

CHAPTER I

THE DISCOVERY, EXPLORATION AND POPULATION OF AUSTRALIA

The European discovery of Australia began in 1606, when a Dutch vessel, the *Duyfhen*, under the command of a captain whose name is unknown, crossed from New Guinea into the Gulf of Carpentaria and sailed along its eastern shore to Cape Turn-again or Keer-weer. He reported that there was no outlet eastward to the Pacific and this land was therefore regarded as part of New Guinea; for though Torres had previously sailed through Torres Strait, his discoveries were unknown. Hence the existence of an independent land to the south-east of the Malay Archipelago was first recognized when Dirk Hartog, in 1616, sailed along part of the north-western coast of Australia. Other Dutch explorers between that date and 1642 determined the general course of the western coast of Australia. They thus proved the truth of earlier rumours of a great land to the south-east of Java. A great southern continent had been assumed on theoretical grounds by the medieval geographers; and vague reports, probably based on

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voyages by Malays, led to the representation on the maps of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of a vast island in the position of Australia. It was usually known as Jave la Grande, but Wytfliet, who in 1597 said it was so large as to be “a fifth part of the world,” called it “Australis Terra.”

These early Dutch explorations led up to the famous voyage of Tasman, in 1642. His expedition was despatched by van Diemen, the governor of Java. It discovered Tasmania and New Zealand, and gave the name of New Holland to the Australian continent.

British participation in the exploration of Australia began in 1686 and 1699 with the two voyages of William Dampier. He visited the north-western coast, and saw one of the least attractive parts of the continent; so he returned with unfavourable opinions of both the country and its people. Another seventy years elapsed before the next British explorer reached Australia. Then, in 1770, that greatest of British seamen, Captain Cook, crossed in the *Endeavour* from Tasmania to Victoria and sailed thence along the whole eastern coast of Australia. This epoch making voyage proved that the New Holland of the Dutch extended so far eastward as to be indeed a continent. Cook, and his illustrious companion, Banks, recognized that eastern Australia was a land of greater fertility than the western regions, which

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Dampier had described as “the barrenest spot on earth,” and which the Dutchman Nuyts condemned as “a foul and barren shore.” Cook and Banks were both at first disappointed with the appearance of the country. Banks once referred to it as “the most barren country I have ever seen.” Cook described it as “upon the whole rather barren than fertile”; but, he continued, “yet the rising ground is chequered by woods and lawns, and the plains and vallies are in many places covered with herbage”; and he reported the country as well watered. Though Cook and Banks were cautious in their first estimates of the value of Australia, to them is due the beginning of its colonisation. After the loss of the United States the British Government wanted some fresh penal settlement, and Cook and Banks urged that Australia should be used for this purpose. An expedition was sent out under Captain Phillip. It landed in January, 1788, at Botany Bay, the locality recommended by Cook. Port Jackson was at once recognized as a better situation, so the colony was transferred thither, and established on the site of Sydney.

From this centre the exploration of the continent was begun. Lieut. Ball first circumnavigated Australia in 1790, without however conclusively proving its unity. Bass showed that Tasmania was isolated from the mainland by sailing through

