

History

Lesson 3 of an enquiry of 4 lessons

## **Settler colonialism in Australia**

Enquiry: What did British colonialism look like in the nineteenth century?

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# Settler colonialism

A settler is a person who moves with a group of others to a new country or place. Australia is an example of a settler colony, because large numbers of British people moved there. This resulted in the creation of a new white British society. By the middle of the nineteenth century there were six Australian colonies. They were called: New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, people talked of Australia as being part of a 'Greater Britain'. The British knew, however, that there were already people living on the Australian continent - Aboriginal people. As British settler society expanded, it looked to remove and replace Aboriginal society and Aboriginal people. This was different from colonialism in India. In India, a relatively small number of British people ruled over a large Indian population. British people did move to India, but in Australia the number of British people who settled was much higher. Unlike in India, British people tried to start a completely new society in Australia.



# Taking the land (1)

Settler colonialism was founded on taking land from **native** peoples. In Australia, Aboriginal people had lived on the land for around 50,000 years by the time the first British settlers arrived in 1788. There were many different Aboriginal societies in Australia, with different languages and cultures. In 1788, Britain sent people to Australia to form a penal colony - meaning a colony to which Britain sent **convicts**. The idea of the penal colony was that convicts would be transformed into better people by working hard on the land in Australia. Once they had finished serving their sentence, they would be given land to live on, and, over time, they would form a new British society there. The first group of settlers in Australia was made up of the governor, 550 army or navy officers, and 736 settler-convicts. At that same time, it is estimated that there were around 1 million Aboriginal people in Australia.



## Taking the land (2)

The Aboriginal people experienced the arrival of these British settlers as an invasion. In 1788, the colony was small with only a few hundred settlers. But over time, more and more convicts were sent to settle in Australia. Furthermore, people called 'free settlers' started to travel voluntarily to Australia in search a new, better life. As more British settlers arrived, they spread further into Australia and claimed more land. The settlers brought new diseases from Europe, which **decimated** Aboriginal populations. They used violence to steal land from the Aboriginal people. When gold was discovered in the 1850s, hundreds of thousands more British people settled on Australian land, in what became known as the 'Gold Rush'. By 1861, there were over 1 million settlers in Australia. In the later part of the nineteenth century, settler society increasingly dominated Australia and its landscape. Large cities were developed such as Melbourne and Sydney. In addition thousands of miles of railway track were built to connect the cities. In this new British settler society, Aboriginal people became increasingly **marginalised**, excluded and restricted.



# Settler politics and Aboriginal resistance

Aboriginal people had diverse and complex societies. Different Aboriginal communities had their own cultures, rituals, beliefs, structures and laws. When the British arrived, the settlers did not understand Aboriginal society, nor did they particularly try to. The British set up their own laws and hierarchy. The Governor of the colony was at the top of the British hierarchy. As British settlement expanded, settlers used British laws and power to support their violent **seizure** of land from the Aboriginal people. British law in the Australian colonies declared that Britain, not the Aboriginal people, owned the land. Very few settlers were punished for killing Aboriginal people. As Aboriginal people resisted, for example by attacking settlers and their farms, the British sent in the army to fight wars against Aboriginal people. These became known as frontier wars.



# Settler self-government

By the middle of the nineteenth century, white settler society had grown so much that the white settlers believed that they deserved to have a say in their own government. They claimed that it was their right as British people in a 'civilised' society to be allowed to vote for their own government. In the 1850s, the British government handed over self-government to the settlers. This meant that settlers in Australia now had some power to govern themselves and make their own laws. In most of Australia, all men (but not women) were allowed to vote for who they wanted to hold important government positions. However, this was a democracy that served white settlers; it did not benefit Aboriginal people. Aboriginal groups protested for 'land in our own country', but became increasingly restricted in how they were allowed to live their lives. As the white settlers gained more freedoms, many Aboriginal people lost theirs.



# Aboriginal dispossession and exclusion

British settlers' justifications for taking Aboriginal land by force rested on culturalist and racist beliefs. They assumed that Aboriginal people had no laws or developed society of their own. They claimed that Aboriginal people were inferior to the white 'race'. For these reasons, settlers claimed that they had the right to take land from Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people resisted the seizure of their land, arguing that they had rights to 'land in our own country'. Aboriginal demands for land did lead to some success, as colonial governments set aside some land for Aboriginal people to live on, called reserves. One example was the Coranderrk reserve in the colony of Victoria, established in 1863. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, these reserves were becoming more like prisons. In 1869 in Victoria, a law was passed declaring that Aboriginal people were not allowed to leave the reserves. Throughout the Australian colonies, laws were passed restricting the rights of Aboriginal people. In a policy that intensified in the twentieth century, Aboriginal children were taken away from their parents and made to live with white families. These children have become known as the 'stolen generations'.



# Comprehension Questions

1. How long had Aboriginal people lived in Australia by the time British settlers arrived?
2. In the 1850s, settlers were granted self-government. What does this mean?
3. How did settlers try to justify taking land from Aboriginal people?
4. By the end of the nineteenth century, more and more Aboriginal people were confined to living on reserves. What were reserves?
5. How was settler colonialism in Australia different from colonialism in India?





# Glossary

**Convict** - someone who has been found guilty of a crime

**Decimate** - destroy; severely reduce

**Marginalised** - when people are treated as if they are insignificant/do not matter

**Native** - people who were born in a place/who originally lived there (in this case, people who lived in a colony before the British arrived)

**Seizure** - taking something by force

