

# 26 January – or thereabouts

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Consult any vox pop and you will find that the most enthusiastic celebrants of Australia Day rarely know what happened on 26 January 1788. Some think the holiday has to do with Captain Cook, though it was actually eighteen years earlier, in 1770, that Cook made landfall at Botany Bay. A few associate the holiday with Federation, something that happened over a century later, on 1 January 1901, while others still wrap their flag patriotism around references to Gallipoli, assuming that any patriotic celebration must be connected to the ANZACs.

We should sympathise with these people. Why? First, they either have been taught no history of this country, or have been told about it in ways that would make Eric Abetz sound scintillating. Second, and more significantly, they consider the event being commemorated to be utterly unmemorable.

Cook had claimed Australia's east coast for king and empire on 22 August 1770, an event marked by only a couple of lines in his journal, and even they read like an act of absentmindedness. (Eight days earlier he had misspelt Australia as 'Astralia'.) On 26 January 1788, upon landing in Sydney Cove, Captain Arthur Phillip laid claim to vastly more of the continent. Both of these claims were aimed against the Dutch and the French, though the consequences proved to be far greater for Australia's First Peoples than for Britain's rival mercantilist empires. The urgency in formalising Britain's sovereignty was made real on 24 January, when two French ships, under the command of Jean-François de Galaup, Comte de La Pérouse, also entered Botany Bay. Received courteously, the French stuck around for a number of weeks, before setting sail on 10 March, never to be seen again.

The proclamation of the New South Wales colony did not take place until 7 February, when Judge Advocate David Collins formally installed Phillip as governor of Britain's newest trading post and naval refitting station. The erstwhile head of Western Mining, Hugh Morgan, has called for Australia Day to be moved to this date.

None of these datings and doings would matter much were we talking about Wattle Day, a tradition almost as old as our official national holiday. But we are talking about Australia Day, not Wattle Day. The former has been a flash point for political attitudes since the 1988 bicentennial, when the left joined with Aboriginal Australians in protesting 'Invasion Day'. That commitment persists, although the Aboriginal rights movement has lost some of its militancy and non-Indigenous dissent has been reduced to ritual denunciations. The framing of Aboriginal protest continues to pivot between the disempowering narrative of 'Invasion Day' (which positions Aboriginal Australians as passive victims) and the fight-back expressed in 'Survival Day'. Neither of those descriptors adequately captures the fierce battles for country that were waged by the First Peoples during the early stages of occupation.

If we continue reducing our critique of Australia Day to a narrative of invasion, we stand little chance of engaging the 97 per cent of the population for whom this remains a secondary issue. Of course, there are those around the left who revel in that situation, concerned only with asserting their moral superiority through their version of the Pharisee's prayer: 'Thank you god for not making me like other Australians – a racist.' Such unctuousness is an obstacle to changing attitudes. What we need is a challenge to the ways in which Australia Day is being marketed. In short, we need a red-*armband* history of the day itself, and then a fresh perspective on what preceded and followed.

A touch of pedantry would not go astray. The First Fleet did not land on 26 January. That happened eight days earlier, on 18 January, when the first of the ships entered Botany Bay, greeted by the 'Walla, Walla, Walla' cries of the Eora people. In 1984, historian Geoffrey Blainey suggested this date should be Australia Day.

For his part, Phillip did all he could to fulfil the instructions given to him by Lord Sydney in 1787:

*You are to endeavour by every possible means to open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all our subjects to live in amity and kindness with them. And if any of our subjects shall wantonly destroy them or give them any unnecessary interruption in the exercise of their several occupations it is our will and pleasure that you cause such offenders to be brought to punishment according to the degree of the offence.*

Such sentiments were incompatible with prolonged intrusion. That London reissued these instructions to every new governor also contradicts claims that the invasion occurred under the guise of terra nullius, a doctrine formed only in the late nineteenth century in relation to the status of the polar regions. That the High Court accepted terra nullius in Mabo confirms the venerable legal doctrine of Judicial Ignorance. Moreover, the natural law tradition behind terra nullius had been used to oppose, not justify, colonisation.

