

# the Colonisation of Australia

... as told by a nine-year-old in 1960



**Robbo Bennetts**



# Introduction

So many people remember being taught that Captain Cook discovered Australia, and so many more attest that they were never taught anything about Aboriginal history or culture, that the weight of opinion is compelling.

This collective memory has been chronicled by the research. According to UTAS researcher Louise Zarmati writing for The Conversation:

Approaching the 250th anniversary of Cook's first journey to the Pacific, The Conversation asked readers what they remembered learning at school about his arrival in Australia: Most people said they learnt Cook 'discovered' Australia – especially if they were at school before the 1990s.  
(<https://theconversation.com/captain-cook-discovered-australia-and-other-myths-from-old-school-text-books-128926>)

Respected Indigenous researcher John Maynard writes:

I came through a school system of the 50s and 60s, and we weren't even mentioned in the history books except as a people belonging to the Stone Age or as a dying race. It was all about discoverers, explorers, settlers and Phar Lap or Don Bradman. But us Aboriginal people? Not there.  
(<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2020/04/29/honest-reckoning-captain-cooks-legacy-wont-heal-things-overnight-its-start>)

Walkley-winning Indigenous journalist Stan Grant agrees:

There were people standing on the shore as Cook weighed anchor. Smoke from campfires trailed the white men who trekked over the mountains west of Sydney. Black people watched these people who appeared like ghosts and would bring death. But that story wasn't told in my classroom. The lesson I learned was that we didn't matter. In fact we didn't even exist.  
(<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2016/02/25/stan-grants-speech-national-press-club-australia>)

These views are supported by another UTAS researcher, Robyn Moore:

Textbooks published in the White Australia era openly taught a celebratory version of history in which Aborigines were either absent or derided. White people were portrayed as the developers of the nation ... Aborigines are only mentioned occasionally in textbooks from this era. When Aborigines are included, the portrayals are usually negative ...  
(<https://theconversation.com/history-textbooks-still-imply-that-australians-are-white-72796>)

Certainly, whenever this topic comes up, the critical mass of comments on social media platforms that I follow, give the impression that this kind of whitewashing took place all around the country and for many decades, at least until recently.

There is no dispute about what Maynard and Grant and many others remember. However, memory by itself a fact does not make. Memory is certainly an invaluable window into the past, but it cannot always be relied on, even when it is held vividly or with certainty. An uncorroborated memory is not necessarily strong evidence by itself that an event occurred at all, let alone occurred in the way that it is remembered. Even the most intelligent of us can experience false memory.

This is a key reason why primary sources created at the time are so important. Primary sources relating to what schools taught decades ago — such as old textbooks or footage of relevant lessons — are often not readily available, even to the most intrepid researcher.

I attended Lower Plenty State School, in Victoria, between 1955 and 1961. From prep, I walked to school each day with my older brother because Dad left early for work, and Mum was in a wheelchair.

What Europeans called the Plenty River is commonly believed to be where, in 1835, that unsavoury character John Batman met with elders of the Wurundjeri Willum clan. His purpose was to persuade them to make signs on a document transferring the land to him. This was the only “treaty” ever negotiated with the original Australians. Its signing was witnessed by 12-year-old William Barak who was to become a great advocate for his people.

In 1838, big chunks of “crown” land on the west side of the river were sold off to a property speculator. These were amalgamated in 1842 to create Yallambie Park on the site of what had been a squatter’s run. (“Yallambee” is said to derive from an Aboriginal word *nglambi*, meaning to rest or to remain.) By then, it would have seemed to the white settlers as if those who had been living on this land for tens of millennia had “disappeared without a trace”.

In 1860, a toll bridge was built over the river, enabling Cobb and Co stagecoaches to run up through Eltham to the St Andrews’ goldfields.

In 1872, the Education Act 1872 made attending school compulsory for most Victorian children. According to this Act, schooling would be free and secular, in order to ensure that all children would learn “the three Rs”. And in 1876, the “Lower Plenty School” was opened at the first of several sites.

By the year of my birth, 1950 — as the nation recovered from war, and the population boomed — the township of Lower Plenty found itself on the edge of the sprawling capital city. Farmland was morphing into quarter-acre slices of the “Australian Dream”. There were still paddocks. There was still some remnant bush.

And there was still the river.

In 1954, the school's brass band played while the whole school lined up to wave and cheer a young and glamorous queen as her motorcade sailed past on its way to Eltham.

Back then, Lower Plenty was as monocultural as any part of Australia. Most students at the school were Australian-born. Those who had migrated from England, or Holland, or somewhere else in Northern Europe, seemed to readily blend in. I did not meet anyone who looked different from me until I was in my mid-teens.

