brits for most of the 20th century. The playing out of these contrasts adds to the depth and colour of the Australian story.

When Oldest Meets Newest

Australian modern history largely begins with the strange encounter between the oldest continuing culture in the world and the most rapidly changing one. The first Australians were Indigenous Aboriginals (see Chapter 2 for more on their way of life pre-European settlement). They were brought into contact with an invading group of settlers from an island on the other side of the world and off the west coast of Europe — Great Britain.

IN THEIR WORDS

Explorer James Cook had been given a secret set of instructions to open only after he'd done his scientific work in Tahiti: Search for the elusive *Terra Australis Incognita*. If he found it, according to the instructions, he was then to 'with the consent of the

> natives take possession of convenient situations in the name of the King … or if you find the land uninhabited, take possession for His Majesty'.

Cook found the land inhabited — he even observed that, despite their apparent material lack, Aboriginals may be the happiest people on earth — but he then went ahead and claimed possession of the whole east coast of Australia anyway. As far as intercultural harmony went, this set an ominous tone for how Australia's first inhabitants would be viewed by the colonisers. Britain established the convict colony of New South Wales (NSW) shortly after. (See Chapter 3 for more on Cook and the decision to settle NSW.)

Getting ahead in the convict world

If I say to you the words 'convict colony', certain mental images probably automatically flash up. Chances are, they'd be pretty grim 'hellhole'-type images: A basic slave society with clanking chains and floggings.

Setting up a penal colony on the other side of the known world, with minimal chance of convicts returning to Britain once they'd served their time, certainly sounds like a recipe for disaster. But this is where the story of Australia gets interesting.

HISTORICAL ROOTS

> According to English law, criminals usually lost most of their legal rights after being convicted for a crime — and they lost them permanently. They couldn't own property. They couldn't give evidence in court. If the original colony planners or early governors had really been set on making life in NSW as miserable as possible for transported convicts, the

scope was there. But that's not what happened at all. In the new settlement, convicts not only kept their rights — they could own property, and could sue and give evidence in court — but they also became major economic players.

Convicts were allowed to retain legal rights and were given plenty of opportunities partly out of necessity: They were the vast majority of the population. How do you run a society where some 80 to 90 per cent of people can't hold property or talk in court? Convicts were the labour force (and the police force!), and they were the tradesmen and a large chunk of the entrepreneurial class. If you wanted to get anything done in this strange new colony, you had to see a convict about it. Indeed, if you wanted a *date*, you needed a convict. Most of the soldiers and officials had come out without womenfolk. While the soldiers and convict women entered into common-law partnerships (or de facto marriages), plenty of officers had relationships where convict women were their lovers and mistresses, sometimes even setting them up in businesses, having families and children with them, and occasionally even marrying them.

LIFE DOWN UNDER

Economically, the new colony offered plenty of opportunities to make money, especially in importing and exporting — and, most notably, trading in alcohol for a very thirsty populace. Military officers, convicts and ex-convicts were all quick to get in on the act. None of them was super-scrupulous about how they did it, either.

By a weird quirk of fate, which neither transportation's administrators nor its detractors wanted publicised too much, getting caught, convicted and transported for crimes committed in Britain in the late 18th or early 19th centuries was frequently the luckiest break a criminal ever scored. (See Chapters 4 and 5 for more on the opportunities and second chances offered to new arrivals in NSW.)

Eventually, Britain got around to designing and building proper convict hellholes — at Port Arthur, Norfolk Island, Moreton Bay and Macquarie Harbour (see Chapter 6). But that took decades, and life in these places was never the reality for the majority of convicts.

HISTORICAL ROOTS

The myth of NSW as a convict hellhole was at least in part a creation of free settlers. In the 1840s, plenty of now successful free settlers wanted to separate their new home from the stigma of convict association, so they dwelt on the horror of the exceptional places and practices — the chain-gangs, the isolated outposts designed for severe punishments — as if they were the usual thing. They weren't. But they created a myth that still shapes our thoughts about convict life.