Finding Botany Bay too dry, Phillip sailed north on 21 January, soon entering one of the finest harbours in the world. He returned to form a permanent settlement on 26 January, with the remaining ships arriving later that day. Officers and marines disembarked first, while the majority of those transported waited on board. The officials drank four toasts and gave themselves three cheers as they hoisted the Union Jack. (That flag would not include the red saltire of St Patrick until after the slaughter of 30,000 Irish during the 1798 rebellion, leading to the *Acts of Union* of 1801.)

The male convicts were landed over the next two days and were set to work erecting the pre-fabricated government house; the only shelter for those doing the hard work would have been a palm tree. Those labours were the first proof that the convicts were not being dumped, but rather being used to add more value to the settlement than went into the reproduction of their labour. By then the navy, acting on behalf of the state, had taken over the trade in human flesh – a trade that had seen 40,000 convicts sold to North American and West Indian masters in the sixty years before 1776.

The women convicts came ashore on 6 February. That night, when a storm broke, chaos erupted. Those who stole food were flogged the following morning; a few weeks later, on 27 February, one thief was hanged for the same offence. On Sunday 3 February, the Rev. Richard Johnson had taken as his text: 'What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits towards me?'

Again – this time under southern skies – we see the same social inequalities and injustices that led many of the convicts to end up in an open-air prison in the first place. The more we learn about those first days ashore, the better able we are to contest the comfortable narrative of British civilisation being transplanted on our shores. Its agents were intent on maintaining the social order that divided floggers and flogged, masters and servants, corporates and wage-slaves.

But things did not go quite according to plan. As one example: in 1808, the land-grabbing NSW Rum Corps celebrated the colony's twentieth anniversary by overthrowing Governor William Bligh. Repeating this act of rebellion against today's mining corporates is a move worth considering any day of the year.

In 1922, George Arnold Wood, a progressive history professor at the University of Sydney, observed that while Britain's petty thieves were transported, the great criminals stayed behind to govern the

empire. True enough, but Britain had enough elite crooks that it could spare a few to oversee the pillaging of its colonies.

Obsessed with the need for hemispheric balance, classical scholars and medieval geographers imagined *Terra Australis Incognita*, the unknown South Land – austral being Latin for south. The phrase's big entrance into the modern world was in 1606 when the Spaniard Pedro Fernández de Quirós sailed into the New Hebrides (modern-day Vanuatu) and named what he assumed to be a continent *Austrialia del Espiritu Santo*. No, that *Austrialia* is not necessarily another spelling mistake. Some authorities contend that de Quirós altered Austral-is to Austria-lia in honour of the Austrian monarchs who had claimed the Spanish throne.

After Matthew Flinders circumnavigated the continent between 1801 and 1803, he expressed a preference for the name 'Australia', but stuck with *Terra Australis*, regarding it as inoffensive to the Dutch designation of 'New Holland', *Nova Hollandia*, which, incidentally, they had recycled from the name they had given in the 1600s to their possessions in the West Indies. The Dutch name lingered for forty years, even after Governor *Lachlan* Macquarie began referring to 'Australia' in official correspondence from 1817.

The next step is to examine how the term 'invasion' has been used in the story of colonisation. There is nothing new or 'politically corrected' in the term. In 1938, on the sesquicentenary of Phillip's second landing, the Victorian-based Aborigines Advancement League joined the NSW Aborigines Progressive Association to organise the first Day of Mourning, naming colonisation as an act of invasion. That Aboriginal activists of the time promoted their cause in a monthly periodical called *The Australian Abo Call* is another reminder that the social acceptability of words comes and goes. From 1940, the National Missionary Council took up the Day of Mourning for the Sunday before Australia Day. Aboriginal Sunday moved to July in 1955 and expanded to a week in 1975 before including Islanders in NAIDOC since 1989. From little things, big things grow.

