TIMELINE: THE EPIC HISTORY OF AUSTRALIA ©Dr. John Freedman 2025

65,000 BC- ***Homo sapiens* arrives in Australia** about 20,000 years after leaving Africa (and about 20,000 years *before* arriving in Western Europe)
1606 AD - Dutch mariner **Willem Janszoon lands on the western side of Cape York Peninsula**. Australia now becomes known as 'New Holland'.
A few months after Janszoon's landing, Spaniard Luis Vaz de Torres sails through the Torres Strait between Australia and New Guinea. The existence of the Strait is kept a secret for over 100 years.
1616 - Dutch mariner **Dirk Hartog lands in Shark's Bay on the western extremity of Australia** (by accident, after being blown off course on his way to Indonesia). He leaves an engraved pewter plate to mark the occasion - the Hartog Plate can be seen today in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (despite several Australian requests for 'repatriation').
1642-44 - Dutch mariner **Abel Tasman lands on Tasmania** and goes on to **explore the north coast of Australia as well as parts of New Zealand** which he named 'Staten Land' and thought it might well be connected to South America (cartographers realized otherwise and soon re-named it New Zealand after the Dutch province of Zeeland). Tasman did not realize Tasmania was an island. He named it 'Van Diemen's Land' in honor of the Governor General of the East Indies, Anthony Van Diemen.
1688 & 1699 - Englishman **William Dampier** - the pirate, adventurer, naturalist, and writer 'of exquisite mind' who circumnavigated the world 3 times - **lands at Kings Sound and explores the north coast.**
1770 - On the first of his three voyages, James **Cook lands in Botany Bay** and explores the east coast, claiming it for King George III. This begins the inexorable march toward British hegemony over Australia.
1788 - 'Australia Day' - Captain Arthur Philip sails into Sydney Cove with the First Fleet (of 11 ships) to set up an agricultural cooperative using convicts as laborers. The Union Jack is hoisted and the British colony of New South Wales is declared. It comprises central and eastern mainland Australia, Tasmania, both islands of New Zealand, and Norfolk Island. The entire eastern half of Australia is now British, while the western half remains Dutch 'New Holland'. (Note: 'Invasion Day', 'Survivors' Day', 'Day of Mourning', 'Founders' Day' and other names have been proposed amidst ongoing politicized controversy.)
1798 - **Matthew Flinders and George Bass circumnavigate Tasmania**, proving definitively that it is an island. The Strait between Tasmania and the Australian continent is named the Bass Strait.
1803 - **Flinders circumnavigates Australia**. Soon after, in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars, he sets sail back to England and is taken prisoner in French Mauritius for 6 years, preventing publication of his map.
1814 - **Flinders finally publishes his map** which for the first time **labels the entire continent AUSTRALIA**
1825 – The island of Tasmania becomes an independent colony (still called 'Van Diemen's Land').
1829 – The British Empire establishes the Swan River Colony in the western half of mainland Australia. The Dutch, focused on their lucrative spice trade in Indonesia, make no protest. 'New Holland' is no more, and **the entire continent is now under British hegemony**.
1832 – The Swan River Colony is renamed the colony of Western Australia
1836 – The Colony of South Australia is established. **Charles Darwin visits Australia on the *Beagle* - its fauna play a major role in stirring his first heretical thoughts on evolution.**
1839 - The *Beagle* (without Darwin) returns to Australia under the command of Capt. John Wickham who **names the city of Darwin after the naturalist and also names the nearby gulf the Beagle Gulf.**
1841 – The islands of New Zealand are separated from the colony of New South Wale and now become the **separate Colony of New Zealand**.
1851 – Southeastern mainland Australia becomes the Colony of Victoria.
1854 - Gold miners in Ballarat, Victoria, rebel against oppressive licensing laws and overbearing colonial authority. This **'Eureka Rebellion'** is seen as a foundational moment in Australia's march toward full democracy and independence.

1856 – **Van Diemen's Land is renamed The Colony of Tasmania** in honor of the great Dutch mariner.
