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The Gold Rushes



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MILESTONES IN
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

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Before the rush

Before the Europeans arrived in 1788, 600 Aboriginal nations lived in organised societies, each with a system of laws based on care of land. After 1788, the lives of Aboriginal people changed forever. The British brought British laws, and their own concept of ownership of land. At first, Aboriginal people fought against the **occupation**, but they were overcome. As the years passed, the British population grew and the Aboriginal population fell. As their land was taken, Aboriginal societies began to break down. Entire clans were destroyed because of war, **massacres** and European diseases.

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Spread of European settlement

By 1851, much of the south-east corner of the continent, south-western Western Australia and the coast of Queensland was occupied by Europeans. Wherever they took over land, they cleared it and built fences. Aboriginal owners were killed or forced to move to drier areas inland belonging to other Aboriginal nations, and so traditional life broke down as clans had to merge with other clans.

Most land was used to raise sheep for the wool industry, and to farm cattle and grow wheat. The wool industry was important because it raised money for the colonies by providing a product they could sell overseas.

No longer penal colonies

Free settlers and **emancipists** began to see Australia as a place to live away from the **squalor** of overcrowded Britain. From the 1820s, protests against **transportation** increased, but the New South Wales Government and landowners (who used convicts as slave labour) wanted it to continue. Transportation peaked during the 1830s. In 1838, a report found that convicts were treated too harshly, and that their punishment did not deter them from crime. Transportation to Sydney ended in 1840, and to Tasmania in 1852. Suffering a labour shortage, Western Australia accepted convicts from 1850 to 1868.

Life in Australia before 1851

European settlers struggled against the extreme climate, Aboriginal resistance, and isolation from England. Great distances and lack of roads made transport difficult. In the country, many people lived in rough huts made from timber slabs with thatch (straw) or bark roofs. Rich people built stone or brick houses with shingled (tiled) roofs. In the towns and cities, poor people lived in crowded terrace houses, and rich people lived in large houses or mansions.

