

RESEARCH REPORT 42: INVADING THE AUSTRALIAN MIND

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Sometimes it helps to be have been an historian for forty years, with the remnants of a memory. At the end of March 2016 a debate erupted in the media, questioning the veracity of a University of New South Wales statement that Australia had been ‘invaded’, not ‘settled’, and breaking Australian history up into “pre-invasion” and “post-invasion” phases. On 29 March, Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph* ran a front page story under the banner: ‘University of NSW students told to refer to Australia as having been “invaded”’, which was critical of the university advocating the use of the word ‘invasion’ over ‘discovered’ or ‘settled’.²

The article claimed that this was a ‘highly controversial rewriting of official Australian history’. Objection was made to the UNSW *Indigenous Terminology Guide* which states that ‘most Aboriginal people find the use of the word ‘discovery’ offensive’. The next day, Vanessa Croll led off again in the *The Daily Telegraph* with ‘Was Australia “settled” or “invaded”? Did Captain James Cook “discover” or “invade” Australia?’³ *The Daily Telegraph* had ‘beat-up’ the story and *The Australian* picked up the same story on the 30th and ran it as if it was current news.⁴ In fact, the news is more than 20 years old and not new even then.

After that, the media ran with the story, as if it was a sensation, just discovered, and they competed to get comments. The ‘shock jocks’ provided predictable reactions. Sydney talk radio host Kyle Sandilands denounced the University of New South Wales’ material, and let off a blast at university ‘wankers’ trying to ‘rewrite history. Alan Jones weighed in as well:

The study of history ought to be about the examination of facts in order to support a thesis about developing an argument supported by fact ... don’t try and restrict the thinking of university students by some so-called diversity toolkit on indigenous terminology rubbish.⁵

The media became quite frenzied. In Brisbane on Thursday 31st I did five media interviews on the subject: for the news on Channels 7, 9, and 10, for ABC radio and for Radio Australia. I must admit to being a little bemused by it all. I kept being asked about the ‘Flinders document’, and whether The University of Queensland had adopted it, and if it influenced my teaching, and whether Captain Cook was an invader? I asked the reporters why the story was of interest, and the general answer was that once one group covered it, their news room bosses would think they were remiss if they did not. They were all scrambling to meet 5.00 and 6.00pm deadlines.

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² [‘University of NSW students told to refer to Australia as having been ‘invaded’](#), *The Daily Telegraph*, 29.3.16.

³ [‘Was Australia ‘settled’ or ‘invaded’?](#), *The Daily Telegraph*, 30.3.16.

⁴ [Have a Captain Cook at this history rewrite](#)’, *The Australian*, 30.3.16.

⁵ [‘Kyle tees off about “bulls****” university guidelines around Indigenous history](#)’, *News.com.au*, 30.3.16.

Did Captain Cook invade Australia?

I dealt with the Captain Cook question by saying that he had less than 100 crew, and only landed a few times; this can hardly be called an invasion. He was an explorer, one of many, although the *Endeavour* was probably the first European ship to travel along the east coast. Did Captain Cook 'discover' Australia? No, the Indigenous inhabitants did 40,000 to 50,000 years ago. More recently, Asian fishermen had been travelling down from Sulawesi in Indonesia to fish on the northern reefs since about the fifteenth century. Cook and his crew were not even the first Europeans to reach Australia: the Dutch and possibly the Portuguese had been nosing around north-western Australia, the Gulf of Carpentaria and Cape York back as far as the early seventeenth century.⁶ If Cook was an invader, he was late to arrive, and even then it was an initial reconnoitre. I would not call him an invader, although admittedly he did claim the east coast for Britain and he and Sir Joseph Banks influenced the attitudes of the real invaders, Captain Arthur Phillip and his convicts and warders who arrived at Botany Bay in 1788. One of the reasons for choosing Australia as a convict colony was the advice from Cook and Banks that the Indigenous people were nomadic and did not possess the land. The British claimed the eastern half of Australia for the Crown, and later added the western half, effectively dispossessing the Indigenous population. Not until the Mabo and Wik judgements of the High Court in the 1990s was this redressed, and even now it remains a point of great contention.⁷ Until modern-day Australians come to terms with Indigenous custodianship of the land, we can never truly be one people.

