Impact of European settlement on Indigenous people

Introduction

European settlement had a severe and devastating impact on Indigenous people. Their dispossession of the land, exposure to new diseases and involvement in violent conflict, resulted in the death of a vast number of the Aboriginal peoples. The small percentage of Aboriginal people who did not die during these early decades of the colony, were not unaffected. The impact of the white settlers changed their lives, and the lives of future generations, forever.

Colonisation or invasion?

In 1770, English explorer Captain James Cook claimed the eastern portion of the Australian continent in the name of King George III. While sailing from Botany Bay to Cape York, Captain Cook recorded in his journal a number of interactions with the Indigenous peoples of Australia.

It is believed that at least 750 000 Aboriginal people were living in Australia at the time of Captain Cook’s arrival. These people were divided into around 600 different tribes and had hundreds of different languages. Archaeological evidence suggests that the ancestors of the modern Indigenous people of Australia migrated to the continent more than 50 000 years ago. Isolated from external influences, the Aboriginal peoples developed their own way of life, in accordance with their religious and spiritual beliefs of the Dreamtime (Indigenous time of creation).

Despite knowing of the existence of these peoples, the British considered the Australian continent to be a terra nullius under English law. Terra nullius is a Latin term meaning 'land belonging to no one.' Eight years later, the British went ahead with their plans to establish a penal colony in New South Wales. On 26 January 1788, the First Fleet, led by Captain Arthur Phillip, arrived in Sydney Cove.
Dispossession

Not long after the First Fleet arrived in New South Wales, colonial governments began to grant, lease and sell land to white settlers. As the prosperity of the colonial wool industry increased, more settlers arrived in the colony to stake their claims on grazing land from which they could amass their own fortunes. The diminishing availability of suitable land resulted in a number of expeditions to search for more fertile grazing land. New South Wales Governor Darling attempted to curb the spread of settlement in the colony. (Refer to Topic 1: Mass migration, Chapter 3: The life of the squatters). His efforts, however, were more to ensure that the settlers could still be controlled by colonial law enforcement, than out of concern for the original, Indigenous inhabitants of the land.

As squatters began to claim unoccupied land outside the boundaries set by Governor Darling, they began to encroach more and more on Indigenous sacred sites, hunting grounds and food supplies. The settlers completely ignored the deep spiritual connections the Aboriginal peoples had with the land. They believed that the Aboriginal peoples were happy to move on to new land, due to the nomadic (moving from place to place, without a fixed home) nature of the Indigenous lifestyle. The Indigenous peoples, however, always returned to the land after it had been given time to replenish itself.

The dispossession of Aboriginal peoples from their land resulted in a drastic decline in their population. While many Aboriginal people were killed in violent clashes over the rights to settle on the land, a vast number also died from malnourishment. Since they were unable to access clean water or an adequate and nutritious supply of food, this made them more susceptible to fatal diseases.

The repercussions of Aboriginal dispossession continued for generations. A number of Aboriginal people were initially forced into government reserves and church missions. Around the middle of the 20th century, however, many reserves were closed due to overcrowding and increasing maintenance expenses. Aboriginal people were forced into cities and towns where they were had no other option but to live on the outskirts, or in public housing (subsidised by State governments).

Disease

While the British settlers had a hand in the intentional eradication of the Aboriginal peoples, the settlers were also unintentionally responsible for their deaths during times of peaceful contact. When the settlers arrived in Australia they brought with them a number of European epidemic diseases. These diseases included chickenpox, smallpox, typhoid, measles and influenza. The Aboriginal peoples had no immunity (acquired resistance) to these unfamiliar diseases. Within a matter of weeks, the Indigenous population, particularly within densely populated communities, began to experience a rapid decline in numbers. The introduction of venereal disease was also an issue, causing Indigenous fertility and birth rates to be reduced.

Impact on the surviving Aboriginal people

European settlement had a devastating impact on the entire Aboriginal population, not only those who died from disease. This is despite the fact that some white settlers, including colonial government officials and Christian missionaries, tried to help Indigenous people. These
people believed that the Aboriginal people were primitive and uncultured, and that without their help they would die out. Their somewhat misguided attempts to help the Indigenous people are known as **paternalism**. Paternalism means looking after someone and taking care of their interests in the belief that they cannot do it themselves.

From the time they first arrived in Australia, the white settlers had attempted to 'civilise' the Aboriginal people. Making them wear clothes and attend church was only the start of it. The **Native Institute** was set up in 1814 by Governor Macquarie to educate Aboriginal children in the European way. As Governor Phillip had tried with Bennelong and Colebee (two Aboriginal men who were taught the language and culture of the white settlers) over 30 years before, Macquarie believed that if you educated some of the Indigenous population then they would take back what they had learned to their community.