

Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission**From:** Anonymous 1459**Dated:** November 2024**Submission:****What do you know about the colonisation of Victoria and its impacts on First Peoples?**

I have lived in Melbourne all my life. When I read James Boyce's book on its founding (1835) it profoundly changed my view of my city - I have not been able to look at it in the same way. And he talks not only about Melbourne, but the lands surrounding, that were invaded so quickly that the people who were here, the First Peoples, didn't have a chance. I'm now reading Don Watson's *Caledonia Australis*, about the Scottish Highlanders who colonised Gippsland, after having themselves been dispossessed of their ancestral lands by the English. I grew up in the time of the great Australian silence; I remember at school being taught - perhaps a classmate had the temerity to ask what happened to 'the Aborigines' - that they just faded into the background, I'm not even sure where to. I now understand that the process of colonisation and its effects on First Peoples was brutal - murderous - swift and thorough, though not as thorough as the colonisers would have liked, or as was taught until recently.

What has been your experience learning about First Nations history and culture in Victoria's education system? Do you feel it was comprehensive?

See above. I grew up in the time of the great Australian silence; I remember at school being taught - perhaps a classmate had the temerity to ask what happened to 'the Aborigines' - that they just faded into the background, I'm not even sure where they were supposed to have gone. The only acceptable education about history and culture related to pre-colonisation. I remember being taught a rather scientific sounding theory that Aboriginality could be bred out (unlike African blackness, which carried a risk of 'throwbacks') and that this was the best thing. In the meantime we had to do what we can 'to smooth the pillow of a dying race'. Even though we were taught that the referendum in 1967 should be supported, we also learnt that assimilation was the only realistic policy.

What changes would you like to see in Victoria to promote better understanding and respect for First People?

Education in schools has undoubtedly improved since my time. As I've come to realise that there's many First People's histories and cultures - some common themes, but also many particular differences - I've been trying to learn more, and it's not straightforward! At least not in the whitefella way of understanding. Well-meaning people so often misconstrue First People's culture and history, and I have to assume I'm one of them. This is a long way round of saying that I wonder about the quality of what's being taught in schools, especially by teachers who aren't First Peoples themselves and whose own education might be pretty limited. So a practical thing, quality school education. The Premier's testimony to the Commission was powerful for coming from the state's leader, but also a bit shocking for her admission of how little she knew. We probably need more honest discussion from respected leaders. I'm thinking of how we can work to promote better understanding and respect without seeming to talk down to people. And also not putting responsibility for this onto First Peoples.

In what ways do you think non-First Nations Victorians can contribute to the process of truth-telling and treaty?

See above. Those of us who see ourselves as ‘upstanders’ (I love this word that I heard from Aunty Esme Bamblett - allies can be sympathetic bystanders or active upstanders) can share what we know in our own social circles. We can also call out racist comments (doing this can be scary; I might say something like ‘I’m not comfortable with that’). This needs that we need to be clear in our understanding of what counts as a racist comment or racist behaviour. We can also tell truths from our own stories. One ancestor has routinely been described as a pioneer of the town he lived in (in NSW). I think about how that might have been experienced by the local people who were there already. I have found a letter that my great-grandfather wrote in 1901 to a German scientist’s about a paper on ‘brain evolution’, where he wrote ‘The Australian aborigines are truly || representative of an inferior race in process of total extinction, brought about by contact with people of a higher intelligence.’ I wasn’t sure about including the quote as it’s quite shocking, but I think we need to be honest about just how brutal the thinking of the past was. And I’m not sure it’s all gone away.

In what ways could First Peoples history and culture be promoted in Victoria?

I think that gradually this is happening, especially where culture is concerned. I’m not sure that a program led by government is the answer. Perhaps get out of the way and not try to control what Victorian First Peoples are doing. Just facilitate. Promoting history: storytelling. How many people know about William Cooper, that he’s celebrated in Israel as the only person anywhere to attempt to petition the German embassy in protest at Kristallnacht? How many more stories, large and small, local and statewide are there? And statues, murals - civic acknowledgments.

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