1857 – Much of southern central mainland Australia becomes the independent colony of South Australia, and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands (in the Indian Ocean about halfway between Australia and India) are annexed by Britain.
1859 – The northeastern portion of mainland Australia and the Coral Sea Islands become the Colony of Queensland.
1878 – Britain annexes Ashmore Island in the Indian Ocean, 200 mi/320 km off the mainland coast.
1883 – Queensland annexes southeastern New Guinea. (Northeastern New Guinea is Germany's 'Kaiserwilhelmsland' and all of the western half of New Guinea is Dutch.)
1884 – **Southeastern New Guinea becomes the British Territory of Papua**
1886 – The Cocos (Keeling) Islands become administratively part of the Straits Settlements.
1888 – Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean(1600 mi/2600 km northwest of Perth - closer to Asian than Australia) is annexed by Britain and incorporated into the Straits Settlements.
1901 – New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania, Western Australia, Victoria & South Australia colonies federate into the **Commonwealth of Australia, with substantial gains in self-government.**This milestone event begins the process toward true autonomy which will be completed in 1986 (*vide infra*).
1902 – **Britain formally transfers its Territory of Papua in southeastern eastern New Guinea to Australia**.
(Northeastern New Guinea remains Germany's colony of Kaiserwilhelmland, for now.)
(White) women gain the right to vote in federal elections.
1909 – Britain annexes Cartier Island in the Indian Ocean, nearby Ashmore.
1910 – Britain claims Heard and McDonald Islands in the Southern Ocean - 2550 mi/4100 km southwest of Perth and just 1056 mi/1700 km north of Antarctica.
1911– The state of South Australia transfers control of northern central mainland Australia to the federal government, creating the Northern Territory. A small pocket of New South Wales around the city of Canberra is transferred to the federal government (which is seated within it), creating the 'Federal Capital Territory'.
1914 - **Australia enters WWI on the Allied side** the same day that the U.K. declares war on Germany.
1915 – **Australian and New Zealand troops ('ANZACs') land at Gallipoli in a failed campaign** to seize the Dardanelles Strait and knock the Ottoman Empire out of World War I, resulting in over 250,000 casualties on both sides but solidifying Australian (and New Zealand) national pride. The first landing on 25 April is celebrated as Anzac Day in both countries. The tragic outcome also contributed to Australia's drive for independence from British decision-making and control.
Also in 1915: A small pocket of New South Wales around Jervis Bay port area is transferred to the federal government and incorporated into the Federal Capital Territory.
1920 – Following the defeat of Germany, the League of Nations establishes an **Australian mandate in northeastern New Guinea** (the former Kaiserwilhelmland) which becomes the Territory of New Guinea. Australian now governs the entire eastern half of New Guinea. (The Dutch still control the western half.)
1923 – Another German territory, the island of Nauru, is mandated to Australia, Britain and New Zealand with joint trusteeship.
1931 – Britain recognizes Australian possession of Ashmore & Cartier Islands.
1933 – Britain's claims in Antarctica become the Australian Antarctic Territory.
1938 – The Federal Capital Territory is renamed the Australian Capital Territory.
1939 - **Australia enters WWII** on the Allied side the same day that the U.K. declares war on Germany.

1942 –
May 4-8: In the **Battle of the Coral Sea,** the Allies led by the USA thwart the Japanese invasion of Port Moresby, New Guinea, thereby saving Australia from an isolating blockade, more extensive bombings, and/or outright Japanese invasion. To this day, this important event still cements a bond between the USA and Australia. The battle also marks a turning point in naval warfare and the beginning of the end of Japanese momentum in the Pacific War - see my separate handout.
August: Japan seizes Nauru and Christmas Island.
October: A key moment of legislative independence occurs with the adoption of the **Statute of Westminster** which gives Australia equal status with the UK in the British Commonwealth, marking another major milestone toward full independence.
