The British explorer Captain James Cook sailed into Botany Bay in 1770 and claimed the land called *terra nullius* for Britain. *Terra nullius* meaning ‘no man’s land’ was enough justification for the British establishment to take what they pleased, regardless of the fact of indigenous habitation, as evidenced from the very beginning of discovery.

The British politicians and law makers of the time believed they were entitled to take the land and put it to better use for the needs of Britain. To take it without war or treaty. The Aboriginal nations were not recognised, and this was to be the case for over 220 years.

Traditional Aboriginal authority and laws were ignored, and many clans lost their lands without even knowing what had happened. Further problems occurred when the Aborigines continued to go about their way of life, including moving from place to place. This often resulted in crossing a settler’s property which was now considered to be unlawful, resulting in disciplinary action from officials at the time. Soon, many of the indigenous people occupied the prisons alongside the convicts.

The Aboriginal people were forced to abandon their land and accept the laws of the newcomers. They were also expected to start living the way of the settlers, to assimilate, which caused many problems for their nomadic way of life.

The lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples dramatically changed after 1788. The newcomers were not invited and after initial curiosity and tolerance, not welcomed. Indigenous peoples suffered greatly through introduced diseases and illness; such as smallpox, their land was taken from them, new animals introduced into the environment, and lives were lost caused by constant conflict with the colonisers. Even their ancestral and spiritual beliefs were in danger of being lost forever. The British establishment had travelled all the way from England to impose new social, economic and religious order.

In New South Wales, many convicts began to dislike the Aboriginals. The native people had excellent knowledge and understanding of the land and were often rewarded by colonial officials to track and return runaway convicts. The escaped convicts began eating native animals, such as kangaroos and wallabies in order to survive in the harsh environment.

In turn, this behaviour resulted in the Aboriginal hunters taking and eating the introduced livestock animals, including sheep and goats, as the usual native wildlife in their diet was becoming scarce. This was a large cause of conflict as it was considered by the colonists as stealing and ended with many deaths in the indigenous population.
As the colonists grew in number and convicts became free settlers, the number of people who began looking to start a new life in this harsh land increased. Many travelled beyond settlement boundaries and further into native territory to claim land that did not belong to them. They ignored the indigenous residents who already lived there and cleared the land for farming. This included very influential and powerful leaders of the colonies, who decided the location of their new land and how much they chose to claim for themselves. The Aboriginal people were often caught in ambush unawares and left defenceless against the settler’s deadly weapons.

The newcomers were unforgiving, and they believed without doubt the land was theirs to take. New laws in property rights were established and enforced with brutality. There were even instances where murder was considered a rightful action when defending the new land rights.

The new colonial Government set a large police force consisting of military men and convicts to split up Aboriginal groups and move them on to other places. Preferably far away from where the new order was being established. Many indigenous people were taken in to provide free labour and often served as domestic servants or stockmen.

The indigenous population was severely reduced within the first 100 years of British colonisation. The Government decided to ‘protect’ who was left of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, by creating official policies in how to manage them, including forcing them to live in designated areas called reservations and stations, which were run by missionaries.

Eventually, as decades of violence passed into the early 1900s, Aboriginal children (particularly those who were light-skinned) were removed from their families and taken away to be brought up into white society. Later, it was to become official government policy (Assimilation Policy 1951 – 1962) as the ultimate intent was the destruction of Aboriginal society. The children taken were called the ‘Stolen Generation’, and its impact and distress caused to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remains to this day.

**Inquiry Tasks:**

- Watch this video - Australia's Land Rights: The Mabo Decision and Native Title (3:25mins)
- ‘terra nullius’ – write a definition of your understanding of this term, and explanation how this British law impacted the indigenous populations in the first twenty years of European settlement.
- As an Aboriginal (adult male or female, child), write a diary entry explaining what happened when the new settlers arrived, and describe how you felt when they attempted to take over the land that your tribe has lived on for generations.

 **My Place 1788: Waruwi**

ABC Education Interactions between Europeans and Aboriginal Tasmanians
http://education.abc.net.au/home#!/media/2443651/interactions-between-europeans-and-aboriginal-tasmanians

Australians Together – Our History

National Museum of Australia and Ryebuck Media 2008