Since the bicentennial, the language of invasion has been ridiculed, as if it were an invention of Marxists. 'Invasion' was the word used by small-l liberal (Sir) Keith Hancock in his 1930 book *Australia*, long regarded as the most influential short history of Australia. The right-wing Sir Archibald Grenfell Price did the same in his 1949 work *White Settlers and Native Peoples*. This extract illustrates the view then common among conservatives:

*During an opening period of pioneer invasion on moving frontiers the whites decimated the natives with their diseases; occupied their lands by seizure or by pseudo-purchase; slaughtered those who resisted; intensified tribal warfare by supplying white weapons; ridiculed and disrupted native religions, society and culture, and generally reduced the unhappy peoples to a state of despondency under which they neither desired to live, nor to have children to undergo similar conditions.*

However, the academic convention of using 'invasion' did not stop Queensland ALP premier Wayne Goss from erasing the term from the school curriculum. This censorship was just one of the Goss-Rudd policies that perpetuated the legacy of Joh Bjelke-Petersen, smoothing an ideological path for One Nation.

Van Diemen's Land changed its name to Tasmania from New Year 1856, in the vain hope of distancing itself from its history of massacre and incarceration. By the 1950s, Tasmania had made it a criminal offence to libel the dead by referring to their convict status. Some self-righteous descendants tore pages out of convict registers – only to discover that copies survived in England.

During the build up to the 1888 centenary, Melbourne papers poked fun at New South Wales when its premier, Henry Parkes, suggested renaming the colony Australia, proposing instead that it be

known as 'Convictoria'. The Sydney *Bulletin* loathed the thought of celebrating Australia's origin as a criminal dumping ground. The belief that criminality could be inherited was pretty well universal in the nineteenth century; it was even supposed that it could be suckled by the infants of free settlers from the breast of a convict wet nurse.

Victoria and South Australia commemorated their centenaries as free colonies in 1934 and 1936, respectively, and did not care to be associated with old lags. Such high-mindedness will be a tad more testing in light of my recent exposure that The South Australian Company floated on chattel-slavery. Yarraside pretended to be freer than free by promoting the land thief John Batman rather than ex-convict John Pascoe Fawkner as its founder. Finding a convict ancestor did not become fashionable until around the bicentenary, subsequently cemented by the fad for family history.

The 1938 sesquicentenary landed Sydney officialdom with the task of air-brushing the convicts out of the commemorations. In response, the radical writers Miles Franklin and Dymphna Cusack collaborated on a novel, *Pioneers on Parade*, which mocked an old family for concealing its convict founder. It could have been modelled on the Wentworths.

That year, the Communist Party promoted a contrary vision, beginning with the anniversary of Lenin's death on 21 January and concluding with May Day marches.

The name given to 26 January has been the site for several kinds of social conflict.

Sydney celebrated its first Regatta Day in 1837, a year before the fiftieth anniversary of the colony's founding. When the Golden Jubilee did roll around, the governor proclaimed it a public holiday.

It was only in 1888 – the centenary of British occupation – that the celebration incorporated representatives from the other colonies and began being referred to as 'Anniversary Day' or 'Foundation Day', terms that remained in popular use until the 1950s.

The move towards a national celebration was preceded by a growing sense of nationalism. In the decade before the fiftieth anniversary, self-styled Whig patriots had begun gathering in Sydney hotels to push for a local parliament. On the other side were the Tory exclusionists, born free of the convict taint. The split between 'patriots' who prided themselves on being native-born and those from anywhere else culminated in the foundation of the Australian Natives' Association in 1871. The Association soon began advocating for federation of the colonies and for a national holiday on 26 January.

But back to 1838. Not to be outdone by New South Wales, van *Diemen's Land* asserted its identity by establishing its own Regatta Day on 1 December, commemorating the date on which Abel Tasman anchored off shore in 1642. Vandemonians celebrated by the wearing of a sprig of wattle tied with a navy blue ribbon, a practice adopted for Wattle Day. To confirm that all time-honoured traditions are no more than movable feasts, Tasmania's Regatta Day is now held in February.

In South Australia, Proclamation Day falls on 28 December, and is never likely to attract a crowd beyond those holiday-makers taking refuge at Glenelg. Western Australia now has its official day in June, despite the colony's proclamation occurring on 21 October 1890.