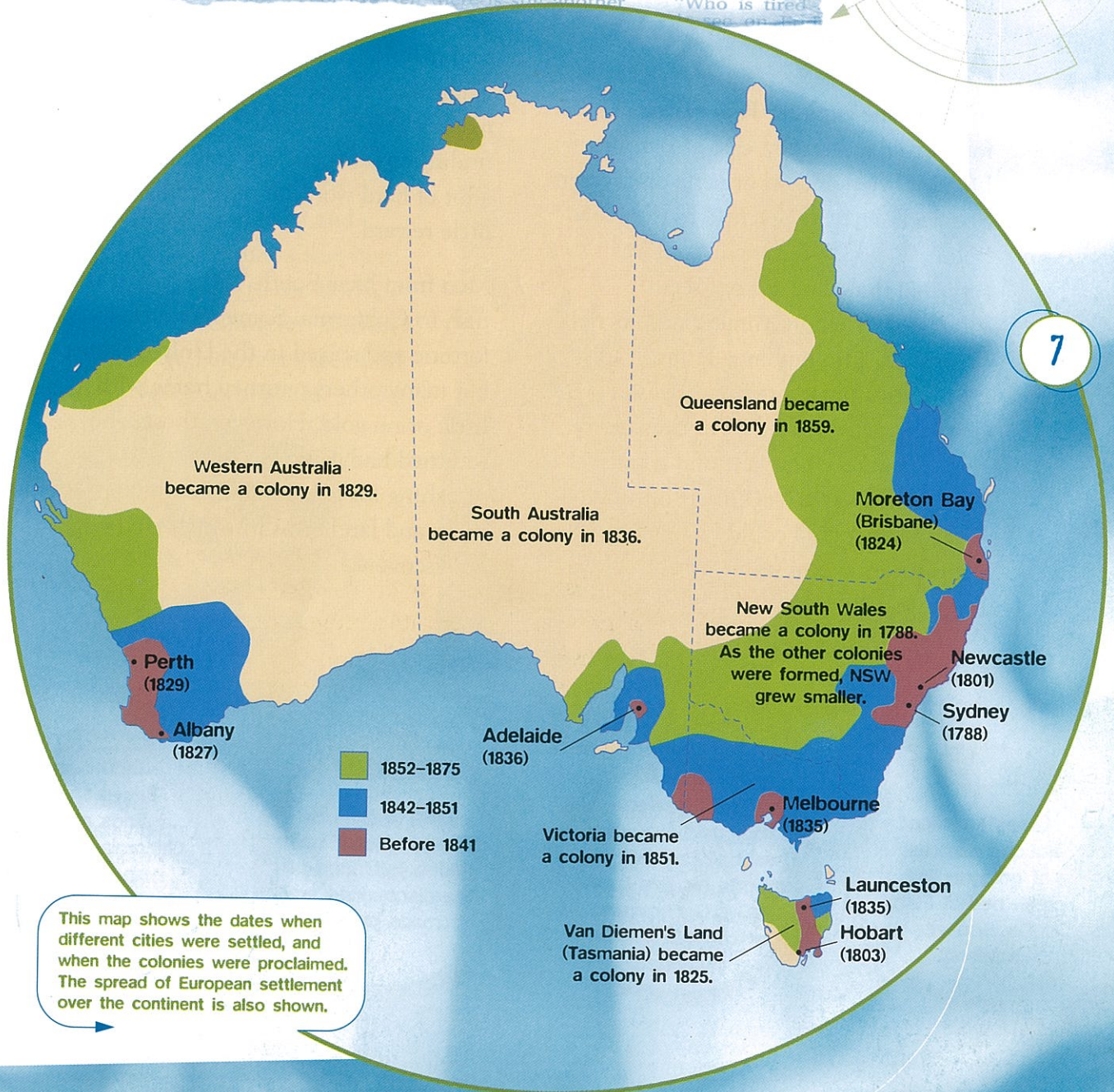


An Aboriginal perspective

Aboriginal writer Burnum Burnum describes the spread of European settlement into the lands of the Birpai, Ngamba and Ngaku nations, on the mid-north coast of New South Wales. 'These nations had initially shown a peaceful front to the invaders, but the relentless push to take over their land, water and food supplies drove them to war with the settlers in a final act of

despair. Starving and outcast in their own country, they fought back from the green fortress [thick rainforest areas] in the Falls Country, to raid settlements for sheep and cattle and challenge the muskets of the invaders.'

From Burnum Burnum, *Burnum Burnum's Aboriginal Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1988.



This map shows the dates when different cities were settled, and when the colonies were proclaimed. The spread of European settlement over the continent is also shown.

The fortune seekers

The government's fear that workers would desert their jobs and rush to the goldfields proved correct. Within days of the news becoming public, men were buying digging tools and rushing to the goldfields. The first people to make a fortune from the gold rushes were **blacksmiths**, who were swamped with orders for picks and shovels. Carpenters set up business making cradles, a wooden frame for separating the gold from the gravel.

Joining the rush

Offices, schools, farms and factories suddenly found themselves without workers. Farms were devastated as workers left crops unharvested. Food became more expensive as supplies dwindled. Ships arriving in Sydney or Melbourne lost most of their crew, who joined the rush. Ships were arriving from around the world, full of people seeking their fortune.

Many families found themselves without fathers, as men were gripped by gold fever. Most travelled alone, imagining they would not be away long. Most promised to return with a fortune, but many families had no income for long periods, and ended up in poverty.

Unprepared

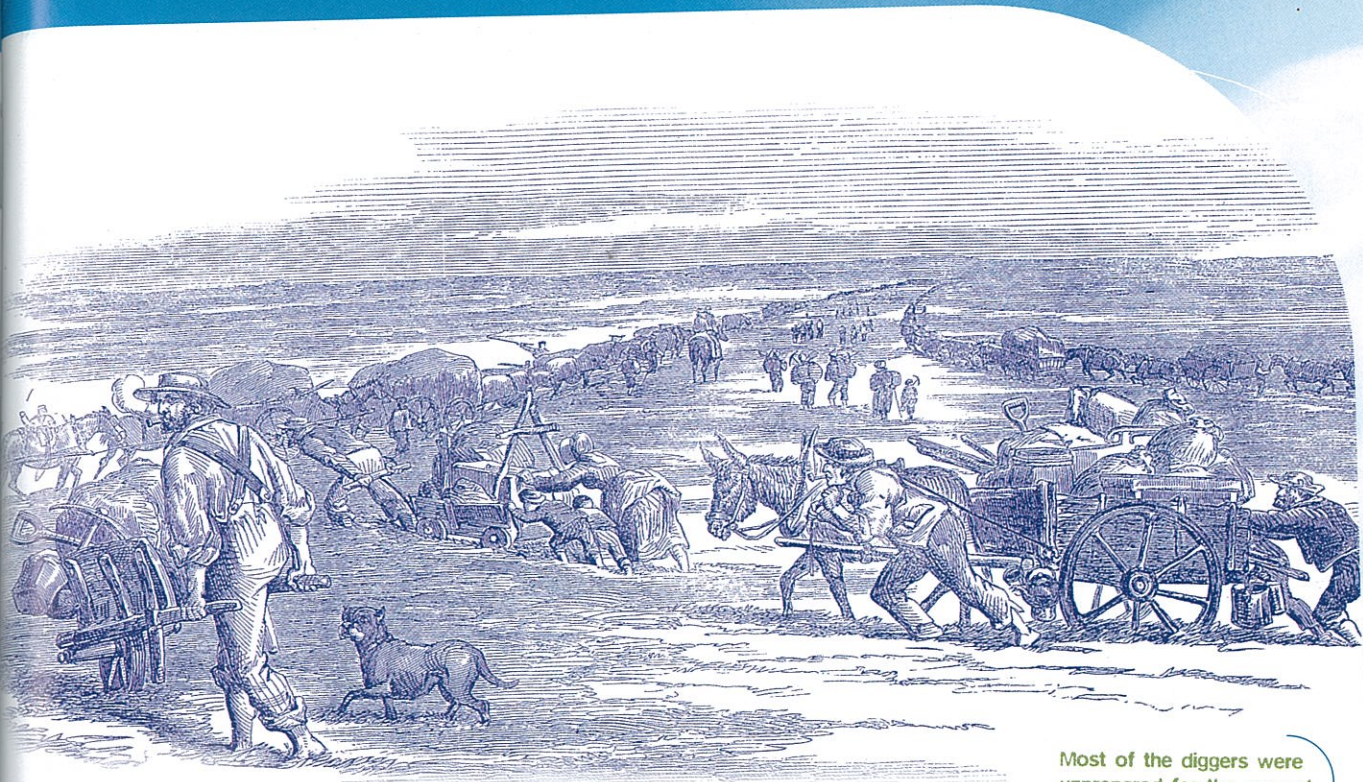
Many of the overseas miners came from California, where the initial rush had died down. These miners were experienced, and knew that hard work lay ahead of them. Most of the local men who went to the goldfields were unprepared for life on the diggings. They took little more than a blanket and a pick, thinking they would make their fortune in a couple of days.

