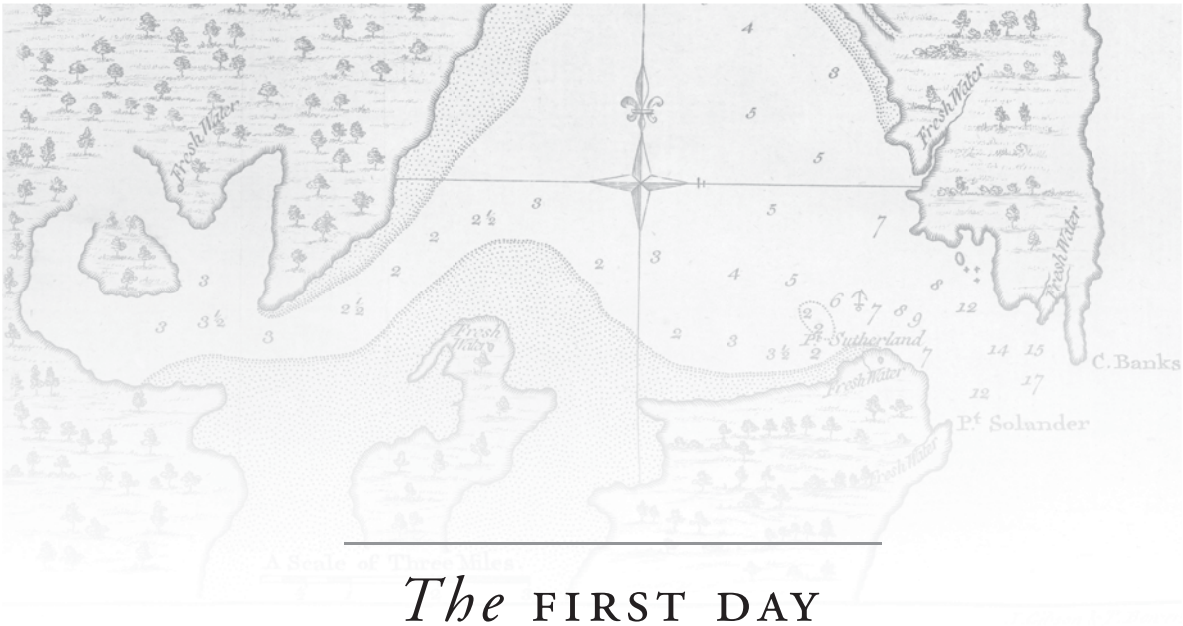

The FIRST DAY

'At day light in the morning we discovered a bay', recorded James Cook in his journal under the date of 28 April 1770. A discovery – the finding of something new – at dawn, the start of a new day. It was a good beginning.

'An opening appearing like a harbour was seen and we stood directly in for it' is how Joseph Banks recorded the event in his journal. The opening to the bay is difficult to miss when sailing up the coast, because its northern headland pokes out beyond the southern coastline like an overbite. As Cook noted in a short section providing future sailors with directions for locating this safe anchorage,

> *in coming from the Southward it is discoverd before you are abreast of it which you cannot do in coming from the northward; the entrance is little more than a Mile broad and lies in* WNW.

From Cook's point of view, the bay looked promising because it 'appeard to be tolerably well shelterd from all winds'. An attempt to land the previous day on the open coast a short distance to the south had been prevented by 'reason of the great surf which beat every where upon the shore'. And so a sheltered bay without breakers was a welcome sight for a ship's captain keen to land. Four weeks had passed since leaving the west coast

of New Zealand at the place that Cook called Cape Farewell. It was time to stop. 'Voyagers would stop', the historian Greg Dening reminds us, 'to refurbish their ships or they came to trade or they came because they needed a stopping place on their way to somewhere else'. The somewhere else in this instance was home. Cook's first voyage to the South Seas was on its last leg. However, there was still much work to do and many miles to cover. Some of the sailors who were participants in and witnesses to what would happen at this particular stopping place over the days that followed did not survive the journey back to England.

