



1788: The Brutal Truth of the First Fleet

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In 1788, 11 small ships set sail from England on an eight-month-long voyage over the roughest of seas, carrying 1,500 people, food for two years, and all the equipment needed to build a colony of convicts in a land completely beyond their experience and imagination. In Portsmouth, the fleet's preparation was characterized by disease, promiscuity, and death. The journey itself was one of unbearable hardship, but also of extraordinary resilience. Upon their arrival, however, the colonists faced their biggest challenges of all: conflict, starvation, and despair. Combining the skill of a vigilant journalist with the magic of a master novelist, this entrancing history brings the sights, sounds, sufferings, and joys of the "First Fleeters" back to life. Journals, letters, reports, and pleas to England are all interwoven here with the author's own insight, and together they convey the innermost horrors and joys of the very first European Australians. The result is a narrative history that is surprising, compelling, and unforgettable.

1788: The Brutal Truth of the First Fleet Details

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Stuart Aken says

This book was recommended to me by a friend in Australia; I doubt I'd have come across it otherwise. Full of detail on the personalities involved in setting up and running the first colony in Australia, the book chronicles events leading up to the decision to transport convicts from England, and describes life for those early involuntary pioneers.

What I found most striking about this account was the utter indifference to either justice or humanity displayed by those in authority. The politicians in charge at the time were clearly unconcerned about the causes of crime, preferring to blame poverty on the poor and ensure these victims were severely punished for having the temerity to attempt to survive in an unjust world. Where, I wonder, have I noted such attitudes in today's world? Ah, that'd be the Tory Government in UK at present, of course.

And that may be one of the points behind this book: the inability of certain authority groups to learn from history.

From the beginning, this enterprise was ill-conceived, poorly planned, underfunded, understaffed, inadequately prepared and generally brought about by a group of wealthy privileged individuals whose only concern was the removal of a problem of their own creating. No compassion, no common sense and no humanity was evident in those making the decisions. They selected unsuitable transport, often inept and/or cruel commanders and a totally unacceptable destination. In spite of the many years of supposed consideration prior to the final departure of the first fleet, the venture was initiated without any care for the unfortunate transportees or their guardians.

As the account unfolds, disaster follows disaster and the reader is left wondering how anyone actually survived this unholy mess. That the vast majority of the convicts who suffered this dreadful journey were guilty only of trying to stay alive in a land where greed ensured the poor remained unfed, unemployed and ignored, seems to have eluded those in authority. Of course, the expedition took place at a time when the religious authorities blamed the poor for their lot; an attitude that seems sadly to continue to this day in certain prejudiced minds.

There are, of course, tales of incredible courage, amazing tenacity, and sheer dogged determination amongst the more frequent accounts of brutality, injustice, indifference and arrogance. The sheer incompetence of so many of those in positions of responsibility is mind-blowing.

I finished this book wondering how Australia ever developed into the modern, outgoing, successful and diverse country it now is. Given this appalling start, it's no surprise that early mistakes were made by settlers and that many injustices were visited on the indigenous population by the put-upon pioneers.

This book is a superb illustration of the faults and conceit that inevitably accompany the expansion of empire, where individuals cease to have any value unless they are people of 'consequence' or wealth. From so far into the future, it's depressing to note that many of the lessons that should have been learned from this almost catastrophic enterprise have been ignored by those in power today.

A sobering and ultimately disheartening account of man's inhumanity to man. Well researched and expressed in terms that fully convey the true conditions in place at the time.

Sandra Munro says

I really enjoyed reading this. It's a non-fiction and well-researched account of the voyage of the First Fleet -

the eleven small ships that carried a human cargo of almost 1,500 people between them, including two years' supply of food and the equipment needed to build a new settlement when they finally arrived in Australia, following a voyage of over eight months. 'It was the biggest single overseas migration the world had ever seen.'

Roughly half of those who came were convicts, many of whom had been first sentenced to death, then had that commuted to transportation. My ancestor, Francis Garland, was one of these. Almost sixty per cent of the convicts had been sentenced for stealing food or other goods of relatively low value. This at a time when the Industrial Revolution in England had begot an economy in which one in eight people in London were living off crime in the city. Harsh sentences designed to curb the robberies were seemingly ineffective, leading to such overcrowding in the prisons that numerous 'hulks', or de-commissioned ships were anchored up and down the Thames to serve as floating prisons. At first the convicts were shipped to Africa or America, but when that was no longer viable, Botany Bay was chosen to become a penal settlement.

'1788' is stuffed full of facts, but filled out with many of the stories of the individual characters that peopled this momentous undertaking. I found it to be eminently readable - not in the least dry. It was interesting and I was sorry to have its three hundred plus pages end so soon.

Graham says

I thought this was an excellent novel that captured the story of the first fleet's trip to Botany Bay. The comprehensive research was clearly evident and the gaps that were filled were based on intelligent supposition.

I knew life was hard for the early settlers but this really brought that brutal fact home to me in no uncertain terms. The suffering of the convicts on the trip was portrayed as truly horrendous. I was amazed at the severity of penalties handed out in England in the 18th century.

