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Empire, convicts and currency

c. 1771–1820

In his thirties, James Cook had played a notable part in securing the empire of the world, particularly of North America and India, to Britain in her Seven Years' War with France (1756-63). When he was killed in 1779, in what his European contemporaries called the Sandwich Islands, Britain was in the midst of another and less successful war with France. When it had ended in 1783, Britain had won Canada from the French but lost her own settlements in North America. The thirteen colonies on the Atlantic seaboard from New England to Georgia had federated to form a new nation, the United States of America. The Peace of Versailles left British statesmen with one major problem – how to preserve what was left of the Empire, principally India – and one minor one – what to do with her surplus criminals now that the North American colonies would no longer take them. William Pitt, who first became prime minister in December 1783, saw his first task as the "uniting and connecting" of a "shattered" empire.[1]

His father, William Pitt the elder, Earl of Chatham, had done much to create the empire when he inspired the country and the government during the Seven Years' War. His great-grandfather had founded the family's fame and fortune during the years when he governed Madras for the British East India Company – in an age when corruption was universal and, under the name of "mercantilism", even those with the cleanest hands innocently proclaimed that colonies should exist for the benefit of the merchants of the mother country. With such a background it is not surprising that the younger Pitt saw the fostering of British rule in India and the East as the principal part of his task. To it he brought those unmatched abilities which had made him prime minister at the age of 24 only two years after he entered parliament. At a time when many English gentlemen drank port every night until stupefaction set in, it was said that Pitt was seen drunk in the House of Commons only once – and then he had the *sang-froid* to retire behind the speaker's chair to vomit. The least talented person in the government was probably Thomas Townshend, Viscount Sydney, Secretary of State. To him fell the less important but more pressing task of finding a place suitable for the reception of Britain's felons.[2]

The matter was urgent because, as it seemed to contemporaries, crime and criminals had been multiplying at an alarming rate. Throughout the eighteenth century the "agricultural revolution" transformed the face of the English countryside. More and more enclosure acts were passed through parliament by and for the landed gentry and their friends – for large "capitalist", farms, run on scientific lines, produced much more food for sale, and profit for their owners, than the traditional kind of land use. As the change proceeded, thousands of small tenant farmers, poor labourers and their families with ancient traditional rights to some forms of land use found themselves expropriated. Most of them moved to the growing industrial towns, as did Henry Parkes' family to Birmingham in the early years of the nineteenth century,[3] but much was lost even by those who found work in the new factories driven by water or steam power. They left, perforce, a settled life in a village community made secure by friendship and traditionally sanctioned relationships involving mutual obligations with squire and parson. They became, often, "hands" in an impersonal factory, living among strangers in jerry-built terrace houses, working for inhumanly long hours at low wages and bereft of all sense of belonging or personal worth – and these were the lucky ones. Those who could not find work often had to steal or starve.[4]

Citizens with property worth stealing naturally worried mightily about the increasing criminality of those to whom they referred as “the lower orders”. But their ideas for stemming the flood of larceny, mayhem and murder were limited. The British governing classes, those whom G .A. Wood called “the men who plundered their country in habitual political robbery”,[5] thought only of terrifying potential malefactors by hanging more and more of the few who were caught. Thus in the century between 1688, when Dampier’s pirates were careening the *Cygnet* on a New Holland beach, and 1788 when the First Fleet landed the first white Australians in Sydney Cove, the number of capital crimes in the English statute books rose from about fifty to two hundred. For instance, by the end of the eighteenth century hanging crimes included picking pockets of goods worth more than one shilling, shoplifting of goods worth more than five shillings, and cutting down trees in an avenue or garden.[6]

Alas for the property-holders, neither the preachings of the clergy nor fear of the scaffold deterred many poor people from following the paths of wickedness in which they had been trained by desperate or demoralised parents. This was partly because police forces were so ineffecient that wrong-doers had an excellent chance of escaping scot free, and partly because the very severity of the laws defeated their purpose. When the penalty for stealing goods of or above the value of a shilling was death, juries often found the value to be less – despite the most cogent evidence to the contrary. Even magistrates and judges frequently sentenced to transportation people who should legally have been “turned off” by the hangman. But these temperings of justice with mercy merely exacerbated the problem of what was to be done with the hordes of criminals unlucky enough to be caught.

Until 1776 most of them had been shipped to the American colonies, where their services, for the term of their sentences, were sold to planters and other employers by the contractors who took them off the hands of the British government. In that year Adam Smith published his classic statement of capitalist economics, *The Wealth of Nations,* and the American colonists, some of whom in time were to become the world’s most ardent capitalists, published their Declaration of Independence, proclaiming “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” to be the inalienable rights of all. Few at that time troubled their heads much about the rights of women, but the founding fathers of the United States of America did think it beneath the dignity of the new nation to continue receiving British gaolbirds. Illogically, or perhaps logically, they made up for the deficiency of cheap labour by buying more Negro slaves, many of whom were brought from West Africa in British ships. There were not enough gaols in the British Isles to hold those sentenced to transportation and so, as a temporary expedient, the government confined them in old hulks, generally moored in naval ports where the prisoners’ labour could be used in building docks and other harbour facilities. Meanwhile successive Secretaries of State for Home Affairs sought suitable places of exile.

In 1782 a few hundred felons were drafted into the army and sent to Cape Coast Castle on the West African “Slave Coast”, but those who survived the fever deserted and fought with a nearby Dutch force against their British masters. Later in the year Gambia was suggested for the first time as a receptacle for the ungrateful wretches. In the following year Cook’s old shipmate, James Mario Matra, first pressed on the government the surpassing advantages of Botany Bay. He felt that this place would make an ideal prison for the convicts, offered many commercial and strategic advantages and, in addition, would make a splendid home for thousands of dispossessed United Empire loyalists – people who, like Matra himself, had declared for the mother country when the American colonies rebelled. The government was not much impressed, nor was Viscount Sydney when he returned to the Secretary of State’s desk in December 1783.

During the next three years Matra, the “loyal” New Yorker, and Banks, his patron, were only two of the multitude of people who lobbied the government with conflicting ideas for the transportation of convicts. Among the places considered more or less seriously were the

Canadian maritime provinces, British Honduras, the island of St Thomas in the Gulf of Guinea, New Zealand, New Caledonia, Norfolk Island, points on the coast of Madagascar, Lemain (an island about 700 kilometres up the Gambia River in West Africa), Das Voltas Bay and several other points on the African coastline, and the islands of Tristan da Cunha, Diego Garcia and the Andamans. The claims of Botany Bay were agitated more often than those of any other place because Cook had sung the praises of *phormium tenax,* a flax plant, and of splendid-looking straight pine trees, both of which flourished on Norfolk Island.[7]

In the eighteenth century, naval power and world dominion depended on ample and assured supplies of timber for ship-building and flax for sails and cordage, just as later navies depended successively on coal and oil; but England drew uncertain supplies of these strategic commodities from Russia and other Baltic areas and, worse from Pitt's point of view, all British ships in the Indian Ocean depended completely on these Baltic supplies shipped to the east with vast difficulty and at great expense. Alan Frost has shown that from 1784 onwards decisions about Home and Colonial Affairs were not made by Sydney, but by the prime minister, Pitt.[8] As we have seen, he was deeply concerned with the security of the Indian trade, after the loss of North-America the greatest source of imperial wealth and of his own family's fortune. Perhaps a settlement on the east coast of New Holland, close to the supposed naval supplies of Norfolk Island, would buttress Britain's strategic position throughout the Indian and Pacific Ocean areas, forestall the French, secure to the Honourable East India Company the lion's share of the "Eastern" trade, and at the same time furnish a suitably remote dumping-ground for the denizens of the hulks whose presence at home had embarrassed successive governments for so long. Besides, empty convict transport ships might bring home cargoes of China tea to quench the latest British thirst.

