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# INTRODUCTION

This is a telling of the story of what happened when a thousand British men and women, some of them convicts and some of them free, made a settlement on the east coast of Australia in the later years of the eighteenth century, and how they fared with the people they found there.

My telling of it has its origins in a place, and in a person. For the place: a few years ago I took a boat trip with my husband across the top of Australia. We stopped briefly at a place called Port Essington, or 'Victoria', on the Cobourg Peninsula. Nowadays it is a ranger's headquarters, but it was built and garrisoned in the first half of the nineteenth century as a fort against the French. The French didn't come, and after about eleven years the soldiers were withdrawn.

It is desolate country, hot, sweaty and, despite its flatness, somehow claustrophobic. The sea up there glitters like new silver, but it's full of crocodiles. Even the tough young ranger didn't swim, despite the heat, despite the boredom. He said the crocodiles were too crafty. If you went in at the same place twice the odds were one of

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them would be waiting for you, and they would pick up the sound of the splashing anyway and slide along to check out the prospects. He also warned us about the snakes, and listed some of the diseases the local mosquitoes were eager to trade for a sip of human blood. There wasn't a lot to do. We looked through the tiny museum, peered into a couple of the dark little stone houses where the married soldiers used to live, and walked a long hot way up to the cemetery. It was a big cemetery for so small a place, spreading over a bluff. From the headstones it looked as if childbirth and infant fevers had been the big killers. No medical assistance in the 1840s, or not at Port Essington. A lot of women and children had been left behind when the soldiers pulled out.

It was a melancholy place, and I was glad to leave it. Then I forgot about it, or thought I had. It came back when I was given a book written by a fellow with the odd name of Watkin Tench, a marine officer who came out to Australia with the First Fleet. I fell in love with Tench, as most of his readers do. He is a Boswell on the page: curious, ardent, gleefully self-mocking. He didn't fit my image of a stiff-lipped British imperialist at all. The visit to Port Essington had made me realise that the past—those early settlements in Australia—had once been as real as the present, which is always an electrifying realisation. Before I quite knew what was happening I had started work on the remarkably accessible documentation for the early years of the British presence at Sydney Cove. Through those British sources I also met the beach nomads of Australia. My aim in what follows is to understand what happened between these un-like peoples when they met on the edge of a continent 20,000 kilometres from England.

The imperial adventure in Australia was played out by a very small cast. A handful of British observers are our main informants as



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to what happened between the races during Arthur Phillip's governorship, which began in January 1788 and effectively ended with his return to England in December 1792. In 1796 his friend and secretary David Collins also went home. Nine years is a brief time span, but in my view much of what mattered most in shaping the tone and temper of white–black relations in this country happened during those first few years of contact.

Doing history teaches us to tolerate complexity, and to be alert to the shifting contexts of actions and experience; anthropology reminds those historians who still need to be reminded that high male politics isn't everything, and that other cultures manage to get along using accounts of the world we find bizarre, even perverse. Historians' main occupational hazard is being culture-insensitive, anthropologists' is insensitivity to temporal change. Both can be insensitive to the reciprocating dynamic between action and context. Together, however, they are formidable, and in my view offer the best chance of explaining what we humans do in any particular circumstance, and why we do it. In what follows I have tried to bring the two methods together in the analysis of a number of sequential episodes, interspersed with short explanatory essays when I think the reader might need to pause for breath.

Coming to the field of Australian history late in life and fortuitously, I did not know the archival material for the early British–Australian encounters. But the published documentation is rich and can be found in most good libraries, where it takes up not much more than one solid shelf. My hope is that readers will be stimulated to read some of that material themselves, possibly as they read this book. I promise they will be rewarded.

The reports, journals and letters I have used are notably well ordered, with the episodes I discuss being described over a handful of



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pages. I have therefore consolidated the relevant references, with their appropriate page spans, at the end of each chapter. The exception is David Collins, whose combination of dogged record-keeping and occasional anecdote sometimes demanded an inelegant string of page numbers. My aim is simple: that readers be able to find the precise passage they want to check in less than a minute's search. I would prefer, of course, the old style, with a protective bristle of footnotes hanging off every page, but now those days are gone.

