TEACHER RESOURCES – THE AUSTRALIAN COLONIES

Colonial Western Australian History – Study of the Swan River Colony 1827 to 1890s

TEACHER RESOURCE 1
THE BRITISH EMPIRE: REASONS FOR BRITISH COLONIAL EXPANSION

Economic Factors – Markets and Resources

At a time when many European nations were becoming industrialized, one of the reasons for colonization was the desire for new markets and natural resources. The colonies could provide the raw materials (such as wool) needed to feed these increasingly hungry factories.

Some argue the American War of Independence, when Britain lost the thirteen American colonies, was due to a conflict about the purpose of a colony. At the heart of the division between the colonists and Britain was a fundamentally different concept of the purpose of the colonies. To the British, the American lands were there largely to provide raw materials to Britain and be consumers of British manufactured goods. This feeling expressed itself in an increasing control and restriction of American trade and industry that helped to build up resentment, especially in New England, where manufacturing goods for export to the southern colonies was already an important part of the local economy. In contrast, many of the colonists saw themselves as carving a new society from the wilderness, unrestricted by decisions made 3,000 miles away across the Atlantic.

The term ‘settler colonialism’ is a term sometimes given to the specific form of colonialism which the American colonists had in mind (in contrast to the British government). Settler colonialism involves foreign family units moving into a region and reproducing. Land is the main motivation as opposed to natural resources such as spices. The Swan River Settlement is an example of settler colonialism.

The Industrial Revolution

This is the name given by historians to the period in the late 1700s to the mid 1800s when the economies of developed countries were changing rapidly. The huge increase in industrial production - driven by inventions, improvements in transport and communications, and new sources of power - led to a move from agrarian based economies to industrial ones. With it came mass production and the search for new markets and raw materials to feed the voracious appetite for growth.

The expansion of towns and cities brought great wealth for some but led to overcrowding and poor conditions for many others. Together with wretched work practices in factories – the *dark satanic mills* referred to in the hymn *Jerusalem* - there was a rise in crime and a desire to discover a new life across the seas, for those rich enough to have the option. The
expansion of the British Empire and the search for new colonies was the impetus for voyages of discovery in the southern hemisphere leading directly to European colonization of Australia.

While the name Revolution implies a sudden and violent uprising, the birth of industrial economies was a more gradual process spanning nearly a century. However for those living at the height of change in the early 1800s, the world had a ‘revolutionary’ feel as war enveloped Europe and the quiet rural life was in upheaval with subsistence agriculture on small holdings being replaced by enclosed fields controlled by powerful landowners and steady migration to towns and cities.

**Strategic Factors – Competition among Nations**

Coupled to economic reasons for colonization is the desire amongst European countries to have control of places geographically situated in strategic places. This was a time when the country with the strongest navy was in effect the greatest power: controlling the seas protected your maritime trade routes.

We mark 26th January 1788 (the arrival of the First Fleet) as the start of the colony of New South Wales but documents representing Britain’s first official expression of interest in Australia predate that and are evidence of the desire to find exploitable natural resources and to expand Britain’s control of strategic trading posts around the globe. Between 1768 and 1779 James Cook made three voyages to the South Pacific and each time carried ‘Secret Instructions’ authorizing him to take possession of ‘a continent or land of great extent’, the fabled ‘Great Southern Continent’, and to annexe any convenient trading posts in the King’s name.

So on Wednesday 22nd August 1770, on Possession Island, he declared much of the east of Australia a British possession:

> “Notwithstanding I had in the Name of His Majesty taken possession of several places upon this coast, I now once more hoisted English coulers and in the Name of His Majesty King George the Third took possession of the whole Eastern Coast … by the name New South Wales, together with all the Bays, Harbours, Rivers and Islands situate upon the said coast ….”

A belief amongst European nations at the time, the so-called Balance of Power, may have driven such actions. European powers made alliances with one another to prevent one nation or alliance becoming the single most powerful force in Europe, they were even prepared to go to war to prevent this.

This was certainly the case in regards the first settlement in Western Australia. Britain sent explorer George Vancouver to claim the south coast around what is now Albany. On 26 September 1791 he declared the area around Point Possession to be British:
“This port, the first which we had discovered, I honoured with the name of King George the Third’s Sound, and this day being the anniversary of Her Royal Highness Princess Charlotte Augusta Matilda’s birth, the harbour behind Point Possession I called Princess Royal Harbour.”

But it wasn’t until 1826 when the French were sailing around the area that this ‘claim’ was consolidated and Major Edmund Lockyer was sent from News South Wales to establish a penal colony / military outpost there.

**Penal Colonies – Dumping ground for prisoners**

Huge numbers of ‘criminals’ clogged British jails in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Until the American War of Independence many were sent to Britain’s thirteen American colonies (in particular Georgia) as cheap labour. But during and after the war (the colonies declared their independence in 1776) this was no longer an option and prison numbers rose again. Joseph Banks, the botanist who sailed with Captain Cook in HM Bark Endeavour in 1779, suggested Botany Bay on the east coast of Australia as a suitable place for a convict colony.

Unlike New South Wales, the Swan River Colony was intended as a settlement for free settlers, not convicts. The word colony comes from the Latin word for colonist – *colonus* – which, according to Wikipedia, also implies a farmer. So, just as Rome established colonies in different parts of the world, the concept was one of settler farmers.

Interestingly, New South Wales could have been a settler colony like the Swan River Colony if the suggestion had been taken up to resettle ‘American loyalists’ there (those who supported the losing side, Britain, during the War of Independence).

Instead, New South Wales was needed to take the overflow from British jails and in 1788 the First Fleet arrived in Botany Bay with approximately 1500 people, half of those being convicts and the rest largely involved with controlling them, rather than the families and free settlers who came to the Swan River Colony.

Albany, which in 1831 became part of the Swan River Colony, was established partly as a penal colony to replace Port Macquarie. In 1827 Major Edmund Lockyer established a small settlement at King George Sound with troops and convicts. The settlement was originally called Frederickstown then renamed Albany for the same person, Prince Frederick, Duke of York and Albany, the second son of King George III.