TRENT DALTON writes for The Weekend Australian Magazine. He’s a two-time Walkley Award winner; three-time Kennedy Award winner for excellence in NSW journalism and a four-time winner of the national News Awards Features Journalist of the Year. In 2011, he was named Queensland Journalist of the Year at the Clarion Awards for excellence in Queensland journalism. His debut literary fiction novel, Boy Swallows Universe, will be published in June, 2018, by Harper Collins.

ERIC LOBBECKE has been a cartoonist for The Australian since 1988. He’s a four-time Walkley award winner; two-time News Limited Artist of the Year; and winner of the Australian Cartoonists’ Association’s Artist of the Year award. He was a finalist in the Dobell Prize for drawing in 2009. Eric has illustrated four children’s books, including The Purple Snow, which he also authored. His paintings have been exhibited in Sydney and London. Eric completed a Master of Art at UNSW Art & Design in 2017.
ARTHUR PHILLIP came to Australia with a vision for a great nation, a place of peace and prosperity open to all the vast continent’s inhabitants, old and new, who he hoped might build a life within its shimmering borders. He was ridiculed by peers for this vision but he held to it. ‘There shall be no slavery in a free land,’ he fiercely declared, almost 40 years before slavery was abolished in Britain.

“He believed something wondrous could emerge from the prison colony he was burdened with building by order of King George III — the most ambitious social experiment ever to be conducted and, against all odds, succeed. Arthur Phillip believed he could turn a monumental historical negative — 780 criminals exiled from home constructing “a commonwealth of thieves” — into something close to the grand and evolving positive that is Australia in the year 2018.”

With these words Trent Dalton throws a new light on our nation’s founding father, Captain Arthur Phillip, and the eight-month 17,000 nautical mile journey he undertook with 780 criminals exiled to an unknown great southern land.

Drawing on First Fleet journals held in the State Library of New South Wales, Dalton uses the voices of the men and women on this perilous journey to bring the story to life in all its brutality and grandeur.

His words are beautifully illustrated by award-winning artist Eric Lobbecke.

As debate raged this year over the meaning of Australia Day and the most appropriate date on which to celebrate it, The Australian published this series to remind readers of the grand narrative of British settlement.

Dalton and Lobbecke’s series pays tribute to the extraordinary achievement of the First Fleet voyage and to the grit and vision of the man who led it.

We hope The First Fleet: A Graphic Journal will be read in schools and living rooms around the country.

It is a story - our story - which deserves to be retold, reread, reassessed, rediscovered.

PAUL WHITTAKER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, THE AUSTRALIAN
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION  ‘First, finest white Australian’ ................................. 6

CHAPTER ONE  Voyage of the damned ................................................... 10

CHAPTER TWO  Mother of all voyages .................................................... 28

CHAPTER THREE  Betties bring trouble ................................................... 37

CHAPTER FOUR  Day of destiny ............................................................. 48

CHAPTER FIVE  One small first step ......................................................... 59

CHAPTER SIX  Wedded to a future ......................................................... 70

This book is also available as an audiobook read by Trent Dalton. Listen to it on The Australian here
‘First, finest white Australian’

THIS WAS NO INVASION SCENE. This was a First Fleet sailor standing on the finest coastline in the world, dropping his pants to show Australia’s first inhabitants he was a man and not a woman or a god. Another brief moment of practical humility and goodwill conceived 230 years ago by the deep-thinking captain standing passively adjacent to the curious display of wrinkled British man junk. Captain Arthur Phillip had safely led 1420 souls aboard a fleet of 11 ships 17,000 nautical miles across deadly seas in the most extraordinary and treacherous flotilla voyage in history.

By January 20, 1788, the ships of Phillip’s mighty First Fleet had been reunited in Botany Bay. The intrepid captain’s concerns had switched immediately from survival at sea to life in Oz. He was thinking about food. He was thinking about shelter. He was thinking about friendship, a notion of a shared humanity so perfectly realised in that moment two meeting races — those sea-spent Poms and the Eora people of coastal Sydney — bonded over the male copulatory organ and all the earthly trouble carried within it.
“At those initial meetings, the first Eora priority appears to have been to establish the strangers’ sex — men dealt with men,” says Grace Karskens, a University of NSW ethnography historian and world authority on early colonial Australia. “The (British) had no beards and they did not appear to have male sex organs. Once he grasped the question, Phillip instructed a sailor to drop his pants at one meeting — in response a great shout went up from the Eora warriors.”

Phillip had come to Australia with a vision for a great nation, a place of peace and prosperity open to all the vast continent’s inhabitants, old and new, he hoped might build a life within its shimmering borders. He was ridiculed by peers for this vision but he held to it. “There shall be no slavery in a free land,” he fiercely declared, almost 40 years before slavery was abolished in Britain.

He believed something wondrous could emerge from the prison colony he was burdened with building by order of King George III — the most ambitious social experiment ever to be conducted and, against all odds, succeed. Arthur Phillip believed he could turn a monumental historical negative — 780 criminals exiled from home constructing “a commonwealth of thieves” — into something close to the grand and evolving positive that is Australia in the year 2018.

This was no invasion scene. This was Phillip in September 1790, in Manly Cove, near-fatally speared in the shoulder while attempting to communicate with a group of indigenous Australians feasting on a dead whale. When others called for retribution, Phillip called for understanding.

Two hundred years later, one of this young nation’s most esteemed legal figures, Geoffrey Robertson QC, described that man as “the first and finest white Australian” who set a “standard of decency and justice for which we should express gratitude”.

An avid Phillip scholar, Robertson has lobbied for decades to have the oft-overlooked captain’s remains — believed to be resting in the grounds of a church
in Bath — repatriated to Sydney’s Botanic Gardens, overlooking, says Robertson, “what Phillip was first to describe as the world’s finest harbour”. “As a nation, we probably owe more to him than to any other single person. Quite literally, our founding father.”

“Change the date!” wrote a faceless spray-painter last year across a Hyde Park statue of Captain James Cook, the man who mapped the coast of NSW 18 years before Phillip raised the flag of Great Britain in Sydney Cove on January 26, 1788. Six months before the Hyde Park vandalism, research marketing agency Review Partners conducted a survey asking 1043 Australians to identify the historical event celebrated annually on Australia Day. Only 43 per cent connected the date with the arrival of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove, with one in five saying the day marked Cook’s discovery of Australia’s east coast and a small but puzzling 2 per cent who said the day recognised an important battle in World War I. But maybe fewer still would associate Australia Day with the spirit of growth, unity and possibility that Arthur Phillip possessed that day he stood beneath that raised flag; the moral vision that carried him from Portsmouth to Rio de Janeiro, from the Cape of Good Hope to Botany Bay and on to Sydney Cove; that hope-filled vision that was, alas, eventually broken by the brutal realities of his impossible mission.

This six-part illustrated series tells the story of Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet’s epic journey to Australia Day. “The First Fleet: A Graphic Journal” uses existing First Fleet journal manuscripts — of the 11 known manuscripts in existence, nine are held in the Mitchell and Dixson library collections of the State Library of NSW — to bring this world-changing odyssey to life for a new generation of Australians through the art of Eric Lobbecke and the voices of the men and women who found themselves part of this majestic fleet sailing into history. Some 1420 souls bound by circumstance and fate. Bound for glory and tragedy, hardship and hope. Bound for Botany Bay.
LONDON BLEEDS. LONDON BREAKS. This boy shivers. This boy shakes. October 1783. One hour past midnight. John Hudson assesses the dimensions of a glass skylight above a window to the well-appointed home in East Smithfield he has every intention of robbing. Only nine years old, young Hudson is not yet aware how dramatically notions of dimension and space and distance figure in his destiny.

He was born into a city with 1500sq km of space and one million souls burdened with the fate of squeezing into it. Sometimes history is only a question of size and space. The size of a pox sore on a young father’s forearm. The space between two kneecaps when the working girls of Drury Lane open their legs. The length of a shiv held to the chin of a wealthy gentleman. The 17,000 nautical miles and 252 days at sea separating young John Hudson from a great southern prison about 7.6 million square kilometres wide and long with vast blue oceans for walls.

