(Keynote Speech)

Making Sense of Australian History

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On 26 January 1788, Captain Arthur Phillip assembled his small group of English officers and marines on the shore of Sydney Cove to witness his assertion of control over New South Wales. In one great land grab, the British were claiming ownership of nearly half the Australian continent, and simultaneously dispossessing all its Aboriginal inhabitants. In acting out this ceremony, Phillip followed time-honoured European methods of establishing a legal claim to territory. There was the raising of the English flag, the reading out of his official appointment as governor, the symbolic firing of muskets by the marines and the drinking of a toast by Phillip and his fellow officers. The convicts stayed chained in the holds of the anchored ships and any Aborigines in the vicinity remained watching, presumably with a mixture of apprehension and curiosity, from the relative security of the trees. It was a brief and simple act from which much would flow. However, there was no certainty that Phillip’s claim would endure any more than that of the Dutchman, Abel Tasman, his compatriot, Dirk Hartog, or any of the other Europeans who had charted its shores or stepped ashore and claimed parts of the Australian coastline over previous centuries.

In making his claim, Phillip was conscious of the two French ships riding at anchor in Botany Bay, just to the south, and the encampment that the French were establishing on shore, at the very place that the British had planned originally to establish their own settlement. The French arrival was no coincidence. They were fierce rivals of the British and had their own ambitions in the Pacific. Although Phillip was assured by the French commander, the Comte de La Pérouse, that it was an exploring expedition, principally of the north Pacific, the British could not be sure that the French would not be tempted in the future to contest the peremptory British claim to half a continent, just as they had previously contested the British claim to North America. Nor could the British be confident that the Dutch, who had done much more charting of the Australian coastline than the British and had attached the name, New Holland, to the continent as a whole, would not demand that the British respect their prior claims based upon discovery. Indeed, when the British officers had first sighted the French sails off Botany Bay, they had feared that it was Dutch ships coming to contest their claim. But they were French, and they sailed away, never to be seen again after their ships were wrecked in the Santa Cruz islands. As for the Dutch, they refrained from contesting the British presence on the continent they had long ago decided not to settle.

The Aborigines of the Sydney region might have presented the most potent threat to the British presence. They were there in much greater numbers than the British had been led to believe by Captain Cook and his party, after they had returned from Botany Bay in 1771. The few thousand Aborigines easily outnumbered the thousand or so British, most of whom, of course, were convicts

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who could not be trusted with weapons. But the Aboriginal resistance to the British presence was so disorganised and sporadic that Phillip blithely dismissed calls by one of his officers to construct a stockade to protect against a massed attack. And the threat of such an attack was soon removed after smallpox killed many of the Aborigines and ensured that the growing British settlement could remain in quiet occupation of the place thereafter. Over the next 217 years, the only threat would come when Japanese submarines loosed off a few shells in an unsuccessful attack on the harbour bridge in June 1942. Yet it would be wrong to regard the raising of the flag by Arthur Phillip in 1788 as having settled the question of Britain's proprietorship of Australia. That question would remain at the heart of Australian society and do more than any other factor to shape Australia's history.

Historians have grappled with ways of explaining Australian history and have chosen different themes over the years, from such things as the effect of distance to the role of gender, each of them offering fresh insights into why Australia has developed in particular ways. But it is the ongoing process of claiming proprietorship that does more than anything to explain the ways in which Australian society has developed over the centuries. It is as a supplanting society that modern Australia can best understood. That is, as a society that has moved onto the territory of another and proceeded over an extended period to make that territory their own. Of course, most societies are supplanting societies, often becoming complex and multi-layered ones like the United States and the United Kingdom. Their histories can likewise be written according to this organizing theme, with the original arrival of the newcomers initiating a dynamic that plays out through its subsequent history, shaping the development of the society in a myriad of ways.

Under this schema, the raising of the flag by Phillip in 1788 was just the first act, which staked out a claim of legal proprietorship based upon the earlier act of discovery and claim of ownership by Captain Cook. The claim of legal proprietorship was extended over subsequent decades to incorporate the entire continent. But there had been several such legal claims before, and none had come to anything. Cook's claim could have suffered a similar fate, had it not been followed eighteen years later by the arrival of Arthur Phillip and his marines and convicts. Phillip's arrival at Sydney Cove began the establishment of a claim of effective proprietorship as the British proceeded to occupy the continent, bit by bit. That process is still continuing, with much of the continent still being lightly peopled at best and parts of it still being unseen by non-Aboriginal Australians, other than from the vantage point of an aircraft.