There were difficulties in deciding how to proceed. The first might seem trivial, but is not: what to call the people the British found living around what was to become Sydney Harbour. 'Aborigine' is anachronistic: a colonial construct crusted with later stereotypes. It also smoothes away that people's variousness, and their sheer unexpectedness. The British called them 'natives' or 'indians' or sometimes, not always pejoratively, 'savages', which at least captures their strangeness and the intruders' unease. I call them 'Australians', which is what they undoubtedly were, just as the British were certainly other—'them' as against 'we people here'. The word 'British' also gave me pause, given the mix of nations among soldiers, sailors and convicts of the first fleets, but I could find no better alternative.

Readers will be frustrated to discover that some of the most intriguing questions about the Australians cannot be answered from the 'outsider' sources we have. Our informants had been schooled by their professions to be scrupulous observers, but whole areas of local life, especially of thought and sensibility, remained invisible to them. Working on the Mexico of five hundred years ago I was able to retrieve something of the Indians' thinking as to what was happening in their sacred unseen worlds from the elaborate descriptions



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of ritual life collected from native lords, and detailed Spanish reports of the transformations in Indian ceremonial life over the first fifty years of colonisation. That kind of reconstruction is impossible for my own country, where contact began a mere two hundred years ago, not least because after the first few years the Australians ceased to be of much interest to the British, while in Mexico the friars remained committed to the pursuit of souls. In my view the sacred world of the Australians in 1788—the world of mind and spirit, none of it written but stored in landscape, artefact, dance and story—is closed to us outsiders. My interest therefore focuses on the Australians' secular life: on what we can learn from British observers during those first few years of contact, before cynicism set in, about a remarkable people.

I have another hope, at once deeper and more tentative: that by retracing the difficulties in the way of understanding people of a different culture we might grasp how taxing and tense a condition 'tolerance' is; and how we might achieve social justice between Australia's original immigrants, and those of us who came later.

The Australians and the British began their relationship by dancing together.



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# DANCING WITH STRANGERS

On a December evening in 1832 the *Beagle* entered a bay in Tierra del Fuego and gave young Charles Darwin his first view of the famously savage Fuegians. Through the gloom he could distinguish some remarkably tall men, naked except for long skin cloaks slung from their shoulders, perched on the edge of a wild promontory, shouting and waving their cloaks. He watched as they followed the ship along the coast to its overnight anchorage.

Darwin was an eager member of the party which went ashore the next morning to meet the wild men. There were four of them, and Darwin was fascinated: 'I could not have believed how wide was the difference between savage and civilised man; it is greater than between a wild and domesticated animal…their very attitudes were abject, and the expression of their countenances distrustful, surprised, and startled.' That vast gulf shrank slightly over the next minutes. The wild men accepted the Englishmen's gifts of scarlet cloth, which they tied around their necks, and in return they gave their own welcome. An old man paired himself with Darwin, clucked like a

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chicken, patted the Englishman on the breast, gave him three hearty, simultaneous slaps on the back and chest, and then bared his bosom for Darwin to return the compliment.

What to do next? Clearly words were useless: Darwin thought the men's language was no language at all, being as savage as they were, a 'barely articulate' matter of raspings and hawkings with a few gutturals mixed in. So parallel gabbling gave way to a more elastic mode of expression: competitive face-pulling. The British began it ('Some of our party began to squint and look awry'); the savages eagerly reciprocated, winning the contest when one young Fuegian with black-painted face and a white band across the eyes 'succeeded in making far more hideous grimaces'. Then they mouthed words at each other, and again the Fuegians won: 'They could repeat with perfect correctness each word in any sentence we addressed them, and they remembered such words for some time'; and Darwin paused to wonder why savages should have a natural bent for mimicry.

Then the British reclaimed the initiative. They began to sing and to dance, and this time they struck gold: 'When a song was struck up by our party I thought the Fuegians would have fallen down with astonishment. With equal surprise they viewed our dancing.' But they recovered quickly, and 'one of the young men, when asked, had no objections to a little waltzing'. Later in the day there was more dancing, and by the evening, Darwin tells us, 'we parted very good friends; which I think was fortunate, for the dancing and "sky-larking" had occasionally bordered on a trial of strength'. The wild men had truly descended from their 'wild promontory' to mingle and dance on the beach. We leave Darwin and his company peacefully waltzing with savages in the Land of Fire.

