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Why Australia Day and Anzac Day helped create a national 'cult of forgetfulness'

By Paul Daley

It's beyond time Australia cast off these sturdy cultural crutches that both, somehow, define national birth

Australia Day celebrations in Sydney. Australia Day marks, for Indigenous Australians, dispossession and all its associated multi-generational malevolence. Photograph: Jonny Weeks for the Guardian

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Australia Day and Anzac Day are months away.

But I'm getting in early. It's beyond time Australia cast off these sturdy cultural crutches that both, somehow, define national birth, so we can discover who and what we truly are.

Australia Day, celebrating British invasion in 1788, and Anzac Day, marking Australia's involvement in the failed invasion of the Ottoman empire in 1915, are but relatively recent, fleeting moments of note among innumerable others in our 60,000-year continental human history.

Anachronistic, steeped in sentiment and myth, they belong largely to an Australia that was comfortable to (officially) define itself as being for the white man.

Some will always celebrate the arrival of the First Fleet on 26 January, despite the fact this day – more than any other – marks, for Indigenous Australians, dispossession and all its associated multi-generational malevolence.

Insofar as Anzac Day gives Australia an opportunity to remember its veterans of all wars and reflect upon the terrible human impact of armed conflict, each 25th of April should rightly endure as a moment of national commemoration.

Though perhaps, it is time, too, for Anzac Day and, or, Remembrance Day (a day to supposedly remember all war dead and which falls on 11 November, the anniversary of the first world war armistice) to encompass recall of the tens of thousands of Indigenous warriors who resisted the European invasion here.

Many Indigenous service personnel – from the Boer war to the present – have described the anomalies they have felt between being recognised for fighting in the King or Queen's uniform and the lack of (mainstream, cultural) acknowledgement afforded ancestors who resisted, with shield and spear, the imperial red-coats.

The anthropologist William Stanner was not the first to see how Australian history had, like the continent itself, been colonised.

But he was among the first of his epoch to articulate the malaise that afflicted conversation about what should inform the national being.

And so in his 1968 Boyer lectures, Stanner referenced the "great Australian silence". This was the failure of most books about Australia's past to substantively address Indigenous history, not least resistance and black/white frontier violence.

Stanner said: "It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale."

A national cult of forgetting.

The obverse, of course, is what the nation chooses to remember.

I've written before about how governor Lachlan Macquarie (monstrous in his treatment of Indigenous people) was responsible for creating the cult of white imperial/colonial self-congratulation that evolved from his "foundation day" into Australia Day.

For a long time now, especially since the cultural resurgence of Anzac in the 1980s, Australian sentiment about national foundation has largely found anchorage in 26 January and 25 April.

Here's a prediction: with the end of the centenary celebrations of the first world war in 2018 (upon which Australia is lavishing hundreds of millions of dollars), Anzac could assume a more low-key, contextual place in popular Australian consciousness. Meanwhile, mainstream debate about commemoration of Australia (Invasion) Day – with all its exclusive connotations for some migrants, religious minorities and Indigenous people – is, I think, a harbinger of potential future renaissance.

Will Australia Day be celebrated on 26 January in 50 years, even 20 or 10 years? Doubtful.

But, like so much other important national business, consensus about the acknowledgment of Australia's supposedly defining moments remains, for now, in the stultifying, python-grip of bipartisan major party politics.

Thankfully the path – blazed initially by Stanner and others including Henry Reynolds – is now being graced with significant others, notably and most recently, though by no means exclusively, Nick Brodie, Anna Clark and Mark McKenna.

Brodie's new book bears the title 1787 – a provocation to consider the tens of thousands of years of continental civilisation and external contact (with Macassans, Dutch, French and other British) that precedes the date that so fixates national memory, 26 January 1788. There's not room here to expound on its achievements, except to say that it is history – incisive, provocative, meticulously researched – at its best.

Meanwhile, McKenna's From The Edge – Australia's Lost Histories is equally provocative, not least for its exploration of some telling early and complex relationships between European (and other) interlopers and the Indigenous inhabitants, that have been overlooked in mainstream Australian historical narratives. McKenna documents profound, life-saving acts of Indigenous generosity, recognised, gratefully by the imposters – but too often generally repaid with assumptions that the dark-skinned were, nonetheless, subhuman savages and, therefore, expendable.

Both books echo the multitude of stories that are in the ancient songlines, art, music and oral histories of Indigenous Australia. They amplify how our history is now intellectually and emotionally obliged to demonstrate that, in this timeless land, colonialism and all since is but a blink of the eye.

It's hard, meanwhile, to find a pithier, more delightfully conversational book about history than Clark's Private Lives, Public History. It cleverly provokes thought and, inevitably, discussion about how and why we have defined ourselves as a nation. It should be in all classrooms.

Change is glacial. But it is coming.