1942-45 - **Australian forces heroically defend New Guinea from Japanese incursions** in the longest and arguably most horrific and grueling battleground of the Pacific War.
1945 - The **Japanese surrender** on August 15. Australia becomes a founding member of the U.N.
1947 – The UN returns Nauru to Australia, Britain and New Zealand as a joint mandate. Christmas Island and the Cocos Islands are transferred to British Singapore.
1948 - **Aboriginal people are granted citizenship.**
1949 – Papua and New Guinea are united into a single 'Territory of Papua and New Guinea'.
Heard & McDonald Islands are transferred to Australia.
1955 – Britain transfers the Cocos (Keeling) Islands to Australia.
1958 – Britain transfers Christmas Island to Australia.
1962 - **Aboriginal peoples are given the right to vote**.
1965 - The first **Australian ground troops arrive in Vietnam**. Over 60,000 Australians would serve in the 10-year war, with over 500 killed and over 3000 wounded.
1966 – **Nauru becomes an independent nation**.
1967 - Over 90% of **Australians vote "Yes" in a Referendum to count Aboriginal people in the census** and allow the federal government (rather than individual states) to make laws governing them and protecting their welfare. This is considered a landmark in indigenous rights - although controversy and revisionism still surround its legacy.
1973 - The iconic **Sydney Opera House opens**
1975 – U.K.-appointed Governor-General Sir John Kerr dismisses democratically elected Prime Minister Gough Whitlam amid a **constitutional crisis** in a dramatic and controversial moment in Australian political history. This will serve to catalyze Australia's progress toward true and complete independence.
Papua New Guinea becomes an independent nation.
1986 - **The Australia Act** brings full and complete independence to Australia with a landmark piece of legislation that ends all UK control over Australia's affairs. This act made all Australian law, decision-making and action completely independent of the U.K. Parliament and U.K. courts.
1992 - The **High Court overturns the doctrine of *terra nullius*** (that Australia was "nobody's land" before 1788) in The Mabo Decision which recognizes native title to land for the first time, revolutionizing Indigenous land rights.
1996 - The **Port Arthur Massacre**: A lone gunman murders 35 people and wounds 23 others at the historic Port Arthur site in Tasmania. This led to sweeping gun reform laws under Prime Minister John Howard, including a massive gun buyback, a ban on semi-automatic rifles, and stricter licensing laws.
2000 - The **Sydney Olympics** is spectacularly successful in a global coming-of-age moment for Australia.

2008 - Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivers a formal **National Apology** in Parliament to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people removed from their families under past government policies. A deeply emotional milestone in reconciliation.
2017 - The **Marriage Amendment Act** legalizes same-sex marriage in Australia.
2019-20 -The **Black Summer Brush Fires** cause devastation with 18 million hectares burned, over 3,000 homes lost, and 34 deaths. Triggered by extreme drought and heatwaves, the crisis led to massive evacuations, wildlife loss (billions of animals), and intense criticism of then-Prime Minister Morrison's response, accelerating national conversations on fire preparedness and environmental policy.
2021 - **AUKUS Security Pact** - Australia, the UK, and the USA form the AUKUS partnership, committing to nuclear-powered submarines for Australia in a $368 billion deal. This bolstered Indo-Pacific security amid tensions with China but cancelled a prior French submarine contract, straining diplomatic ties with France and highlighting Australia's pivot toward strengthening alliances with the USA.
2020-22 - **Stringent COVID lockdown policies** with considerable economic and mental health tolls cause friction between federal and state authorities and contribute to the 2022 election defeat of the Morrison government.
2023 - **The 'Indigenous Voice to Parliament Referendum'** designed to enshrine an indigenous advisory body in the Constitution fails with 60% voting No. Championed by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese as reconciliation progress, its loss deepens divisions on indigenous rights and prompted policy shifts in heritage law (indigenous rights protections and assistance programs saw an erosion of support) and immigration law as well (immigration laws tightened).
2025 - The Pacific Ocean is renamed **The Gulf of Australia**. (Just kidding!)