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We don't readily think of dancing as a phase of the imperial process, but rather more than forty years before, when a fleet of British ships berthed on the east coast of Australia, first at the place they named Botany Bay and then at 'Sydney Cove', a surprising amount of interracial dancing went on. On 29 January 1788, three days after landfall, Lieutenant William Bradley, second in command of HMS *Sirius*, was dutifully charting the harbour when he had his first meeting with the Australians. It was a remarkably friendly encounter, the British party being welcomed ashore by unarmed men who pointed out a good landing place 'in the most cheerful manner, shouting and dancing'. (At this point we have to suppose 'dancing' meant no more than 'caperings': 'the giving of direct physical expression to sensations of pleasure and excitement', as my dictionary dourly puts it.) From the strips of cloth tied around their bodies Bradley knew that at least some of these friendly fellows must have met with Governor Arthur Phillip the previous day, with the bright rags the spoils of their meeting.

Then, Bradley tells us, 'these people mixed with ours and all hands danced together'. The next day at Spring Cove there was another impromptu dance party when about a dozen of the local men came paddling in soon after the British landed, left their spears in their canoes as a sign of friendship, and all proceeded to more 'dancing and otherwise amusing themselves'. Then they embarked on an even more intimate interaction: the combing of never-before-combed hair. I would have thought this exercise painful for the people who suffered it and distasteful to the Europeans who performed it—the hair, Bradley tells us, was 'clotted with dirt and vermin'—but excitement and curiosity overcame fastidiousness, and it seems all parties enjoyed themselves.

We can imagine the hair clipping, but what can this mysterious



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'dancing together' have looked like? Rollicking British hornpipes followed by elegant Australian knee-lifts? Wild hoppings and leapings from some cultural no-man's land? Bradley, having thickened the mystery with words, clarifies it with paint in a charming watercolour, signed 'WB' and titled *View in Broken Bay, New South Wales, March 1788*: that is, two months after landfall. (The picture is reproduced on the cover of this book, and on the third page of the plate section.) The dancing is presented as a decorative foreground to the 'view', so Bradley probably constructed this particular representation from several incidents, but as he was a serious young naval lieutenant who set great store by accuracy, I think we can rely on him. What he shows us is the British and the Australians dancing hand in hand like children at a picnic: that is, dancing in the British style. (Darwin's 'waltzing'—bodies facing and lightly embraced—had not yet become respectable in Britain. That had to wait on the loosening effect of Napoleon and Waterloo.) Furthermore, the pairs are scattered over the whole foreground, with none of the local preference for formation dancing, which reinforces my suspicion that it was the British who took the initiative.

The First Fleeters also invoked the power of song. When Surgeon-General John White fell in with a large body of Australians at Botany Bay soon after landing, he was anxious to make them realise the fatal power of the short metal sticks the British redcoats carried, both to preserve the peace and to save local lives. He therefore concocted a vivid visual demonstration: he borrowed a warrior's shield, propped it as a target, and fired his pistol at it. Alarm erupted, both at the noise and because the ball passed clean through the shield. White does not bother to tell us what happened next (his journal is a rather shorthand affair) but Watkin Tench of the marines, with his eye for the speaking detail, does. White began to



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whistle 'Marlbrooke has gone to the wars', the tune we know as 'We won't get home until morning'; the locals took up the fetching little air; the panic subsided; and 'Marlbrooke' became a favourite item in the Australians' expanding repertoire of borrowed songs. Six months later, with relations souring and some British blood spilt, White still trusted in the pacifying power of song when some canoes ventured to fish behind the point on which the hospital was built. After some friendly exchanges with one couple, White persuaded one of the British gentlemen with him to sing. The women in the canoes responded: they 'either sung one of their own songs, or imitated him, in which they succeeded beyond conception'. The impromptu songfest had gone on for some time when an Englishman happened to appear with a gun and the panicked Australians paddled away. White ordered the gun set aside, his people kept right on singing, and the canoes came back to their fishing and their friendly conversation-through-song.

Some encounters were raunchier. Lieutenant Philip Gidley King of the *Sirius* gives an amiably binocular account of what the locals might have been seeing during his own first contact with a band of Australians. As the first man was being coaxed to approach by the offer of the usual trinkets King noted that he 'seemed quite astonished at ye figure we cut in being cloathed'. And then, reflectively and not altogether in bad faith, 'I think it very easy to conceive ye ridiculous figure we must appear to these poor creatures, who were perfectly naked.' It was King who later took the direct way to resolve another mystery. Because the British were both beardless and came swaddled in 'cloathing' there had been baffled speculation among their hosts as to their sex: speculation which had already generated gusts of nervous laughter. Australians followed different protocols for the genders even more earnestly than did the British, so



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