



CASE STUDY 2 BACKGROUND: LIVING IN THE BRITISH EMPIRE: AUSTRALIA

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✿ Living in the British empire: Australia

The history of British rule in Australia is the story of some very different groups, whose stories are linked to each other.

Image 1



A gift from the city of Adelaide to Queen Victoria in 1897. The cabinet contained a speech explaining the loyalty of the Australian people to the Queen.
(PRO ref: PP 1/636)

✿ Australian Aborigines

Aboriginal peoples lived in Australia for thousands of years before Europeans arrived. They suffered greatly as a result of the arrival of the British in Australia. When Captain Cook visited in the late 1700s it is estimated that there were about 750,000 Aborigines. By the 1920s this number had fallen by around 90%. There were violent clashes between the Aborigines and the settlers in the early years. However, most deaths were caused by diseases that Europeans brought to Australia, and the gradual takeover of Aboriginal lands for farms and settlements. British farming methods, like the use of wire fences, disrupted the traditional Australian way of life and led to further violence between British settlers and Aborigines. The introduction of sheep and rabbits devastated their environment, their food sources and hunting grounds. Settlers often killed Aborigines who trespassed onto 'their' land. Many Aborigines moved to the towns to try and make a living. Here they suffered discrimination and disease, with alcoholism being a particular problem. British governors and officials in Australia were generally less harsh towards the Aborigines than the settlers of British descent. After the British handed over direct rule to Australia in 1901, the treatment of Aboriginal peoples did not improve.

✿ Convicts

Throughout the 1600s and 1700s Britain had a major problem with crime and criminals. Many people convicted of crimes (including petty crimes such as theft) were sentenced to be transported to America. In the 1770s the American colonies revolted against Britain. This meant that Britain had nowhere to send its convicts and turned towards Australia. The first convict colonies of Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) and New South Wales were set up in the 1780s.

It is difficult for us to imagine how hard life was for the early convicts. The greatest hardship was being torn away from their homes and families, almost certainly never to see them again. Australia was a harsh and unfamiliar environment, with its hot climate and weird animals. Then there was the brutal discipline of the convict colonies. The evidence suggests that Van Diemen's Land was run more harshly than New South Wales. This is partly because Van Diemen's Land received many of the prisoners considered troublesome, such as Irish and Canadian rebels who tried to overthrow British rule in the 1830s and 1840s. It was also due to the attitudes of the governors of each area. In New South Wales the convicts were generally in great demand because there was a tremendous shortage of labour. Once they had served their sentences they could apply for grants of land and become settlers. Most convicts did not return to Britain as life in Australia presented them with better possibilities.

Transportation to Australia ended in 1852, although convict labour was still used in Australia until 1867. Transportation ended for several reasons. One was a campaign against its cruelty (in Britain and Australia). Another was that the growing population of settlers began to see themselves as 'Australians' and began to resent Britain dumping its poorest and most troubled people in their country. A further reason was that as emigration of free people to Australia grew, there was less need for convict labour.

⚙ Settlers



Free settlers began coming to Australia in the 1800s. However, the numbers were very small compared to the large numbers of emigrants going to Canada and the USA. The British empire gave these people opportunities for a new life. On the other hand, many of them felt that British rule at home had failed them and forced them to leave their homes and families.

Several factors increased the numbers of emigrants from the 1830s onwards. One key factor was hunger and misery in Ireland. Ireland was plagued by overpopulation and poverty, and then by a terrible famine in the 1840s. The government and local officials in Ireland put together a range of schemes to help poor Irish farmers emigrate to America and Australia. Throughout the 1840s emigration to Australia was running at about 15,000 per year. Not all of the arrivals were Irish. Large numbers of the English poor also emigrated, especially in the later 1800s.

Image 2



Part of a government proclamation about ownership of gold in Australia, 1851
(PRO ref: CO 201/444)

Another key factor that brought emigrants to Australia was gold. It was first discovered in the 1850s. Once it was realised that the deposits were rich, there was a flood of emigrants keen to make their fortune. Few got rich from gold, but many did well from supplying tools, clothes, equipment etc.

Relations between the settlers and their British rulers were usually, but not always, good. Economic growth helped. Australia's economy grew rapidly in the later 1800s, fuelled by gold and the trade in wool. There were disputes between the wool farmers and the government over land ownership and taxes. There were also clashes between miners and the British. One clash ended in a shoot-out at Ballarat in 1854 that left 17 miners and 5 police dead. Generally, by the 1880s there was a definite sense among the settlers that they were 'Australian'.

⚙ Links



Australia's story

<http://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/home.htm>

Official government web site with timelines, documents and links

BRITISH EMPIRE

Living in the British empire – Australia



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Background source one

A gift from the city of Adelaide to Queen Victoria in 1897. The cabinet contained a speech explaining the loyalty of the Australian people to the Queen.

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Background source two

Part of a government proclamation about ownership of gold in Australia, 1851
(PRO ref: CO 201/444)

WHEREAS by Law, all Mines of Gold and all Gold in its natural place of deposit, within the Territory of New South Wales, whether on the Lands of the Queen or of any of Her Majesty's subjects, belong to the Crown: And whereas information has been received by the Government that Gold exists upon and in the soil of the County of Bathurst, and elsewhere within the said Territory, and that many persons have commenced, or are about to commence, searching and digging for the same, for their own use, without leave or other authority from Her Majesty: Now, I, SIR CHARLES AUGUSTUS FITZ ROY, the Governor aforesaid, on behalf of Her Majesty, do hereby publicly notify and declare, that all persons who shall take from any Lands within the said Territory, any Gold Metal, or Ore containing Gold, or who within any of the Waste Lands which have not yet been alienated by the Crown, shall dig for and disturb the soil in search of such Gold Metal or Ore, without having been duly authorised in that behalf, by Her Majesty's Colonial Government, will be prosecuted, both Criminally and Civilly, as the Law allows: And I further notify and declare, that such Regulations as, upon further information, may be found expedient, will be speedily prepared and published, setting forth the terms on which Licenses will be issued for this purpose, on the payment of a reasonable fee.

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