The skylight is narrow but young Hudson’s stomach reminds him how slim his
The body has become, some pitiful width between a wire-thin chest and the lingering last gasps of England’s dead. His hands and feet are covered in black soot. Fine carbon powder on his lungs. He swallows a cough. The boy’s a seasoned chimneysweep, a miserable occupation that sees boys like Hudson fall regularly from snowy rooftops and slow-roast themselves alive in oven flues, with the singular self-educational fringe benefit of improving a budding thief’s ability to squeeze through tight spaces.

He takes one last look across the empty alleyways of London. King George III’s city of shadow and fog, disease and desperation. A crack in the cold, still night. The skylight glass falls away and the boy slips inside the house, scaling down the home’s internal walls to a table beneath his entry point. He scurries through the darkened home, fills his nervy hands with a linen shirt, five silk stockings, two aprons and a pistol. He exits the house quickly and undetected but leaves behind a fateful trace of his bold endeavours. A sooty footprint on the table beneath the skylight.

Young John Hudson doesn’t know it yet but he’s just secured himself a place in Australian history, his own small role in one of humankind’s most ambitious and bizarre social experiments. John Hudson will be the youngest convict to sail with the First Fleet, 11 small ships hauling 1500 souls and two years’ worth of food and supplies to a distant land that exists only in the imagination and the paper line drawings of a dead man named James Cook.

The boy will owe it all to John Howard. In 1777 the great British prison reformer publishes The State of the Prisons, an excoriating public assessment of his dark journey through the abyss of England’s overcrowded and overwhelmed prison system. He describes prison cells, 5m by 3m, filled with up to 24 starved and suffocating thieves breathing air through a few small holes in a cell door. He describes dens of disease and criminal knowledge-sharing and prostitution and rioting and scarce rehabilitation. He describes places doctors refuse to
visit for fear of infection. He talks of turnkeys turning blind eyes to prison
graft and debauchery. Itching and scratching and rotting scurvy humans on
floating prison hulks, less men and women than bipedal carcasses. Shoeless and
semi-naked and crazed and doomed prisoners envious of their countless and
throbbing vermin cellmates that can scamper to freedom through every crack in
the empire’s faulty and collapsing prison system.

The boy will owe it all to Sir Joseph Banks. Here’s the great botanist now, still
handsome and brash in his early 40s, standing before the House of Commons
committee established to solve the escalating prison problem, urging the
consideration of Botany Bay on the fertile and inescapable New South Wales
coast of New Holland as a suitable destination for prisoner transportation.
Published accounts of Banks’s jaw-dropping southern journey of discovery with
Captain James Cook have turned the razor-sharp naturalist into a scientific
celebrity of such renown that the respected Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus
has suggested the great and vast southern continent be known forever more as
“Banksia”.

“Joseph Banks Esq. being requested, in case it should be thought expedient to
establish a Colony of convicted felons in any distant part of the Globe, from
whence escape might be difficult … informed your committee that the place
which appeared to him best adapted for such a purpose, was Botany Bay,” reads
an account of Banks’s committee appearance.

“He apprehended there would be little possibility of opposition from the natives,
as during his stay there in the year 1770, he saw very few and did not think there
were above fifty in the neighbourhood … those he saw were naked, treacherous,
and armed with lances, but extremely cowardly, and constantly retired from our
people when they made the least appearance and resistance.

“The climate, he apprehended, was similar to Toulouse in the South of France
… there were no beasts of prey, and he did not doubt oxen and sheep, if carried
there, would thrive and increase … The grass was long and luxuriant, and the
eatable vegetables, particularly a sort of wild spinach; the country was well supplied with water; there was an abundance of timber and fuel sufficient for any number of buildings, which might be found necessary.”

“WHERE?” WHISPERS young John Hudson to an old cellmate in the bowels of the Dunkirk, the floating prison hulk moored in Plymouth Harbour, southwest England, where the boy has languished for three years amid men, some hopeless, some half-dead, carrying every venereal disease moonlight London can manufacture. “Botany Bay,” his cellmate barks.

It’s March 1787. The boy never read about Cook’s Pacific odyssey — the great navigator’s world-changing walk across the shores of Botany Bay — because the boy can’t read. Most of his fellow convicts on the First Fleet will build an image of their final destination out of whispers and rumours. The great southern land. Terra Nullius. No man’s land. A searing barren hell, some whisper. There are naked savages there, they whisper, because they have no possible insight into the complex, possibly 60,000-year history of the prisoner island’s inhabitants; their connection to place; their dreaming. Paradise, whisper others. Wild fruits the size of your fist. Fresh fish as silver as the moon with flesh as white as your eyes. Golden sand beaches and hills that roll across the country’s endless coastline like the curves on a costly Covent Garden toffer.

For three agonising years in the sweltering, suffocating Dunkirk, the boy’s been stewing on his one great error in judgment: robbing the East Smithfield home of a man with half a brain. The homeowner, a chemist named William Holdsworth, spotted Hudson’s sooty toe marks on the table beneath the skylight.

“They were small toes,” said Holdsworth, giving evidence in the Old Bailey where young Hudson was dragged before Justice Wills around Christmas 1783. “I took the impressions of the foot and of the toes that were on the table upon a
piece of paper as minutely as I could."

Another witness, Sarah Baynes, said she spotted Hudson vigorously scrubbing himself clean in a boarding house washtub. Canny Ms Baynes knew that young London chimneysweeps welcome a wash like they welcome a slow-roasting death inside a chimney flue. They eat and sleep in soot, wear the warm black chimney dust in winter like a snug-fitting coat. Their reticence to scrub themselves clean is part of the reason why they so often die of testicular cancers from the build-up of toxic soot that collects around their genitals. Ms Baynes later found Hudson’s stolen goods bundled in the corner of the boarding house.

A third witness, a pawnbroker named John Smith, said Hudson was the boy who tried to sell him an expensive linen shirt on the morning of October 17, 1783.

“He said it belonged to his father,” Smith told the court. “I asked who had sent him. He said his mother. I stopped him.”

The court turned its attention to young Hudson. “How old are you?”

“Going on nine,” stout Hudson replied.

“What business were you bred up in?”

“None, sometimes chimneysweeps,” Hudson said.

“Have you any father and mother?”

“Dead.”

“How long ago?”

“I don’t know.”
Justice Wills was reluctant to convict. “One would wish to snatch such a boy, if one possibly could, from destruction, for he will only return to the same kind of life which he has led before,” he said.

But this was the life John Hudson was born into. The boy was sentenced to seven years’ transportation.

“Where’s Botany Bay?” a confused Hudson asks his Dunkirk cellmate.

His cellmate laughs.

“Do you know where the earth ends, lad?” the old con asks.

“I think so,” says the boy.

“Well, it’s a little further south than that.”

---

SPRING 2017. The glorious 24/7 metropolis of Sydney. The restless and heaving concrete beast that has spread outwards over 230 years from Circular Quay.

When this rare and beautiful monster was only three months old in April 1788, it was a series of huts and camps identified not by street names but letters of the alphabet.

The 1500 members of the First Fleet turned this place into the most populous city in Oceania where, today, five million souls squeeze into 658 suburbs stretching 70km to the Blue Mountains in the west, Hawkesbury in the north and the verdant hills of Macarthur to the south.

A short walk from Circular Quay is the State Library of NSW on Macquarie
Street. Curator Elise Edmonds pads through a corridor in a secure floor of the library. She swipes a security access card and opens a doorway to the history of modern Australia’s birth. With rubber-gloved hands she has carefully laid this history out on a long rectangular reference table.


She’s nodding at the most exhaustive collection of original First Fleet documentation in the world. Of the 11 known First Fleet journal manuscripts in existence, nine are held in the Mitchell and Dixson library collections of the State Library of NSW. The original and breathtaking private manuscript journals written by the men who were there, the men who survived the great experiment and handed their personal reporting over to history: John Hunter, second captain, and Philip Gidley King, second lieutenant; William Bradley, first lieutenant; Jacob Nagle, a seaman; and George Worgan, surgeon, all serving on the fleet ship Sirius; Ralph Clark, second lieutenant of marines on the Friendship; James Scott, sergeant of marines on the Prince of Wales; John Easty, private marine on the Scarborough; and Arthur Bowes Smyth, surgeon on the Lady Penrhyn.

On the reference table, amid these doorstopping and yellowed journals, are handwritten letters home to wives, parents and superiors; elaborate drawings, maps and charts. “It’s their eyewitness accounts of the experience,” Edmonds says.

