

OPINION

Australia always was – and it always will be – Aboriginal land

WARS are not always won by the good guys – but the conquerors make the babies and write the histories, so it often seems that way.

Imagine, for a moment, that Germany and Japan had won the Second World War. Jersey would now be part of the German Reich. Australia would also be occupied, with a substantial Japanese population.

Jersey's main public holiday would not be Liberation Day, but 30 June or 1 July, celebrating the glorious event in 1940 when the new rulers took possession of the Channel Islands and started to share their enlightened concept of Aryan racial supremacy with the grubby indigenous Islanders. How would Jersey people feel about celebrating that anniversary – even 80 years after being 'liberated' from the yoke of British imperialism?

That nightmare scenario is reality for Australia's Aboriginal First Peoples.

Our history books tell us that Captain Cook 'discovered' Australia in 1770, and the First Fleet, under Captain Arthur Phillip, 'settled' the land in 1788. That is what we now call 'fake news'. Australia did not need to be discovered or settled. Its inhabitants knew perfectly well where it was. They had been living here in relative peace and harmony for at least 65,000 years before any acquisitive European set his eyes on the place.

The landing of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788 was an invasion, backed by overpowering military force. Nobody asked permission from the inhabitants, or tried to negotiate an agreement with them. It was some time before anyone tried to learn their language – or to teach them English. They were dismissed as 'ignorant savages', sub-human or prehistoric creatures who could be ignored with impunity – or raped or killed or just beaten into submission, if they were troublesome.

For administrative convenience, English lawyers discounted the existing population and declared Australia 'terra nullius' – an empty land that belonged to no other human beings, and was therefore up for grabs. Successive Governors proceeded to make 'land grants' to anyone they liked – free settlers, convicts who had served their term or been pardoned, loyal servants of the ruling clique or just old chums.

For the local people, the invasion was followed by 200 years of brutal persecution and contemptuous disregard. There was no need for 'ethnic cleansing', the modern euphemism for genocide. It was widely believed that 'nature would take its course' and over a few generations, the primitive characteristics of the Australian Aboriginal race would be bred out of the genome and the superior characteristics of the conquerors would assume precedence. Hitler would have understood.

Smallpox, influenza and venereal diseases decimated the population, sometimes even before first contact. When Indigenous people tried to resist



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A Jerseyman in Australia

the appropriation of their homelands or to take their share of the new crops and livestock that appeared, they were ruthlessly massacred or chased away to other Indigenous nations, where they did not belong.

Much brutality was done in the name of religion. The occupying forces did not understand the complex, spiritual relationship the First Peoples had with 'country'.

Indigenous Australians know they



■ An Aboriginal flag installed on Old Parliament House on North Terrace in Adelaide city, Australia. The yellow circle represents the sun, the red is for the earth and the black for the people – it is a symbol of hope Picture: AMOPHOTO_AU/SHUTTERSTOCK

originate from the land and when they die they will be reunited with it, like their parents and grandparents and hundreds of earlier generations. They have many sacred rituals which preserve this knowledge, pass it on to their children and help to protect and conserve the environment and the biosphere.

The invaders, with Trump-like, ignorant conviction in their own rightness and righteousness, believed they were conferring a great blessing on the 'natives' by preaching the Gospel, teaching them hymns and prayers and allowing them to attend their churches – at a respectful distance.

Aboriginal people are traditionally hospitable. They welcomed the strangers to their campsites and shared their food with them. Many adopted the new faith, but must have been perplexed to see how rarely Christ's Australian followers exhibited Christian charity. How Christian was it to steal Aboriginal children from their families, beat them, lock them up and sell them into lifelong servitude?

In 2008, PM Kevin Rudd acknowledged the appalling treatment of 'the Stolen Generations' and made an apology on behalf of the nation on 'National Sorry Day'.

Even today, Aboriginal life expectancy is ten years less than the average and they are ten times as likely to be imprisoned or to die in custody. It is a bleak picture but now there is genuine reason for hope.

Australians are becoming much more aware of past atrocities and the need for truth-telling, reconciliation and representation, in the form of the proposed 'Voice to Parliament', a chamber of review which would check any

proposed legislation affecting Indigenous people.

I must confess a personal interest. As an indigenous Jerseyman, I spent five years in the 1980s making documentaries about Aboriginal life and culture for ABC-TV. At the time, my father commented that it was a noble effort but about 30 years too early. 'Change has to start somewhere!' I retorted – but I'm afraid he was probably right.

In recent years, I have been delighted to witness the emergence of a significant number of Aboriginal academics and artists, lawyers, leaders, historians, novelists, film directors and producers, actors, painters, dancers and musicians. New generations of Indigenous Australians are taking advantage of educational opportunities and beginning to excel in many creative and other areas.

Indigenous knowledge and wisdom are being treated with new respect, as we realise we need a fresh approach to caring for the environment that sustains us all. Last year's catastrophic bushfires highlighted the need for today's Australian firefighters to learn the traditional techniques of 'cultural burning' used by Aboriginal people for thousands of years to husband the land and protect it against uncontrollable conflagration.

Australia Day will again be a 'Day of Mourning' for Australia's First Peoples, but what the Uluru Statement from the Heart called 'the torment of our powerlessness' is slowly coming to an end. 233 years of occupation has been excruciating for the world's oldest continuing human culture, but it has clearly shaken off the yoke of oppression and survived – and we have much to learn from it.