At last in 1787 the King's speech to parliament announced that a plan had been formed "for transporting a number of convicts in order to remove the inconvenience which arose from the crowded state of the gaols in different parts of the kingdom".[9] A new empire and a new receptacle for unwanted criminals was to replace the lost American colonies. It was symbolic that the first human being to be hanged at "Botany Bay", Thomas Barrett, was transported for the crime of having returned to England before the end of the fourteen years for which he had been exiled to America for stealing a watch.[10]

In May of the same year, the First Fleet of eleven store-ships and transports set sail for Botany Bay. Most of its complement of something more than a thousand felons and their gaolers disembarked in the virgin bush at Sydney Cove eight months later, on 26 January 1788. It had been – for the period – a slow but more than usually healthy voyage.

The first governor and commander-in-chief was Arthur Phillip, a sensible and, by contemporary standards, unusually humane naval captain. A typical man of the Age of Reason, he gave formal assent to the doctrines of the Church of England, which body he regarded as a useful buttress of state power rather than as one concerned with supernatural revelations or the calling of sinners to repentance. He probably owed his appointment to his friendship with George Rose, Secretary to the Treasury, or with Sir Evan Nepean, Under-Secretary to the Home Office, both of whom were friends and confidants of Pitt himself. All three knew of Phillip's abilities, for they had despatched him on a secret and successful mission to France in 1784 to spy on war preparations in Toulon and other ports.[11] Doubtless Phillip knew too that the government saw the new settlement as a "strategic outlier" to imperial interests in Asia as well as a conveniently remote convict depot. This would account for his being almost the only person in the First Fleet who foresaw the time when the miserable little gaol might become a prosperous and civilised country, but the immediate struggle for survival taxed his strength to the limit.

His human cargo had been dumped on the shore where Sydney now stands. About three-quarters of them were convicts, men, women, and children; many were aged or infirm, and

nearly all unwilling to work. The remainder were mainly Marine Corps officers and men, sent out as a guard; but from the moment of landing, the officers manifested a keen appreciation of their station in life. They refused to compromise what they regarded as their dignity by supervising the work of felons, except in the case of those who had been assigned to them personally as servants. Thus the best-behaved – or most sycophantic – convicts had to be made constables and placed in other positions of some responsibility. Most of the colonists were criminals from the slums of London and other great cities. There was hardly a gardener or farmer among them. Seeds refused to sprout in the alien soil, and for the first two years the colony was threatened with famine. With something of Cook's nobility, Phillip placed his private stock of food in the communal store and decreed the same scale of rations for bond and free. The "starving time" had passed by the time he sailed for England in December 1792, and the day when the colony would be self-supporting seemed not quite as far off as before. There was one convict in the First Fleet, who had been bred to farming, James Ruse. Phillip gave him every encouragement and in April 1791 title to the first 40 acres (16 hectares) of land ever granted by the British Crown on the Australian continent. By that time Ruse had succeeded in producing enough to keep himself and his family.[12]

Only about one convict in every four in the First Fleet was female. This gross imbalance between the sexes generally increased throughout the whole period of transportation. When the last "exile" landed in Western Australia in 1868, about 162 000 had been transported, of whom about 25 000, or one in every six or seven, were women.[13] The scarcity of women in the early days disfigured Australian life for long afterwards, creating a much cruder, male-dominated, "frontier" society than developed in most other colonies where Europeans settled in the nineteenth century. Surprisingly, the reasonable men in the British government, who drafted Phillip's commissions, recognised the danger and sought to provide against it. Phillip was to order the commanders of any ship visiting islands in the south seas "to take on board any of the women who may be disposed to accompany them to Sydney", providing that no deception or compulsion was employed.[14] Possibly because he feared that the Polynesian women would in fact be brutally kidnapped if the scheme were put into effect, the man of the enlightenment ignored the proposal. No women were present when the officers and marines hoisted the Union Jack and "christened" Sydney Town about noon on 26 January 1788, at the spot in the bush where the obelisk now stands in Macquarie Place. When the female convicts landed on a Sunday eleven days later, most un-Sabbath-like scenes ensued. As darkness fell, men and women, convicts and marines joined in an orgy of rum and fornication. A tropical storm poured down on the revellers, seemingly lashing them on to fulfil the Biblical command to Noah and his sons to be fruitful, to multiply and to replenish the earth.[15]

Contemporary observers, whether male or female, agreed that the women convicts were even more profligate, vicious and irredeemable than the men, but recent research shows that all have been tarred with the sins of a minority.[16] At least one woman in every five was a prostitute at the time of her arrest.[17] In the early years of the system, most others were forced into prostitution on the transport ships, where they lived promiscuously with the sailors or took a protector from among them. Those whose "innocence" survived until their arrival at Port Jackson or Hobart Town were almost always forced into prostitution in the new country, if only because prisoners had to find their own board and lodging. Only the luckier or more attractive women were able to cohabit with only one man, at least for a time. As late as 1811, as soon as female convicts disembarked, officers, non-commissioned officers, privates and free settlers took it in turns to have women assigned to them "not only as servants but as avowed objects of intercourse, which is without even the plea of the slightest previous attachment as an excuse, rendering the whole colony little less than an extensive brothel".[18]

Up until about the same date, women were sometimes flogged for real or imagined misbehaviour, but this rarely or never happened later on. After about 1820, recalcitrant or

spirited female prisoners were punished only by having their heads shaved, by serving a sentence on the treadmill, by solitary confinement or by imprisonment at the Female Factory at Parramatta or at The Cascades outside Hobart Town.[19] To these places were sometimes sent also those female prisoners unlucky (or lucky) enough not to have been assigned to a settler. Hardened old harridans and at least relatively innocent new arrivals were all put to work weaving rough cloth for "Government". Yet the life of a Factory woman was not one of unrelieved hard labour and boredom. Because of the scarcity of white women, and because the authorities believed that embracing holy matrimony improved the character of both spouses, a sort of marriage bureau was conducted at Parramatta every Monday morning. The best behaved women were paraded by the matron. Dressed in whatever finery they could muster, they conversed with free but unmarried men in search of a helpmeet. Any couple who fancied each other was then given a special licence and married, often by Reverend Samuel Marsden. The bridegroom was usually an emancipist farmer or "dungaree settler" like the bush-ranger Ben Hall's father, who was married "out of the Factory" in this way. James F. O'Connell gives a vivid account, that at least rings true, of one such wedding. The happy couple sets out on their long journey to the farm in a bullock-dray in which the "stringy-bark" settler has "previously deposited something hardly less beloved ... than his wife – a five-gallon keg of Cooper's gin". After the wedding party has disposed of tea, mutton and damper served on dishes made of "rounds of logs, sawed off thin", the keg is broached, pipes and tobacco produced, and

> an edifying conversation commences between the new wife and her female visitors – an exchange of experiences, in which each details how cruelly she was "lagged" on suspicion; all innocent as the fifteenth generation yet to be born, of the crime for which the magistrates had the tyranny to convict her; the dirty vagabonds of witnesses cruelly swearing her life away.[20]

Yet despite the profligacy and drunkenness forced on them by a crude and massively male-dominated society the majority of women convicts did improve vastly in morals, if not necessarily in manners. The most cogent proof of this is that they bore and brought up the first two generations of native-born, white Australians, people whom even the sternest moralists proclaimed to be ethically superior in every way to their parents and, more often than not, to the generality of free immigrants.[21]

Phillip's instructions also enjoined him to "open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoying all our subjects to live in amity and kindness with them".[22] No one could have tried harder to carry out this order. On 15 May 1788 in his first despatch to his master, Lord Sydney, Phillip wrote "it was my determination from my first landing that nothing less than the most absolute necesity should ever make me fire upon them".[23] Two years later he was still better than his word. On 7 September 1790 at Manly Cove, displaying, as a later generation of Australians might say, "more guts than Ned Kelly", but not more than Cook had shown at his death, the unarmed governor of New South Wales walked along the beach holding out both hands in a gesture of peace towards an armed Aborigine. For answer the black man hurled his spear so forcefully that the barbed point transfixed Phillip's right shoulder. The butt-end of the 3 metre-long spear kept striking the ground as this gentleman of the age of enlightenment returned painfully to his boat. No serious efforts were made to punish the offender.[24]

The captain-general could not, however, control the passions of his white subjects as he could his own. From the very first day of contact many convicts and marines stole from the Aborigines their fishing and hunting tackle, their women and sometimes their lives, just as the British government, in the person of Arthur Phillip, had already stolen their land. The first-comers fought back as well as they could. In the first three years up to December 1790 they had killed or wounded seventeen whites. When Phillip's gamekeeper, M'Entire, was killed in that month, the governor's stock of calm reason came to an end. He despatched two punitive

expeditions with orders to bring back in bags the severed heads of six Aborigines from what was thought to be the offending tribe. Both expeditions failed even to make contact with the Aboriginal enemy,[25] but from that time onwards no one set in authority over white Australians made such efforts as Phillip had done to see that they lived "in amity and kindness" with black ones, and few indeed tried so hard to understand them.

