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It's not 'politically correct' to say Australia was invaded, it's history

The latest manufactured outrage from the Daily Telegraph and other rightwing groups ignores the experience of the continent's Indigenous people



The Daily Telegraph's 'Whitewash' story on Wednesday, which claims the University of New South Wales is rewriting history. Photograph: Jonny Weeks for the Guardian

By Paul Daley
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So, the arbiters of political correctness gone mad have apparently decided we need a quick top-up lesson on Australian Indigenous history. Or something.

It's not quite clear what, precisely, they think.

“University of NSW students told to refer to Australia as having been ‘invaded’”, screams today’s headline in Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph* about a guide at the university for “appropriate language use for the history, society, naming, culture and classifications of Indigenous Australian and Torres Strait Islander people”.

Have a look at the guide and judge for yourself.

You might agree with all of it, some of it or none of it. Or you might not care either way. I'm fine with most of it and that which I'd contest if I could be bothered – such as the “Dreamings” being more appropriate than the “Dreamtime” – are neither here nor there.

But, horror, the Tele warns – “students are being told to refer to Australia as having been ‘invaded’ instead of settled in a highly controversial rewriting of official Australian history”.

They even use conservative historian Keith Windschuttle and (wait for it) the Institute of Public Affairs to help make their non-case.

Highly controversial? Really? Nah.

And here we were wondering if there had been a sudden re-ignition of the “history wars” (to which Windschuttle and IPA were central) when debate over (warning, I'm about to do it) European invasion and dispossession centred on the National Museum of Australia and polarised historians between the “white blindfold” and “black armband” camps.

And over what? Some guide that might help naïve university students think before they speak about matters relating to **Indigenous Australians**. To my mind this would be a good thing, given the hand comparatively recent continental history has dealt Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

And we'd be right. Australia has largely moved on from the times under John Howard's prime ministership when the museum was riven by acrimonious argument about how it ought to depict frontier history, and whether the murders of tens of thousands of Indigenous Australians by British soldiers and “settlers” constituted war on the colonial frontier.

An instructive starting point: Indigenous warriors who resisted invasion certainly regarded it as war, as did numerous colonial authorities including governors, not least Lachlan Macquarie – a vicious, calculated murderer of his colony's Indigenous people.

While conservative estimates would put Indigenous deaths at the hands of soldiers, “native police”, militia, explorers, miners and farmers at 30,000, recent credible academic research indicates the figure in Queensland alone was 65,000. Although violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was most extreme in Queensland, a conservative national extrapolation potentially adds another deeply unsettling dimension to Australia's malevolent recent history.

My starting point as a non-Indigenous person who writes about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their stories, has always been to listen. To listen to the ways stories are told by Indigenous people themselves, to understand their meaning and to respect the way they view – and share – their histories.

Respect is the critical word here. And that has nothing to do with being politically correct. Respect, starting with capital-I for Indigenous (I have never met an

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person who did not want their people thus described). Neither have I come across too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (not to mention a growing number of non-Indigenous Australians) who refer to the arrival of the first fleet in 1788, and all of the ensuing extreme violence and dispossession, as anything other than “invasion”.

The growing debate around the celebration of Australia Day each 26 January (Invasion Day to many Indigenous Australians) including in the pages of this country’s more reactionary journals, indicate just how much the argument has advanced since the history wars. Such change can never, of course, evolve too fast.

“They [students] are also told it is offensive to suggest James Cook ‘discovered’ Australia,” the Tele tells us.

Get out! Where to begin?

Maybe ask the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders themselves or, indeed, the Macassans from Sulawesi with whom they traded for centuries before Cook anchored his Endeavour at Botany Bay in autumn 1770. Others, including the Dutch, might also have a view about first non-Asian contact and European “discovery”.

Yes, as the UNSW guide suggests, Cook mapped the east coast of this continent. But he hardly discovered it.

Instructively, that moment of first east coast British-Indigenous contact was signified with violence when Cook’s men shot at and wounded at least one Gweagal tribesmen. Cook took their spears and a shield. The shield, part of the British Museum’s Indigenous collection (the spoils always go to the victors), was recently the centrepiece of a display at the national museum exhibition, Encounters. The shield has a notable hole in it.

The museum reckons it’s from a lance.

But the Gweagal, who want that stolen shield permanently returned, will tell you it’s from a musket round.

I know who I believe.