

Prison Hulk to Redemption: Part one of a family history 1788-1900

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Chapter 2

A brief account of the early years

On the 28th of April 1770, the then Lieutenant James Cook steered his ship, *Endeavour*, into a broad open bay and dropped anchor at its southern shore. He named it Stingray Bay because of the abundance in its waters of stingrays that his crew gorged on. He later crossed out Stingray Bay in the ship's logs and entered Botany Bay in tribute to Botanist Joseph Banks, the ship's eager scientist. Banks had put together an impressive collection of specimens of unknown plants and animals after trekking around the land bordering the bay's shores.

Cook and *Endeavour* were on their way back to England after carrying out the official task of observing the transit of Venus from the island of Tahiti. There were also unofficial tasks one of which was the order to investigate the existence of the South Land whose ancient mythology promised great riches of all kinds. From Roman times, it had been called *Terra Australis Incognita* – Unknown South Land. The search for the mysterious land of the south had occupied the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Spanish, and lately the English in the person of William Dampier (1688 and 1689). Dampier added little to the findings of the Dutch seamen.

Until Cook's voyage to track the transit of Venus, the most successful effort to map what was south of present day Indonesia and New Guinea was the voyage of Dutchman Abel Tasman in 1642 and 1643. This eight-month voyage on the order of the Governor of Batavia to find the South Land took Tasman west from Batavia (today's Jakarta). Keeping the Indonesian islands to the north of him, he eventually turned and sailed far to the south before turning directly east. After navigating a great distance, he hit landfall. He followed the shoreline south, mapping it as he went, turned east, then north, but left the coast to head east again. He named this bushy land mass *Anthoni Van Diemens Landt* after Batavia's governor. After some days, he made landfall again. Thinking the land he had come across reached as far as *Tierra Del Fuego* in South America, he noted *Staten Landt* in his logbook. *Staten Landt* was the Dutch for the Spanish name of Argentine's *Isla de Los Estados*.

Mapping the coastline he sailed north, eventually into open sea. Taking the route north of New Guinea and the Indonesian Islands he returned to Batavia, his starting point. Abel Tasman's voyage of 1642-1643 set the limits to the maps of the continent south of Indonesia and New Guinea until Cook's voyage of 1769 and 1770. Maps named the continent thus far discovered *Hollandia Nova*. The English called it New-Holland. It was also referred to by its ancient Latin term, *Terra Australis*. James Cook most likely worked from the map produced by historian John Campbell in 1748 which included Tasman's discoveries. Campbell's map showed New-Holland's unbroken coastline running west from New Guinea in the north-east, then south, turning east and coming to an end northwest of Van Diemens Land. The coastline mapped at *Staten Landt* is now termed *Zeelandia Nova* after the Dutch province of Zeeland. In fact, Tasman had mapped

the west coast of present-day New Zealand. The east coast of New-Holland was not mapped. It was a blank area on Campbell's map of 1748.

When Cook had left Tahiti, he sailed south reaching the coast of *Zeelandia Nova*. He mapped both islands and went ashore at eight different places. From *Zeelandia Nova* he sailed directly west and in time came to a wooded coastline. He turned north along the wooded coast, eventually sailing into the bay he called Botany Bay. He and Joseph Banks found the countryside around Botany Bay promising for cultivation. They described the natives as noble savage in bearing while others had found them the most miserable primitive people they had ever seen. Cook then sailed more than 2,500 miles to the north mapping the coastline as he went. At the tip of the continent, he found what is now called the Torres Strait. This was the key piece that all before him had missed or had failed to slot into the puzzle. Cook could now connect the dots. After his voyage of 1769 and 1770, maps could present New-Holland as a complete continent separated from New Guinea and with an unbroken coastline. The only part that remained to be clarified was the separation of Van Diemens Land from the New-Holland continent. Cook claimed the land he had discovered for the British Crown and called it New South Wales.