The abyss of incomprehension which separated the two races was graphically illustrated in May 1791. Phillip decided to make an example of a convict caught in the act of stealing fishing tackle from Dar-in-ga, the wife of Colbee. The man was severely flogged in the presence of many Aborigines who had been made to understand the reason for his punishment, but "there was not one of them that did not testify strong abhorrence of the punishment, and equal sympathy with the sufferer".[26] Aborigines never could understand people who, in cold blood, deliberately inflicted pain on a fellow human being. Unlike nearly all other people on the earth, they never engaged in any form of cold-blooded torture. As the eyewitness, Tench, put it, the fiasco showed that the Aborigines were "not of a sanguinary and implacable temper. Quick indeed of resentment, but not unforgiving of injury."[27] Their humane and conciliatory temper, like their social organisation and the inferiority of their weapons, remained a fatal weakness in their efforts to resist the implacable and bloodthirsty European invaders." The temper of North American Indians, for instance, was very different and their resistance to white conquest correspondingly more sustained and somewhat more successful.

Thus with relatively slight pressure toward closing their ranks against the black natives, white Australian pioneers had ample scope for falling out with each other. The historian may doubt whether there was any more quarrelsome society in the world than that of early New South Wales, though even at this period quarrels were usually fought out in law courts, drawing rooms and grog shops with words and fists rather than with more lethal weapons. Naturally, indeed inevitably, the traditionally hallowed class distinctions of England tended to be reproduced in the Antipodes. In some ways, conditions even accentuated them. For many years after the first white settlement – up until at least 1840 – the vast majority of working people were convicts, or ex-convicts, or people who associated familiarly with these groups and their children. Thus a visiting ship's captain wrote in 1805:

> The circumstances under which the colony was settled, and the very purpose of the settlement, has had a very visible effect upon the general manners, or what may be called the national character, of Botany Bay. The free settlers are not without something of the contagion ... From upwards of a hundred families who have been sent out from England, there are not above eight or ten between whom and the convicts the smallest degree of discrimination could be drawn.[28]

Under these conditions it was not surprising that the colonial "gentry", at first nearly all naval or military or civilian government officers, should have drawn their spiritual skirts closely about them in an effort to fix between themselves and the "felonry" an even greater gulf than existed between the gentry and the "lower orders" in contemporary Britain.[29] The two parties early came to be known as "exclusionists" and "emancipists", the former because they sought to exclude from polite society ex-convicts and all other low fellows, the latter because they were emancipated prisoners or friends, associates or descendants of such people. John Hood hardly exaggerated when he wrote as late as 1843: "Caste in Hindostan is not more rigidly regarded than it is in Australia: the bond and free, emancipist and exclusionist, seldom associate together familiarly."[30]

This deep and bitter class feeling was sharpened too by the fact that there were relatively few middle-class people to serve as any kind of bridge between the masses, tainted with the stigma of felonry, and those who considered themselves the colonial gentry. As late as 1841 the New South Wales census listed 4477 squatters (large-scale graziers), merchant-importers, bankers, and professional men, and 50 158 craftsmen, labourers, servants and so on. Between

these upper and lower millstones there were only 1774 shopkeepers and other retail dealers. In the foundation years the absence of any middle order of people was, as we have seen, even more marked. As David Collins, the colony's first judge-advocate, noted:

> It was to have been wished, that a watch ... had been formed of free people ... But there was not any choice. The military had their line of duty marked out for them, and between them and the convict there was no description of people from whom overseers or watchmen could be provided.[31]

Yet, despite these factors, the gulf between the two classes was never as unbridgeable as those who came to be ironically termed "pure merinos" (rigid exclusionists) wished to make it.[32] From the beginning there were other, and even more powerful, levelling influences at work. First, the very intensity of the exclusionists' emphasis on their gentility betrayed the precariousness of their position. The British class structure could not in the nature of things survive, without modification, transplantation to an antipodean wilderness – especially with its vital middle component missing. If the colonial working people were heavily tainted by convictism, so were their self-appointed betters by the part they played in "the system". As the celebrated naturalist, Charles Darwin, who visited Sydney in 1836, put it:

> How thoroughly odious to every feeling, to be waited on by a man who the day before, perhaps, was flogged from your representation, for some trifling misdemeanour. The female servants are of course much worse; hence children learn the vilest expressions, and it is fortunate if not equally vile ideas.[33]

Moreover, though a few of the squatters and other "pure merinos", especially after about 1820, came from families recognised in Britain as gentry, the great majority of the exclusionists did not. For the most part, members of the colonial upper class came from the middle or lower middle class in England. Often they were distinguished from the generality of colonists, only by their greater wealth – and their greater taste for vulgar display. As the well-bred Hood lamented in 1843:

> If the truth must be told, the fortunes of many of the exclusionists themselves were not acquired by the purest means; close contracts, the gin or rum-shop, embarrassments wilfully created by insidious loans and ejectments, and other crooked paths, were used equally by both parties, bond and free.

Or as the radical Presbyterian parson. Reverend Dr John Dunmore Lang, put it: "*Very* strange tales are told of gentlemen of New South Wales."

Worse, from the point of view of the traditionalists, was the extreme fluidity of colonial society. Many emancipists like Simeon Lord and Samuel Terry, the "Botany Bay millionaire" who once owned the land on which Sydney's general post office now stands, rapidly became rich, and if they themselves were never quite accepted in polite society, their offspring often were. "Their children are sent to the colleges of England," wrote Hood, "and their daughters' fortunes get them husbands from among the free."

The truth was that the convict system tended to corrupt the manners, if not always the morals, of both the prisoners and their gaolers. Technically the settler acquired a property in the services of the convict, not in his or her person; but in practice, as we have seen, free persons selected female convicts, more or less openly, as mistresses. There were of course honourable and honoured exceptions, men like Governor Phillip and the much-loved Governor Lachlan Macquarie who ruled from 1810 to 1821, but Governor Philip Gidley King (1800-06) had two sons by convict mistresses, one named Norfolk and one Sydney, presumably in honour of their respective birthplaces. David Collins, deputy judge-advocate of New South Wales under Phillip, had two children by Anne Yeates in Sydney and two more by Margaret Eddington when he was Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land, where his successor, "Mad Tom Davey", in his official capacity attended divine service with a convict paramour on his arm. True, Davey was dismissed, but when viceroys conducted themselves thus, what was to be expected of the felonry? In fact, at least up to the end of Macquarie's reign, the great majority of all the children born in the colony were illegitimate, being quaintly

if prophetically termed in official documents "national children". About nine-tenths were the offspring of convicts or ex-convicts on at least one side of the (often temporary) parental union.[34]

The general debauchery was both sustained and aggravated by the oceanic tide of Bengal rum which was for many years the principal commodity imported. It was an age of prodigious drinking in which London gin-shops advertised that customers could get drunk for a penny and dead drunk for twopence, but the specially selected colonists at Sydney and Hobart Town outdrank all others. The New South Wales Corps, recruited for the peculiar service of keeping order at "Botany Bay", replaced the Marine detachment on Phillip's departure in 1792. It proved a thorn in the flesh of successive governors from 1795 until its departure in 1810, earning in popular usage the sobriquet of the "Rum Corps". During its existence, and for most of the following decade, coinage was in such chronically short supply that rum, often used as a generic term for spirits, became the commonest medium of incentive payments to convicts and the commonest article of barter, so common that some historians have held that it functioned as the *de facto* currency of the colony during this period. The traditional words of "The Convicts' Rum Song" give a romanticised, or heroic, picture of the place rum occupied in the community and hint at the reasons for its importance.