I also said that I was not dogmatic in teaching, and although I agreed that the British had invaded Australia, the best way to convince students was to present evidence and show how interpretations often altered over time. I also pointed out the different status of various British colonies and protectorates, such as New Zealand where a treaty was signed (and much dishonoured) and there was organised warfare, and Pacific Islands where customary land rights were preserved (but also turned into a figment, waste and vacant lands). This is standard historical procedure, and while a more controlled approach is needed at a school curriculum level, in a university the students are adults and while treating all subjects with care, we 'tell it as it is', to the best of our abilities and the available evidence.

The vast majority of historians have held similar views for at least three decades. It is all fairly logical. What is an invasion? If one group of people move onto the land of another group with no invitation, refuse to leave, refuse to acknowledge prior land rights, and use military force to maintain their presence, then surely it is an invasion? Many Europeans at the time did not see it as an invasion (although some did); they saw it as their right to take over all corners of the world. Indigenous Australians could not say, 'excuse me, you are invading our land'; they spoke hundreds of languages and lacked the unified capacity of the British convict and later settler societies. Indigenous Australians also lacked equivalent fire power. We have no way of knowing the Indigenous population in 1788, but it seems to have been around one million. Introduced diseases, to which the Indigenous people had no immunity, killed hundreds of thousands. In the 1970s, estimates based of archival research suggested that around 50,000 were deliberately killed by the Native Mounted Police (a para-military force which operated in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland), and by settlers, using guns and poison. The current research by Raymond Evans and Robert Ørsted-Jensen suggests, conservatively, that 50,000 were deliberately killed on the Queensland colonial frontier alone. Most of Queensland was settled onwards from the 1860s when European weaponry was technically improved (by use of rifles and multiple bullets), which meant that the killings were easier to accomplish.

Language guides in the universities

Meanwhile, having found itself in the middle of a controversy, the UNSW hastened to add that:

The guide does not mandate what language can be used. Rather, it uses a more appropriate/less appropriate format, providing a range of examples. Recognizing the power of language, the terminology guide is designed as a resource to assist staff and students in describing Indigenous

⁶ ['European exploration of Australia'](#), Wikipedia.

⁷ ['Mabo v Queensland \(No 2\)'](#), Wikipedia; ['Wik Peoples v Queensland'](#), Wikipedia.

Australian peoples and their history and culture. The University is committed to giving all our students a positive and inclusive learning experience and respecting and learning about Indigenous knowledge is integral to that.⁸

One does not need to look far to find support for the UNSW stand. The Flinders University-derived document on terminology has been widely adopted around Australia.⁹ It appears on the Ipswich City Council website. It's a sensible statement giving advice on words and concepts likely to cause offence and clarifies the most appropriate language to use. Amongst many pieces of advice, it says that it is more appropriate to use the words 'invasion', 'colonisation' and 'occupation' than 'settlement'. The document says:

Australia was not settled peacefully, it was invaded, occupied and colonised. Describing the arrival of the Europeans as a 'settlement' attempts to view Australian history from the shores of England rather than the shores of Australia.

The use of the word 'settlement' ignores the reality of Indigenous Australian peoples' lands being stolen from them on the basis of the legal fiction of terra nullius and negates the resistance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The fact that most settlers did not see themselves as invading the country, and that convicts were transported against their will is beside the point. The effects were the same for Indigenous Australian peoples.¹⁰

Other resource bibliographies and websites are referenced in the Flinders document. The University of Queensland does not appear to use the document, although a long and quite moderate statement appeared in UQ News on 30 March, written by Jon Willis, Director and Manager of Academic Programs at the UQ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit.

When we talk about Indigenous perspectives on the European settlement of Australia, we of course talk about the fact that many Indigenous people in historic and contemporary times think of white settlement as invasion. Australia Day is called Invasion Day by most Indigenous Australians, so this would hardly be a surprise to anyone. However there is quite a difference between offering a range of Indigenous perspectives on Australia's history, and the kind of debate in the press recently.

Students are well aware that some Indigenous perspectives on these issues are very different from the views of other Australians, and certainly differ from international legal perspectives, although even these perspectives remain in contention.

The doctrine of native title in common law, as an example, was unthinkable in Australia when I wrote my masters thesis on the doctrine in 1989, yet now it is recognised both in common law and in legislation. The recent adoption by the UN of a declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People is also shifting international perspectives on the nature of Australia's settlement history.¹¹

At the same time as I weighed into the argument, so did Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk. Never one to beat around the bushes, she said it was time to tell the truth:

For many years, Australian schools and Australian institutions have not told the truth about the way in which Australia was settled. A lot of indigenous people lost their lives—there were massacres and the truth always must be told.¹²

Sam Watson, an Indigenous activist, praised her for her stand, calling her words 'courageous'. I called her interview a 'brave and forthright statement', and added that 'Australians have come to realise that the reconciliation process that is taking place slowly in Australia now is not about

⁸ ['Britain 'invaded' Australia? New South Wales University accused of 'rewriting history'](#), UNSW (30.3.16).