Before Cook's voyage, there had already been much talk about Tasman's discoveries. Fiction writers thoroughly entertained the public with their speculations of what lay to the south of the Dutch Indies. Alongside the wild imagination of novelists, there was serious discussion about the imperial prospects of New-Holland and the Pacific area. Britain and France were the foremost powers of the day, and neither wanted to be left behind in investigating the strategic and commercial advantages. Then the conflict with the Americans and the loss of the American colonies presented a pressing dilemma for Britain's government. What were they going to do with their burgeoning prison population? Getting rid of them to the Americans was no longer an option. Considering the ongoing public chatter of the prospects offered by the New-Holland continent, it was no surprise that Botany Bay on the coast of New South Wales was suggested as an excellent place to dump the country's miserable felons. After much talk – some finding the idea laughable, some impossible, some morally fraught – the government decided to take up the suggestion. A plan was developed. Most people understood then and since that the desire to relieve Britain's overcrowded prisons was the overriding motivation to set up a penal settlement in New South Wales.

Historian Geoffrey Blainey has claimed the issues were more complicated than the mere choice of a penal settlement. The motivations were fourfold, he suggested: first, Botany Bay was an outstanding place to send convicts; second, there was a need to establish a port of call on the developing trade routes in the Pacific and Indian Oceans; third, there was the availability of excellent quality flax and timber for naval purposes (sail and ship building) on Norfolk Island; and finally, the climate and soil of New South Wales was suitable for agriculture. This last, however, was based on the misleading impression that Cook and Banks had of Botany Bay's physical environment. The soil turned out to be not nearly as fertile as they thought and water sources scarce. Blainey has concluded that Cook had arrived in Botany Bay during a time of the year when rain and high humidity prevailed. All things considered, the British plan to establish a colony in New South Wales and a presence in that sphere of the world was to be an almost unimaginable imperial undertaking. Few people could comprehend its extent. Britons at the time had every reason to see the plan as a grandiose fantasy likely to end in a

spectacular failure. Ironically it was the miserable, depraved, God-forsaken convicts that would turn out to be an indispensable element in the success of the undertaking.

The task of setting up the New South Wales Colony fell to naval officer Arthur Phillip. The British government appointed him Captain-General and Governor-in-Chief. His brief was to establish a settlement at Botany Bay, to cultivate the land for provisions, to maintain religion and order, to encourage the convicts to good habits and to free them if their conduct warranted, and to grant them land and the means of cultivating the land. It was a brief for redemption. He was also to seek friendly relations with the natives. As for the social and political structure of the colony, a familiar template was to go from Britain with Phillip. Historian Manning Clark wrote, 'To assist him in the administration of affairs there was to be a criminal court, presided over by a judge advocate and six military officers, and a civil court, consisting of the judge advocate and two officers appointed by the governor. It was a government designed to ensure law and order and subordination by terror, a government designed for men living in servitude rather than for free men.' Despite the tight control and the absence of some form of democratic election for many years, the colony would have all the elements of the British government in principle: executive, legislative, and judiciary branches and the ancillaries. The coming years would gradually unloose the strings binding the elements to the one overseeing authority. As will become evident in what follows, Manning Clark exaggerated the terror of the Colony's authority and the servitude of the convicts, let alone the free settlers.

The First Fleet departed Portsmouth on the 13th of May 1787. The eleven ships headed by the two naval ships HMS *Sirius* and HMS *Supply* carried all up 1,420 people that included 753 convicts (548 men, 188 women and 17 children). They stopped first at Rio de Janeiro in South America. From there they sailed to Cape Town for more provisioning that included seeds, fruit trees and domestic animals. From Cape Town, they sailed via the Great South Ocean to Botany Bay. When Arthur Phillip on board the *Supply* as the leading vessel sailed into Botany Bay on the 18th of January 1788, natives in canoes near the south shore hastened to land while the women and children took to the bush. According to Manning Clark the natives now on the water's edge 'set up a horrid howl and indicated by angry gestures with sticks and stones that the white man was not wanted.' Clark for reasons of his own is surely overstating the reaction. I hardly think that the natives were already full of views about the 'white man' as they watched the *Supply* sail by and anchor. The ready explanation for any howling and gesturing is that they were reacting in some fear to the perceived encroachment on their territory. Aboriginal tribes fought among themselves over territory, so it was routine to act aggressively towards any strangers, white or black. As I say, it is stretching it to claim the natives made the fine discernment that Cook and his crew were white and thus hostile by virtue of their particular colour. In fact, there appear to be different firsthand accounts of this event.