Leaping into the big time with wool

At first, NSW was a trading and maritime colony. In 1808, 20 years after first settlement (and about the same time Governor Bligh was arrested by an extremely irritated populace — see Chapter 4) the population of the main port town, Sydney, was about half that of the entire colony. In the 1820s and 1830s, a real foothold finally started to be put down on the broader continent because of one main factor — the take-off of wool.

Australia’s south-eastern grasslands, the end product of millennia of firestick farming burn-offs by Aboriginals (performed to attract kangaroos and other game to the new-growth grassland), were discovered to be perfect for grazing sheep on. And sheep grew wool. And wool was just what the new textile industries of Britain’s industrial revolution wanted a lot of. (See Chapter 6 for more on the prosperity brought about by sheep farming and the land grab that followed.)

LIFE DOWN UNDER Not for the last time, Australia’s jump into big-time prosperity had everything to do with high demand for raw materials from a nation flexing its muscles as a newly arrived industrial giant. (America, Japan and China would all play similar roles at different times in the 20th century.) Not for the last time, either, would a massive inward surge of investment capital make for a leveraging up of debt levels that meant when crunch time came, as crunch time tends to do, bankruptcies started popping up like toadstools everywhere (see Chapter 7).

Gold, Gold, Gold for Australia

At the end of the 1840s, Australia and the world were emerging from economic depression. Then along came the discovery of gold to dazzle everyone. The idea of getting your very own hands on a jackpot of wealth was what brought men and women to Australia in their hundreds and thousands in the 1850s, making for a transformation of colonial society.

Gold, an insanely profitable export, started being shipped out of the country, filling the treasuries of newly self-governing colonies as it did so. (This was in the days before Federation, when the states that now make up Australia acted as independent colonies.) And those who were lucky enough to have found gold and were newly cashed up had no shortage of things to spend their money on, as imports started flooding in. (See Chapter 8 for more on the gold rush and its effects.)

A building boom also followed. While the massive surge of new arrivals was happy enough to live in tents and canvas towns for the first few months, and makeshift shelters, shanties and lean-tos for another few years after that, ultimately they wanted to live in proper houses — which all had to be built. As did roads. And schools for all the children being born. Then railways, telegraphs — why not?! 'If the world has it, we shouldn't lack for it' was the generally agreed sentiment (see Chapter 9). Limitless progress, development and prosperity were there to be enjoyed. The newest inventions and technology were certain requirements as the 'steam train of progress' of the 19th century took off with rattling speed, with the colonies demanding to be in the front carriage.

Welcoming in male suffrage

Democracy was another accidental by-product of the gold rushes — although, at this stage, for 'democracy' read 'votes for most men'. The Australian colonies were some of the very first places anywhere in the world to grant practically universal male *suffrage* (voting rights). (And, 40 to 50 years later, Australia would be one of the very first places to give votes to almost all women.)

HISTORICAL ROOTS The granting of the right to vote to most men in the 1850s was one of those sublimely unexpected twists in Australian history. In Britain at the time, constraints were placed on who qualified for the *franchise* (that is, who was allowed to vote). Traditionally, those who owned large amounts of property or paid big amounts of rental qualified to vote. When Australian colonies were granted elected Legislative Councils, constraints similar to those operating in Britain were put in place. But what members of the British parliament didn’t know was that rents were much, much higher in Australian cities. Thanks to gold, everything had shot up — prices, wages, rents, the lot. Without realising it, the British parliament had set constraints that allowed a much higher proportion of men to vote than in Britain. So, without great agitation or publicity campaigns or fanfare, practically all men got the right to vote in elections that formed the colonial governments. Politicians changed their pitch and their promises accordingly. (See Chapter 8 for some of the initial political effects of the more universal male suffrage.)

LIFE DOWN UNDER Even after winning the vote, it seemed that many people in the colonies didn’t really *care* about politics. They hadn’t come here to vote, after all. They’d come here to get rich. And the ‘native-born’ white settler Australians were notoriously unconcerned about political life. Many newly arrived