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At first, most men with families went on their own to the goldfields, promising to come back with a fortune.

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Most of the diggers were unprepared for the amount of work they would face at the diggings.

Sydney Morning Herald 20 May 1851

The discovery by Mr Hargraves ... has produced a tremendous excitement in the town of Bathurst and the surrounding districts. For several days, ... the business of the town has been utterly paralysed. A complete mental madness appears to have seized every member of the community, and as a natural consequence there has been a universal rush to the diggings.

People of all trades were quickly transformed into miners, and many a hand which had been trained to kid gloves or accustomed to wield nothing heavier than the grey

goose-quill (pen) became nervous to clutch the pick and crowbar.

Scores have rushed from their homes, provided with a blanket ... and a pick, full of hope that a day or two's labour would fill their pockets with the precious metal, and we have heard of a great number who have started without any provision but a blanket and some rude instrument to dig with. Such is the intensity of excitement, that people appear almost regardless of their present comfort and think of nothing but gold.

Of course, all this must end in disappointment.



Population explosion

Between 1850 and 1860, the population of the colonies almost tripled, from 430 000 to more than 1 200 000. This increase was caused by the influx of people during the gold rushes. The increased population changed the colonies, especially Victoria. The wealth and population Victoria gained from the gold rush made it the richest colony, a position it held into the early 1900s.

Excitement around the world

Throughout 1851, news of the gold discoveries in New South Wales and Victoria spread around the world. The excitement of the Californian gold rush was still fresh in people's minds.

Thousands of people saw the Australian gold rush as another chance to make a fortune. Other than experienced miners from the Californian goldfields, hopeful miners came from many places, including Britain, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Spain, Austria, New Zealand and China.

The Chinese

One of the largest and most successful groups of miners came from China.

Chinese people had come to the Australian colonies before 1851. In 1848, many Chinese were brought to Australia to work as servants, miners,

labourers, plantation workers and station hands. They had not come as permanent immigrants, but as **indentured workers**, which meant that they had to return to China after they had finished working. They worked hard and sent money back to their families in China. Most workers came from the Guangdong and Fujian provinces in China's south-east.

When the gold rushes began, Chinese people already in Australia sent letters to their friends and relatives in China. News spread through the Guangdong and Fujian provinces, and shiploads of Chinese people arrived in Sydney and Melbourne. By 1855, there were 20 000 Chinese miners in Victoria, and by 1860 there was more than 50 000.

Racist views acceptable

Many European miners resented the Chinese on the goldfields. The Chinese worked longer hours, re-worked areas that had already been mined, and often found more gold than the Europeans. At that time, most Europeans found it acceptable to hold racist views, and considered the Chinese inferior to white people.

Colonial governments passed laws to try to restrict Chinese immigrants. In Victoria, the *Chinese Immigration Restriction Act* was passed in 1855. It charged ship owners a 'head tax' of

£10 (several months wages for an ordinary worker) for every Chinese person who came to Victoria aboard their ship. The law also limited the number of Chinese people allowed to come aboard each ship, based on the weight of the ship. One immigrant was allowed for each ten tonnes, so a ship weighing 100 tonnes could land only ten Chinese immigrants.

At first, almost all the Chinese were men, although some women travelled to Australia to join them later. Some decided to remain in Australia, forming the foundation of today's Australian Chinese community.

A flood of people

Between July and October 1851, Ballarat's population grew from a few hundred to 10 000. By the end of 1852, the town's population had risen to 30 000. Other Victorian goldfields towns experienced the same growth. During 1851, Victoria's population grew by 100 000. New South Wales also experienced a strong increase in population. However, the populations of Tasmania, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia dropped as a result of the gold rushes.



The hostility against the Chinese often became violent. At Lambing Flat, NSW, a riot against the Chinese occurred in 1861.