In his *A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay*, Watkin Tench, Captain of Marines, wrote that the natives on the day of arrival 'were assembled on the beach of the south shore [of Botany Bay], to the number of not less than forty persons, shouting and making many uncouth signs and gestures.' This appears to be the incident Clark is referring to. But Tench follows this account with descriptions of several subsequent meetings during which the natives were friendly and showed no sign of resentment. Manning Clark disregards the amicable meetings in the first period of the English

settlers' contact with the natives. David Collins, Captain of Marines and on arrival appointed Judge Advocate and Secretary to Governor Phillip, wrote his version of what appears to be the same event but on a different day. It happened a few days later.

Governor Phillip did not find the conditions at Botany Bay as Cook and Banks had described them. There was nowhere suitable to establish an encampment for more than a thousand people. Watkin Tench wrote that the country around Botany Bay 'rather disappointed our hopes, being invariably sandy and unpromising for the purposes of cultivation, though the trees and grass flourish in great luxuriance.' More importantly, there was not a sufficient supply of fresh water. On the 21st of January, Governor Phillip decided to take a party in three rigged rowboats to Port Jackson to see if there was a more favourable place for the settlement. Captain Collins was of the party, but he wrote this account in the third person.

The day was mild and serene, and there being but a gentle swell without the mouth of the harbour, the excursion promised to be a pleasant one. Their little fleet attracted the attention of several parties of the natives, as they proceeded along the coast, who greeted them in the same words, and in the same tone of vociferation, shouting everywhere 'Warra, warra, warra' words which, by the gestures that accompanied them, could not be interpreted into invitations to land, or expressions of welcome. It must however be observed, that at Botany Bay the natives had hitherto conducted themselves sociably and peaceably toward all the parties of our officers and people with whom they had hitherto met, and by no means seemed to regard them as enemies or invaders of their country and tranquillity.

Thinking that Cook's account of Botany Bay was far too optimistic, Governor Phillip feared that he would find the same conditions everywhere. He had little expectation of coming across a spot more suitable for settlement in Port Jackson. In this, he was pleasantly disappointed. Captain David Collins continues his account.

In one of the coves of this noble and capacious harbour, equal if not superior to any yet known in the world, it was determined to fix the settlement; and on the 23rd, having examined it as fully as time would allow, the governor and his party left Port Jackson and its friendly and peaceful inhabitants (for such he everywhere found them), and returned to Botany Bay.

From the eyewitness accounts of the first contacts, it is obvious that Governor Phillip and his executive team made every effort to create friendly relations with the Aboriginals, and in the first period the contact was friendly. It was never going to remain so. The cultural gap was unbridgeable. History is full of such examples of conflict caused by the expansion and immigration of peoples. The clashes would come later, but they were not over the colour of Governor Phillip and his people. It was inevitable that one side would be the all prevailing victors.

Having decided on a place to establish the settlement, Phillip lost no time in ordering the Fleet to Sydney Cove named 'in compliment to [Lord Sydney] the principal secretary of state for the home department.' Phillip sailed round to Sydney Cove in *Sirius* on the evening of the 25th. On the morning of the 26th of January, he went ashore with

his party. Philip Gidley King, second lieutenant on *Sirius*, and later Governor King, wrote of the occasion:

At daylight the English colours were displayed on shore & possession was taken for His Majesty whose health, with the Queens, Prince of Wales & Success to the Colony was drank, a *feu de joie* was fired by the party of Marines and the whole gave 3 cheers which was returned by the *Supply* [at anchor in Sydney Cove].

According to David Collins, the same ceremony was repeated that evening after the crew of the *Supply* had come ashore.

In the evening of this day [26th] the whole of the party that came round in the *Supply* were assembled at the point where they had first landed in the morning, and on which a flag-staff had been purposely erected and a union jack displayed, when the marines fired several volleys; between which the governor and the officers who accompanied him drank the healths of his Majesty and the Royal Family, and success to the new colony.