The collected material resting on this table is so rare and essential to history that each fragile piece of paper before us has been heritage-listed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register for its “world significance and outstanding universal value”.

Spend enough time with this collection, Edmonds says, and the story of the First Fleet comes alive. It becomes so real through the words of our dauntless flotilla journalists that you can feel it, smell the flapjacks they’re eating for lunch, taste
the desiccated salted beef and pea porridge they’re slurping for dinner; feel the sting of saltwater when it runs into a lash wound; stomach the stench of the human shit mixing with the bilge water down below where John Hudson will spend his long journey to a magical land called Oz. But where does one start this story?

Edmonds’s gloved hands reach for a thick and precious library manuscript. One starts from the top, of course.

“Arthur Phillip,” she says.

She turns to the manuscript’s title page. It takes 20 seconds to say the title aloud. *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay With an Account of the Establishment of the Colonies of Port Jackson and Norfolk Island, Compiled from Authentic Papers, Which Have Been Obtained from the Several Departments to Which Are Added the Journals of Lieuts. Shortland, Watts, Ball and Capt. Marshall with an Account of their New Discoveries.* Edmonds turns to chapter two of Arthur Phillip’s own epic First Fleet account. And the story begins.

16 March 1787

“The squadron destined to carry into execution the above design, began to assemble at its appointed rendezvous, the Mother Bank, within the Isle of Wight, about the 16th of March, 1787. This small fleet consisted of the following ships: His Majesty's frigate Sirius, Captain John Hunter, and his Majesty’s armed tender Supply, commanded by Lieutenant HL Ball. Three store-ships, the Golden Grove, Fishburn, and Borrowdale, for carrying provisions and stores for two years; including instruments of husbandry, clothing for the troops and convicts, and other necessaries; and lastly, six transports, the Scarborough, and Lady Penrhyn, from Portsmouth; the Friendship, and Charlotte, from Plymouth; the Prince of Wales, and the Alexander, from Woolwich. These were to carry the convicts,
with a detachment of Marines in each, proportioned to the nature of the service; the largest where resistance was most to be expected, namely, in those ships which carried the greatest number of male convicts. Altogether they formed a little squadron of eleven sail.”

She’s named after the southern star, the brightest star in the night sky. HMS Sirius. Her gundeck is 33m long, 10m across the beam. She carries the brightest star in the British Navy. Captain-General Arthur Phillip stands by the man on the wheel of the fleet’s flagship vessel. He scans the waters of Portsmouth harbour on England’s southern coast where the captains of 10 more ships under his command await his signal.

The whole grand First Fleet experiment has cost the British government about £84,000 and every spent pound weighs on the shoulders of this stout, determined, reasoned, compassionate, multilingual, hook-nosed, dark-eyed perfectionist orphan divorcee former spy. Here stands a man the viceroy of Brazil, Luis de Almeida, calls “very clean-handed; an officer of great truth and bravery”.

His mother, Elizabeth Breach, warned him of the perils of sea travel. Her first husband, John Herbert, was a professional seaman who died of yellow fever in a British naval hospital at Port Royal, Jamaica, in October 1731. Herbert’s will opened with the words: “Mindful of the perils and dangers of the sea and other uncertainties of this transitory life ...” Elizabeth’s second husband, German-born Jacob Phillip, most likely died in “Sea Service”, later entitling his orphaned son — Arthur — entry into the Greenwich Charity School of the Royal Hospital for Seamen for “the Sons of disabled Seamen, or whose Fathers were slain, killed or drown’d in the Sea Service”.

Arthur Phillip wasn’t raised in a stable and privileged family environment but his faith in the notion of family will soon figure dramatically in the making of a country the world will come to call Australia.
He's 48 years old. He's been sailing since he was a naval boy servant, aged nine. He steeled his teenaged sea legs on whaling ships in the gloomy and terrifying Arctic Circle. At 17 he began a formal naval career that took him through the Seven Years War; through the explosive Siege of Havana in 1762, which saw 2700 British soldiers fall to Spanish guns. At 25 he married Margaret Charlotte Tybott, the wealthy 41-year-old widow of a London merchant, who insisted her new husband sign a prenuptial agreement the day before their wedding. The couple ran a farm in the Hampshire countryside, near Portsmouth. It was here he finessed the agricultural skills he'll use a year from now to establish farms in New Holland.

He was 31 years old when he left Margaret for his one true love, the cold blue sea that an extraordinary Yorkshireman 10 years his senior, Lieutenant James Cook, was then mapping in the name of Britain aboard an unlikely coal ship called the Endeavour.

The following decade saw the intrepid Arthur Phillip serve in the American War of Independence and reportedly sail into the highly charged world of naval espionage, using his fluency in French, Portuguese and his father's native German tongue to gather global intelligence on France's naval expansions, a kind of sea-bound sleeper agent not averse to prowling the ports and dockyards of South America and France, snake-charming state secrets from unsuspecting local sailors.

By the time he clambered up the accommodation ladder to stand on the deck of the Sirius, wrote military engineer and historian George Landmann in the mid-1800s, he “had doubled every cape, had navigated every sea, had been tossed by the severest hurricanes and ... been longer on the seas than on the land”.

He's already the governor of a land he's never seen. He received his commission as governor of New South Wales on October 12, 1786. He has authority over the land mapped by Cook from Cape York in the wild continent’s deep far north to Van Diemen's Land in the south. All he has to do is make it there alive, mindful
of what his mum’s first dead husband called “the perils and dangers of the sea”.

In his modest private cabin below deck, among his clothing and personal effects, is a document outlining his instructions from King George III, composed and approved by home secretary Lord Sydney (Thomas Townshend), the driving political force behind this bold Botany Bay experiment.

“You are to endeavour, by every possible means, to open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all our subjects to live in amity and kindness with them. And if any of our subjects shall wantonly destroy them, or give them any unnecessary interruption in the exercise of their several occupations, it is our will and pleasure that you do cause such offenders to be brought to punishment according to the degree of the offence.

“You will endeavour to procure an account of the numbers inhabiting the neighbourhood of the intended settlement, and report your opinion to one of our secretaries of state in what manner our intercourse with these people may be turned to the advantage of this colony.”

Phillip sees a future in Australia others can’t see. Many of his naval contemporaries see only doom in the experiment, great folly and bloody disaster. Some London press reports have predicted as many as 80 per cent of his convicts will be dead by the time Phillip sights New Holland’s east coast. But he sees something grand in that barren place across the globe, something closer to nationhood. “There shall be no slavery in a free land,” he fiercely declares.

He has scribbled copious notes on his plans for the colony; sent endless correspondence to Lord Sydney detailing his clear vision of how the fleet will survive in such a wild foreign land.

Modern Australia will be constructed from a tool cargo of 300 chisels, 175 hand saws and hammers, 140 drawing knives and augers, 100 wood planes, 50 pickaxes, 40 wheelbarrows, 12 ploughs and 10 forges.
The first settlers of Botany Bay will build a place called home out of 2000 spikes, 1000 squares of glass, 200 hinges, 100 locks and 10 barrels of nails. They’ll eat cattle and hogs and stores of grain purchased along the voyage in the Cape of Good Hope.

Phillip had hoped the government would endeavour to fill the convict transports with men with labouring, building, woodwork and farming experience who could greatly assist the establishment of the colony in Botany Bay. But it’s mostly thieves that occupy the fleet’s convict transports. Useless lifelong criminals, weak-boned men better at cutting purses than pine. Spindly burglars and pickpockets, disease-carrying prostitutes.

More than 60 per cent of the convicts have been sentenced for stealing food or goods of little value. Most of the remaining transported felons were tried for breaking and entering and highway robbery, or more ambitious offences such as forgery. An average age of 27. There are 14 pregnant female convicts who will give birth on the long voyage south. Most convicts have languished in chains and shackles aboard the fetid floating prison hulks eating ox cheek soup.

Phillip looks to the Portsmouth shoreline. The London friends and families of the departing convicts have descended upon Portsmouth to see the fleet off, creating a violent and perverse cesspool of localised drunken grief and crime. On the women’s transport, the Lady Penrhyn, keen-eyed ship surgeon Arthur Bowes Smyth writes in his diary of the alarming sight of “a corpse sewed up in a hammock” casually floating by his anchored vessel. About 778 convicts, almost 200 of them women, are now spread across six fleet transports in cluttered lower prison decks with headroom as low as 1.3m.