It is easy now (over 200 years later and living in the Australian paradise) to forget the hardships our predecessors endured. This book clearly brings those hardships into focus.

Garry Griffin says

1788 is the story of the First Fleet, from its origins in the aftermath of the American Revolution, through its planning and the execution of those plans, and finally its outcome - the settlement at Sydney Cove. The book also covers the Second and Third Fleets.

I found the book to be a readable, if slightly detached, account of these events. David Hill knows how to tell a story in simple and direct terms, although throughout the telling the author remains slightly removed from

the events, as if determined to retain the journalist's eye even when the events themselves could easily support a more empathetic storyteller.

Perhaps by remaining sufficiently distant Hill is allowing the story to tell itself, and in the end this may be a wise decision. There is no shortage of other tale-tellers to draw upon - Hill uses numerous contemporary sources to flesh out his account - and it is clear that the First Fleet was a venture high in the minds of the public in late 18th century England.

However, towards the end Hill's lack of personal reflection on the events he is describing leads the reader into a long list of "who did what, and when, and when did they die" which becomes tedious. Hill is right to assume that the story of the First Fleet is one which is not well told elsewhere, to my knowledge, and it is clear that the story is full of compelling episodes, fascinating individuals, and portentous events, but he does not take full advantage of these factors to produce a narrative which is equally compelling and fascinating. The sad story of the crew of the *Guardian*, sent to refurbish the starving settlement, and doomed to strike an iceberg in the Southern Ocean en route to Sydney, is substantial enough to merit a whole book of itself. Hill's account of the *Guardian*'s fate is well-written and perhaps the best section of the book. Similarly, his account of the escape of Mary Bryant is well-researched and written with a keen journalist's nose for the key facts.

Mary Bryant's incredible story has provided plenty of material for later storytellers

Some areas are covered in a threadbare fashion. The settlement at Norfolk Island, for example, was a scene of unspeakable cruelty towards the convicts on the part of the military in charge of them, if Robert Hughes' account in *The Fatal Shore* is to be believed. Yet little of this tale is told in 1788. Hill seems to be give the impression that Norfolk Island was a relatively peaceful place full of mutton bird-chasing convicts and farmers, even though he acknowledges that Major Robert Ross' first act was to declare martial law as soon as he got there, without saying why Ross might have thought this to be necessary.

Relationships with the local indigenous groups are also covered briefly, although perhaps this was because Hill wanted to retain the focus on the settlement's development, rather than widening the scope to include an analysis of interracial progress. Nevertheless, it does appear that Sydney Cove is developing in a vaccuum, not only divorced (deliberately) from the world of England all those thousands of miles away, but also from the world of the Gadigal and Eora people in whose midst (and plenty) they were starving to death.

Key figures emerge, and Hill incorporates their stories skilfully into the broader picture. Arthur Phillip naturally plays a major role, but appears as a dull career-focussed navy man. The gulf between the Royal Navy figures who were the early Governors of New South Wales (Phillip, Hunter and King), and the military types (the Marines) who enforced the Governor's will (or not), is made clear by Hill in the final sections of the book. Hunter comes through as an ambitious and scheming individual, broken in the end by his own ambition.

The colored photo section is particularly disappointing. Surely Hill or the publishers could have found more

interesting photos than those included, which seem to be dry and dull, or just distant pictures of ships under sail.

Hill's book makes easy and interesting reading. It doesn't pretend to be overly academic and this is a good thing in terms of making the story accessible to the reader. Let the academics pick holes in the historical accuracies, as I'm sure they will.

Vicky Kennard says

I enjoyed this and learnt a lot

Lisa says

I liked this. 1788 by David Hill is a chunky, easy-to-read simple narrative of Australia's first years of European settlement, but there was detail and gossip I didn't know about, and it was a forceful reminder of the astonishing courage of those who came here on the First Fleet.

That doesn't include the convicts – we don't know enough about their attitudes to know whether they were brave or not since there are no written records, and they had no choice anyway. But officers who came out of retirement to take on this long and perilous voyage, and then deal with the complexities of setting up here where there was nothing familiar and not even shelter or recognisable foodstuffs – they were truly heroic, notwithstanding the complex moral ambiguities of indigenous ownership of the land.

Joseph Banks doesn't come out of it very well. He enthused about Australia as a verdant land of opportunity when (a) his own notes were less effusive, and (b) he'd seen hardly anything of the place and was only here for a week. How the First Fleet didn't starve to death is a miracle...

Something else too: Austria has marketed the idea that Mozart was born there and Hitler wasn't; the US has sold itself as the 'Land of the Free' – when in fact it had transportation of British convicts for many years just as Australia did. Many of their pioneers must also have been convicts, but we don't hear about any so-called 'convict stain' – they've air-brushed it away as if it never happened. Interesting...