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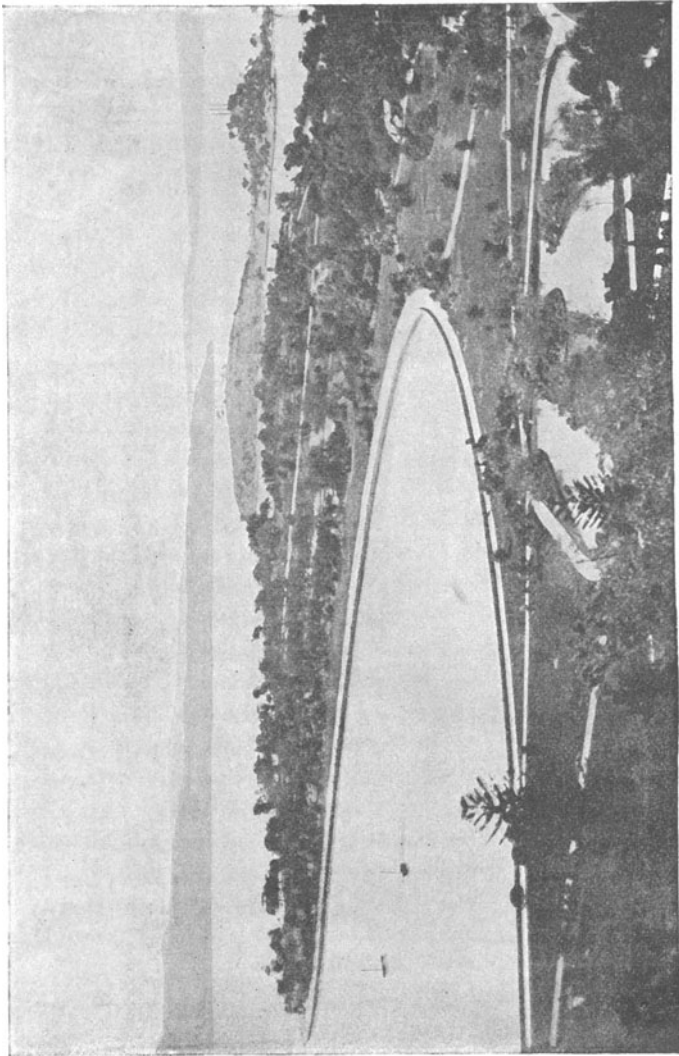


Fig. 1. Sydney Harbour

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Bass Strait during a cruise in an open boat from Sydney to Western Port.

After the voyage of Cook the greatest single contribution to knowledge of the Australian coasts was made by Flinders during the voyage of the *Investigator*, 1801–1803. He then discovered the chief geographical features on both the southern and northern coasts and, as Prof. Scott has shown, to him is really due the adoption of Australia as the name of the continent. Flinders surveyed the Great Australian Bight, Spencer Gulf, and the Gulf of Carpentaria. He thus finally disproved the hypothesis that the New South Wales of Cook was separated by sea from the New Holland of the Dutch explorers. The survey of the north-western coasts by King in 1817 and 1822, completed the preliminary examination of the Australian coast.

The inland exploration of Australia was long delayed by the difficulty of finding a practicable route from the coastal plains around Sydney up the steep face of the East Australian Highlands. All the attempts to climb these mountains failed until 1813, when a devastating drought on the coastal plains stimulated more determined efforts to reach the highlands. Three explorers, Wentworth, Blaxland and Lawson, then forced their way up a spur and found themselves on a plateau, which they crossed until the rivers flowed westward into the

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interior of the continent. The same year an expedition under Evans advanced further into the interior and discovered the Macquarie River; and the same explorer subsequently reached the Lachlan River. It was believed that no great river had its outlet on the southern coast of Australia; so Oxley was sent, in 1815, to trace the Lachlan River to its end. He followed the river until his progress was stopped by wide swamps; and, after another attempt, he concluded that the rivers flowing into the interior down the western slope of the highlands all ended in vast swamps or in an inland sea.

Attention was then diverted from the districts west of Sydney to the south-west. The Murray River was discovered in 1823. It was crossed in 1824–25 by Hume and Hovell, who discovered the snow-clad Australian Alps, and reached the shores of Port Phillip at Geelong. In 1828 Allan Cunningham, the Kew botanist, found a way from Brisbane, through Cunningham's Gap, on to the high plains of southern Queensland, and thus opened the way to the settlement of the rich country known as the Darling Downs. The same year Sturt visited the Macquarie River to determine the conditions of the river basins in the interior of New South Wales during a period of drought. He found that the Macquarie River disappeared on the plains, and that the water in its pools and even in a flowing stream

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was intensely salt. The party nearly perished of thirst, and Sturt returned with the report that the interior of Australia was a desert watered by rivers of brine. Next year Sturt descended the Murrumbidgee to its junction with the Murray River and continued down it to the sea; but his account of the country he had seen and of the value of the Murray was again discouraging.