> Cut yer name across me backbone,
> Stretch me skin across a drum,
> Iron me up to Pinchgut Island
> From today till Kingdom-come!
> I will eat yer Norfolk dumpling
> Like a juicy Spanish plum,
> Even dance the Newgate Hornpipe
> If ye'll only gimme RUM!

"Pinchgut Island", originally little more than a barren rock in Sydney Harbour, served as a place of solitary confinement, and occasionally of execution, for particularly refractory convicts in the early days. Later officially renamed Fort Denison, the older term has persisted in popular usage. A "Norfolk dumpling" symbolised prison conditions at Norfolk Island, after 1825 the most appalling of all penal settlements for twice-convicted felons. The "Newgate hornpipe" meant, of course, the "dance" of death on the gallows. Nevertheless, legend has exaggerated the quantity, though not the quality, of brutality inflicted on the "government men" under the convict system. Probably fewer than 15 per cent of all those transported ever saw the inside of such penal hells as Norfolk Island, and probably fewer than half were ever flogged at all. Soldiers in the army, equally subject to the lash, very often committed crimes in Australia because they were convinced that they would be better off as convicts. There were many humane and reasonable men like D'Arcy Wentworth among employers, as well as some sadists. Alexander Harris, one of the most judicious reporters of early Australian life, has left two accounts which together show vividly the worst and the best sides of "the system". The first is an eyewitness account of a flogging, the second a convict's own tale of the brighter side of the picture:

> I saw a man walk across the yard with the blood that had run from his lacerated flesh squashing out of his shoes at every step he took. A dog was licking the blood off the triangles, and the ants were carrying away great pieces of human flesh that the lash had scattered about the ground. The scourger's foot had worn a deep hole in the ground by the violence with which he whirled himself round on it to strike the quivering and wealed back, out of which stuck the sinews, white, ragged and swollen. The infliction was a hundred lashes, at about half-minute time, so as to extend the punishment through nearly an hour ... They had a pair of scourgers, who gave one another spell and spell about; and they were bespattered with blood like a couple of butchers. I tell you this on the authority of my own eyes. It brought my heart into my mouth.[35]

The narrator of the following story was a convict who had absconded from the penal settlement at Coal River, later Newcastle. He was captured and brought before the bench for sentence:

> Then was my turn; but old Dr Wentworth was on the bench, and you know I had been sent to him for six weeks in harvest directly after I came into the country ... So, all of a sudden, just as I thought I was going to get my dowry, up jumps the old doctor, stamping as if he was mad, and shaking his fist at me ... "Gentlemen," says he, "this is one of the most polished scamps in the Colony. I know him well. Two hundred lashes! Pooh, pooh! He'd forget about it by tomorrow morning. I fancy I'd better have him down to my Homebush farm and see what I can do with him." ... So it was agreed on, for none of the other magistrates dared say No when D'Arcy Wentworth said Yes ... So there I was by that night at sundown eating and drinking the best there was in the huts at Homebush; and you heard tell how all the doctor's men live. There I stayed till I got free; and then hired to him. Never got one lash the whole five years I was with him.[36]

The prevalence of rum, like the foundation of Australia itself, also owes something to America. When Phillip, worn out and ill, left for England, no new governor had been appointed. Major Francis Grose, commandant of the New South Wales Corps, became lieutenant-governor. Soon after his assumption of power, the Yankee ship *Hope* sailed through Sydney Heads with a much-needed cargo of general provisions and 7500 gallons (more than 28 000 litres) of rum. Her skipper, Benjamin Page, swore he would not sell his mixed cargo unless every barrel of rum was also purchased. Supplies of all kinds were still desperately short and Page, like other trading skippers, demanded absurdly inflated prices for his goods. In the face of such extortionate demands, the officers of the Corps and their friends decided to form a counter-monopoly of their own. Under the nominal command of Grose, but largely inspired by a forceful young lieutenant called John Macarthur, they combined to purchase, without competition, the whole cargo of the *Hope* – and of most other ships which came to the colony for years afterwards. Soon the soldiers of the Corps found that their wages were being paid partly or wholly in rum or other trade goods, all of which were valued by the officers' junta at absurdly high rates. In this way poor settlers, mostly emancipated or time-expired convicts, and even those still serving their sentences, were also exploited by the monopolists; for it had early been discovered that as an incentive to efficient work, the scourger's cat-o'-nine-tails, no matter how furiously and continually plied, was insufficient. The convicts were therefore allowed to seek private employment in the late afternoons after their "government work" for the day had been done. When Phillip left, the officers of the Corps lost little time in extending this privilege, especially by withdrawing many more convicts altogether from government work and assigning them to themselves and their friends. The officers also began the practice, continued by later governors, of granting large tracts of land to each other. These changes, however discreditable to the officers concerned, did lead to much more efficient farming. The amount of wheat in circulation increased almost as much as the amount of rum. The colony rapidly became self-sufficient in basic foods and the "starving time" a memory.[37]

Three more naval governors, John Hunter, Philip King and William Bligh, tried without avail to break the rum traffic and to mitigate the social and economic evils which it nourished. Instead their own careers were blighted by the entrenched influence of the rum traffickers. Bligh, who governed from 1806 until 1808, was actually deposed in a *coup d'etatcarried* out by the "Rum Corps" – the very body whose prime function it was to uphold his authority. Fifteen months after the First Fleet reached Sydney Cove in January 1788, Bligh's crew had mutinied in HMS *Bounty* near Tahiti. The story is well known and has caused posterity to think of Bligh as a blustering and brutal bully. True, but the record shows he was a good deal more than that. How else could he have brought safely to Timor, a distance nearly 9000 kilometres, the open boat in which he was set adrift, overloaded as it was with eighteen men and boys who refused to join the mutineers? As governor of New South Wales, Bligh's

determined efforts to curb the power of the rum traders rapidly made him very popular with the "little men" of the community, particularly with the struggling emancipist farmers of the Hawkesbury River district some 40 kilometres northwest of Sydney. They made him equally unpopular with the officers of the Corps and the exclusionists, people who were not used to being sworn at in the "tarpaulin's" language Bligh favoured.

Of these, the most influential was John Macarthur. Legend held that he came of an old Jacobite family and had the ear of powerful friends in England. With his wife and infant son, he arrived in 1790 as a lieutenant of the New South Wales Corps. Though he never became a senior officer, the strength of his character was such that, almost from the beginning, he dominated those who considered themselves gentlemen and, more narrowly, the junta of military and civilian officers which led the rum monopoly. Yet he enriched Australia as well as himself by his obsessive pursuit of wealth, and his dubious claim to have founded the wool industry has been accepted by most historians.[38] Gentle and virtuous in his family life, his overweening pride drove him to quarrel violently with any man who crossed his designs. His critics maddened him with the taunt of "Jack Boddice", implying that his father, a Devon draper, had specialised in selling male corsets to his military customers. One of his many enemies called him "as sharp as a razor and as rapacious as a shark", and Governors Hunter, King and Bligh all denounced him in scarcely less baleful terms as, among other things, "the grand perturbator". Towards the end of his life his turbulent passions ended in madness. At the time of the "Rum Rebellion" he had been thrown into gaol by the courts, formally for a minor breach of the law but in fact more for his obstinate and successful defence of the rum traders' interests. From prison he engineered the junta's bloodless coup, which was actually carried out by Major George Johnston, commander of the Corps and lieutenant-governor of the colony.

In the hot evening of the twentieth anniversary of the first landing, 26 January 1808, with band playing and colours flying, the "Rum Corps" carried out what some cynics have termed its only martial action. Inspired by rum thoughtfully provided by Mr Macarthur, the soldiers lurched across the bridge which spanned the Tank Stream near the present intersection of Pitt and Bridge Streets. To the tune of "The British Grenadiers" they staggered up the hill to Government House where the New South Wales Corps soldiers on guard promptly joined their fellow rebels. No one offered to defend the King's representative except his daughter, Mrs Mary Putland, who invited the drunken troops to stab her to the heart but to respect the life of her father. Major Johnston then "arrested" Bligh, whom it was his first duty to protect against all the King's enemies. A contemporary print shows him being dragged from his hiding place under a bed; but in view of his naval record it seems likely that this was a piece of rebel propaganda.[39] Macarthur's part in these treasonable proceedings may be divined from a hasty note he sent to his wife:

> My Dearest Love,
> I have been deeply engaged all this day in contending for the liberties of the unhappy colony, and I'm happy to say I have succeeded beyond what I expected. I am too much exhausted to attempt giving you particulars: therefore I must refer you to Edward [their son] who knows enough to give you a general idea of what has been done. The tyrant is now, no doubt, gnashing his teeth with vexation at his overthrow. May he often have cause to do the like.