⁹ Flinders University, General Information Folio 4, [Representations and Protocols of Acknowledgement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples](#)

¹⁰ Ipswich City Council, [Appropriate Terminology, Indigenous Australian Peoples](#)

¹¹ [Australian History at UQ](#). 'Statement from Associate Professor Jon Willis, Director and Manager of Academic Programs, UQ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit', 30.3.16.

¹² ['Queensland Premier praised for 'invasion' stance'](#), ABC News.

putting people into the constitution. It's about owning up to what happened in the past and that it was not a process of calm colonisation'.¹³

Most of the comment from the general public was supportive, indicating that historical revision over the last thirty years has percolated through the education system and the media generally.¹⁴ The tweeters and letter-writers were out in force. Australian author Justine Larbalestier tweeted:

If you find the fact of the English invasion of Australia controversial then you simply don't know the history of your own country.¹⁵

Natasha Robinson, a journalist, added:

Australia was not settled peacefully, it was invaded, occupied and colonised. Hardly a 'highly controversial statement'.

Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* on 2 April carried several letters to the editor on the subject. Ian Withnall of *The Gap* opined that:

I don't have any problem with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people describing the settlement of Australia as an invasion, because it was from their point of view. Students should know how our indigenous people were dispossessed and treated, but do not politicise common words and limit our language.

Frank Forrest of *West End* said that:

The critical responses to Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk's comments about the need to accurately teach the history of white settlement re-inforce her argument. Generations of Australian children have not been taught what really happened, which is why such uninformed criticism remains widespread.

However, Geoff Roberts of *Brendale* said that history was full of examples of 'superior civilisations' gaining 'dominance over their inferiors'.

This inveiglement with our historical origins is being driven by the fringe dwellers from the intellectual far left and proponents of political correctness. Regardless of the words used, or how we got here, we are here—all of us, Australians—and we're not leaving any time soon.¹⁶

In 'The Verdict' section of the paper, three journalists all came to the same conclusion: it was an invasion.

A twenty-year-old debate

At the beginning of this article, I said that there was nothing new in this debate. As soon as it arose, I began to remember back to an earlier Labor Premier, Wayne Goss (1989-1996), who took a less supportive stand on the issue in 1994.¹⁷ There is a sense of *déjà vu*, an exact parallel more than twenty years ago.

In 1991, the Queensland Department of Education recommended to schools that Units 1 and 2 of its Year 5 Sourcebook be scrapped because they contained inaccurate and misleading representations of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. The Studies Directorate at the Education

¹³ See footnote above.

¹⁴ [Britain invaded Australia?](#) (already cited).

¹⁵ '[University of New South Wales calls Europeans' arrival an "invasion"; re-ignites debate over Australian History](#)', *International Business Times*, 30.3.16.

¹⁶ *Courier-Mail*, Brisbane, letters to the editor, 2.3.26.

¹⁷ '[Wayne Goss](#)', Wikipedia.

Department worked industriously, bringing the curriculum wording into line with current historical thinking. Then, in February 1994, the *Courier-Mail* made the revisions into a major story. Ray Land, then the Principal Policy Officer (Humanities) in the Studies Directorate soon found himself under attack. For more than two weeks, the media battle raged across state borders and in Canberra. Premier Goss and his Minister for Education Pat Comben were in the middle of it all. The debate was very similar to that of 2016: 'invasion, settlement and the language of dispossession and frontier experience'.¹⁸

The small edited book that emerged later in 1994 quietly exposed the interference by the political arm of the Queensland Government. One of the major scholars of frontier Australia, then and now, is Henry Reynolds. He wrote a short essay in *Invasion and After*, and some radio interviews with him were included.¹⁹ In 1994, it was John Laws who led the 'shock jock' charge in Sydney, and in Brisbane it was ABC radio journalist Sandy McCutcheon. In 1994, Reynolds said something very similar to my words above:

Well, I think, it was an invasion. If you arrive without being invited to another country and you bring military force with you, with the intention of using that military force to impose your will, I think it has to be interpreted by any measure as an invasion. Now I also believe that Australia was settled as well. I think both terms should be used..it was a case of settlement following invasion.²⁰

Mark Finnane from Griffith University also tried to explain how historians teach:

Good teaching is about showing the limits and the context of any particular view of the past. So a good history teacher, presented with a text which talks about settlement of Australia in 1788, will want to show what particular kind of settlement this was, why it was different from the settlement of New Zealand, or Canada, or South Africa, and how these differences (above all in a rather similar relation to Indigenous people) as well as similarities (these were all countries profoundly affected by European expansion) arise.²¹

The Queensland primary school social studies syllabus had been prepared in 1987 and was due for revision, but the changes proposed by the Studies Directorate were not accepted. The Office of Cabinet prepared a two page Teacher Information Sheet, which actually had many of the same qualities of the Flinders University document quoted above.