Cook's decision to sail westwards from the west coast of New Zealand with the intention of meeting with the east coast of New Holland had been one of three alternatives. One option was to sail to the east in the direction of Cape Horn with the hope of determining once and for all the existence or otherwise of the great southern land. This was the most desired course because of its potential for great discoveries. But it would be a long way around for a ship that had already been at sea for nearly two years. It was too risky and so was not pursued. A second option was to sail to the south of Van Diemen's Land and directly to the Cape of Good Hope. This route would be short on discoveries, but it would be a quick and certain way home. This was the least desirable plan, and so was passed over in favour of the third option. This was to sail to the west. As Cook explained in his journal,

> *until we fell in with the East Coast of New Holland and then to steer the direction of that coast to the northward or what other direction it may take until we arrive at its northern extremity, and if this should be found impractical then to endeavour to fall in with the lands or islands discovered by Quiros [in 1606].*

No grand discovery would be made along this route, but there would be some interest along the way that would provide a modest compensation for not having located the elusive southern continent. Banks wrote,

> *In doing this, although we hoped to make discoveries more interesting to trade at least than any we had yet made, we were obliged intirely to give up our first grand object, the Southern Continent: this for my own part I confess I could not do without much regret.*

As the *Endeavour* loitered at the entrance to this bay on New Holland's east coast, Banks did not yet know it but this would be the place for some of his most interesting and most famous botanical discoveries. They would be, one suspects, a salve for his initial regret.

And so 'into [the bay] I resolved to go with the Ship', Cook wrote, 'and with this view sent the Master in the Pinnace to sound the entrance while we kept turning up the Ship having the wind right out'. Nigel Erskine, a curator at the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney, has kindly translated Cook's maritime vernacular. Commenting on this passage, he says:

> *It seems Cook was keeping the* Endeavour *from making any headway which would take him away from the entrance to Botany Bay until the pinnace returned. I interpret 'we kept turning up' to mean turning the vessel up into the wind. In this manoeuvre, the ship moves as if it is going to tack through the eye of the wind but fails to do so and is effectively 'in irons' with all the sails aback – or 'having the wind right out' of them. It is a way of stopping the ship in the water.*

Robert Molyneux was the master sent in the pinnace to sound the entrance to the bay at nine in the morning. He was twenty-two years of age and already a veteran of voyaging to the South Seas. As master's mate, he had sailed with Captain Samuel Wallis on the *Dolphin* between 1766 and 1768 – the expedition that became famous for 'discovering' Tahiti. So this was not his first expedition; but it would be his last. He died just out of Cape Town as the *Endeavour* was embarking on the home stretch. However, that was still almost a year away. He kept a log for part of the voyage, which includes tantalising descriptions of the ship's time in Tahiti, but it ends in October 1769. He also kept a journal, which continued for a few months longer but its last entry was 9 January 1770, before the *Endeavour* reached this bay, so we do not have any testimony from him about the east coast of New Holland.

In the log, he condenses a full day into a few lines, listing all the major occurrences but elaborating none of them. I wonder if his verbal reports to his captain, or his conversational mode, were the same. A portrait of him in New Zealand's Hocken Library shows a fine-featured face with a long nose, a high forehead and a confident gaze (Plate 2). Upon Molyneux' death, Cook commented in his journal that he was a 'young man of good parts, but had unfortunately given himself up to extravagancy and intemperance which brought on disorders that put period to his life'. In the portrait there's little sign of the penchant for extravagance that Cook claimed killed him.

From on board the ship, Banks saw through glasses about ten people gathered around a fire on the north head 'at a very barren place'. Soon afterwards, the group 'retird to a little eminence where they could

conveniently see the ship', said Banks. He observed closely every move of the people he saw on the shore. He noted for instance that four more men came to join those who were already gathered on the headland. Those four men had arrived in two canoes, which they pulled up onto a beach immediately below the cliff. Who knows from where they had come, or what they had been doing prior to joining the others. Fishing in the shallows further inside the bay, perhaps. Spying on the ship, possibly. At this point, the pinnace approached the north point where this group had gathered. As it did so, the people 'all retird higher up on the hill', except one who hid behind some rocks where he remained the entire time. He was a man on lookout duty.

'Sounding' is an apt word for what the men in the pinnace were doing on this day. They tested not only the depth of the water but also incidentally the feelings of the local people. As the pinnace was rowed around the coves close to the shore with the men on board regularly dropping and drawing the lead, some local men followed it. They initially followed at a distance. But then, within a cove, 'a little within the harbour', they came down to the beach and, according to Banks, they

> *invited our people to land by many signs and word[s] which he did not understand; all however were armd with long pikes and a wooden weapon made something like a short scymetar.*

Banks had got this report verbally from Molyneux when he returned to the ship.