“The Transports are fitted up for the Convicts, the same as for carrying troops,” writes Lieutenant Philip Gidley King in his journal. “Except the Security, which consists in very strong and thick bulkheads, filled with nails, and ran across from side to side of the ’tween decks abaft the Mainmast with loop holes to fire
through, in case of any irregularities among the Convicts, the hatches are well secured by Cross bars bolts, and strong locks, they are likewise railed round with large oak stanchions from deck to deck. Sentinels are placed at the different hatchways and a Guard always under Arms on the Quarter deck. The Steerage of each transport is appropriated for the use of the Marines and every precaution is used to prevent any intercourse between them and the Convicts.”

Gidley King is a 29-year-old protege of Arthur Phillip’s. He’s second lieutenant on the Sirius and he’ll one day be the third governor of NSW.

The largest transports, the Alexander and Scarborough, carry more than 200 men each. The smallest transport, the Friendship, carries 80 men and 24 women. The Alexander is so dangerously festering with disease that 16 of its convict passengers have already died before the fleet has even left Portsmouth, prompting Phillip to have the ship “cleaned and smoked”. Some transport cells are so small that men in groups of four in chains and irons can’t lie down for sleep. Buckets for toilets. No portholes to see outside. Darkness upon darkness. Dirt upon dirt. Disease upon disease. For eight months they will crouch and kneel and lie among rats, cockroaches, bedbugs and lice. In the slimy celled darkness below the Alexander and Scarborough there are no journals to record the incidents of rape and sodomy and graft, the dangerous alliances formed, the unspoken hierarchies between those with jail smarts and influence and those who can crush a man’s larynx with a single hand.

Here’s two likely men now in the Scarborough prison deck: Phillip Farrell and Thomas Griffiths. They’re seasoned sailors. Farrell was a boatswain’s mate on the navy ship HMS Goliath. Griffiths sailed in the American War of Independence. Farrell was sentenced to seven years’ transportation for stealing a handkerchief. Griffiths was sent to Botany Bay for stealing 80 shillings worth of cloth. These men saw enough of the Scarborough’s rigging on the way down to their cells to know, should the opportunity present itself, they themselves could sail her off to their own designated horizon were they to summon enough convict muscle to hold the ship’s marines at bay. These convicts are bright enough to form plans
and Arthur Phillip knows that convicts forming plans leads to only one thing: mutiny.

In the bowels of the Lady Penrhyn, 29-year-old Mary Marshall — transported for stealing 10 handkerchiefs from a Piccadilly linen draper — jostles shoulder-to-shoulder with her female cellmates for space closer to the companionway to the upper deck, where the thick air is freshest.

Sharing this space with her is Dorothy Handland, a woman the ship’s surgeon, Arthur Bowes Smyth, will record as being 82 years of age, possibly the oldest convict transported in the First Fleet. Bowes Smyth sketches her portrait in his journal, looking every bit her age in her eyes, nose and chin. Two hundred years later some historians will call the death of Dorothy Handland the first registered suicide on Australian soil.

That version of her tragic tale says that somehow the old clothes woman from Camden, London, sentenced to seven years’ transportation for perjury, will survive the eight-month journey to Australia only to, in an apparent bout of depression, hang herself from a gum tree in Sydney Cove in 1789.

There’s a 32-year-old pickpocket down here with Dorothy named Tamasin Allen. There are thieves like Sarah Purdue, 23; Maria Hamilton, 33. Phillip writes to his superiors about the appalling physical health of these female convicts aboard the Lady Penrhyn.

“The situation in which the magistrates sent the women on board the Lady Penrhyn stamps them with infamy — tho’ almost naked, and so very filthy, that nothing but clothing them could have prevented them from perishing, and which could not be done in time to prevent a fever, which is still on that ship,” he writes.

Not for the first time will rumours of Phillip’s humanity spread through the fleet when he gives clothing issued for crew members to the ailing convict women.
But to misread his compassion for weakness would be folly. Many of the convicts can’t read but they can hear just fine when Phillip’s orders are relayed to the convict sentinels about how any attempt to contest the command of the ship should be punished with “instant death”.

Over on the store ship, the Golden Grove, the 34-year-old First Fleet chaplain, the Anglican Reverend Richard Johnson, oversees the safe storage of the 4000 religious books and pamphlets he and wife Mary will carefully nurse to New Holland and disperse among sailors, marines and convicts alike. Some 100 Bibles and an endless stack of pamphlets with soul-correcting advice: *Exercises Against Lying; Caution to Swearers and Dissuasions for Stealing.*

The five missing convict women, Arthur Bowes Smyth notes aboard the Lady Penrhyn, are evidently yet to read the Reverend Johnson's *Exhortations to Chastity.*

“Ten o’clock at night Lieutenants Johnston and Collins went into the hatches and called over the list of the female convicts,” he writes. “Found five women missing (four with the sailors) and one with the Second Mate (Squires). Had all the women put into irons and removed forward.”

In a quiet corner of the smallest convict transport, the Friendship, 32-year-old Scottish Lieutenant Ralph Clark stares into a small oval portrait of his beloved wife Betsey Alicia. He kisses Betsey’s framed face, runs his fingers along two locks of hair pressed into the rear of the portrait, possibly the hair of his three-year-old son, Ralph Stuart Clark.

“Oh Gracious God, what a task have I gone through last night in taking leave of the dearest and best of Wives and not seeing my Boy,” he writes.

Ralph Clark wasn’t born for such voyaging as this. He’s a lemonade drinker. He will yearn for his Betsey Alicia and he will bemoan the noise of the fleet; the wenches and the whoring and the secret rum drinking of his fellow marines.
“I never should have thought of leaving the best of women and the most sweetest of boys,” he writes.

On the transport ship, the Charlotte, walks a curious man named Captain-Lieutenant Watkin Tench, quite possibly the deepest thinker among the fleet’s Royal Marines: a scholar of Shakespeare and Milton; an ethnographer, legal eagle, soldier and philosopher. His father and mother are dancers, they run a dance academy in Chester, near the border of Wales. There will come a time when his heart will soar when he is allowed to release the convicts under his charge from their fetters, but for now he walks among them, bound and huddled in the lower decks of the Charlotte.

“The convicts’ constant language was an apprehension of the impracticability of returning home, the dread of a sickly passage, and the fearful prospect of a distant and barbarous country,” he writes.

But he senses, all the same, that the convicts want to be off. “An ardent wish for the hour of departure ...”

And at daybreak on May 13, 1787, Arthur Phillip grants the convicts their wish for motion. He gives the signal to weigh anchor.

“We weighed and run through the Needles and by noon got a good offing with the wind at E.S. E,” writes Philip Gidley King aboard the Sirius.

“Oh my God, all my hopes are over of seeing my beloved wife and son,” writes the lovesick Ralph Clark, as the breathtaking fleet makes its way to the North Atlantic Ocean.

In the prisoner deck of the Friendship, the bonded convicts brace for the movement of their vessel under sail. Some older convicts rejoice. Amid the sweary bedlam of celebration sits a quiet boy. Head down, elbows resting on his kneecaps.
Young John Hudson does not shiver. Young John Hudson does not shake. He's a teenager now. He entered puberty in prison. His voice is deeper; muscles harder, heart stronger.

He's lived through starved and freezing London winters. He's survived a perilous London boy's life diving down suffocating chimney flues for food. He's survived the big sweltering sick of the anchored British prison hulks. He sure as hell can survive Australia.
SEE IT THROUGH THE EYE OF A SPYGLASS. Eleven British ships at full sail cutting across the Atlantic. Arthur Phillip’s majestic First Fleet flotilla en route to a place where a troubled bush kid named Ned Kelly will one day hammer a bulletproof breastplate and a golden girl named Betty Cuthbert will set fire to a running track and a bronzed larrikin named Paul Hogan will crack jokes atop the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Turn the spyglass a little to your left and zero in on the smallest convict transport ship in the fleet, Friendship. Hear the sound of a baby cry.

Convict Susannah Holmes pulls her infant son, Henry Kable Jr, to her breast. The boy is the most famous child in the fleet, the central figure in a convict love story splashed across the papers of Fleet Street.

