

# From Aussie Aussie oi oi on my birthday, to Always Was Always Will Be

By Belinda Huntriss 21 Jan 2020 - 4:33 PM UPDATED YESTERDAY 7:19 PM

Summer used to be my favourite time of the year but as the days get longer, hotter and the end of the month fast approaches, a familiar feeling of dread comes over me. I share my birthday with the birth of colonial Australia.

If I rewind to my childhood, at this time of year I would be bursting with excitement for the date fast approaching. My birthday would be all about family, friends, parties and ice-cream cake.

But I didn't know what I didn't know.

My school experience was Anglo-centric, devoid of any Aboriginal perspective. I was taught Captain Cook discovered Australia along with the explorers who braved the harsh Australian landscape.

I learnt nothing about colonisation and the intergenerational impacts it had on Aboriginal people. In fact, my education contributed to a total confusion of who I was and an embarrassment about my brown skin, which even resulted in me trying to scrub my skin off in the shower and asking my mum if I could have a skin colour change like Michael Jackson.

That's when Mum realised I needed some questions answered.



I grew up in Gloucester, NSW - Worimi country, a small farming town on the mid north coast.

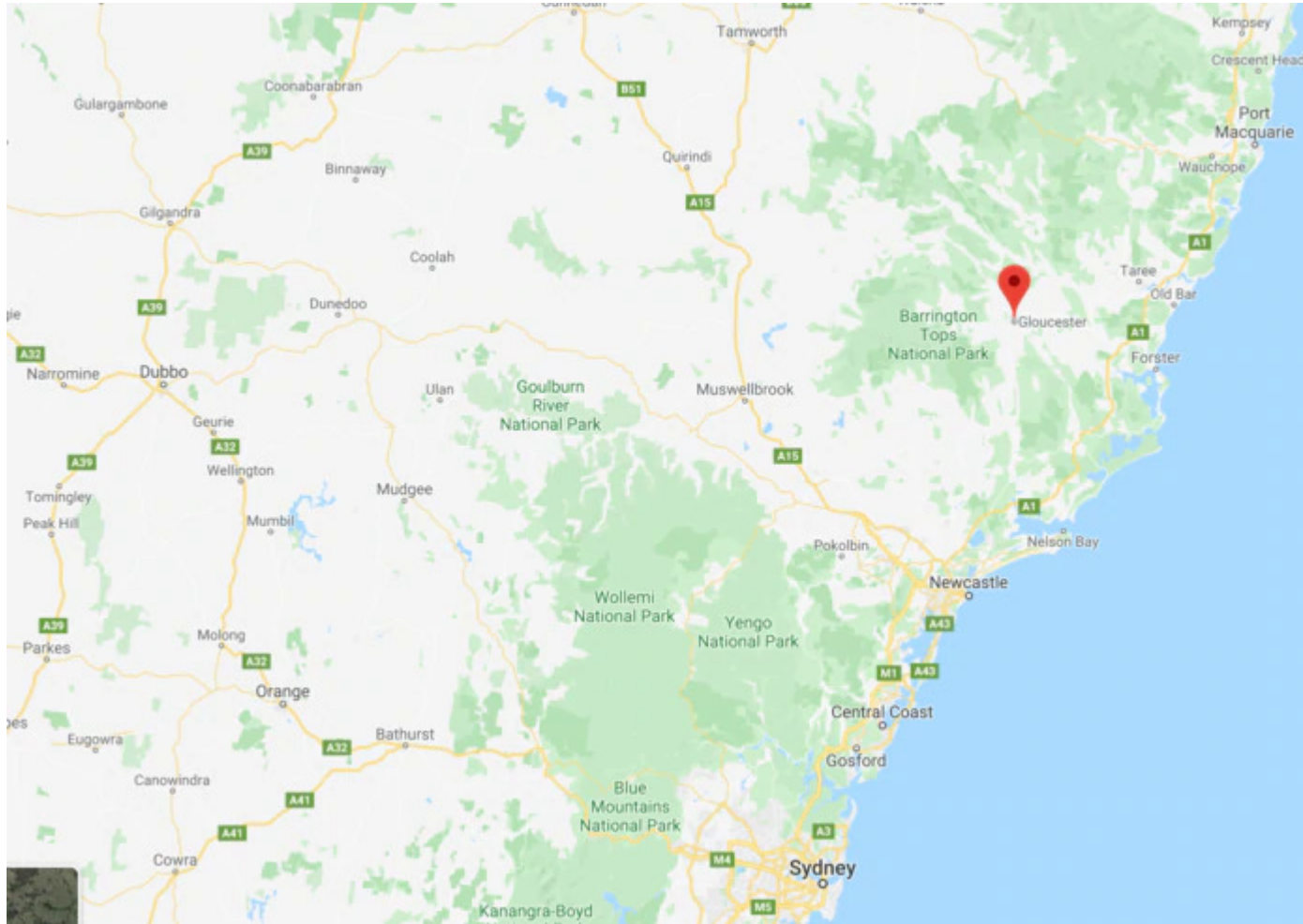
I moved away many years ago, but when I drive back and see the mountain range I know I am home.