To establish a claim of effective proprietorship, the territory must be mapped and its features named by the newcomers. The pre-existing people have to be conquered and, in the process, usually denigrated as savages or worse. The conquered territory must have a clear border staked out and the occupation of the territory protected by defensive works of some kind or another. The resources of the territory have to be developed in ways that can be portrayed as being superior to those of the pre-existing people. A foundation story has to be developed to underpin the newcomers' occupation. The pre-existing people have to be made to disappear from the landscape or otherwise accede to their dispossession. And the newcomers have to populate the territory with their own people. All these stages can be discerned in the history of Australia, with many of them ongoing.
In the case of Australia, though, the struggle to achieve an incontestable claim of effective proprietorship has been easier than in many other places. The British had a great advantage in Australia being an island with a clear, ready-made border - its shoreline - although the sheer size of the continent meant that it took more than a century to fully explore its desolate interior. Moreover, the conquest of the indigenous inhabitants was facilitated by the social organization of Aboriginal society in small bands, which prevented the much more serious and sustained resistance that the British experienced in North America. The relative isolation of Australia, and its absence of immediately identifiable riches, also aided the British in securing their occupation. Several European nations, including the French, the Spanish and the Russians, sent exploring expeditions to Australia in the immediate decades after Phillip's arrival. They were captivated by the different flora and fauna, but they could not see any resources that would make it worth the expense and trouble of establishing a colony of their own on the continent. The British were fortunate that the gold rushes occurred when they did, seventy-three years after Phillip's arrival and well after the British had marked out with settlements their intention to occupy the continent as a whole. Australians have struggled, though, with the establishment of a satisfying foundation story that can explain and justify their occupation of the continent and dispossession of the Aborigines.

Australia's foundation was always going to be more problematic than most, centering as it did on the exile of convicts in chains. Although some Australians have come recently to embrace the convicts as victims of a harsh social and legal system, the story of their arrival and treatment in Australia has not been elevated as a foundation story fit for a modern nation and capable of justifying their occupation of the continent. You won't find politicians at Port Arthur, seeking a photo opportunity among the ruins of the convict settlement. They look to other stories to affirm Australia's nationhood and justify the presence of non-Aboriginals on their ancient continent. It was hoped by colonists that federation might provide such a story. The coming of federation in 1901 was embraced by some colonists not just because it would bring cheaper meat but because it would knock convicts off the national pedestal. But federation had trouble capturing the national imagination in 1901 and, despite the efforts of the Howard government, generated little excitement when its centenary occurred in 2001. Middle-aged men sitting around conference tables discussing the formation of a nation is not calculated to stir the blood of the nation's youth, particularly when they were not ushering in an independent nation but were content to continue as a quasi-colony of Britain.

Even as federation approached, some Australians were concerned that the dull fabric of the foundation story would not be sufficiently colourful to provide a satisfying garb with which to drape the young nation. It could not compete with America's war of independence, or those many national stories that ascribe their foundation to divine intervention. There was particular concern that Australians had not fought a major battle to justify their occupation of the continent. Ignoring the 5,000 Europeans and perhaps 50,000 Aborigines who had been killed in the long-running war of hit-and-run skirmishes on the Australian frontier, it was argued by some that their occupation was deficient for not having mixed the blood of their manhood in the soil that they were claiming as their own. So there was a palpable sense of relief when Australians were finally embroiled in a battle of heroic proportions. It seemed hardly to matter that the battlefield was a world away and that the battle ended in defeat for the Australians. Over the following decades, the Anzac story has come to
take the most prominent place in the pantheon of foundation stories to which Australians turn for inspiration and justification for their possession of the place they have come to regard as their own.

Unlike Australia Day, with its commemoration of Phillip’s peaceful landing, Anzac Day commemorated an act of blood-letting by Australia’s young warriors, which is something that all societies regard with a particular reverence and with which successive generations of young Australians could identify. The so-called Anzac legend came to be regarded as a sacred story of devotion and sacrifice. It was so sacred that it was forbidden to capitalize on the story by applying the Anzac name to commercial products. Not even the renowned Australian aviator, Charles Kingsford Smith, who was a veteran of the war, was allowed to use the Anzac name on his record-breaking aircraft. When he flew into Sydney in the early 1930s with the word Anzac emblazoned on the aircraft’s wing, Customs officers forced him to cover the name. As a foundation story, though, the Anzac story, now elevated to Legend status, has received shifting emphasis. In 1938, the 150th anniversary of Captain Phillip’s arrival, it was still the pioneers, the creators of ‘white Australia’, who were privileged as the most prominent features in the pageant that wound its way around Sydney streets to the showgrounds. There was no sign of the convicts whose short-handled hoes had carved many of those streets out of the bush and little sign of the soldiers who had defended those streets in distant Turkey.

