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BOOK ONE

CONVICTS, WOOL, & GOLD

1788–1860

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CHAPTER I

Governor Phillip and the Establishment

THE first British settlement in New Holland was planted on 26 January 1788 beside a little rivulet, known later as the Tank Stream, on Sydney Cove, Port Jackson. It was not scenic beauty that attracted the sailors, but the prime necessities of a seafaring people—sheltered anchorage and fresh water. Ages earlier, larger streams had carved out the deep valleys drowned under Port Jackson. The headwaters of those streams had been captured in some great earth change by the Nepean-Hawkesbury river-system. Thus the harbour formed by their submergence had escaped silt. Deep water slept in all its hundred bays and arms.

But the plain behind lacked a fit scene for immediate agriculture, the hard labour to which the convicts brought by the First Fleet had been condemned; and it was walled off from the rest of the Continent by the Blue Mountain cliffs. Till the mountains were crossed it was a port without a hinterland.[1] The great sandstone gorges thirty miles westward of the harbour beat back inland exploration for a quarter of a century. Possibly the officials of a colony that was primarily a prison cared no more than the aborigines to know what lay beyond the ranges. Like the aborigines, who obtained a sparse living from fish, game and roots, they clung to the harbour shores.

The only denizens of the virgin land were primitive

[1] See T. G. Taylor's article on "Economic Geography" in the *Australian Encyclopaedia*, vol. 1 (third edition), pp. 504 *et seq.* and the larger works it epitomizes, e.g. *Australia, Physiographic and Economic.*

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hunting tribes who, by restriction of their numbers and by elaborate taboos, had adjusted their hunting to the supply of game. No competition with other races or cultures had narrowed their fields and enforced pasture or agriculture, the domestication of animals and plants in chosen spots. The intruders found a forest-clad country—unkempt, uncanny and unknown.

Prisoners, emancipists and officer-settlers tilled a few areas of alluvial soil which they found chiefly along the Hawkesbury valley. The best of these, however, were liable to sudden devastation by the flood-waters which the Nepean-Hawkesbury system hurled seaward along one narrow valley. As their harvests were swept away almost as often as not, the exiles found their main support in the stores and clothing brought from overseas and served out by the naval captains still in command. Unlucky delays in re-victualling the little white population made equal rations an established rule of early Sydney.

This was unfortunate. It confirmed in economic childishness that first company of marines and convicts. Neither criminals nor warders make a positive contribution to the social economy of production and exchange. In early Sydney this special department of British life was separated, isolated and given the appearance of a new community. But it proved difficult to introduce into it the main activities of a self-providing society. The First Fleet had been sent primarily to rid Britain of a troublesome accumulation of criminals. That good riddance was the dominant motive is plain enough. Several of the early batches of prisoners were sent without any record of individuals' terms of imprisonment. If any thought was given to their employment at the Antipodes, it was of the vaguest character. Perhaps the reports about Botany Bay made by Captain Cook and Sir Joseph Banks led the officials to expect an immediate and abundant return from cultivation of the soil.

Governor Phillip's instructions bade him treat "the

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productions of all descriptions acquired by the labour of the convicts as a public stock".[1] Part of this he might use for the subsistence of the convicts and of his civil and military establishment. "The remainder of such productions you will reserve as a provision for a further number of convicts who will shortly follow you." But Cook's fertile meadows at Botany Bay proved to be sodden rush flats, and around Port Jackson Phillip found neither the land nor the men needed for instant and energetic tillage.

As far as eye could reach the country appeared "one continued wood". Trees "so large that the removing them off the ground after they are cut is the greater part of the labour" cumbered the whole country. Difficulties with his human material proved greater still. The convicts, numbering 717 at the landing, 529 being males, were the sweepings of the prison hulks. Artificers and useful hands had been retained in Britain. "The sending of the disordered and helpless", wrote Phillip, "clears the gaols and may ease the parishes from which they are sent, but if the practice is continued, this settlement will remain for years a burthen to the mother country."[2] His sinister charges were woefully unlike "farmers and emigrants who have been used to labour and who reap the fruits of their own industry....Amongst the convicts we have...many who are helpless and a deadweight on the settlement....Those who have not been brought up to hard work, which are by far the greatest part, bear it badly. They shrink from it the moment the eye of the overseer is turned from them".

The eye of the overseer was universally needed. The convicts were not led by the ordinary motives to honest industry—they had therefore to be driven. Phillip had counted on the loyal aid of the officers of the Royal Marines who had come as guard over the convicts. To his chagrin the officers, led by the lieutenant-governor Major

[1] *Historical Records of Australia*, series 1, vol. 1, pp. 11–12, Governor Phillip's Instructions.
[2] *H. R. of A.* series 1, vol. 1, p. 197, Phillip to Grenville, 17 July 1790.