It is a beautiful place with a dark history. The valley held secrets and so did my family.

My upbringing was typical of many country kids - swimming in the river, riding horses, camping, fishing and playing sports. I was happy.

But I grew up disconnected from my Aboriginal heritage, despite living in the area nearby our traditional country.

And I have spent years trying to figure out why?



In the region where I was raised, there is a strong and proud Aboriginal history of resistance and survival.

The impact of colonisation was devastating for the Worimi and Biripi people, who suffered dispossession of land and hunting grounds, poisonings, massacres, violence with many moved on to missions.

Growing up in a town like Gloucester was challenging for me as a brown-skinned, clearly identifiably Aboriginal kid, with what we called a Neapolitan ice-cream family - a brother with red hair, a blonde sister, a brown-skinned mum and a dad with English heritage.

Every year on my birthday, the 26<sup>th</sup> January, I celebrated Australia Day with the rest of our town.

I hadn't yet pieced together that this date would be challenging for someone like me, with mixed heritage.



I was on the front page of the local paper for being the first baby born on Australia Day at our local hospital, and I won an Australia Day award at our local ceremony. This was all normal where I grew up.

But I didn't know what I didn't know.

At primary school I experienced many painful instances of racism that in hindsight were vitally important in helping me understand more about my identity- without them I may not have searched for answers, to know who I am.

My mum and dad were open with me about my Aboriginal heritage. I knew my mother was Aboriginal, from the country we lived upon, but she couldn't

tell me much, as she herself didn't know much.

And you dont know what you dont know.

I am grateful for the snippets of information about my Aboriginal family, although I am resigned to knowing I may never get all the answers I need, as all of my Old People have passed away now.

When I asked about my great-great grandmother's skin colour, I was told she was never without long sleeves, a hat and gloves. Could it be that she was covering up her identity as an Aboriginal person?





After high school I studied to become a Primary School Teacher. I attended the University of Newcastle where attending Wollotuka changed the course of my life. I learnt from Elders, teachers and community members about the Aboriginal history of our country, and where I was from. I heard stories of pain, trauma and the outright horror of dispossession, massacre and violence, removal of children and segregation.

Once I knew, I couldn't forget it.

I feel an obligation to share these stories- because you don't know what you don't know.

I'm now a mum with two beautiful, cheeky boys who we are trying to raise strong in all their cultural identities.



It is challenging having honest conversations with my oldest son about the 26<sup>th</sup> January, when his paternal great grandparents were moved off their homelands to a mission island, had segregated schooling and were refused entry to hotels. My son's paternal grandmother had to hide from the welfare.

How can we be neutral about these injustices?

A few years ago I was advocating for #changethedate. I believe the 26th is a reminder of how much culture has been lost, across many nations and within my own family.

The more I learn, about my family, my culture and our history, the more my views on the date shift.

Now I support the movement to abolish the date; to me it seems sadistic to celebrate any date that glorifies a so-called 'advanced civilisation' colonising the nation at the expense of the First peoples.

My birthday is still spent surrounded by family, friends and ice cream cake, but at times it is overshadowed by a feeling of dread, sadness and anger.

Ironically, my nine year old nephew now shares the same birthday.

Unlike me, my nephew and sons have all known since birth, their heritage. I feel positive about our next generation.

The students I teach get it. They understand what happened to Aboriginal people as recently as the 1970's was morally wrong. Young people are our future leaders and politicians, and since we now teach both sides of history, I know one day soon this day that represents Australia's colonialism, January 26 - Australia Day - will be gone forever.

Because, once you know, you know.

***NITV presents a selection of dedicated programming, special events and news highlights with a focus on encouraging greater understanding of Indigenous Australian perspectives on 26 January. Join the conversation #AlwaysWasAlwaysWillBe***

**Belinda Huntriss** is a descendant of the Worimi and Darug peoples. She has worked in Aboriginal education for ten years but she says her most important role is being a mother.