Johnston and the junta took over the government, continued to import rum, and proceeded to grant more land to themselves and their friends. After some years Johnston was cashiered by a London court-martial. Macarthur was not allowed to return to Australia for some time, but his wife Elizabeth capably looked after his colonial interests during his absence.

Those who hold that the New South Wales Corps' treasonable deposition of Bligh constituted the only warlike deed in its inglorious history do it a little less than justice. Four years earlier it had carried out a slightly less discreditable action. In 1798 the most recent Irish

revolt against their British overlords had been bloodily suppressed at the "Battle" of Vinegar Hill. Shiploads of the defeated rebels were transported to New South Wales where, despite the fact that their lives had been spared, they obstinately continued to hate their masters. Governor King, a devout loyalist and supporter of the Protestant establishment, inquired into rumoured Irish plots to take Sydney in 1800 and 1802. Then in March 1804 the rumours became real. One of the transported rebels, William Johnston, armed a band of convicts, mostly Irish, with stolen muskets and improvised pikes and swords. They marched from Castle Hill towards Windsor, calling on all convicts to join their crusade against the establishment. Informed by an Irish traitor, one Keogh, King ordered Major George Johnston and a detachment of the New South Wales Corps in pursuit. The soldiers overtook the rebels at Vinegar Hill, now known as Rouse Hill, about 7 kilometres short of Windsor. They answered Johnston's demand for their surrender with a defiant shout of "Death or Liberty". Johnston then asked their leaders to come forward to parley with him under an implied promise of safe-conduct. William Johnston and his fellow rebel, Phillip Cunningham, were simple-minded enough to trust the word of a British officer, even one enrolled in the notorious "Rum Corps". After some discussion, George Johnston clapped his pistol at Cunningham's head while an attendant trooper pointed his at William Johnston's. Defeated by what the gentlemen of the Corps doubtless considered a brilliant stratagem, the leaderless and ill-armed convicts ran away. Nine were butchered before they reached Windsor and Cunningham was hanged out of hand there on the staircase of the public store. In the following week those considered to be the ringleaders were punished according to the heinousness of their offences. Three were publicly hanged at Parramatta, three at Castle Hill and two at Sydney. Thirty-five were sent to the penal station at Coal River, renamed Newcastle.[40]

The Reverend Samuel Marsden, ever zealous in his support of the Protestant ascendancy, busied himself in extracting incriminating evidence from witnesses, as he had done after the earlier rumoured revolt of 1800. On that occasion, in his capacity as a magistrate, he had not scrupled to break the laws of God and man by ordering floggings to extort confessions from vaguely suspected persons. In 1804 two such were named Fitzgerald and Galvin, transported for their part in the rebellion of 1798. Their flagellation was described by Joseph Holt, another suspected plotter who, since he was a Protestant and a gentleman, was punished only by being forced to watch the torture of his countrymen. "There was two floggers," wrote Holt,

> Richard Rice and John Jonson, the Hangman from Sidney. Rice was a left handed man and Jonson was Right handed so they stood at each side and I never saw two trashers in a barn moove their stroakes more handeyer than those two man killers did ... as it happened I was to leew'rd of the floggers and I protest, tho' I was two perches from them, the flesh and skin blew in my face as they shooke off of the cats.
>
> Next was tyed up paddy galvin, a young boy about twenty years of age. He was ordered to get three hundred lashes. He got one hundred on the back and you cud see his back bone between his shoulder blades, then the Doctor order him to get another hunder on his bottom. He got it and then his huckles was in such a jelly the Doctor order him to be flog on the Calves of his legs. He got one hunder there and as much as a whimper he never gave. They asked him if he would tell where the pikes was hid, he said he did not now, and if he did he would not tell. "You may as well hang me Now," he says, "for you will never get any musick from me." So they put him in the Cart and sent him to the Hospita1.[41]

Australians generally and Irish-Australians in particular remembered the sort of thing that was done to Paddy Galvin and to thousands like him. Folk memory often preserved too the tradition of Galvin's iron will in the face of hopeless odds. "I'll fight but not surrender," said the anonymous, but clearly Irish-Australian, Wild Colonial Boy many years later. Later still, at the time of what contemporaries called the Great War, most Irish-Australians, though very willing to fight for Australia, still hated England, their hereditary enemy, sufficiently to vote "No" in the campaigns for conscription for overseas service.

The "Rum Rebellion" at least prompted His Majesty's ministers, preoccupied with the Napoleonic wars, to give an unwonted modicum of thought to affairs in New South Wales. The system by which naval governors had to depend for their authority on the goodwill of a military force, which distance made semi-autonomous in practice, was abandoned. On New Year's Day 1810 Lieutenant-Colonel Lachlan Macquarie, at the head of his own regiment of 73rd Highlanders, assumed office as governor. For the next twelve years he ruled New South Wales and its dependencies in much the same absolute but paternalistic spirit as some of his ancestors had ruled their Highland clans. Like previous governors, he regarded the Church of England as a body of men whose prime function was to preach obedience to the secular power of the state. He made the leading clergyman in the colony, Reverend Samuel Marsden, a magistrate of whom the convicts said "The Lord have mercy on you, for his reverence has none" and whom Commissioner Bigge found to have ordered floggings far more freely than any of the lay magistrates in the colony.[42] The Church of England in Australia at this time seems to have regarded itself as a kind of moral police officer in the service of government, so much so that many church foundation stones, like those of St Matthew's at Windsor and St James' in Sydney, bear no cross or other Christian symbol but simply a crown, the date and the sufficiently significant inscription, "L. Macquarie Esq., Governor".

During his regime (1810-21), the power of the rum monopolists was broken, not so much because of the loyalty of his regiment or even his own prodigious efforts, as because the rising native-born generation, an increasing trickle of free immigrants and growing export trade in whale oil and sealskins rendered a nearly closed monopolistic system no longer economically viable. He closed scores of licensed taverns while sly-grog shops multiplied, for if the monopoly of rum was ended, the rate of its consumption hardly lessened. He gave to the central Sydney area the basic street plan it has today. He ordered the erection of many fine buildings. Among those still standing are St James' Church in King Street, the adjoining Hyde Park convict barracks and the graceful Georgian building long known as the "Rum Hospital". Only two parts of the last still stand. One serves as the Parliament House of the state of New South Wales. Its name derived from the fact that, in his efforts to stamp out the rum trade, Macquarie at one stage thought to control it by granting to three contractors (not including Macarthur!) an *official* three years' monopoly of the import of spirits. In return they built the hospital. History will never know how much more rum was smuggled into the colony or illicitly distilled there.

Macquarie's chief architect was an emancipist who had been transported for forgery, Francis Greenway, whom later generations have agreed to honour as an artist in brick and stone. The new governor consistently encouraged merit wherever he found it, even inviting deserving emancipists to dine at his table. One of Macquarie's ex-convict friends was William Redfern, a 23-year-old surgeon's mate in the Royal Navy when he was transported in 1797. When the crew of his ship mutinied, he was overheard by a fellow officer to advise them to "be more united among themselves", and thus he became a mutineer and a felon.[43] Not all of Macquarie's emancipist friends were such fine people as Redfern, but a vice-regal invitation to dine with any emancipist was more than most exclusionists could stomach. So two of them, Archibald McNaughton and Phillip Connor, lieutenants in Macquarie's own regiment, pointedly left his table one night early in 1813. A few weeks later in the dusk of a fine June evening, "flown with insolence and wine", and dressed in merry parti-coloured costumes, the two officers took a turn in the lower end of Pitt Street near the waters of Sydney Cove. There they met a young needlewoman, Elizabeth Winch, also taking the air with her lover, "John Brown the Painter". Apparently every emancipist girl knew what to do when confronted with military gentlemen. Elizabeth turned at once and ran for cover to the house of her employer, Mrs Ann Holness, with whom she lived at number 17 a few metres along the road.