After the Second World War, when Australians had been more directly involved in the actual defence of their conquered homeland, the Anzac legend came to occupy a more prominent place. As a schoolchild in the 1960s, I can recall classes being told each year over the school’s public address system of the gallant story of Simpson and his donkey at Gallipoli, while Anzac Day was occupied with marches and reunions of returned soldiers. But that changed in the 1970s, and not just because of the Vietnam War and the rise of the anti-war and feminist movements, with their criticisms of Anzac Day and even direct attacks on the celebrations. With each passing year, as the diggers themselves died out, the crowds watching the Anzac Day marches shrank further, while the day itself appeared increasingly anachronistic and irrelevant to Australia’s future. As it declined in importance, there was a new foundation story vying for supremacy as successive governments gave support to the idea of multiculturalism, which was presented as a more inclusive story better suited to the new, ethnic reality of postwar Australia. The bipartisan political support for multiculturalism under a succession of governments from Whitlam to Hawke, inevitably downgraded the position of the Anzac story, which was predominantly of interest to British Australians.

Multiculturalism was welcomed as a foundation story that spoke to both the present and future of Australia. It could hide the shame of both the convict story and the story of the pioneers, which was not only tainted by their association with the origins of ‘white Australia’, but also with the war on the frontier, with the dreadful extent of that war being revealed in the 1970s and 80s by a new generation of historians. Multiculturalism might also be able to ease the now Vietnam-tainted story of the diggers into the shadows, while being able to incorporate the Aboriginal presence seamlessly into a unified, national narrative. Aborigines would be just another migrant group, according to one version of multiculturalism. It allowed Australians to declare to the world, and to comfort themselves, that the foundation story of modern Australia could be found in the mass immigration program of the
postwar world. It was a story akin to America's Pilgrims Fathers, of people escaping their war-torn circumstances to seek sanctuary in a new world across the oceans. Commemorations of the migration experience began to vie with Anzac Day, helped along by the multicultural television and radio broadcaster, SBS, and by the establishment of an Immigration Museum in Melbourne and by other museums, such as the National Maritime Museum in Sydney, making immigration as one of their special concerns.

But the immigration story proved to be more problematic than its boosters had foreseen. When tens of thousands of Vietnamese and Chinese refugees were allowed sanctuary in Australia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it provoked intense questioning of multiculturalism as many British Australians began to fear that their hold on the nation was being undermined by the new arrivals. Just as they had denied Aborigines a special place as the indigenous inhabitants of the continent, so British Australians now found that they had been reduced by multiculturalism to be just one more ethnic minority or else excluded altogether from consideration within the immigration story. The historian Geoffrey Blainey probably captured it best when he warned of multiculturalism reducing Australians to what he called 'a nation of tribes'.

Just as the immigration story was being undermined by fears about Asian immigration, and about the rise of the so-called Asian 'tigers' which threatened to eclipse Australia economically, so the Anzac story was reinforced in the 1980s and 90s by the involvement of the Australian army in various peace-keeping operations, culminating in its role in restoring independence to East Timor, effectively expunging the taint of the army's involvement in Vietnam. At the same time, both sides of politics competed to make the Anzac story the preserve of their particular political party after David Williamson's 1981 film, Gallipoli, invested the campaign with renewed popular interest and modern relevance. Young Australians, in particular, found that they could identify with the tragic innocence of the young Australians who fought at Gallipoli. Bob Hawke presided over a special commemoration at Gallipoli to mark the 75th anniversary of the Australian landing, while in 1992 his successor Paul Keating tried to shift the focus from Gallipoli to the Australian victory on the Kokoda Track in the Second World War, by kissing what he clearly regarded as the sacred soil on which Australian blood had been spilt in the direct defence of the Australian nation. His successor, John Howard, has tried to appropriate both Gallipoli and Kokoda for the conservative cause, unveiling a memorial at Kokoda in 2002 and in recent months trying to stop a mining development that threatened to mar what he called the 'sacred' Kokoda Track.