Governor Phillip was at pains to celebrate the momentousness of the occasion, something that many of his people may not have quite grasped. When he pierced the soil of Sydney Cove with his people's flagpole, raised their cultural symbol, and poured himself and his officers what amounted to a libation, he was committing a seminal act that would germinate like the proverbial mustard tree. He was sowing the seeds of a new nation on a new continent and bringing civilization to that mass of land. He was inaugurating a new nation, nation understood as a moral incorporation of people with an established culture, and not merely as a mass of land between geographical coordinates which is ancillary to the primary notion. Captain Phillip and the people of the Fleet did not only come ashore with provisions and animals. They landed on the shore of Sydney Cove a vast cargo of culture and technology which would begin developing in its own unique direction. Watkin Tench describes what followed the inauguration.

The landing of a part of the marines and convicts took place the next day, and on the following, the remainder was disembarked. Business now sat on every brow, and the scene, to an indifferent spectator, at leisure to contemplate it, would have been highly picturesque and amusing. In one place, a party cutting down the woods; a second, setting up a blacksmith's forge; a third, dragging along a load of stones or provisions; here an officer pitching his marquee, with a detachment of troops parading on one side of him, and a cook's fire blazing up on the other. Through the unwearied diligence of those at the head of the different departments, regularity was, however, soon introduced, and, as far as the unsettled state of matters would allow, confusion gave place to system.

Everyone from Captain Phillip to the most incorrigible of convicts had the template of that (cultural) system in their heads and were unconsciously following the pattern. Accommodating the supreme ruling authority and organising living quarters for the newly arrived happened as a matter of course. Watkin Tench:

Into the head of the cove, on which our establishment is fixed, runs a small stream of fresh water, which serves to divide the adjacent country to a little distance, in the direction of north and south. On the eastern side of this rivulet the Governor fixed his place of residence, with a large body of convicts encamped near him; and on the western side was disposed the remaining part of these people, near the marine encampment.

That arrangement remained for the physical expansion of Sydney Town. Government House today is more or less in that same place on the eastern side. The western side is known today as the Rocks, as it has been for many years. After the planting of the flag and the founding ceremony as the seminal act of the new nation, it was time for the formal declaration of its legal and governmental structure. Again, from Watkin Tench:

Owing to the pressing business to be performed immediately after landing, it was found impossible to read the public commissions and take possession of the colony in form, until the 7th of February. On that day all the officers of guard took post in the marine battalion, which was drawn up, and marched off the parade with music playing, and colours flying, to an adjoining ground, which had been cleared for the occasion, whereon the convicts were assembled to hear His Majesty's commission read, appointing his Excellency Arthur Phillip, Esq. Governor and Captain General in and over the territory of New South Wales, and its dependencies; together with the Act of Parliament for establishing trials by law within the same; and the patents under the Great Seal of Great Britain, for holding the civil and criminal courts of judicature, by which all cases of life and death, as well as matters of property, were to be decided. When the Judge Advocate had finished reading, his Excellency addressed himself to the convicts in a pointed and judicious speech, informing them of his future intentions, which were, invariably to cherish and render happy those who shewed a disposition to amendment; and to let the rigour of the law take its course against such as might dare to transgress the bounds prescribed. At the close three vollies were fired in honour of the occasion, and the battalion marched back to their parade, where they were reviewed by the Governor, who was received with all the honours due to his rank. His Excellency was afterwards pleased to thank them, in public orders, for their behaviour from the time of their embarkation; and to ask the officers to partake of a cold collation at which it is scarce necessary to observe, that many loyal and public toasts were drank in commemoration of the day.

With the reading of the public commission, all the formal acts necessary to the new nation were completed. In a speech that followed, Governor Phillip radiated confidence and optimism about the Colony and the direction in which he was determined to take it. He showed he had a vision that he would pursue for the people of the embryo nation. A passage from that speech:

And I do not doubt that this country will prove the most valuable acquisition Great Britain ever made. We have come today to take possession of this fifth great continental division of the earth, on behalf of the British people, and have founded here a State which we hope will not only occupy and rule this great country, but

also will become a shining light among all the nations of the Southern Hemisphere. How grand is the prospect which lies before this youthful nation.