Norwich Castle jail in the 1780s was an unlikely place for romance to bloom but it bloomed all the same for convicted thieves Henry Kable and Susannah
Holmes. They conceived a child in prison, Henry Kable Jr. Shortly after the boy’s birth, Susannah was selected for transportation to Botany Bay. Boarding the prison hulk in Plymouth in which the young mother and child would wait to be transferred to the First Fleet, the prison hulk captain spotted Susannah with her five-month-old baby in her arms.

“The Captain, finding that one of them had an infant, peremptorily refused to take it on board, saying that he had no orders to take children,” said a newspaper report at the time.

Henry Kable Jr was promptly passed into the hands of Norwich prison jailer John Simpson, who had accompanied the transportees to Plymouth.

“The frantic mother was led to her cell, execrating the cruelty of the man under whose care she was now placed, and vowing to put an end to her life as soon as she could obtain the means,” the newspaper reported. “Shocked at the non-paralleled brutality of the Captain, and his humanity not less affected by the agonies of the poor woman, and the situation of the helpless babe, Mr Simpson resolved still, if possible, to get it restored to her. No way was left but an immediate personal application to Lord Sydney (chief government architect of the Botany Bay experiment) ... He therefore immediately went back to Plymouth, and set off in the first coach to London, carrying the child all the way on his knee, and feeding it at the different inns he arrived at as well as he could.”

Heroic Simpson, so the newspapers said, was denied initial access to Lord Sydney’s office but refused to be turned away and chanced upon Lord Sydney as he was descending a set of stairs. Lord Sydney was reportedly puzzled by the jailer’s sweeping and tragic narrative, but sympathetic too. Inspired by Simpson’s spirited quest, his Lordship promised the child would be returned to his mother and, moreover, his father, Henry Kable, would be permitted to join his despairing lover aboard the Friendship. Simpson set off to Norwich to collect Henry Kable Sr and, “travelling three days and nights without sleep”, returned to Plymouth to see mother, father and child reunited just before the departure of the Friendship.
“It is with utmost pleasure that I inform you of my safe arrival with my little charge at Plymouth,” Simpson wrote in a letter quoted by London’s newspapers. “But it would take an abler pen than mine to describe the joy that the mother received her infant and her intended husband with. Suffice it to say, that the tears that flowed from their eyes, with the innocent smiles of the babe, on the sight of the mother, who had saved her milk for it, drew tears likewise from my eyes. And it was with the utmost regret that I parted with the child, after having travelled with it on my lap for upwards of 700 miles backwards and forwards.”

Henry Kable Jr only reminds seasick and miserable Lieutenant Ralph Clark, permanently unsatisfied royal marine on the Friendship, how much he misses his own wife and child back home.

“Did nothing but dream all last night, about being with my most Sincere Betsey and Son,” he writes in his journal. “Oh my god, never did a man long so much after anything than I do to know how they both are, what would I give for a letter from her dear hand but why do I think of impossibilities because I love them tenderly with a sincere hart, as ever man loved woman.”

Clark is cranky. He believes the Friendship’s contracted sailors are demanding increases in meat rations with the sole aim to trade the food for sex with convict women. Sailors have prised an access hole in the barrier wall separating the female prisoners.

“The damned whores,” Lieutenant Clark writes.

As the fleet pushes southward deep into the Atlantic, word reaches Arthur Phillip on the Sirius of a mutiny plot on one of the largest male convict transports.

“I have received a report from the officers on board the Scarborough respecting the convicts, who, it is said, have formed a scheme for taking possession of the
ship. I have ordered the ringleaders on board the Sirius ... I have no time to enter into particulars.”

The particulars are that convict chancers Phillip Farrell and Thomas Griffiths have been betrayed by one of their own potential mutineers. No honour among a ship full of thieves. Farrell and Griffiths planned to take moonlight control of the ship with the brute force of a gang of freed convicts. But they sought assistance from the wrong man, a traitor who told the Scarborough’s security of the mutiny plot before being promptly transferred to another ship for his own safety. Farrell and Griffiths, who steadfastly deny the supposed plot, are made merciless example of. Bound hand and foot and flogged aboard the Sirius, 24 lashes each that cut progressively deeper into the exposed back flesh that won’t necessarily be disinfected by subsequent buckets of saltwater that only serve to “rub salt into the wound”.

ARTHUR PHILLIP instantly refocuses on the mission. He never loses sight of the grand goal of this bizarre social experiment.

“The sanguine might form expectations of extraordinary consequences, and be justified, in some degree, by the reflection, that from smaller, and not more respectable beginnings, powerful empires have frequently arisen,” he’ll later write. “The phlegmatic and apprehensive might magnify to themselves the difficulties of the undertaking, and prognosticate, from various causes, the total failure of it. Both, perhaps, would be wrong.

“To all it must appear a striking proof of the flourishing state of navigation in the present age, and a singular illustration of its vast progress since the early nautical efforts of mankind; that whereas the ancients coasted with timidity along the shores of the Mediterranean, and thought it a great effort to run across the narrow sea which separates Crete from Egypt, Great Britain, without hesitation,
Amid Phillip’s increasingly loyal crew on the Sirius stands an adventurous American able seaman named Jacob Nagle. He’s a Pennsylvanian who fought for and met none other than George Washington in the American Revolutionary War. He knows a good leader when he sees one. He notes, approvingly, Phillip’s response to an act of brutality aboard the Sirius. The ship’s third lieutenant had two crewmen flogged for not being at their designated watch positions. This act of aggression has caused the other modestly paid crewmen to threaten revolt, saying they’d sooner jump overboard than suffer the lash for such relatively minor mistakes.

“The governor ordered every officer on the ship into the cabin,” Nagle writes. “And told him if he knew any officer to strike a (crewman) on board he would brake him immediately. He said those men are all we have to depend upon and if we abuse these men that we have to trust, the convicts will rise and massacre us all. Those men are our support and if they are ill-treated they will all be dead before the voyage is half out and who is to bring us back again?”

Early June 1787, and the fleet sails into the Canary Islands, 100km west of Morocco. Some 21 convicts have now died on the Alexander, the least hygienic of the ships, its passengers riddled with pneumonia and dysentery. Jacob Nagle is not the only man in the fleet who welcomes a supply stopover on the Spanish-controlled island of Tenerife, where Phillip and his senior officers are treated to a lavish dinner with the local Spanish governor, the Marquis de Branciforte.

“We all went up to a wine ship to get some wine during the time the governor was gone,” Nagle writes.

In the cramped and motionless prison deck of the Alexander, convicts curse their officer captors for their abilities to freely enjoy themselves on land; they can only dream of the fresh fruits and meats the officers will indulge in and the island’s eye-pleasing Spanish women selling the fruits and meats. In a corner
of the prison deck, the eyes of a resourceful convict named John Powers track and memorise the movements of the sentinels on watch as he considers the 30-plus crew members he’ll have to slip past unseen if he’s to carry out a bold and impossible plan forming in his tired mind.

Meanwhile, buying his wine on land, seaman Jacob Nagle is pick-pocketed by a deceptively fast old female beggar.

“I returned immediately to see after my pouch, having two guineas in it,” he writes. “The landlady took (the suspected thief) into her bedroom and searched her and found the pouch inside of her shift, at the back of her neck. If she had not stripped her naked she would not have found it.”

Phillip orders heavy stocks of available fruit — figs and mulberries mostly — to ward off the dreaded scurvy at sea. The eyes of the marines on board light up at the sight of fresh beef and bread stocks.

“Captain Cook had very fully shown, how favourable such expeditions might be made to the health of those engaged in them,” Phillip writes. “If the ancients made these islands the region of fable, and their poets decorated them with imaginary charms to supply the want of real knowledge, the moderns cannot wholly be exempted from a similar imputation.”

On a still night before the fleet is about to sail out of the waters off Tenerife, convict John Powers has had enough of the dank and disease-ridden abyss of the Alexander’s prison deck. Working temporarily above deck he spots an opportunity to scamper undetected to the edge of the Alexander, slides his body over the side and lowers himself down to a small rowboat attached to the mighty transport. He tucks himself low into the rowboat. In the black Tenerife waters he rows hurriedly to a Dutch East India Company vessel sharing sea space with the Alexander. He begs the Dutch East India crew to take him on board as a most-grateful crew member. He’s denied. He rows on, desperately searching for alternatives — anything but that hulking ship bound for Botany Bay. He rows
into a nearby beach, frantically scrambles over slippery rocks fringing the shore, hides in the darkness of surrounding land cover. But it’s a fool’s quest. There’s no avoiding Botany Bay. There’s no escaping John Hunter, fierce commander of the fleet’s lead ship, HMS Sirius. Hunter is a stone-faced survivor of the bloody three-hour, close-range Battle of Dogger Bank in the North Sea during the American War of Independence.