'Invited our people to land by signs and word[s] which they could not understand'. This is one of those phrases penned by mariners in unfamiliar places that encapsulate the essence of the experience of cross-cultural encounter. There is a statement of understanding followed by an admission of non-understanding. The sentence has its own internal contradiction. It captures the tension inherent in trying to make sense of things in the absence of a shared language and in situations with little or no precedence. Could the men in the pinnace be certain that the signs the local people made were an invitation to them to land? Are gestures of invitation universal? If they could not understand the words spoken, then how did they know they were not in fact being told to go away?

Sentences like this are worth noticing because they serve as reminders of the uncertainties that characterise all cross-cultural encounters. It can be tempting to read the words of men like James Cook and Joseph Banks as though they provide clear windows onto past events. Yet it is surely

mistaken to take Cook or Banks or any other of the journal writers on board the *Endeavour* completely at their word. The issue is not that they are unreliable witnesses or liars or fabricators. The problem is not even to do with the limits of language to represent something called reality. Rather, the crux of the matter lies in the very nature of the experience of meeting strangers, of encountering others, of having one's communications lost in translation. The mariners who wrote journals, particularly detailed and lengthy journals such as those produced by Banks and Cook, were themselves grasping for the right words to represent their experiences of encounters with people whose language, spoken and gestural, they did not comprehend. Not surprising then that they sometimes found themselves lost for words, or made contradictory statements, or crossed out what they had written, or later inserted something new over old text. Their writing is a testament to their struggle to make sense. As they wrote down what they saw and what happened, the mariners guessed at the meanings of things with varying degrees of certainty.

Like the men sounding the entrance, we cannot be sure what the local people were trying to convey with their signs and sounds. Unlike them, we have the advantage of being able to draw on later sources that describe aspects of the social life of the local people who lived on this part of the coast or further afield. These other, later sources provoke ideas about ways in which it might be possible to interpret some of the descriptions provided by Cook, Banks and others. Although the material available about the local people in this part of the country is certainly not comprehensive, it can be complemented with material from other regions. However, drawing comparisons and correspondences between one group and another should be done with some caution. This was a country of not one people, but of many different groups. Probably the greatest challenge is to compare the records from Cook's own time with ethnographic and other accounts based on observations made in later periods, when the situation of local groups had changed through the conditions brought about by colonisation. Nonetheless, this mosaic of material is 'at least suggestive of the indigenous societies and cultures that existed earlier'. Suggestiveness informs speculation. It's better than nothing.

Ethnographies of indigenous groups that were produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as A. W. Howitt's *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia* (first published in 1904) can help. In a short section on gesture language, Howitt suggests that among some groups 'a stranger . . . seen . . . from afar . . . can be interrogated at a safe distance by gesture

language as to who he is, where he comes from, and his intentions'. Could this have been the meaning of the signs interpreted by the men in the sounding boat as an invitation to land?

Banks continued closely watching the local men who had remained on the headland while the others followed the sounding boat around the coves. He had watched them watching him watch them. He wrote,

> *During this time a few of the Indians who had not followd the boat remaind on the rocks opposite the ship, threatening and menacing with their pikes and swords – two in particular who were painted with white, their faces seemingly only dusted over with it, their bodies painted with broad strokes drawn over their breasts and backs resembling much a soldiers cross belts, and their legs and thighs also with such like broad strokes drawn round them which imitated broad garters or bracelets.*

Banks again describes the way in which each of the two men held in his hand a wooden weapon 'about 2½ feet long, in shape much resembling a scymeter'. (A 'scymeter', or scimitar, is a sword that is short and curved. A common assumption is that Banks used the comparison in an attempt to describe a boomerang, but it was more likely that the object he observed was a type of curved wooden club, sometimes known as a waddy.) And all the while they 'seemed to talk earnestly together, at times brandishing their crooked weapons at us in token of defiance'.

A 'token of defiance'. Not an invitation to fight. Not even defiance itself. A sign or show or display of defiance. Banks was aware that there was a performance in process on the point opposite the ship as it waited for the pinnace to return. He was not interpreting their behaviour simply in terms of straightforward combat, or outright aggression, which is the way that later settler Australian storytellers would commonly present it. During the long voyage so far, he had observed on more than one occasion the function that performances had when strangers arrived. But he knew, as did Cook, that 'there was always a fine line between dramatised and actual threat'. On this occasion, as it turned out, James Cook was not prepared to spend much time testing where that line might lie in this new and strange place.