Lieutenant Connor gave chase. To protect his sweetheart, Brown ran between them and was beaten about the head by Connor, who then walked some little distance away up the street. McNaughton continued to argue with Brown outside the locked door of number 17, behind which Mrs Hotness and her boarder waited anxiously. When Connor returned to support McNaughton, Elizabeth bravely stepped out into the street, but only for long enough to persuade Brown to come back inside the house with her. The gentlemen then began to batter their way inside while the occupants pushed against the door to keep them out. Alerted by the din, Mr William Hotness returned from a neighbour's house, which he had been visiting. When he asked what the drunken assailants wanted, they answered that they would have the two women, Ann Hotness and Elizabeth Winch, and that they would "do so and so to them and you too ... making use of a very indecent expression."

At this the emancipated tradesman, described by several witnesses as "a remarkably quiet man", replied, "I'll do so to you", as he put his hand on Connor's chest and pushed him away from the door. Both gentlemen then battered Holness to death with sticks, fists, their boots and palings torn from a nearby fence.

Those whom Macquarie officially named the murderers were tried by a court presided over by Ellis Bent, the judge-advocate, and comprising five mess-mates of the accused and two other officers from the Royal Volunteer Corps. The luckless Holness's body was examined by four medical gentlemen including D'Arcy Wentworth. They all swore to the opinion that death had been caused by "an effusion of blood in the lungs", but said that they could find on the corpse no external marks of violence sufficiently severe to have caused it. The fatal effusion, they thought, was much more likely to have been caused by the very violence of the dead man's passionate anger than by any slight violence inflicted by those who had sought to rape his spouse. So the honourable military court was able to find Connor and McNaughton not guilty of murder but "guilty of Feloniously killing and slaying the said William Holness" and to impose on each the farcical penalty of one shilling's fine and six months in Parramatta Gaol.[44]

Small wonder that the new viceroy came to the considered conclusion that the emancipists, with all their sins upon their heads, had done more for the prosperity and good order of the country than those who considered themselves their betters. During the last two years of his term, the British government sent out an able lawyer, J.T. Bigge, to report on the colony and on Macquarie's administration of it. The old viceroy's view of the factions in New South Wales was made clear in a letter he wrote to Commissioner Bigge during 1819. Here is an extract with emphatically muddled syntax and indignantly explosive capitals, just as it sputtered from his quill.

> You already know that Nine-tenths of the population of this Colony are or have been Convicts, or the Children of Convicts. You have Yet perhaps to learn that these are the people who have Quietly submitted to the Laws and Regulations of the Colony, altho' informed by the *Free Settlers* and some of the Officers of Government that they were illegal: these are the Men who have tilled the Ground, who have built Houses and Ships, who have made wonderful Efforts, Considering the Disadvantages under which they have Acted, in Agriculture, in Maritime Speculations, and in Manufacturers; these are the Men who, placed in the balance as Character, both Moral and political (at least since their Arrival here) in the opposite Scale to those Free Settlers (who Struggle for their Depression) whom you will find to preponderate.[45]

We have seen that bitter class feelings existed in Australia before Macquarie's time. Perhaps his emancipist policy did something to accentuate them. It certainly did in the opinion of leading exclusionist spokesmen like Macarthur , who successfu1Iy obtained the ear of Bigge and decisively influenced the tenor of his official report. More than ever the emancipists and their children felt that Australia, as it was beginning to be called, was *their* country, founded for them and their descendants. Yet Macquarie's period had also instituted profound changes that were to strengthen the influence of the free immigrants even more in the long run.

When he sailed for Britain, New South Wales was no longer primarily a prison farm measuring some 60 kilometres from east to west and from north to south – extensive by British standards, it is true, but still hemmed in between the Blue Mountains and the Pacific. In 1813 a way across the range had been found by a party which included young W.C. Wentworth, son of the old doctor, and one of the first and most illustrious native white Australians. Six years later he wrote, of the western plains stretching away beyond the Great Divide, that they were "admirably suited for the pasture of sheep, the wool of which will without doubt eventually become the principal export of this colony, and may be conveyed across the mountains at an inconsiderable expense".[46] Not everyone at the time shared Wentworth's vision. Nevertheless, almost limitless pastures for the expansion of the wool industry stood waiting. The Bank of New South Wales, which flaunted its contempt for tradition in 1982 by renaming itself Westpac, was founded in 1817, mainly by some successfu1 emancipists, with the governor's encouragement. Cedar- cutting in the coastal brushes had joined whaling and sealing to furnish profitable export commodities. Wholesale importers and traders were firmly established in Sydney and Hobart, and retail trading had begun. Few people still depended directly on the communal government store, as all had done in the foundation years and most still did on Macquarie's arrival. Bigge's *Report* to the home government urged that extensive parcels of land, principally for stock raising, should be granted to respectable free immigrants in proportion to the amount of capital they brought with them to invest. With cheap assigned convict labour, the profits to be made in pastoralism were very tempting, and an increasing stream of well-to-do free immigrants arrived to take advantage of the new arrangements.

Yet the harvest lay for the most part in the future. Only the seeds had been planted during Macquarie's regime, some of them unwittingly. In any case, the old chieftain received little official credit for his exertions. Bigge's *Report* condemned his emancipist policy and his "extravagant" building program – unjustly as it has seemed to posterity. At the same time, the report recognised economic reality by advocating the development of a large-scale wool industry for the future, thereby at least tacitly condemning the effort of past governors to carry out government policy; for, insofar as the Home authorities can be divined to have had an economic policy for the colony, it had been to encourage the development of a large class of (mainly emancipist) small-holding agriculturalists. Macquarie was given an affectionate farewell by thousands of his subjects.[47] When he sailed for the last time out of Sydney Harbour in the *Surry* on 15 February 1822, New South Wales was considerably more prosperous, and somewhat less turbulent and wicked, than it had been on his arrival.

It was also much more extensive. In pursuance of his instructions, and of the elusive flax plant, Phillip had despatched Philip Gidley King to settle Norfolk Island within a few weeks of the First Fleet's arrival in Sydney. By 1799 a young naval surgeon, George Bass, had explored the coastline south of Sydney in some detail, discovered Western Port and circumnavigated Van Diemen's Land, examining *en route* the estuaries of the Tamar and the Derwent. In 1803 he disappeared after leaving Sydney on a trading voyage to South America, but his name lived on in Bass Strait.

He had been accompanied on several of his exploratory voyages by another young naval officer, Matthew Flinders, who proved to be second only to Cook as a navigator and hydrographer. Promoted commander in 1801, he left England in HMS *Investigator* to explore the still unknown coast between Nuyts' Land at the head of the Great Australian Bight and what is now known as the Victorian coast. He thus became the first European to see most of the shoreline of South Australia, which he charted accurately. At Encounter Bay opposite Kangaroo Island, on 8 April 1802, he met Captain Nicholas Baudin of the French Navy, who had been following the coast westwards. A month later he dropped anchor in Port Jackson and had the leaky and rotten *Investigator* overhauled. In July he sailed again on what was to be his

greatest achievement, the first circumnavigation of Australia since Tasman's. Unlike the Dutchman, he mapped the coast in detail as he proceeded northward. On the Gulf of Carpentaria's shores he was puzzled by numerous indications of recent visits by Asian ships. Finally, at an anchorage off the northeastern corner of Arnhem Land, which he named Malay Road, the *Investigator* fell in with six Malay proas engaged in fishing for trepang. As the ship's cook was a Malay, Flinders was able to talk easily with Pobassoo, the Malay commander and his captains, who told him there were sixty vessels altogether in their fleet. Being Muslims, they exhibited disgust at the sight of pigs but, said Flinders, "had no objection to port wine".[48]

When the *Investigator* returned to *Port* Jackson in June 1803, relations with France were by no means as cordial as had been his meeting with Baudin in Encounter Bay. Governor King had been alarmed by Baudin's visit to Sydney over a year before and had urged the British government to forestall French designs by planting settlements in the Bass Strait area. He sent a party under Lieutenant John Bowen to settle at Risdon Cove in the Derwent estuary while the erstwhile judge-advocate of New South Wales, Colonel David Collins, sailed from England in charge of 450 marines and convicts to plant the flag in the Port Phillip area. Collins was dismayed by the lack of wood and water on the inner shore of the peninsula near the present site of Sorrento. After only about three months he took his party to the Derwent, where they joined Bowen's smaller band to found Hobart in 1804. In the same year King sent Lieutenant-Colonel Paterson of the New South Wales Corps with seventy-five convicts to found another outpost at Launceston on the Tamar estuary.