In 1994 Wayne Goss had made an Australia Day address where he warned against politically correct language, 'a fad which could generate inequity at the expense of the majority of the people'. This was used against the proposed revisions. On 7 February, Comben said that he hadn't seen the new materials but he would not stop using words like 'explorers' and 'settlement'. Bob Quinn, a Liberal politician, said that the new material 'was almost sanctioning a re-write of history'.²² The next day, as the debate raged, Comben distanced himself from the draft and said that 'he would be surprised if the "preferred terminology" which had been vigorously challenged would end up in the final draft. Rob Borbidge, National Party member for Surfers Paradise and later Premier (1996-1998) was far more outraged. He said 'it was a disgrace to the explorers, pioneers and settlers'. Quinn was back, with a comment that it was a 'thinly disguised attempt at social engineering'.²³

¹⁸ Ray Land (ed), *Invasion and After: A Case Study in Curriculum Politics*, Nathan (Qld): Queensland Studies Centre, Griffith University, 1994, p.3.

¹⁹ Henry Reynolds, 'Invasion and Settlement: Reflections Based on the Historical Record, in *Land, Invasion and After*, pp.13-17.

²⁰ Mark Henry Reynolds, ABC Radio National, Australia Talks, 15.2.94, in *Land, Invasion and After*, p.6.

²¹ *Courier-Mail*, 7.2.94, quoted in Land, *Invasion and After*, p.6.

²² Tony Koch, "Furore over invasion text—Government refuses to intervene", *Courier-Mail*, 8.2.94.

²³ Department of Premier and Cabinet Media Release, 8.2.94, 'Premier orders education terminology guide withdrawn'.

The same day, Premier Goss issued a media release saying that he had ordered the education terminology guide to be withdrawn. On 8 February the *Courier-Mail* headlined 'Goss cans "invasion" textbook'.

Goss and Comben did not back the measured approach of their Studies Directorate. Twenty-two years later, a Premier from the same Labor Party, has stood her ground and said that the truth must be told. The 1994 incident was not one of Wayne Goss' finest moments, but he is no longer here to explain his thinking. Perhaps the last word can be left to Nancy Bates of the *Fraser Coast Chronicle*:

Parental fears might be unreasonable but educationalists would be wise to tread warily. It is interesting that Wayne Goss has moved quickly to reassure people that children of European descent will not be taught in schools to despise their parents as products of brutal invaders. Mr Goss might not be regarded as politically correct by some of his colleagues but he is politically astute.²⁴

Back to the present

All of this brings us back to March and April 2016. The similarities are striking. The debates that professional historians have amongst themselves in academic journals and books do not always transition through to the general public. Academics seldom make much quick impact at all, however, apart from the baying hounds in the media, I get the feeling that the general public has moved on quite a lot on the issue. I would put this down to the slow changes in the education curriculums in schools and universities, and the flow on.

The public is primarily informed by the media, newspapers, radio and television, which are often more interested in beating up a story, and clearly the media has a short memory. However, the journalists that I dealt with on the story all knew the current situation in historical thinking.

As an aside, back in the 1990s at The University of Queensland at least, an introductory course in Australian history was compulsory for journalism and education students. They emerged with their degrees and a much better understanding of Australian history than equivalent students today. This wider educative function of basic Australian history was abandoned, largely due to the greed of academic disciplines to control their own courses. The wider base still exists at some Australia universities (University of Newcastle is one), but sadly it has slipped away elsewhere.

There is every possibility that some of the journalists writing about this in the last week were born after 1994, or at least were too young to have noticed the 1994 debate on terminology. They may also have no formal knowledge of Australia history. This time around, Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk should be congratulated for her 'no nonsense' approach to the issue. But please leave universities to get on with their business or educating adults and teaching them to think, to examine evidence and interpretations, and to come to their own conclusions.

²⁴ Mark Nancy Bates, 'Tinkering with young minds', *Fraser Coast Chronicle*, 10.2.94.