The Anzac story was further highlighted as the media mounted a grisly countdown as the last surviving veterans of Gallipoli died off, with each of the final few being accorded a State-funded funeral and sometimes a direct telecast of the service and extensive treatments in the press. It culminated in the death of the last veteran, Alec Campbell, in May 2002, which prompted a flurry of media interest as politicians crowded the pews of his funeral service. With the support of state and federal governments, the Anzac story just gets stronger, with well-funded official websites established to embellish the Anzac story and support its teaching in schools, where it has become central to history courses. It was given a further boost in 1995, when the Australian Football League initiated a regular match on Anzac Day between Collingwood and Essendon. The game has become the most
popular non-finals match and is marked by increasing military display. Tens of thousands of Australians, many of them young, begin the day by attending a dawn service at a war memorial. Thousands of other Australians spend the day visiting former Australian battlefields, which stretch from Flanders to Kokoda. Most of them gather at Gallipoli, which John Howard has proposed including on a National Heritage list. Even with the unpopular involvement of Australian troops in Iraq, the new-found enthusiasm for the Anzac legend just keeps increasing, although it is probably safe to say that most Australians still regard it as just another, welcome public holiday.

The reasons for the recent rise in popularity of Anzac Day have been ascribed to the political machinations of John Howard or the dying off of the Gallipoli veterans and the looming disappearance of veterans from the Second World War. But there are deeper reasons. In a recent article on Gallipoli, historian Mark McKenna cited the comment of a young Australian attending the dawn service at Gallipoli last year who declared that ‘it’s not about the empire, it’s about us’. And that’s exactly right, although perhaps not about all Australians, although attempts have been made to make the Anzac story as inclusive as possible by including Turkish veterans in the annual marches and by making it encompass more than just Gallipoli by including Kokoda and other campaigns as well. Its advocates have portrayed it as a universal story of courage and sacrifice, and doubtless this partly explains why it has been embraced by many Australians. But the advance of the Anzac Legend, and the concomitant retreat of the multicultural story, has a deeper significance. It is a reflection of the uneasiness being felt by British Australians as they face the looming prospect of becoming a minority in what they regard as their own land. That uneasiness boiled over into a riot in 2005 at Cronulla, a beachside enclave of British Australia in Sydney, where youths wrapped themselves in the Australian flag and stormed from the beach, in conscious emulation of the Anzacs, to attack any foreign-looking ‘outsiders’ they could find in the surrounding streets.

Just as white Americans are presently wrestling with the prospect of becoming a minority in many cities and regions of their country, so British Australians are confronting their failure to populate the continent with their own people. From the beginning, it was a massive challenge for the British to populate such a large, forbidding and distant continent set so far from their own shores. Japan’s takeover of Hokkaido and incorporation of the island into the Japanese nation in the late nineteenth century was nothing compared with the predicament in Australia, where after more than a century of British occupation there was still less than four million people, little more than half the population of London at that time, trying to occupy a continent almost the size of Europe. Even now, after more than two centuries, much of northern Australia still remains lightly peopled, with just 1% of Australia’s population living in the Northern Territory despite it constituting about one-sixth of the nation’s area. With Australia’s present population of twenty-one million people, the nation still faces the challenge that comes from being a relatively small population occupying a relatively large territory. The United States, with about the same area if Alaska is not included, has fifteen times the population of Australia. Both countries have had to rely on the recruitment of other peoples to complete the supplanting of the original inhabitants and the securing of their own hold on their separate continents. Both are now struggling to accept that the cost of securing their society’s hold on the conquered territories will be to see themselves become minorities in those societies.
The events on the beaches of Sydney Cove, Anzac Cove and Cronulla are just three episodes in the continuing struggle that was first sparked by Captain Arthur Phillip when he announced the British intention to dispossess the Aborigines. That proved to be much more difficult project than he could ever have imagined and continues to this day, with government attempts to make Aborigines, as indigenous people, disappear from the landscape. As a supplanting society intent on dispossessing pre-existing people, the British in Australia have been following a path well-worn by other societies across the world, which have pursued in vain the quest for exclusive possession of the particular territories they happen to occupy. It is a path that has no ending. As the archaeological layers of successive societies living on a single site reveal, the history of the world has been, and clearly continues to be, the history of people on the move. Making sense of Australian history, as with any history, requires historians to acknowledge that fundamental fact of human existence.

[Notes]