Thus began the settlement of Europeans in Van Diemen's Land and the extermination of the original settlers, a process virtually completed within the Biblical span of one man's lifetime, three score years and ten. Most of the four or five thousand Tasmanians were killed in the first twenty years of contact with tile whites – by the time that the island was made into a separate colony in 1825, administered directly from Britain and no longer responsible to the governor of New South Wales. Many were murdered by white soldiers or police or respectable settlers, but probably many more by assigned convict servants or absconders who had become bushrangers. Many too, especially women, aided in the establishment of white Australia's first major industry – whaling and sealing.

Known to contemporaries as "the fisheries", this industry provided the first "staple" export commodity which flax and ship's timbers failed to furnish. Up until about 1834, whale and seal oil, whale bone and seal skins made up easily the most lucrative part of colonial exports. Only then were "the fisheries" overtaken by wool. American and British whale ships frequently visited Sydney and Hobart Town, especially after the East India Company's monopoly came to an end in 1813, but the industry was largely in the hands of emancipists and native-born people. In Sydney the most prominent firm engaged in "the fisheries" in the 1800s was that of Kable and Underwood, two ex-convicts who had come out with the First Fleet. One of Kable's native-born sons, "Young Kable", became the leading bare-knuckle prize-fighter in the 1820s. People of this sort, for the most part, built the ships of eucalypt hardwoods and provided the finance and the crews. They also kidnapped hundreds of Tasmanian and mainland Aboriginal women to be exploited both as expert seal-hunters and sexual slaves. As James Kelly, a sealing captain of Hobart Town, put it in 1816, "the custom of the sealers in the Straits was that every man should have from two to five of these native women for their own use and benefit, and to select any of them they thought proper to cohabit with as their wives".[49] On one sealing trip in 1816, Kelly circumnavigated Van Diemen's Land in a clockwise direction for the first time. He made great use of female Aboriginal seal-hunters and boasted of the great profit he made on the trip. A surviving portrait shows what later generations of Australians would have called a "flash", bumptious, "two-bob lair" or larrikin. Born in 1791, this "Currency" lad was the son of an Irish convict woman.[50]

Ships often landed parties of men at lonely spots on the south coast, or on islands in Bass Strait, or even far out in the ocean, to collect seals. These people were often left alone for months or years at a time and sometimes, if their “mother ship” was wrecked, until they died. Usually they brutally ill-used Aboriginal women whom they had kidnapped. In South Australia a legend still tells of a beautiful young Aboriginal woman who was snatched away from her child on the mainland and taken to the permanent camp of sealers established on Kangaroo Island from 1804 onwards. She eluded her captors and swam back across Backstairs Passage through 14 kilometres of shark-infested waters to her child and her tribe. Though told with many fanciful embellishments, the story is true down to the unusual comeliness of its heroine.[51] Such things certainly happened hundreds of times. By the end of Macquarie’s reign in 1822, most of the southern Australian coasts and islands and even places as far afield as Macquarie Island, halfway to the Antarctic continent, had been visited or lived on by these brutal off-scourings of the convict system, and the population of Aborigines and seals had been reduced by about half. Aborigines living near Sydney had been dispersed and debauched. A contemporary engraving by an American artist, Augustus Earle, shows their state more graphically than volumes of print could do.

Whaling and sealing were the main, but not the only, maritime occupations of early Australians. Until pastoralism surged ahead in the late 1830s, the prevailing odour in white Australia was one of rum and tar, not greasy wool and gum trees. As Alan Frost has shown, the decision to occupy “Botany Bay” in the first place was taken primarily in answer to “a naval question”. The first four governors were naval officers. The first settlements at Sydney, Norfolk Island, Hobart, Launceston, Newcastle, Moreton Bay and the rest were virtually island-ports, which communicated with each other and with the rest of the world only by sea. Rum – “Nelson’s blood”, the preferred drink of British seamen – lubricated the colonial economy, the social intercourse and the dreams and nightmares of the colonists alike. People looked outward to the ocean for inspiration and profit, not inward to the unknown, dry interior of the continent. By the 1830s there were few islands in the Pacific which had not felt the influence, good and bad, of Australian ships and Australian men, most of them convict bolters or Currency people. As early as 1809 King Kamehameha of Hawaii, for instance, employed a convict “bolter”, William Stevenson, and seven of his mates as official distillers of rum to the court. To later Australians it may seem ironic that they built their still at Pearl Bay, now known as Pearl Harbor. These men already spoke English with an Australian “accent”, as do Fijians and both Maoris and Pakehas in New Zealand to this day.

A Scottish sailor reported the following conversation with “Long William”:

> “Sir,” he said, “me ‘ouse is on a bit of a rise and from me front [veranda] you can see all over your land, and if any of those bloody Indians are loafing on the job you can tell it without stirring a step, and loaf the buggers will, if you let’ em. I’ve got two of them tending me still, this minute, and iffen I don’t look out they’ll let the fire out in a jiffy. God strike me pink if they won’t, and the mash all spoiled to hell an’ gone. You’ll find it pays Mr Campbell, to keep an eye cocked and make’ em watch their paces, the easy-going bastids, if you’ II pardon me langwidge, sir.”
> Here was indeed a language which was new to me though not for its oaths. It was like Cockney such as I had heard about the docks in London, but Cockney with a different flavour and with queer turns of speech that those who lived in New Holland or Australia soon acquired.[52]

After whale and seal products the most important commodity in Pacific commerce was timber. The beautiful red cedar wood, which once grew prolifically in the rainforests of coastal New South Wales, was felled and floated down the coastal rivers by old hands and their Currency offspring. From the rivermouths it was taken away in Australian ships more often than not, to Sydney, Hobart and London or other overseas ports.[53] The same colonial ships developed a lucrative trade in sandalwood, carried from Melanesian and Polynesian islands to Chinese and Southeast Asian ports, where it was made into magnificent furniture for the affluent and in cense for the religious. Emancipist and Currency merchants shared too

in the business which British leaders from Cook to Pitt had hoped would provide the staple commodity for export from New South Wales – timber for shipbuilding. Most of this, especially wood for masts and spars, came from New Zealand. This meant that it was a dangerous trade, for to the everyday risk of shipwreck was added the chance of being killed, cooked and eaten by Maori or Melanesian warriors who were by no means as backward in the art of warfare as their Aboriginal counterparts. In 1809, for example, the ship *Boyd* sailed for New Zealand to pick up a cargo of spars for London. Among the passengers was Ann Glassop, convict mistress of William Broughton, Deputy Commissary of New South Wales and a magistrate, who had arrived in the First Fleet as a servant to Surgeon White. Ann Glassop was taking her 2-year-old daughter, Elizabeth Isabella Broughton, to England, apparently to visit some of her other children by Broughton who were being educated there. The *Boyd* anchored in the Bay of Islands,[54] that early New Zealand rendezvous of tough Maoris and scoundrelly whites, but was lured away by the promise of spars some 50 kilometres to Whangaroa. In New Zealand, as like as not, massacres were carried out by the first-comers, not the invaders. All the crew and passengers of the *Boyd* were killed and eaten except for a Mrs Morley and her infant, a boy named Thomas Davis and 2-year-old Betsy Broughton. A few months later the survivors were rescued by Alexander Berry, also seeking a cargo of spars, and put ashore in Lima, Peru, where the infant Betsy was looked after for eleven months by a certain Don Gaspar de Rico. She was brought back to her father in Sydney by a passing British ship and lived to marry the nephew and heir of Charles Throsby, the early explorer of the Illawarra and Goulburn districts, Charles Throsby Jnr. By him she had seventeen children, some of whom became the ancestors of many prominent Australians.[55] Betsy Broughton's most illustrious descendant was the commanding officer of the first AIF, Major-General Sir W.T. Bridges who, before he was killed at Gallipoli, ensured that Australian troops would retain their own identity throughout the Great War and not be distributed among British units as they had been in the Boer War fifteen years earlier.

