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A History of Melbourne

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Introduction

Melbourne stands as one of Australia's most dynamic and vibrant cities—a metropolis celebrated for its creativity, diversity, and quality of life. Yet beneath the city's contemporary bustle lies a layered and complex history that stretches back tens of thousands of years. From its Indigenous foundations through waves of colonisation, prosperity, hardship, and renewal, the story of Melbourne is one of continual transformation. This book offers a comprehensive account of that journey, tracing the evolution of Melbourne from its earliest days as the land of the Kulin nation to its present role as a global city.

The history of Melbourne cannot be told without recognising the deep spiritual and physical connection of the Kulin peoples to the land known as Narm. For millennia, groups like the Wurundjeri and Bunurong managed and cared for the area's rich landscapes, establishing sophisticated societies long before the arrival of Europeans. The traces of their enduring culture survive, woven into the urban fabric of the city and acknowledged in contemporary debates about heritage and identity.

European exploration in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries marked a dramatic turning point. The process of settlement—often undertaken in disregard of Indigenous rights—brought profound upheaval and tragedy for Melbourne's original inhabitants. The founding of Melbourne in the 1830s, and its official survey as a township shortly after, set in motion a rapid transformation. Within decades, the settlement known for its muddy banks and grid-like streets would become renowned as “Marvellous Melbourne,” the grand heart of Victorian prosperity and ambition.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Melbourne was shaped by gold rushes, waves of migration, and bursts of innovation. Its fortunes rose and fell with economic cycles, but the city repeatedly demonstrated a capacity for reinvention. The legacy of events such as the 1956 Olympic Games, the influx of post-war migrants, and the implementation of urban renewal projects continues to define Melbourne's distinctive character—one built on both the challenges and triumphs of its past.

As a twenty-first century metropolis, Melbourne remains in constant flux, navigating the pressures of population growth, cultural change, and global challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet the city's identity is rooted in a long tradition of adaptation and openness. Today, Melbourne honours its Indigenous heritage while embracing its multicultural future, earning global recognition for its liveability, creativity, and cosmopolitan spirit.

This book invites readers to journey through the major eras of Melbourne's history,

exploring how people, policies, and pivotal events have shaped the city's trajectory. In tracing the interplay between land, culture, power, and community, we gain insight into Melbourne's ongoing story—a history as complex, compelling, and unique as the city itself.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land of the Kulin Nation: Melbourne Before Europeans

Before concrete and glass, before streets lined with cafes, before the distant hum of traffic, the land upon which Melbourne now sprawls pulsed with a different rhythm. For countless generations, stretching back perhaps forty thousand years or more, this place was the domain of the Kulin Nation. This alliance of Indigenous language groups held a deep, intricate connection to the country, a bond forged over millennia of living with and caring for the land and waterways. Their presence was not merely inhabitation; it was a complex stewardship that shaped the environment and was shaped by it in return.

The Kulin Nation comprised several distinct groups, including the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung, the Bunurong Boon Wurrung, and the Wathaurong. While the broader Kulin alliance encompassed a wider territory, the lands where Melbourne now stands were primarily the traditional Country of the Wurundjeri and Bunurong peoples. These groups spoke related languages and shared many cultural practices, yet maintained their own distinct identities and territories, their boundaries respected through custom and interaction.

This area, known to the Traditional Owners as Narm, was a vital heartland. Situated around the wide bay and the winding river they called Birrarung – the 'river of mists' – Narm was a place of abundance. The rich estuary and surrounding wetlands teemed with fish, eels, and waterfowl. The grasslands and woodlands supported kangaroos, possums, and other game, alongside a diverse array of edible plants and roots. This bounty allowed the Kulin people to thrive, sustaining their communities through a sophisticated understanding of the seasonal cycles and the intricate ecology of their Country.

Their lifestyle was one of sustainable use, not exploitation. The Kulin people moved across their lands according to the seasons, following the availability of resources. They camped in temporary shelters, often called 'mia mias' – simple bark huts that could be erected and dismantled with ease. These seasonal movements were dictated by the ripening of plants, the spawning runs of eels, or the movements of game, ensuring that no single area was over-used and that resources were allowed to replenish. This mobility was not nomadic wandering but a carefully planned and culturally significant pattern of habitation.

The Wurundjeri people, whose name is said to come from the manna gum tree ('wurun') and a grub found near it ('djeri'), held the land along the Birrarung. They

knew the river intimately, its moods, its eddies, its bounty. The Bunurong people held the coastal lands and the southern shores of the bay. Their connection to the sea and foreshore was equally profound, relying on shellfish, seals, and other marine life. Their territories met, and interactions, both social and ceremonial, were governed by long-established protocols and reciprocal obligations.

Creation stories formed the bedrock of Kulin society, explaining the origins of the land, its features, and the people themselves. Central to these stories was the spirit-ancestor Bunjil, the eagle, a creator figure and law-giver. These narratives were not mere myths but practical guides for living, embedding within them knowledge of the land, social rules, and moral codes. They reinforced the deep spiritual connection between the Kulin people and their Country, emphasizing responsibility and respect for all living things and the landscape itself.

Meeting places were crucial within the Kulin Nation, facilitating gatherings for ceremonies, trade, dispute resolution, and maintaining alliances. The Narrm area, with its strategic location and abundant resources, served as a significant hub for such meetings. The confluence of fresh and saltwater, the convergence of different clan territories, made it a natural place for peoples from across the Kulin lands to come together, share knowledge, and strengthen their bonds.

The "treaty" later claimed by John Batman in 1835 involved a ceremony, likely a *tanderrum*, which in Kulin custom was an agreement for temporary access to land and resources by visitors, ensuring safe passage and shared use. This highlights the Kulin peoples' established systems for managing relationships between different groups and their territories, systems that were profoundly misunderstood or willfully ignored by the arriving Europeans who held a vastly different concept of land ownership as an exclusive, permanent commodity.

Tragically, the ancient world of the Kulin Nation faced devastating disruption long before permanent European settlement took hold in the Port Phillip District. Diseases like smallpox, measles, and venereal diseases, introduced by Europeans further north, spread across the continent through Indigenous trade routes and social networks. By the time European pastoralists began to penetrate the future colony of Victoria in the 1820s, Indigenous populations had already suffered catastrophic declines. Estimates suggest the population was drastically reduced from potentially 100,000 in 1788 to under 20,000 by the time European eyes first seriously considered settling the south. This horrific demographic collapse significantly weakened Indigenous societies, making them more vulnerable to the subsequent wave of colonisation and dispossession.

Despite the profound changes wrought by colonisation and the subsequent growth of the city, the Kulin peoples' connection to Narrm endures. While the physical landscape has been dramatically altered, numerous sites of cultural and spiritual significance

remain, often unseen or unrecognised within the modern urban sprawl. Ongoing efforts by the Traditional Owners seek to protect and revitalise these places, ensuring that the ancient history of the land is not forgotten.

In a contemporary acknowledgement of this enduring heritage, the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council formally agreed upon the boundaries between the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri and Bunurong peoples across the city in 2021. This modern demarcation, running across the metropolitan area, places sites like the CBD, Richmond, and Hawthorn within Wurundjeri Country, while areas such as Albert Park, St Kilda, and Caulfield are on Bunurong Country. This formal recognition underscores that Melbourne's story is built upon foundations laid tens of thousands of years ago, on land that continues to hold deep meaning and significance for its original custodians. This ancient history, woven into the landscape and preserved in the cultural memory of the Kulin Nation, provides the essential context for understanding the dramatic transformation that would follow with the arrival of Europeans.

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