Joseph Banks had a copy of William Dampier's 1699 voyage journal with him. Presuming he had read it closely, he could well have anticipated this scene. When Dampier and his men were digging for water in the sand on the north-west coast seventy years earlier there came '9 or 10 of the Natives to a small Hill a little way from us, and stood there menacing and threatening us, and making a great Noise'. 'Menacing and threatening'

– Banks had used the same words as Dampier when he sought to describe what he saw. And there would be many mariners who touched the coast of the continent after Banks and Cook who would be greeted in this way by the local people. Eighteen years later, waving weapons welcomed the leading ships of the convict-bearing convoy (now known rather grandly and capitalised as the 'First Fleet' – a title that could only be ascribed in the wake of a second fleet being sent out from Britain). As one witness described that episode in a letter home: 'The Natives as we Sail'd in came Down to the edge of the Cliffs Making a Noise & Lifting up their spears'.

One of the local men Dampier had encountered on the north-west coast in 1699 was wearing body paint. He had

> *a Circle of white Paste or Pigment (a sort of Lime, as we thought) about his Eyes, and a white streak down his Nose from his Forehead to the tip of it. And his Breast and some part of his Arms were also made white with the same Paint,*

wrote Dampier in his account. He surmised that this man, adorned as he was, was a leader. A hundred years after Dampier, the navigator Matthew Flinders touched on the south-west coast while circumnavigating the continent. There he noted the way in which the local people one morning had admired the marines' 'red coats and white crossed belts . . . having some resemblance to their own manner of ornamenting themselves'. This time it seems it was Banks who was being plagiarised, because he had described the pattern of the marks on the bodies of the men on the headland while the *Endeavour* lingered at the entrance to this bay as being 'like a soldier's cross belts'.

According to the archaeologist Sylvia Hallam, body decoration 'created a sense of occasion, turning an encounter into a formal meeting, and heightening everyone's awareness of the importance of the occasion'. This comes from an article by Hallam, published in 1983, about meetings or encounters between local people and various 'outsiders' on the western side of the continent. Through assembling an archive of descriptions taken from voyage journals, explorer accounts, colonial memoirs and ethnographic studies describing what happened when local groups came into contact with people who were strangers to them – whether those strangers were other indigenous people, maritime voyagers, early explorers, or new settlers – Hallam is able to provide a broad typology of the actions and reactions of the local group encountered. Some of the behaviours she describes chime with the things that Banks, especially, recorded in his journal on the day the *Endeavour* arrived in this bay, such

as the weapon waving and the loud shouting and the body decoration. If one compares the occurrence in 1770 with other recorded episodes on other beaches around the vast coastline, it becomes quite clear that the local people were behaving in ways consistent with practices employed by other groups elsewhere across the continent, and at times both before and after 1770. They were acting – at the outset at least – in customary ways. This was a meeting with strangers.

In Banks' retinue was Sydney Parkinson, a draughtsman who had had to assume most of the responsibility for making illustrations of things seen on the voyage after the death in Tahiti of Alexander Buchan, another artist whom Banks had brought along. A portrait of Parkinson, believed to be a self-portrait, held in the Natural History Museum in London shows him rosy-lipped and wide-eyed (Plate 3). On a page of sketches he made while at this bay are rough drawings of two men with painted bodies (Plate 4). The models might have been these two men on the headland, bodies painted, weapons held aloft. The artist went to some trouble to illustrate their body decorations, showing the bands around the thighs and below the knees on one of them and the pattern on the chest of the other.

In making these sketches, Parkinson's purpose was to make 'personal notes, not scientific records', the art historian Bernard Smith explains. These rough drawings were *aides de memoire* from which the artist hoped to work up more detailed illustrations, although it seems that he was unable to do so before he died on the return journey to England. Later images of local men around Port Jackson made by artists in the opening years of the British settlement document similar body adornment. A picture by the enigmatic 'Port Jackson Painter', for instance, of a man known as Balloderree shows strokes of white paste underneath his eyes and drawn diagonally from each of his shoulders meeting at a point in the middle of his chest. Describing this decoration, John White, an officer in the first fleet, wrote in his journal in early 1788 that 'many of their warriors . . . we observed to be painted with stripes across the breast and back, which at some little distance appears not unlike our soldiers' cross belts'. This is the same recognisable military image being used again to create a correspondence between something familiar and something unfamiliar.