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Robert Ross, "declined any interference with the convicts, except when they are employed for their own particular service". The marines, they argued, had been sent as a garrison; their duty as guard over the convicts ceased at the landing. It was the first Australian strike, and one on the part of the directing class. They even objected to forming a court of criminal jurisdiction, an essential service in such a community. "Here", Phillip reported, "are only convicts to attend to convicts and who in general fear to exert any authority." Productive labour around Sydney broke down at once. In six months only eight or ten acres could be sown with wheat and barley. Even on these tiny patches the harvest failed: the seed had been over-heated on the voyage out. The sharing of the ship's stores continued, providing an effortless subsistence all too easily accepted by thieves and warders. The cult of energetic production had to make headway against this institution of paternalism.

In 1789 Phillip transferred the essay in public agriculture to Rose Hill or Parramatta, where, at the head of one branch of the harbour, he had found an open fertile area. But the change of soil did not mend matters. Under the only reliable supervisor, Henry Edward Dodd, a free man who had come as Phillip's personal servant, a hundred convicts raised 200 bushels of wheat, 60 of barley and small quantities of oats, flax and Indian corn. All of this was preserved for seed, and as Dodd would not contemplate remaining as a settler, the problems of food-supply and of supervising convict labour were not solved. In every despatch Phillip wrote of his need of continued supplies and of competent superintendents. "Men have been found"—this was in July 1790—"who answer the purpose of preventing their straggling from their work, but none of them are equal to the charge of directing the labour of a number of convicts with whom most of them are linked by crimes they would not wish to have brought forward." A time-expired convict, James Ruse, had been given in

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1789 an acre of ground and a hut at Rose Hill "in order to know in what time a man might be able to cultivate a sufficient quantity of ground to support himself". His thorough tillage convinced Phillip that the colony would support itself on its own produce as soon as free settlers with convict servants worked for their own hand on their own land.

The attempt to grow food supplies by public agriculture brought the colony to the very brink of collapse by starvation. Phillip's careful plans for the expedition had made the voyage out a remarkably healthy one, but his foresight as a ship's captain could hardly be expected to extend to the needs and functions of a farming community at the Antipodes. No ploughs had been brought. Ground cleared by cutting down the big trees and "grubbing out" the smaller ones was hand-tilled between the stumps, with spade and hoe, a method the honesty of which could be ensured only by watching every stroke. Ruse said of his farm, "I dug in the ashes, and then hoed it, never doing more than eight or perhaps nine rods in a day, by which means it was not like the government farm, just scratched over, but properly done". Phillip's workmen were all too likely to quarrel with their tools, and those sent with the transports seem to have been of the poorest sort. "Bad tools", wrote Phillip in November 1791, "are of no kind of use. Two or three hundred iron frying pans will be a saving of spades. For cross-cut saws, axes, iron-pots and combs we are much distressed."

As herdsmen the convicts were of even less use. Phillip's instructions warned him to take the utmost care of the livestock, for breeding purposes. "The settlement will be amply supplied with vegetable productions and most likely with fish." But the convict herdsmen allowed the cattle to wander off into the bush and get lost. The forty-four sheep brought by the First Fleet also disappeared one by one, the losses being ascribed to dingoes and native spears.

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With crops insufficient for seed at the next planting, with livestock disappearing into the bush, Governor Phillip, though he did not doubt "but that this country will prove the most valuable acquisition Great Britain ever made", had good cause to reflect that "no country offers less assistance to the first settlers, nor could be more disadvantageously placed with respect to support from the mother country, on which for a few years we must entirely depend".[1]

Phillip's early warnings prompted British officials to send him relief, but unluckily their first attempt to do so miscarried. The 'Guardian', a new fast-sailing 44-gun ship, sailed in June 1789 with two years' provisions for the settlement, clothing, sails and cordage, medicines, blankets, tools and agricultural implements. Having added plants and stock to her priceless cargo at the Cape, she should have arrived about the end of January or early in February 1790. "At that period the large quantity of livestock in the colony",[2] as it seemed to the Judge Advocate, "was daily increasing; the people required for labour were, comparatively with their present state,[3] strong and healthy,...the ration of provisions would have been increased to the full allowance; and the tillage of the ground consequently proceeded with in that spirit which must be exerted to the utmost before the settlement could render itself independent of the mother country for subsistence." Alas! On 23 December, after leaving Cape Town, the 'Guardian' collided with an iceberg. With great difficulty the gallant Riou worked her back to that port.