My childhood was blessed. In my free time, I played down the river, or played backyard footy or cricket. We kids had a lot of freedom and we could generally wander or ride our bikes for miles ... so long as we were home by 6pm for Tea. My brother and I usually only got into trouble with Mum and Dad if we broke another one of Mum's pot plants with a cricket ball that had flown past the keeper, or we punched another hole in old Freeman's asbestos cement shed with a straight-drive over the long-on fence.

It was an era when nasty dogs roamed the streets. When many people did not bother to lock their houses or their cars. When the Olympics and black-and-white television suddenly appeared in our lounge rooms. When a vaccine was developed for polio. When the Russians put a man in space. When our mums saved up their house-keeping money and bought their first Simpson automatic washing machine, their first Sunbeam Mixmaster or Hoover vacuum cleaner.

My teacher in Grades 4 to 6 was Mrs Thomas. She presented as a very strict Victorian-era school ma'am. She was a well-groomed, older, married woman with three daughters, the youngest of whom was four grades above me. Mrs Thomas drove a tiny Ford Prefect utility, and lived in an elegant cottage on a riverside property named Linden Lea after a song that was popular way back in 1901. The apple trees on the property evoked these lines in the song:

... where, for me, the apple tree  
Do lean down low, in Linden Lea.

The Victorian law requiring female teachers to resign from teaching when they married was only repealed in 1956, but Mrs Thomas was asked to go back to teaching, at LPSS, in 1952.

Mrs Thomas's father, I discovered recently, had been a long-serving conservative Tasmanian politician, and was knighted in 1954, the year of the Queen's visit.

Some of Mrs Thomas's pupils adored her; some (like me) feared her. One recalls that she had a deadly aim with a duster. When my brother and I rode our home-made billycarts down her long steep pot-holed road, without crashing into the gutter, we occasionally got as far as the Thomases' gate. If we did, we got out of there fast because we expected her to come out and growl at us.

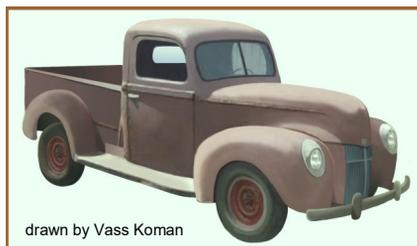
Our daily school routines were predictable. After whole-school assembly on the asphalt quadrangle, we would march off in different directions to our classrooms, often, curiously, to the amplified refrains of *The Battle of New Orleans*:

We fired our guns and the British kept a-comin'  
There wasn't nigh as many as there was a while ago  
We fired once more and they began to runnin'  
On down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico

The girls would slip into our classroom first, and sit on one side of desks all lined up in a row. Boys would then slink in and sit alongside the girls. Students sat in the order of their test scores on the previous Friday.

In class, Mrs Thomas stood imperiously on a low stage in front of a very large blackboard. Her task was to sculpt our little minds in ways that would make us all good future citizens. *Our* task was to busily fill our exercise books with the stories of germs, milk production, Merino sheep, and colonisation.

At recess, the girls would slip out, followed by the boys, and we would go down and drink our warm milk out of one-third pint bottles that had gone creamy sitting in the sun. Then we would usually segregate ourselves. Us boys would play marbles or British Bulldogs, while the girls played skippy, hopscotch or rounders. Then we would line up again, and the girls would go back into class first.



After school, Mrs Thomas would occasionally give me a ride home in the back of her ute, dropping me at her turn-off. On the way, I always fretted, knowing that she would invariably take off just as I was climbing out over the tailgate. (A former classmate, SMC, said that Mrs Thomas once took some kids to the Eltham swimming pool. When they were about to head home, she pretended that her ute was out of puff and made the kids push it up the hill, whereupon she took off with all the kids chasing after her.)

I know what I was taught about who discovered Australia, and I know whether or not Aboriginal Australians were more than just a footnote in *our* history. I have kept my old workbooks, and I have in my library the history book that we studied.

I have scanned many of the pages of two workbooks, and pasted them here. The words are that of a young left-handed boy struggling with both ink smudges and the intricacies of the English language. The clumsy expression is accompanied by naive illustrations.

***The Colonisation of Australia*** is a record of what was taught in a small-town Victorian primary school sixty years ago about the arrival of the first European explorers and settlers, and what they saw when they got here.

Included are over 50 scanned pages of the author's Grade 5 and 6 Social Studies workbooks.

This book not only paints a picture of what it was like growing up in the 1950s, but it provides a valuable contribution to our knowledge about the institutional practices of the state school system back then.

### **The author**

Robbo Bennetts helped make history at La Trobe University by actively participating in the anti-war movement in the late 'sixties and early 'seventies.

Halfway through a double History degree, he dropped out and worked as a builder's labourer for twelve years, finishing his degree at night.

In his mid-thirties, he qualified as a teacher, and taught for three decades in schools around Australia, including remote Indigenous schools in the Top End.



Disclaimer: the author does not take credit for setting up this classroom.