By the end of Macquarie's governorship, white Australian traders had been seen and white Australian voices heard all over the Pacific. On the mainland the mountains had been crossed, as we have seen, and sparse pastoral occupation of the interior had just begun to spread out from Bathurst. To the south, settlement had spread through the Illawarra district and inland to the neighbourhood of the present site of Moss Vale and the Cockbundoon Range. To the north, Governor King had begun the first permanent white settlement at Newcastle as a place of secondary punishment for the rebellious Irish convicts defeated at the "Battle" of Vinegar Hill in 1804. The Hunter Valley and the Illawarra district had been settled, if sparsely, by cedar-getters, coalminers and others.

Much has been written in this chapter of the depravity of early Australian society. It would be misleading to end it without mentioning moral changes for the better which were already becoming visible before Macquarie's departure. Gov ernor Hunter wrote in 1798:

> A more wicked, abandoned, and irreligious set of people have never been brought together in any part of the world ... order and morality is not the wish of the inhabitants; it interferes with the private views and pursuits of individuals of various descriptions.[56]

The "national children" of the official documents were known popularly as "Currency lads and lasses," originally because, like the makeshift local currency of the early days – Spanish or "Holey" dollars with "dumps" punched out of their centres, traders' tokens, notes-of-hand and so forth – they were a local product not imported from Britain, as were free immigrants, convicts and a trickle of sterling coinage.[57] Some of these Currency children could hardly have known who their parents were. Perhaps they were better off than those who did since, in the eyes of respectable contemporaries, most of their fathers were drunken and demoralised habitual criminals, and most of their mothers equally drunken and demoralised prostitutes. Small wonder that godly people like Reverend Samuel Marsden feared the worst for the

thousands of "national children" growing up in these conditions. For the first twenty-five years or so of Australia's history, observers were almost unanimous in expecting that the native-born would reproduce the manners and morals attributed to their progenitors. Yet no such thing happened.

Commissioner Bigge, we have seen, was by no means predisposed to view the convict and emancipist classes favourably. Yet in his *Report on Agriculture and Trade,* issued in 1823, the classic statement on the transformation of their children occurs:

> The class of inhabitants that have been born in the colony affords a remarkable exception to the moral and physical character of their parents: they are generally tall in person, and slender in their limbs, of fair complexion and small features. They are capable of undergoing more fatigue, and are less exhausted by labour than native Europeans; they are active in their habits but remarkably awkward in their movements. In their tempers they are quick and irascible, but not vindictive; and I only repeat the testimony of persons who have had many opportunities of observing them, that they neither inherit the vices nor feelings of their parents.[58]

There is not the slightest doubt that such a reform did take place. Contemporary evidence is practically unanimous. For instance, Peter Cunningham, a hard-headed Scots surgeon, wrote in 1827 of "the open and manly simplicity of character displayed by this part of our population ... [which] ... was little tainted by the vices so prominent among their parents ... Drunkenness is almost unknown to them, and honesty proverbial."[59] And in 1834 even the dour Reverend Lang, whose talent for nosing out human wickedness was possibly unrivalled in the whole continent, wrote:

> I am happy, indeed, to be able to state, as the result of ten years' extensive observation in the colony, that drunkenness is by no means a vice to which the colonial youth of either sex are at all addicted. Reared in the very midst of scenes of drunkenness of the most revolting description and of daily occurrence, they are almost uniformly temperate: for if there are exceptions, as I do acknowledge there are a few, the wonder, I had almost said the miracle, is that they have not been tenfold more numerous.[60]

The most convincing evidence is probably that of Sir William Burton, a justice of the New South Wales Supreme Court from 1833 until 1844. He was so impressed by the law-abiding nature of the Currency people that he inquired closely into the criminal statistics of the time.[61] From his data it has been shown that the first generation of white natives, as they were called at the time, were, at least in a statistical legal sense, *more* virtuous than any other class in the community including that of the free immigrants. Over the five-year period 1833-37, for instance, the average number of persons tried annually before Burton, per thousand of each of the four classes of people in the colony, was as follows: *Convict,* 3.4; *Emancipist,* 3.2; *Free immigrant,* 1.3; *Currency,* 1.0. Further, none of the crimes committed by Currency people in this period, Burton maintained, was of an atrocious kind punishable by death; and nearly half (thirteen out of thirty) were for stock-stealing, generally known as "cattle-duffing" – an activity not held to be criminal at all by popular Australian opinion until almost the present century. Robert D. Barton, uncle of "Banjo" Paterson and a respectable squatter, as an old man in 1917 could still write, without conscious humour:

> The young Australians were, I think, strictly honest as regards money or valuables; you could leave your hut or house with everything open for days, perhaps weeks, and when you returned you would miss nothing, except, perhaps, that someone had made a pot of tea or got a feed, which, of course, they were all entitled to, and never refused. But, from my earliest recollections, the branding of other people's calves was not looked upon as a crime. ... and the killing of cattle for meat on the place was almost invariably done at someone else's expense. However, that condition of things gradually changed, but a great many men never realised the change ... but continued their depredations, which were then called cattle-stealing.[62]

How did these Currency men and women rise above the influence of their surroundings? Not by a miracle, as the Reverend Lang was tempted to suppose. The main reason seems to have been that most emancipist parents, though they commonly cohabited without clerical licence or divine blessing, were in other ways reformed and normally decent people, like Ann

Glassop, who provided good homes for their offspring. They were not nearly as immoral as they were painted by respectable middle-class observers.[63] Secondly, compared with those in Great Britain at the time, Australian conditions offered a very good living to anyone able and willing to work. There was an almost continuous labour shortage, especially in the bush, partly because in a seemingly limitless wilderness inhabited by very few people the sheer quantity of urgently necessary work also seemed to be limitless, and partly because so much of the labour force was highly inefficient. We have already seen how convicts had to be bribed with incentive payments to improve upon the "government-stroke" which was their preferred, go-slow method of working. Yet most employers found convict labour much more efficient than that of most free immigrants, who were unaccustomed to Australian conditions. Under these conditions, free *and* experienced labour was at such a premium that even children could command good wages – and did. It seems incredible, but contemporary documents abound with evidence of 10- to 15-year-old boys carrying out responsible and sometimes lonely jobs. Thirteen- and 14-year-olds commonly drove bullock-teams on long cross-country journeys; young Albert Wright for many years managed a remote western sheep-station, alone except for one half-mad shepherd. Thus colonial conditions provided the economic opportunity for young people to become precociously self-reliant. The environment was such as to enable and promote the reaction of Currency children away from overtly depraved convict-emancipist characteristics. Thus Bigge's *Report on the State of the Colony* (1822) noted that young Currency men were unwilling to marry convict women, owing "chiefly to a sense of pride in the native-born youths, approaching to contempt for the vices and depravity of the convicts even when manifested in the persons of their own parents".[64]

There were, of course, other convict-emancipist attitudes, not necessarily vicious in themselves – such as group loyalty, or hatred of informers and of affected manners – which the rising generation of young Australians saw no reason to reject. Historians have too long been mesmerised by the horrors of the convict system and the depravity of many of its victims, forgetting the Gospel statement that a person is never defiled by what is done to him or her, but only by the person's own deeds. In this perspective, early Australian history surely gives much cause for pride and little for shame. From the most unpromising possible material there developed in a few short years the self-reliant progenitors of a free and generous people – generous, that is, to all save foreigners and the black people from whom they were taking the country. By 1821 New South Wales had begun to be something much more than the miserable slave farm which had been founded thirty-three years earlier. Not only was a vigorous and self-respecting generation of native-born people growing up, but a new class of respectable free immigrants, not mainly dependent upon the colonial civil or military establishments, had begun to make its appearance.