“A little westward of the town they discovered the boat beating on the rocks,” Hunter writes. “And rowing in to pick her up they discovered the fellow concealing himself in the cliff of a rock, not having been able to get up the precipice. The officer presented a musket at him and threatened if he did not come down and get into the boat he would shoot him.”

On June 10 the fleet leaves Tenerife, heads south in the direction of the west coast of Africa. Five days later officer William Bradley, aboard the Sirius, notes a historic crossing that lifts the spirits of the younger sailors who have never journeyed this far south. “At noon crossed the Tropic of Cancer,” he writes. “Had the sun in the Zenith at nearly the same instant.”

Arthur Bowes Smyth, surgeon on the Lady Penrhyn, notes that the ceremony of “ducking” was “performed on all who had not crossed the line”.

It’s a ceremony that might stretch back as far the Vikings, dunking a fresh sailor’s head in the ocean in honour and appeasement of the gods. The First Fleet sailors dunk their heads in honour of Neptune, moody and fickle god of these treacherous and endless seas. Above deck, sailors and marines alike cheer and jeer the young sailors brave enough to submit to this rope-burning rite of passage. In the prison deck of the Alexander, failed convict escapee John Powers sits motionless in irons. He sits perfectly still because the slightest movement of his body stings his festering lash wounds. He pays no fealty to Neptune. The sea never did anything for him. He wouldn’t be the first English convict removed from his homeland to wish fatal peril on Phillip’s First Fleet. Neptune be damned.
And for any convict who dreams of ending their role in the great experiment, Neptune is about to meet them beyond the equator in the cold unknown Southern Ocean, where the ocean god will try his level best to drag this vast and brutal fleet down to the bottom of the deep blue sea, pulling the very notion of Australia down with it.
WELCOME TO THE SUCK. The wicked doldrums. The energy-sapping, life-draining low-pressure system beyond the equator where the First Fleet stagnates in hot and windless ocean, all but trapping Phillip’s 11 ships in a maddening vortex of slow movement as the equatorial atmosphere expands and turns once-billowing sails into stiff bed sheets.

In the bowels of the Prince of Wales convict transport ship, prisoners and marines alike fight a plague of bugs that has taken near-ownership of the vessel.

The ship bilges, where dank excess water collects in the lowest point of the vessel, have become so foul to the nose that it alters the prisoners’ sleep patterns. Lack of sleep equals impatience equals agitation equals violence. Some convicts harness an almost Zen-like patience to stomach the conditions; still themselves for hours, less movement means less heat. Movement equals realisations of confinement equals panic. The heat and humidity is causing the fleet’s female convicts to fall into convulsive fits.
“In the evening it became calm, with distant peals of thunder, and the most vivid flashes of lightning I ever remember,” writes surgeon John White aboard the Charlotte. “The weather was now so immoderately hot that the female convicts, perfectly overcome by it, frequently faded away; and these faintings generally terminated in fits. And yet, notwithstanding the enervating effects of the atmospheric heat, and the inconveniences they suffered from it, so predominant was the warmth of their constitutions, or the depravity of their hearts, that the hatches over the place where they were confined could not be suffered to lay off, during the night, without a promiscuous intercourse immediately taking place between them and the seamen and marines.”

Prostitution is rampant. Convict women are parting their legs for marines and seamen for as little as a sliver of salted beef or an extra cup of freshwater. Some women are “so uncontrollable that neither shame (but of this they had long lost sight) nor the fear of punishment could deter them from making their way through the bulkheads to the apartments assigned to the seamen”.

The strange weather has brought strange dreams to the lovelorn Lieutenant Ralph Clark aboard the Friendship.

“Dreamt of being with my beloved Alicia,” he writes of his wife back home. “Oh, why did the dear sweet woman learn me to believe in dreams ... Should not have been so unhappy as I am at this present moment from dreaming that my Alicia took a dead louse from herself and gave it me. Oh, unlucky dream, for have often heard her say that dreaming of lice was a certain sign of sickness.”

He stares nightly into a framed picture of his beloved Betsey Alicia while cursing the women aboard his ship.

“I never could have thought there were so many abandoned wenches in England,” he writes. “They are ten thousand times worse than the men convicts and I am afraid that we will have a great deal more trouble with them.”
He stays well clear of a 21-year-old convict woman, Sarah McCormick, when she’s called to the surgeon’s quarters.

The surgeon’s grim face tells Sarah McCormick exactly what he has on his mind. He punctures her skin with a rudimentary surgical instrument and blood gushes from her body. He’s bleeding her, attempting to drain diseased blood from her system.

“The doctor has been obliged to bleed her twice today and says that she will not live the night out,” writes Clark. “She is now quite speechless. I am apt to think (God forgive), if it is not so that she is eaten up with the pox. She is one of them that went through the bulkhead to the seamen. I hope she has given them something to remember her. Never was there are a set of greater rascals together than they are.”

LATE JULY, 1787. The fleet is some 800km from the next major supply stop in Rio de Janeiro. Phillip assesses the water and food stocks. They’re running low. He cuts down the water rations, only further enhancing the agony of the languishing convicts. Three pints of water per person per day. Clothes washed in saltwater. Bodies washed in saltwater.

Sailors and marines fish for prized fresh sea beasts to supplement their low rations. Aboard the flagship Sirius, gifted cartographer William Bradley is captivated by the alien anatomy of a devil fish hauled on deck.

“Before he could be hoisted in, three very large sucking fish were soon on him, one of which was struck and got in and was the largest I ever saw; it was 2ft, 9in long,” Bradley writes. “It being dark when this monster was got in, he was kept on the quarter deck all night, but was dead as soon as out of the water from
having had several harpoons stuck in him. In the morning, two sucking fish, seven inches long and quite white, were taken from within him out of his mouth perfectly alive.”

A brilliant and tragic fate awaits William Bradley beyond the Southern Ocean. Upon arriving at Botany Bay, he will join Captain John Hunter on multiple surveys of the Australian coastline. He will be a friend and champion of the indigenous inhabitants of Port Jackson. He will be one of the brave men Arthur Phillip will turn to when, in October 1788, the new colony runs dangerously low on supplies and Bradley joins a six-month supply-gathering mission to and from the treacherous Cape of Good Hope. He will return to Britain a naval hero. Raised high on Phillip’s recommendation, he’ll serve in the French Revolutionary Wars as a great master and commander of war ships until he suffers the first of several severe mental disturbances. He’ll be removed from service and his great naval reputation will be the only thing that will save him from a death sentence when, in a suspected period of mental illness, he’ll be arrested for attempting to defraud the British postal service.

In a unique twist of fate, the former officer in charge of sentenced transportees will himself be sentenced to transportation, before having that sentence reduced, once again, under the condition he exile himself from Britain. He will spend any remaining clear-headed days of his life as a recluse in the city of Le Havre by the Seine in France, where he will tinker away privately on ambitious maritime inventions he hopes will revolutionise all-important naval calculations of longitude.

Some 213 years from now, in the year 2000 — the year William Bradley’s charted Sydney coastline welcomes people from across the world to the Olympics — an American filmstar named Tom Cruise will shoot movie scenes on Bradleys Head, in the Mosman headland of Sydney Harbour. They’ll call that movie Mission: Impossible, a fitting title for the grand experiment William Bradley finds himself a part of here and now on the rising seas carrying the fleet toward South America.
OVER ON THE FRIENDSHIP, the ship’s master Captain Francis Walton has a gift for Ralph Clark he hopes might lift the lovesick officer’s spirits. Clark writes of the gift in the same breath he speaks of delighting in the punishment of a troublesome convict, Elizabeth Dudgeon.

“Capt. Walton has given me a puppy,” he writes. “Have called it Efford after the dear sweet place where first I came acquainted with my Alicia, my virtuous wife. Capt. Meredith ordered one of the Corporals to flog with a rope Elizh. Dudgeon for being impertinent to Capt. Meredith. The Corporal did not play with her, but laid it home which I was very glad to see. Then ordered her to be tied to the pump. She has been long-fishing for it which she has at last got until her heart’s content.”