A truer estimate however was formed a few years later by Sir Thomas Mitchell, who, in 1835, crossed from Sydney to the upper part of the Darling River, and followed it south-westward nearly to its junction with the Murray. He thus disproved the idea that the Upper Darling discharged to the sea on the northern coast. The following year Mitchell made the most epoch making of all Australian expeditions. He continued his former route south-westward along the Darling, till it flowed into the Murray, and then explored western Victoria; he reached the southern coast at Portland, where he found that the Hentys had established a whaling and sealing station. Thence he returned across western and central Victoria. He was so delighted with the country that he named it "Australia Felix," and his glowing descriptions of its fertility led to its rapid occupation by sheep farmers. Many of them came from Tasmania and entered Victoria through the newly established ports at Melbourne and Geelong.

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Melbourne was first occupied in 1835 by a few settlers from Tasmania. It was proclaimed a town in 1837; and within ten years of that date most of the fertile and open plains of Victoria had been occupied as sheep stations.

The exploration of the middle part of southern Australia was begun from Adelaide, which was founded as an experimental colony in 1836. A grant of land in that region had been awarded to the South Australian Colonisation Association in 1834; and a party of colonists, organized in accordance with the principles of Gibbon Wakefield and trusting for revenue to the sale of land, arrived at the end of 1836. Adelaide was proclaimed a township in 1837. The country between it and Melbourne was explored by the "Overlanders," who crossed from Port Phillip with cattle. The most famous of these men was Eyre, subsequently Governor of Jamaica. He settled for a while in South Australia, made the earliest explorations northward from the head of Spencer Gulf, and discovered that the country was a desert with vast salt lakes. The country to the north being then valueless, Eyre turned his attention westward, and during the most adventurous journey in Australian annals, marched around the Great Australian Bight to the settlements on the western coasts.

The occupation of Western Australia, an area for

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which will be adopted the convenient and oft-used abbreviation Westralia¹, had meanwhile been begun in 1829 in order to secure the British possession of the whole of Australia; the colony was for long confined to the Swan River Settlement at Perth and at Albany on the magnificent harbour of King George Sound. Many daring pioneer expeditions organized from Perth returned with most unfavourable reports of the interior; and the better watered districts in the northern part of the territory were too tropical and too remote to tempt extensive settlement at that time. The occurrence of gold in Westralia was first proved in 1848; the existence of a gold-field was first discovered in the northern districts, in Kimberley, by Hardman in 1884; but it was not until 1892, that the first mining discovery of immediate political importance was made at Coolgardie. The search from that gold-field led to the finding of the rich gold mines of Kalgoorlie. Permanent settlements were then established in the interior, and from them prospectors and pastoralists discovered the chief features in the geography of the country. Railways have since been constructed far

¹ This term avoids such apparent contradictions as eastern Western Australia or such tautology as western Western Australia, and the ambiguity of the term Western Australia when used for a political division and more indefinitely for the western part of the continent.

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inland to serve the widespread mining fields, though with the exception of the mining towns the population is mainly confined to the better watered agricultural districts of the south-western corner of the State.

The first journeys towards central Australia were organized in the hope of finding there a mountainous well-watered country; but after Eyre and Sturt had described the area to the north of the South Australian Highlands as hopeless desert, the main motives of exploration were geographical discovery and the ambition to cross the unknown interior to the opposite coasts. It was found during these journeys that districts which had been described as barren wastes were covered after wet seasons with rich grass and dotted with fresh water lakes.

The first explorers to cross the Continent from south to north were Burke and Wills, both of whom perished beside Cooper Creek in 1861 during their return journey. Macdonald Stuart, working further to the west, after several attempts, succeeded in 1862, in crossing from Adelaide to the coast of the Northern Territory and back again. Leichhardt endeavoured to traverse the continent from east to west, and the complete disappearance of his expedition somewhere to the north of Lake Eyre is one of the great mysteries of Australian exploration, for no trace of his extensive equipment has ever been found. Efforts to discover his fate contributed