

**By Jill Fenwick OAM**

---

When I began teaching Australian History back in the 1970's, Aboriginal Australians got short shrift. Yes, they were the first peoples of Australia, but they were to many primitive and backward, being nomadic peoples who lived off the land, but were hunter-gatherers, who had not progressed or become 'advanced'. After 40,000 years, they had no written language, no villages or towns, no domestic animals other than dogs, few tools and didn't practice agriculture.

It took Jared Diamond's *Guns and Germs and Steel*, published in 1998 to educate me. Yes, Australia had once had giant kangaroos and giant wombats, but these had been wiped out by the Ice Age. This left Australia with no domesticable animals, no cattle or sheep, no oxen, no horses or donkeys. There were no domestic fowl either, no chickens, or geese from which to breed. From the list of the world's wild grass species with the heaviest grain Australia had only two, both near the bottom of the scale (grain weight 15 milligrams in contrast to the heaviest grains' 40 milligrams). Thus, Diamond argues '... any food production in Australia would be severely limited, by the lack of domesticable animals, the poverty of domesticable plants and the difficult soils and climate.' The Aboriginal people were bound to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, where times of settling were tied to the availability of food and moving on allowed renewal.

Add to these difficulties, the colonisation of Australia by the British, who saw the land as theirs for the taking. This pushed the native peoples into areas of less fertility. Nor did settlers see the native animals as 'belonging' to the

local Aborigines, so that areas once harbouring kangaroos, wombats, fish, and native birds, were denuded of food for the local Aborigines. Where the white man settled belonged to him, while the local Aborigines were seen as thieves if they killed a sheep or 'stole' from his stores.

The highest density of Aboriginal people lived around the wettest, most fertile areas – the Murray-Darling river systems, the eastern and north coast and the southwestern corner of Australia. These were the lands most desirable for the European population, who killed or drove the native people back into the areas unattractive to their own ambitions. The boomerang was no match for the gun.

Massacres occurred as late as the 1930s. The first conflict took place in the months after the landing of the First Fleet and the last, the Caledon Bay crisis in 1934. The Wikipedia entry on Australia's Frontier Wars estimates that a minimum of 100,000 indigenous Australians and between 2,000 and 2,500 settlers died in armed conflicts. The Waterloo Creek massacre of 1837, south-west of Moree, N.S.W, with figures of how many Aborigines unable to be estimated. The last officially sanctioned massacre of Aborigines was the Coniston Massacre in the northern Territory, where, in August of 1928, the murder of a dingo hunter, was met with an official hunt, ending in the estimated death of two hundred Aborigines.

After Federation, there was a major debate about who should be eligible to vote in the Elections for the newly Australian government. As with the Voice, there was very strong opposition by a large number of politicians campaigning against giving native peoples the vote. Senator Alexander Matheson stated that such a step would be 'repugnant and atrocious'. Senator Richard O'Connor, however, spoke out strongly in support:

*It would be a monstrous thing, an unheard of savagery on our part to treat Aborigines, whose land we were occupying, to deprive them of any right to vote in their own country simply on the grounds of their colour*

However, it was not to be:

The Commonwealth Franchise Act of 1902 barred Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from participating in Commonwealth elections unless they were already eligible to vote in their state election. It was not until 1962 that Australia's native peoples were given the vote. The report from the Select Committee on Voting Rights of Aborigines, 1961, stated that

*Your Committee, while limited by its terms of reference to the franchise, recognises that franchise alone is not enough. It hopes that the exercise of the franchise by aboriginal people will lead to policies which meet their need.*

However, it was not until 1984 that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were required to enrol and vote like other Australians, only 39 years ago.

Now is the time to correct the wrongs of the past by supporting The Voice when the referendum comes. Give Australia's Aboriginal population a chance to influence policies related to their own lands and communities. Let them speak up for their people and their needs.