Since departing Portsmouth, Captain James Meredith has been plagued by the ill behaviour of four women aboard the Friendship. If these women wanted a gang name then “The Betties” would have been an obvious choice. Elizabeth Dudgeon was sentenced to seven years’ transportation for robbing a drunk. Elizabeth Pulley is a thief about 24 years of age. Records say she burgled the home of another Elizabeth — Elizabeth Minns — and stole 10 pounds of cheese, three pounds of bacon, 24 ounces of butter, three pounds of raisins, and 12 pounds of flour for which a jury said she was “to be hanged by the neck until she be dead”. She got a trip to Botany Bay with James Meredith and Ralph Clark instead, and there have been times below the Friendship she wished the jury’s original sentencing stuck.

This moment, right here in the doldrums, in the heart of the ocean’s tropical suck, is the lowest point of Elizabeth Pulley’s life. In the fledgling Sydney Cove settlement she will meet Anthony Rope, a skilled carpenter and brickmaker sent aboard transport Alexander for theft. They will be married by Reverend Richard
Johnson in May 1788, and have eight children, the oldest of whom will possibly be the first child conceived and born in the new settlement.

Elizabeth “Betty” Thackery is a feisty 20-year-old who some say will be the first female convict to walk on Australian soil when, on February 6, 1788, during the bulk unloading of women convicts, she impulsively jumps from her longboat and makes a bolt for the beach at what is now Sydney’s Rocks precinct, where she skips joyously before a crowd of cheering male convicts and guards.

Elizabeth Barber is the incorrigible ringleader figure currently furiously arguing with Captain Meredith, asking him, without a hint of seduction, to “kiss my c..t”.

“Elizabeth Barber abused the doctor in a most terrible manner and said that he wanted her and called him all the names that she could think of,” writes Ralph Clark. “After dinner Capt. Meredith enquired into the matter and asked her how she could raise such a report and abuse Mr. Arundell so. She still insisted that it was true. She was very much in liquor. She was ordered on a pair of leg irons. When she was getting them on she began to abuse Capt. Meredith in a much worse manner than she had done the doctor. She called him everything but a gentleman and said she was no more a whore than his wife. She then abused (Lieutenant William) Faddy and I wonder how she come to forget me amongst the number. In all the course of my days I never heard such aspersions come from the mouth of a human being. The Capt ordered her hands tied behind her back and to be gagged to prevent her from making noise. She hoped and she was certain that she should see us all thrown overboard before we got to Botany Bay. From the bottom of my heart I don't think that the doctor, Mr. Arundell, ever offered any such thing to that brute. She desired Meredith to come and kiss her c..t, for he was nothing but a lousy rascal as we were all. I wish to God she was out of the ship.”

Captain Meredith shackles Elizabeth Barber and Elizabeth Thackery together in irons. He shackles Elizabeth Dudgeon and Elizabeth Pulley together in irons. “The damned whores,” writes Clark. “The moment that they got below, fell a
fighting amongst one another and Capt Meredith ordered the Sergt. not to part them but to let them fight it out.

“I would rather have a hundred more men than to have a single woman. I hope in the ships that ever I may go in hereafter there may not be a single woman.”

Lieutenant Ralph Clark’s holier-than-thou journalising about the wicked ways of women and his endless scribbled messages to his beloved Betsey Alicia contrast the truth of his destiny. “From the bottom of my heart I don’t believe there is a single woman in all the place so handsome as my beloved Betsey,” he scribbles artfully. “If she was here they would steal her from me but that must take first the last drop of my blood before they should have her.”

But Australia does funny things to a person. Once planted in the strange new natural wonderland of New Holland, Clark’s clean and pure heart will fall for a 17-year-old convict mistress named Mary Branham who was 13 years old when she was sentenced to transportation for stealing two petticoats. She will give birth to Clark’s child on July 23, 1791. That child, a girl, will be christened the following December in the colony of Sydney Cove. That baby girl — that young Australian — will be named Alicia.

But those events are far from this moment right here, where we find Clark scurrying across the deck of the Friendship in search of his beloved dog, Efford.

“Efford?” he hollers.

“Efford?” he hollers.

But he knows what’s happened to Efford. “Lost my dog, Efford, overboard,” he writes. “I am apt to think that he was thrown overboard by the first mate. If I was certain I would make some of the men give him a good thrashing. I am sorry that I lost him, poor dog, for he began to be very fond of me.”
A softer, more reserved Elizabeth rests in the corner of the Lady Penrhyn's prison deck, sucking on a slice of salted beef. Elizabeth Hayward is the youngest of the fleet's female convicts, aged 13. Transported for stealing clothes from a master to whom she was apprenticed, Elizabeth has learned to stay invisible among 101 fellow female convicts, fall into the background, not fall prey to the older women, and sailors and marines, who might choose to exploit a teenage girl on her way to an unknown land. Her low spirits are buoyed by descriptions of a pod of whales the ship passes, one “as long as a ship”, writes surgeon Arthur Bowes Smyth. If Elizabeth can make it all the way to Sydney Cove alive, she will find some semblance of a life again, she will be cared for and valued as a household servant to Reverend Richard Johnson and his wife, Mary.

Lady Penrhyn is a poor sailing ship, always lagging behind the rest of the fleet that often reduces sails to let her catch up.

“At three o’clock in the afternoon of the 2nd of August, the Supply, which had been previously sent ahead on purpose, made the signal for seeing land, which was visible to the whole fleet before sunset,” writes Watkin Tench on the transport ship Charlotte.

Rio de Janeiro. To surgeon Arthur Bowes Smyth’s eye, this natural paradise appears to glow. “Beautiful in the extreme,” he writes. “So much so that I find myself inadequate to the task of doing it justice.”

On the deck of the Sirius, even Arthur Phillip allows himself a smile. Rio means replenishment. Rio means survival. His crew can’t see it beneath his commander’s coat, but, for the briefest moment, the invisible weight on Phillip’s shoulders eases.

“The port is one of the finest in the world, very narrow at the entrance, and within capacious enough to contain more ships than ever were assembled at one station,” Phillip writes in the State Library of NSW manuscript, The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay.
“In the narrative of Captain Cook’s Voyage in 1768, we find, on his arrival at this place, great appearance of suspicion on the part of the Viceroy, harsh prohibitions of landing, even to the gentlemen employed in philosophical researches, and some proceedings rather of a violent nature. The reception given by the present Viceroy to Governor Philip and his officers was very different: it was polite and flattering to a great degree, and free from every tincture of jealous caution.

“Provisions were here so cheap, that notwithstanding the allowance of meat was fixed by Governor Phillip at twenty ounces a day, the men were victualled completely, rice, fresh vegetables, and firing included, at three-pence three-farthings a head. Wine was not at this season to be had, except from the retail dealers, less was therefore purchased than would otherwise have been taken. Rum, however, was laid in; and all such seeds and plants procured as were thought likely to flourish on the coast of New South Wales, particularly coffee, indigo, cotton, and the cochineal fig. As a substitute for bread, if it should become scarce, one hundred sacks of cassada were purchased at a very advantageous price. Cassada, the bread of thousands in the tropical climates, affords one of those instances in which the ingenuity of man might be said to triumph over the intentions of nature, were it not evidently the design of Providence that we should in all ways exert our invention and sagacity to the utmost, for our own security and support.”

Providence. It’s a notion Phillip has been reading about in the writings of Cook and the brave British men who sailed into this vivid port almost two decades before him. Phillip knows the colony he’s been tasked with constructing will succeed on good fortune as much as hard work and order and intelligence. The protective care of God. Good luck and bad luck. The whole fleet looks for warning signs of success and failure. Portents and charms. Omens and harbingers.
In the port of Rioro, deep in the still prison deck of the Charlotte, convict Mary Braund rests two hands over her starving belly. She’s a thief born into a penniless Cornwall fishing family.