At Sydney her non-arrival and the rapidly approaching exhaustion of the 1787 salt pork and flour prompted

[1] *H. R. of A.* series 1, vol. 1, p. 51, Phillip to Sydney, 9 July 1788. The poor equipment may have been in part deliberate. W. Eden in a *History of New Holland*, 1787, wrote of the convict as "a forlorn hope", "a fair subject of hazardous experiments". "Offended justice in consigning him to the inhospitable shore of New Holland does not mean thereby to seat him for his life on a bed of roses."

[2] D. Collins' *Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, p. 84.

[3] These reflections seem to have been written in June 1790.

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Phillip to put his people on half rations.[1] He had somewhat earlier sent off the 'Sirius' to Cape Town for flour. Field labour had to be suspended through sheer weakness: The surviving sheep and cattle were eaten. It became a struggle to survive, hardly different, save in the hope of succour from overseas, from that of the aborigines around them.[2] Little flour was to be had at Cape Town. The 'Sirius' was sent on a second voyage to China, but *en route* she was wrecked off Norfolk Island whither she had taken a detachment of 300 convicts and 70 marines. The smaller store-ship 'Supply' was then despatched to Batavia. Some convicts sent into the bush to shoot kangaroos reported, after three weeks, that they had shot only three. In each fishing boat armed guards were set to prevent the complete plundering of the catch.

At last, on 3 June 1790, two months after the 'Supply's' departure, the long delay was explained by the arrival of a transport, the 'Lady Juliana'. She brought an "unnecessary and unprofitable cargo" of 222 female convicts mostly "loaded with the infirmities incident to old age" and "never likely to be other than a burthen to the settlement". But, as full counterpoise, came word of the 'Guardian's' stores salvaged at Cape Town and of other store-ships well on the way. A fortnight later, 20 June, the welcome signal of a ship in sight flew again at South Head, and in came the 'Justinian' heavily laden with stores. At the very end of the voyage each of these ships had passed through a critical moment. "The 'Lady Juliana', in standing into the harbour with a strong southerly wind, got so close to the North Head that nothing saved that ship but the set of the tide."[3] The 'Justinian',

[1] As to the scale of rations at various dates see *H. R. of A.* series I, vol. I, p. 44 *et passim*, vol. II, p. 358, and T. A. Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, vol. I, pp. 55, 60, 62.

[2] What the early settlers thought of the aborigines may best be gathered from Phillip's despatch to Sydney of 15 May 1788, *H. R. of A.* series I, vol. I, pp. 24 *et seq.*; *Early Records of the Macarthurs*, pp. 33, 37; D. Collins, *op. cit. passim*.

[3] Phillip to Nepean, 29 March 1792, *H. R. of A.* series I, vol. I, p. 347.

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on 2 June, in the same heavy rain and wind, "unexpectedly saw the land under her lee and was obliged to anchor on the coast, very fortunately so near the rocks that the return of the sea prevented her riding any great strain on her cable. Had those two ships been lost", wrote the stoical Governor, "the colony must have suffered very severely indeed". The relief was of brief duration. Hard on the heels of the 'Justinian' came the Second Fleet of convict transports—the 'Surprize', 'Scarborough' and 'Neptune' —and out of them landed a ghastly company of sick and dying. "Great numbers were slung over the ship's side in the same manner as they would sling a cask. Some died upon deck, and others in the boat before they reached the shore. There were landed not less than 486 sick."[1] The voyage, especially aboard the 'Neptune', had been badly found and abominably managed. By scurvy and "low fever" there died on board that ship 158 out of her 502 convicts. On the 'Surprize' 36 died out of 256, and on the 'Scarborough' 73 out of 259. Fifty more died within a month of landing. "It would be a want of duty", reported Phillip, "not to say that it was occasioned by the contractors having crowded too many on board those ships, and from their being too much confined during the passage." On 17 July 1790, three weeks later, he wrote of 450 sick "and many not reckoned as sick have barely strength to attend to themselves. When the last ships arrived we had not sixty sick in the colony".[2]

Finally, to dash all plans of making the colony self-supporting by agriculture, came drought of a duration and intensity unknown in English experience. The seed sown in 1790 was barely recovered at harvest. In November 1791 Phillip had to feed and clothe 2570 male and 608 female convicts and 161 children. What wonder that his

[1] Rev. R. Johnson to Mr Thornton, quoted in J. H. L. Cumpston and F. McCallum's *History of Intestinal Infections* (Commonwealth Department of Health), p. 34.

[2] The Rev. Johnson adds some reflections on the "astonishing villany

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