

The First Fleet:

Maritime Triumph and a Triumph of Humanity

We Aussies love bagging our past. David Hill's 'national bestseller', *1788* is subtitled *The Brutal Truth of the First Fleet*. Charles Wilson, in *Australia: The Creation of a Nation*, rails against the 'inefficiency, carelessness and idleness of the masters and servants of the ministries which all had a finger in the pie called the First Fleet'. Its fate rested, he asserts, 'with an ill-chosen, ill-organised, contentious and unwilling body of what passed for public servants ... and a venal and corrupt body of private contractors'. The stereotype is that the infant colony of New South Wales was a terrestrial hell to which were assigned the socially damned by an uncaring government who only wanted to solve their crime problem as cheaply as possible without concern for human life.

However if one studies the facts the conclusion might be different.

For a start:

The First Fleet was one of the most successful voyages in modern maritime history.

The Fleet left Plymouth on 13 May 1787. It reached Santa Cruz, Teneriffe, Canary Islands, W of Morocco, on 3 June and stayed there until 10 June, replenishing stores. About a week later, the Fleet passed the Cape Verde Islands, and Phillip decided not to call in as it was all going so well with the prevailing winds behind them. From early August to 3 September they were in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, stocking up oranges, lemons, pineapples, bananas, guavas (all of which = vitamin C). The Fleet was in Cape Town, South Africa, from 13 October to 11 November. They took on animals in pairs, each ship becoming another Noah's Ark. Then they left the known world, sailing for Botany Bay. Phillip arrived on 18 January 1788, and all 11 ships arrived within 2 days of each other.

On the 11 ships were over 1000 passengers, including 586 male convicts, 192 women convicts and wives, and 213 marines, plus some of their wives and children. Of these 48 died on the voyage, considered a remarkably low death rate for the time, and less than one fifth of the death rate of the second fleet.

After this 252 day, 16,000 mile voyage, made at the speed of a man walking, Phillip came across a cove which, he said, had a good spring of water (the tank stream) and which was so deep that ships could anchor 'so close to the shore that at a very small expense quays may be made at which the largest ships may unload'. He added: 'This cove which I honoured with the name of Sydney is about a quarter of a mile across and half a mile in length'.

So ended one of the great nautical achievements of the modern world. How is its success to be explained?

The Humanity of Lord Sydney and Governor Arthur Phillip

The letter announcing that New South Wales was to be settled by convicts was signed by Lord Sydney, Home Secretary, on 21 August 1786. Sydney decreed that the new colony was not to

be a military prison, but a civil administration, recognising the property rights of convicts. His chosen leader of the enterprise, Arthur Phillip, also laid a humane foundation to the colony with his declaration that 'there can be no slavery in a free land, and consequently no slaves'. His humanity extended to the Aboriginal people: he ordered that there was to be no pay-back when he was himself speared at Manly by an Indigenous warrior. Phillip was himself quite capable of envisioning a great future for the infant colony. He wanted to call it 'New Albion', and a sketch he commissioned in July 1788 incorporating his plans for Sydney Cove, showed wide streets and a church and hospital at the centre of the future town. Phillip was not anti-church as secular historians have suggested.

The Long Pedigree of the Humane Foundations to the settlement of Sydney

The surprisingly humane element in the provisioning of convicts on the First Fleet may be traced directly back through the abolition of the slave trade movement to the Evangelical Revival under John Wesley and George Whitefield. One converted under Whitefield's impassioned preaching was Margaret Gambier who came from a family of Huguenot émigrés.

She transfused her faith into a midshipman, Charles Middleton (1726-1813), whom she married. He became Comptroller of the Navy Board. On Prime Minister William Pitt's instructions, Middleton built up the Royal Navy so that it became stronger than it had ever been in peace time. Pitt considered him 'the best man of business' he knew. Middleton was opposed to all forms of corruption. There was no doubting his contribution to the professionalization of the public service, using religion as his instrument. 'Without religion there can be no public principle', was his stated belief.

As Comptroller, Middleton was responsible for finding the eleven ships of the First Fleet, only one of which was more than six years old, and supervised their fitting out and their equipping with stores and provisions. He was passionate about doing this properly to maximise its chances of success.

Middleton's spiritual guide, apart from his wife, was his minister, the Rev James Ramsay. It was he who started the movement for the abolition of the slave trade. He was known as 'the pioneer abolitionist'. And it was Ramsay (who had been a surgeon) who was responsible for selecting the team of surgeons for the voyage and for establishing medical facilities in the new colony to ensure that the population of the new settlement remained alive and healthy.

The contractor for the First Fleet was William Richards Jr, a friend of Middleton and an evangelical Christian. Far from being 'venal' and 'corrupt', he honoured his contract with the government both in spirit and in the letter. He ensured that convicts and marines on the First Fleet were so well provisioned that they became healthier (heavier anyway) as the voyage proceeded.

He was subsequently engaged to transport 100 convict women on the *Lady Juliana*, and they arrived 'healthier and happier than they had ever been in their lives'.

For the second and third fleets, by contrast, the contractor was Camden, Calvert and King, a firm engaged in the slave trade. They were both disasters: 267 of the 1006 convicts on the second fleet perished, more than five times as many as in the first fleet, and the death rate on the third fleet was twice that of the first fleet.

So William Richards was re-engaged as the contractor for the three ships which arrived in 1792 after the third fleet, when only one life was lost.

The Forces of Humanity at Sydney Cove

Chaplain Johnson and his wife Mary were not the only representatives of vital Christianity and humane civilisation in the new colony. Among the devout Christians were also two future governors of the Colony: Captain John Hunter, who was 2ic to Governor Phillip and became governor of the colony from 1795 to 1800 and Lt Philip Gidley King, destined to follow Hunter as governor from 1800 to 1806.

But the most truly remarkable of the First Fleet's contingent was Lieutenant William Dawes. He befriended the Indigenous Eora people and attempted to learn their language. His notebooks have survived and they reveal his wonder at aspects of Aboriginal culture and his sensitivity to their plight. He even stood up to Phillip when the latter, worn out by the difficulties of the new settlement, temporarily lost his own humanity, and ordered the capturing and beheading of six Indigenous men in retaliation for their killing of his gamekeeper. Dawes was appalled, and though under orders, made sure that he and his search party found no Aborigines to imprison or kill.

Dawes later became (three times) governor of the freed slave settlement of Sierra Leone. He also became the first person appointed by the Church Missionary Society to teach its prospective missionaries. He offered to teach them 'a native tongue picked up at Botany Bay'.

The year 2014 was the bicentenary of the death of Arthur Phillip. Monuments to him were unveiled in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney and in Westminster Abbey. His essential, if not perfect, humanity makes him worthy of the honour. But he was neither alone, nor even pre-eminent, among the long line of humane founders of the Botany Bay experiment.

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