Enter a new twist to the battle of names. In 1905 in the wake of Britain's genocidal war against Boer women and children, British authorities proclaimed 24 May to be Empire Day. That moniker disappeared along with the empire, to be reborn as Commonwealth Day in 1958, before being overtaken by the Queen's Birthday public holiday in 1966. The celebration of the monarch's birthday had been observed since the founding days of the colony and was traditionally observed in early June – close to the birthday of the current Queen's grandfather, George V – as it continues to be done in

most Australian states. In Western Australia and Queensland, however, the holiday is observed in September and October, respectively. Again, it seems that time-honoured celebrations are not as inflexible as some might suggest.

The term 'Australia Day' pops up in a number of contexts before it was officially applied to 26 January. While Irish Catholics have always observed St Patrick's Day on 17 March, those living Down Under began to rally around Australia's patronal day on 24 May (the Feast of Our Lady Help of Christians). In 1911, inspired by the renewed push for home rule, Irish settlers took to flying the St Patrick's Cross over St Mary's Cathedral in a further display of Pat-riotism. More importantly for our purposes, they began referring to 24 May as Australia Day.

The empire struck back in 1915. The Red Cross designated 30 July as Australia Day in a bid raise comfort funds for the ANZAC troops, repeating the exercise the following year. *The Bulletin*, despite being pro-war and pro-conscription, was sickened at the thought of Red Cross ladies purring 'over the cream-puff at Government House'.

Just before 26 January 1932, Jack Lang's Labor government in New South Wales, as part of its disinclination to enrich British bondholders at the expense of Australia's unemployed, officially changed Anniversary Day to Australia Day. Later that year, the prime minister and Labor rat Joe Lyons put his timid voice behind 'Australia' for the day.

In 1946, the Australian Natives' Association began pushing for an official body to oversee celebrations, leading to the formation of the Australia Day Celebrations Committee (later known as the Australia Day Council). That same year, the commonwealth and state governments agreed to unify all the state-based Australia Day celebrations. The decision was taken to mark the date with a public holiday on the closest Monday. It was only in 1994 – almost half a century later – that a national public holiday on 26 January was established.

If we Australians simply cannot get by without a special day, we should choose to celebrate something we did for ourselves, not something that was done to us.

One strong contender is 29 November, when the diggers at Ballarat took the Eureka Oath: 'We swear by the Southern Cross to stand truly by each other, and fight to defend our rights and liberties.' Other possibilities are the defeats of the two conscription plebiscites in 1916 and 1917, or the failed referendum to ban the Communist Party in 1951. All four dates should be annual celebrations in a republic.

The choice has to be towards the lives of everyday Australians, not an occasion for another bout of trumpery from bunyip aristocrats. Importantly, a people's day will value the joys of life, not the horrors of war and death.

We should also return to the tradition of celebrating our national day as a long weekend. Come to think of it, we should make every weekend a long one by winning a 32-hour working week – the ultimate commemoration of the campaign for the eight-hour day in 1856.

There is much more to 26 January than the start of an invasion that took 160 years to complete. Before the First Fleet set sail, its occupants had been divided between the 1 per cent and the 99 per cent, as civilisation had been for thousands of years. As with the British enclosures and clearances, the invasion initiated a dispossession that turned many of its survivors into wage-slaves.

When the Aborigines Progressive Association was reformed in 1963, its leaders reasoned: 'Aborigines are a working-class people and it is only natural that we appeal to our fellow workers in the trade unions to support us in our struggle for justice and equality.' The unions answered by

sending a team to investigate racism in Walgett months before the student Freedom Ride, and by providing supplies for the Gurindji at Wattie Creek from 1966.

We do a disservice to our future if we campaign against 26 January solely on the grounds of race and ethnicity. The day has strong links to class conflict, and by drawing out such complexities, we should be able to convince the majority of Australians to change it. Some twenty years after the critic AA Phillips diagnosed our 'cultural cringe', he warned against overreaction in a 'colonial strut'. What our democratic temper needs, as Phillips perceived, is to embrace as our national ideal the finest element from the ANZAC tradition – namely, the 'slouch': a relaxed upright stance