

Why I cherish Jan 26 in all its complexity



Cartoon: Eric Lobbecke.

- Scott Morrison
- *The Australian*
- 4 September 2017

We don't get to choose when or how our story starts, or rewrite what has happened since. The same is true for nations.

It wasn't a particularly flash day for William Roberts.

Bunkered down in the bowels of *The Scarborough* with 207 other convicts, he had arrived in Port Jackson after a long and treacherous voyage from Portsmouth.

It was January 26, 1788. It was a new beginning for him, but it would have seemed a particularly grim one and life was about to get a lot tougher.

William, my fifth great grandfather, had been transported to NSW for stealing £5 and a half-pound weight of yarn valued at nine shillings.

The Scarborough returned to NSW with the *Neptune* as part of the notorious Second Fleet. Below deck on the *Neptune* was Kezia Brown, my fifth great grandmother, a gardener's labourer who had been transported for stealing clothing from her employer.

During her voyage, more than a quarter of the convicts died and over a third were sick when they landed. Of the entire Second Fleet, 124 died soon after landing.

The Rev Johnson described the misery of the scene of their arrival as "indescribable ... their heads, bodies, clothes, blankets, were all full of lice. They were wretched, naked,

or dig to filthy, dirty, lousy, and many of them utterly unable to stand, to creep, or even to stir hand or foot”.

These were the humblest of beginnings and not the best of memories, but it is where our modern Australian story began.

William and Kezia were married at St Phillips in Sydney a few years later. They then carved out a future for them and their family in a harsh colonial environment in what is now western Sydney.

I’m glad William and Kezia made the trip, even though for them it began as a cruel punishment. We have become an amazing nation.

However, our modern Australian story has not been without its failures, its shames and tragedies, in particular for indigenous Australians.

North of Brewarrina, not far from the ancient fish traps where I was just over a week ago, is the site of the Hospital Creek massacre, where 400 indigenous Australians were slaughtered in 1859. Unforgivably, just one of many such episodes that is part of our difficult past, that should be, and is, rightfully taught in our schools.

But we must also teach and celebrate the tremendous stories of how our modern nation has been built, and by whom.

One cannot cancel out the other.

Like the story of the 24-year-old bounty migrant from a small poor rural village in England who arrived in Sydney in 1839 with his wife, newborn child and just five shillings and thruppence in his pocket.

In his biography of Sir Henry Parkes, Stephen Dando-Collins tells us that “day after day, Henry went ashore and walked the streets of Sydney, then a city of 25,000 residents. Each evening he would return to Clarinda and their baby aboard the Strathfieldsaye, footsore and still unemployed.

In his own words, his ‘youthful impatience’ gave way to ‘fits of despondency’ ”.

Throughout his life he would lose five infant children, two wives, establish and run a newspaper and a zoo and be insolvent on three occasions. However, he would also become premier, the Father of our Federation and establish public education, nursing, urban sewerage, our first copyright laws, land reform and even champion the creation of Queensland (I blame him for State of Origin).

In 1874, as premier, Parkes gave a small grant to support the building of a public statue of Captain Cook in Hyde Park.

It is this very statue — now ringed by a protective fence — that has been the focus of an unseemly bout of revisionism by those who seek to tear pages out of our history books.

But it is the words engraved on this statue that have been overlooked that reveal something very special about the monument. “This statue was erected by public subscription.”

It was purchased by and for the people of NSW. It was theirs, largely paid for from their own pockets. More than 60,000 Sydneysiders flocked to Hyde Park in 1879 to witness its grand unveiling, following the fanfare of a street parade.

This clearly meant something to a vibrant city and an aspiring nation, proud of what they were achieving.

This is important to understand, because it was this pride, drive and ambition that drove this pre-federation nation to lay the foundation for what we have today.

You don't dig up a time capsule and replace its contents because you don't agree with what's inside it. Such contents shed light on what was important at the time; what moved people to act and what formed their beliefs.

These tales should not be lost in today's noise of revisionism, and not lost in the education of new generations. Because these are the stories of our modern nation; the dates, mere markers along the way.

Like our own stories, we don't get to choose how our national story started.

According to Macquarie biographers Harry Dillon and Peter Butler, January 26 was first officially celebrated as Australia Day on January 26, 1818, when it was declared a public holiday by the governor.

On that day there was a 30-gun salute from the Dawes Point Battery, a public military review on the open ground of Hyde Park. In the evening the Macquaries hosted a dinner and ball at Government House. We have marked it ever since.

Our next Australia Day in 2018 will mark the official bicentenary of our national day.

On that day I will be thinking about our remarkable modern nation, and especially of William and Kezia, now buried together at St Mathews in Windsor.

They could not have imagined what has become of this incredible place or the hundreds of descendants who are now the beneficiaries of what they went through to come to Australia all those years ago.

I'm grateful for what they and every other Australian has suffered and contributed to make this country what it is today.

It matters not where they have come from or how long they have been here.

This is what I will be focusing on when we mark the bicentenary of Australia Day next January and why I believe it must forever remain our national day.

Scott Morrison is the federal Treasurer.