After the soundings had been taken, by noon the *Endeavour* 'working to windward' sailed into the bay towards the southern shore, where an hour and a half later it came to 'with the best bower in sandy ground', as most of the ship's logs explain. The local men who had decorated their bodies, who had brandished their weapons, who had shouted at the ship, were

left behind on the north headland. They presumably stood watching the ship make its way towards the southern shore of this wide bay.

In the wake of this expedition, the place that Cook eventually called Botany Bay came to be conceived as one single geographical entity. The name he ascribed to it covers the immediate hinterland of the northern and southern headlands and the western shoreline, and the expanse of water embraced by them. This is the extent of the country that Cook charted during his short stay. But it is worth bearing in mind, as we follow the *Endeavour*'s men around the landscape during the eight days they spent here, and particularly as they criss-crossed from the north shore to the south shore and back again, that they were probably passing out of the territory of one group of local people and into the territory of another. They were doing something that the local people themselves might not have often done, or not as freely as these strangers did.

The local people who lived on the southern shore of the bay referred to themselves as the Gweagal, although Cook and his men were not able to ascertain this detail while they were there. Despite what some contemporary historians say, there is little solid evidence that a list of words was collected by the mariners from the local people during this particular encounter. There was not the opportunity to exchange very much at all, let alone words. The identification of these people as Gweagal emerges from later encounters in and around this place. David Collins, judge-advocate in the government of the British settlement at Sydney in 1788, investigated and recorded the names that various groups of local people called themselves. While explaining a point about social organisation, he wrote in a book he published that:

> *Each family has a particular place of residence, from which is derived its distinguishing name: thus the southern shore of Botany Bay is called Gwea, and the people who inhabit it stile [sic] themselves Gweagal.*

The people on the western shore of the bay, north of what later became known as the Georges River, were the Gameygal, that is, the people from Gamey (also spelt Gamay or Kamay). The name that the people on the north side of the bay used for themselves is less certain. These days they sometimes appear as the Bediagal on maps that attempt to represent the Sydney landscape as it was before colonisation, but that's more than likely inaccurate.

The expanse of water in the wide bay and the two rivers on its western shore were natural borders between neighbouring groups. While

it is impossible to reconstruct precisely the distribution of all the clans, it is quite clear that in the late eighteenth-century period, when Cook stopped by briefly and when the convicts and their overseers came to stay, the people on the north side of the bay spoke a language different from that of the people on the south, who were speakers of the Dharawal language. According to the archaeologist Peter Turbet, the Gweagal were the northernmost speakers of that language. Groups on the north of the bay spoke what some linguists refer to as the Sydney language.

It's likely that language was not the only difference between these groups. Early colonial accounts suggest some enmity between those who lived north of this wide bay and those who lived on its southern side, and at times ascribe to them different temperaments. Rumour around the first British settlement at Sydney Cove was that the people on the southern side of Botany Bay were a fierce mob. The navigator and explorer Matthew Flinders claimed that they had a reputation among the local people around Port Jackson for being 'exceedingly ferocious, if not cannibals'. While this slur was certainly overblown, it is suggestive of the ways in which the local people living in and around the Sydney settlement in the closing years of the eighteenth century considered their neighbours, or at least characterised them to the colonists living in their midst.

As the *Endeavour* crossed the water towards its eventual anchorage point under the southern shore, it shared the surface of the sheltered bay with four small canoes. Banks describes the scene.

> *. . . [in] each of these was one man who held in his hand a long pole with which he struck fish, venturing with his little imbarkation almost into the surf. These people seemd to be totally engag'd in what they were about: the ship passd within a quarter of a mile of them and yet they scarce lifted their eyes from their employment; I was almost inclined to think that attentive to their business and deafned by the noise of the surf they neither saw nor heard her go past them.*

It is possible that the men fishing did not hear or see the ship go past, as Banks was inclined to believe, or they may have had no choice even in the presence of a strange ship but to fish when the fish were running. Perhaps they had decided on a course of action for dealing with these seaborne strangers, which involved keeping their distance. Or maybe this was a performance too, part of the local people's usual response to strangers in their midst, a strategy that complemented their efforts to engage with the strangers in a more vociferous way. The practice of ignoring strangers, as Hallam explains, was one element within a repeating pattern sometimes