This is unmistakable. Governor Phillip knew exactly what he was doing and what was required of him by the culture of which he was a faithful member. He had come on their behalf to expand that culture into a new state and society and to assert just authority over all who came under that authority. Whether one wants to call Governor Phillip's arrival in Sydney Cove an invasion or not, is really beside the point, which point is about the origin of the Australian nation and who were its first people. This is nation understood in the Burkean sense as a moral incorporation of people and not merely as the geographical coordinates of a land mass.

Note that the above commission refers to the territory on which the Colony was established as 'New South Wales'. No mention of 'Australia'. The formal use of Australia would not be for another forty years after explorer Captain Matthew Flinders began using it from around 1800 to refer to both the continent and its people. This question of name is an important point about origins. It explains why I have used the same terminology as the map makers used to describe the land of the south in the different historical periods. *Terra Australis Incognita* was an abstract term used to refer to a mass of land that existed in mythology. When the Portuguese and the Spanish came across the unknown coastlines south of the Spice Islands, they referred to it as the land of the south – *Terra Australis*. It was the Dutch search for trading opportunities that gradually put form to that southern continent. Their searching culminated in the crucial discoveries of Abel Tasman, who failed by a whisker to join the dots. After Tasman's discoveries, the continent was referred to as New Holland. Even after Cook's success in establishing the fixed coordinates of the continent it continued to be called New Holland.

The Aborigines had never heard of the name New Holland, much less the word Australia. The Aborigines were a collection of sparse nomadic tribes wandering on a territory that was distinguished from the territory of another Aboriginal tribe with whom they sometimes had murderous disputes, as they did eventually with the European settlers. The concept of continent did not feature in their worldview. They were not a civilization as it was understood in the countries of Europe which itself had advanced from tribal life to a complex social, political and economic structure with a highly developed technology. The technology required to build a craft and sail it to a precise point twelve thousand miles away on the other side of the world, as did Captain Phillip and his people, was outside the vision or comprehension of the natives fearfully shouting 'Warra! Warra!' at the vessels sailing by. It is misleading and false to talk about the Aborigines before European settlement as 'Australians'. Indeed, the word 'Aboriginal' is a post-settlement term to refer to a group of several hundred distinct tribes with different languages. The Aborigines on the south shore of Port Jackson could not understand the language of those on the North Shore. This is the hard reality whether one likes it or not. It would make more sense to adopt a collective noun like 'Aboriginalia' to refer to the collection of tribes prior to settlement. After settlement, everything changed – in the same manner it had done through history on many occasions when peoples were on the move. The peoples of Aboriginalia would in time become integral members of the new nation Australia and make their own unique contribution. Aboriginalia would drift into the mists of history.

The way was now open for the development of the embryo nation. Its concrete forms would come from within. What came from within was modified in the course of time as the growing settlement adjusted to the physical environment. Nothing came from the outside on the continent of New Holland. Such development would not be automatic, of course. There was always risk that it would all fail and that the members of the settlement on Sydney Cove would perish, or would be driven out by the Aborigines, leaving them (the Aborigines) open for the inevitable attempts of colonisation at the hands of whoever had the inclination and the means to carry it out. There were many able and ready to make the attempt if the Colony from Britain failed. That the settlement did succeed was due to the character, abilities and leadership of Governor Phillip in those first critical years some of which were on a thin knife edge.

Governor Phillip was a principled self-disciplined man who required the same qualities in his military subordinates and others under his authority. He was also a generous, sympathetic man who wanted the success of the Colony to benefit all its members. He was especially keen to offer the opportunity for redemption to the convicts who had served their time and wished to establish a family on land of their own. In this, however, he was sorely frustrated during those first years. It did not take long to discover that Britain could not translate people and the means of living without more ado to another part of the world. The overwhelming heat, the inadequacy of the tools for cultivation, the unresponsive soil around Sydney Cove, the convicts' torpor and aversion to work, all resulted in the failure of the crops and the reliance on the stores brought from England. By mid-1790, almost two and half years after the arrival of the First Fleet, the people of the Colony had reached the point of starvation. The situation was critical. The arrival of the *Lady Juliana* on the 3rd of May 1790 saved the Colony from collapse...[*book available in Australia*](#)