Sue says

I really enjoyed this book initially because I love history. It really did expose the brutal truth of the the First Fleet and their perilous journey to set up the penal colony in Australia. I did find however that I struggled to read on once they had made it to Australia. Its amazing that the colony did indeed survive (bc it was not thriving in Phillips day)

I took a break for a couple of weeks and then resumed which solved my problem.
A must read for lovers of the truth and Australian history.

Tariq Mahmood says

It's a desperate story of the first shipment of convicts transported to Australia from mainland Britain. And it's makes a fascinating reading, though the immense details sometimes make difficult to read. Two in every ten dwellers in London were making a living out of thievery, while the government of the time was trying to enforce probably the toughest rule of law imaginable, where one could be hanged if caught stealing even a silk handkerchief. But the real issue was enforcement of these harsh punishments as all internments and ruling carried a cost on the exchequer which pushed the government into banishing the convicts abroad. Australia was chosen because of the loss of Americas after its independence. What makes this story even more remarkable that nothing went according to plans. This includes the very study which this excursion was base upon, the choice of landing site, the choice of governor and the efficacy of the land to provide. Human desire to survive under the most dire conditions is probably the single most important lesson I have learnt from this book.

David says

I'm fascinated by Australia's history so I enjoy the story of 1788. After the United States War of Independence Great Britain lost that country as a dumping ground for its convicts of its harsh laws and unbalanced class structure.

Britain was the world's leading economy due to trade and war. But the social conditions, housing, work, education etc were atrocious for many.

Britain desperately needed somewhere to send unwanted people. Parts of Africa were considered. Somebody remembered Cooks voyage and Banks enthusiastic descriptions of the Great South Land.

Britain sent a poorly provisioned crowd of criminals to the other side of the Earth. What could go wrong ?

Josie says

I really loved this book, it was informative and engaging and very well researched. David Hill's use of primary sources giving firsthand accounts of the events and proceedings relating to the story of England's colonial expansion in Australia, provides context to the narrative, fuels the imagination and enables the reader to have a sense of being there. The book gave me an entirely new and deeper understanding of the reality faced by those who struggled with Australia as a new frontier. As a result of reading this book, my respect for and understanding of the celebration of Australia Day takes on a completely new meaning.

Denise Rawling says

A solid and well researched look at the colonisation of Australia and the First Fleet sent here. The author uses primary sources well which gives colour and authenticity to the excellent plain description of events. A great introduction to the rather strange start to the nation we now call Australia. It was a bold even fool hardy enterprise in which many people lost their lives. It has all the elements of human endeavour; cruelty, kindness, fear, courage, endurance, stupidity, foresight - I can go on - it is all here. The individual stories enlarged the bureaucratic process, fascinating in itself. This society seems so far from our values and views in many ways and in others intensely human and understandable to us so many years later.

Kelv says

This is a good, well written, factual book. It is written cohesively, in that the chapters, events, and paragraphs are all tied together in what appears to be done flawlessly. I did not find any distraction or 'off the path' discussion. There were additional parts which were included that were necessary such as La Perouses' landing which is important.

The ending was abrupt, and the conclusion seemed short (2 paragraphs). This book is suitable for anyone wanting to know about the landing of the first fleet.

Tien says

This book described the situation which drove the transport of convicts to Australia, the actual transport, and the first few years of settlement. The convicts' situations were pitiful to begin with; imprisoned due to petty crimes (which merited hanging to begin with but was reduced to transportation), cramped in hulks lacking in food and hygiene. They were then transported in cramped conditions and as they were mostly weak in health, many of them will not make it anyway. For those who did make it, Botany Bay was not the promised land overflowing of milk and honey. Life in Australia was harsh and without regular assistance, they will perish. Nonetheless, some who settled in Australia persisted and was rewarded for their effort.

Here's an extract to show how terrible things were:

...the convict quarters as being seventy-five feet long by thirty-five feet at the widest point (22.8 by 10.6 metres) and the height five feet seven inches (1.7 metres) at the lowest point. Within this space were the 'miserable apartments for confining, boarding and lodging' four hundred and twenty-four male convicts. Each cabin was six feet square, giving each man only thirty-seven cubic feet of airspace – about the size of two coffins... all convicts 'except those of good character or ill health' to be put in irons. Many died before the ship had even left the port, only to be 'thrown overboard unhamocked and unweighted'. During the voyage fifty or sixty convicts at a time were allowed up on deck for two hours but were never released from their chains...

Brendon Schrodinger says

A great little history book for that reassured me that Australian history can be interesting despite being the most badly taught subject through the New South Wales public school system.

Hill quoted and referenced a great many primary sources throughout the book, lending to the credibility of the story. Yet it did not go too far into being a series of facts. Hill told a story between all the sources, bringing the main characters and landscape to life. He managed to convey just how hopeless the situation was, and how difficult day to day life was.

The only criticism I have is the latter part of the book. It seems that Hill decided upon the ending to be when Philip left as Governor, but there seemed to be a bit of a rush to get there. The first year or two was covered in great detail, but the next few years were rushed through.

But a good read to spark interest in Australian history.

Peter Johnson says

Well compiled and interesting history.