The world will one day know Mary Braund as Mary Bryant, the most famous escapee from Arthur Phillip’s fledgling penal colony. For now, she’s just another female convict searching for signs. Running her hands desperately over her belly in the hope she’ll feel her baby’s kick, or just some sign that says her child is still alive.
THE VICIOUS SQUALL HITS TWO DAYS out of Rio de Janeiro and two days before Mary Braund gives birth. “A very violent storm of thunder and lightning,” writes surgeon Arthur Bowes Smyth. Water rushes through portholes and the 11 ships of Arthur Phillip’s First Fleet pitch and roll as “everything that was moveable” tumbles in kind, including a heavily pregnant Mary Braund, sucking deep for enough air for two in the crowded prison deck of the transport ship, Charlotte. Few places, she considers for a moment, could be more inappropriate for childbirth than a convict transport ship cutting back across the Atlantic Ocean through a tempest in the direction of southern Africa en route to a new home in a prisoner island called New Holland.

Six months from now, on February 10, 1788, Mary Braund will become Mary Bryant when she marries fellow convict William Bryant in the settlement of Sydney Cove. William will acquire a hut for his new family. He’s a skilled fisherman and he’ll be given a good job in the settlement as one of the key operators of the colony’s fishing boats.
In October 1790, a Dutch captain will land at Port Jackson in search of supplies. From this captain, William Bryant will obtain a chart, compass, quadrant and enough stashed supplies of his own to make a daring escape from Sydney Cove. On March 28, 1791, the Bryants and seven other convicts will slip away from the settlement in Arthur Phillip’s stolen six-oared cutter. In an impossible journey that will last 66 days and cross 5000km through the uncharted Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait, the Bryants will reach the island of Timor where they will claim to be shipwreck survivors. By Mary’s side in that moment will stand the three-year-old girl who is about to enter the world down here in the bilge-foul bowels of a storm-ravaged First Fleet transport.

In the crashing thunder, the “floating farmyard”, the “Noah’s ark” that is the First Fleet echoes with the barks and squawks and howls of the animals tied down across the fleet ships, including Commander Phillip’s greyhounds and horse and Reverend Richard Johnson’s timorous kittens.

In the three storage ships, Golden Grove, Fishburn and Borrowdale, vital supplies collected from Rio de Janeiro roll across tilted floorboards. Plants and seeds destined to change the landscape of New Holland. Coffee plants, orange trees, cocoa, cotton, guava, prickly pear trees.

“Secure the rum!” holler sailors and marines alike. In Rio, the fleet bought 65,000 litres of rum for the remainder of the voyage and for the first three years of the colony.

In the prison decks, the rolling storm-ravaged ships have caused violent out-breaks of seasickness and the convicts must sit in their own inevitable bile and vomit. Breathing is a luxury down here with all hatches battened down to stop water flooding the cells.

On the deck of the Sirius, hard rain and ocean spray slam against the face of American seaman Jacob Nagle and it feels good to be alive. Only days ago he
almost had his head split open by a sword after picking up a prostitute in a bar in Rio de Janeiro.

“One evening two of us got into a grog shop,” Nagle writes. “And a very handsome young woman, who was very familiar with me, asked me home with her. I accepted and was on the road as far as one square (when a local man) pushed me away from her. I would not let go my hold and he drew back and drew his sword and was raising his sword over his head to cut me over the head.

“At that instant a soldier turned the corner, drew his sword and guarded the blow he was going to make. Another soldier behind him abused him for meddling with me but the fellow begged their pardons and said I had taken his wife from him therefore the soldier let him go and we went to a grog shop and I treated them for saving my life.

“In the morning, (Second Lieutenant Philip Gidley King) came on shore and took me on board with him and enquired of Governor Phillip what to do with me. He was glad to hear that I was alive and desired them to send me to my hammock to sleep as I would be wanted in the boat at nine o’clock.”

THE WILD WEATHER CARRIES through the month of September. On the 19th, a convict is tossed overboard the Charlotte.

“William Brown, a very well behaved convict, in bringing some clothing from the bowsprit end where he hung them out to dry, fell overboard,” writes chief surgeon John White.

Later on the Friendship, Captain James Meredith’s untethered dog, Shot, follows William Brown into the drink. Meanwhile, on the same vessel, Lieutenant Ralph
Clark is dismayed to discover children — soon-to-be Australians — are being conceived on his ship.

“Two of the convict women that went through the bulkhead to the seamen on 3 July last have informed the doctor that they are with child,” he writes. “I hope the commodore will make the two seamen that are the fathers of the children marry them and make them stay at Botany Bay.”

Deep into the South Atlantic, the fleet flagship Sirius is struggling so much in the prevailing storms its commanding officers wonder if the vessel has the strength to make it to the Cape of Good Hope, much less to Botany Bay. Lieutenant Philip Gidley King writes of “the extreme negligence of the Dock Yard officers in not giving the Sirius the inspection they certainly ought to have done”. But the fleet is well past the point of no return. Their fate is in the hands of Neptune, and a former spy named Arthur Phillip.

In early October, Phillip faces a threat not from the clouds above but the dark prison pits below the transport Alexander. John Powers had a taste of freedom when he slid down the side of Alexander undetected in the Canary Islands. He made it to land in a row boat but could not climb the jagged cliff face that eventually ended his bid for freedom. He was lashed mercilessly for his efforts. Powers has managed to convince a number of sailors aboard Alexander to equip him and a group of like-minded convicts with iron bars.

Upon arrival in the Cape of Good Hope, on Powers’ signal, the group will pounce upon their gaolers and take control of the largest convict ship with brute force and nothing-to-lose audacity. But, not for the first time, the First Fleet mutineers are betrayed by one of their own kind. No honour among starving thieves, especially those looking for special treatment from marines who look kindly on plot betroayers. Powers is promptly ordered on to the flagship Sirius and chained to the deck.

Four seamen charged with assisting the mutiny are brutally flogged. The convict
rat in the house is moved to the transport ship Scarborough for his own safety but that measure won’t keep him safe from Powers once they’ve crossed the shores of Botany Bay.

ON OCTOBER 13, the battered fleet anchors in Table Bay, Cape Town, a grim and dangerous Dutch-run colony best defined by the shoreline that greets its visitors.

“There are many gallows and other implements of punishment erected along shore and in the front of the town,” writes surgeon Arthur Bowes Smyth. “There were also wheels for breaking felons upon, several of which were at this time occupied by the mangled bodies of the unhappy wretches who suffer’d upon them: their right hands were cut off and fixed by a large nail to the side of the wheel, the wheel itself elevated upon a post about nine or 10 feet high, upon which the body lies to perish.”

Elsewhere are signs of misbehaving slaves being impaled on poles. In one section of town lay the severed limbs of a Malay slave who had recently lost his mind and ran wildly through town with a machete.

Here, Arthur Phillip is greeted with little of the hospitality he enjoyed in South America. The town’s Dutch governor is reluctant with provisions, forcing Phillip to make repeated applications for food and livestock. Dutch merchants charge the English — who have counted on last-stop Cape Town supplies to carry the fleet through construction of the colony in New Holland — double and triple standard livestock prices.

Surgeon John White observes the courtship rituals of Cape Town women.

“If you wish to be a favourite with the fair, as the custom is, you must in your
own defence, grapple the lady, and paw her in a manner that does not partake in the least of gentleness,” he writes. “Such a rough and uncouth conduct, together with a kiss ravished now and then in the most public manner and situations, is not only pleasing to the fair one, but even to her parents.”

During the long wait for supply approval, marines, sailors and convicts still bound to the fleet ships grow impatient. The flame of a brawl between marines aboard the transport Scarborough will flicker all the way to Sydney where one of the brawlers, Thomas Bullimore, will be reportedly murdered by fellow marines. Bloody fist fights remain a regular part of life for convicts beneath Alexander. Sexual assaults less so, especially since Phillip has conveyed his punishment plans for anyone who would commit crimes of sodomy and murder.

“For either of these crimes I would wish to confine the criminal until an opportunity offered of delivering him to the natives of New Zealand, and let them eat him,” he writes. “The dread of this will operate much stronger than the fear of death.”

One night on the deck of the anchored Friendship, a drunk second mate, Patrick Vallance, falls overboard and drowns while trying to relieve himself over the front of the ship.

Shortly before Phillip gives his signal to weigh anchor and sail from Table Bay, officer Watkin Tench, aboard Charlotte, meets the captain of an arriving ship with American colours, bound from Boston. This Boston captain may be the first man to foretell the 200 years of immigration that will forge the multicultural Australia of the 21st century.

“The master, who appeared to be a man of some information, on being told the destination of our fleet, gave it as his opinion that if a reception could be secured emigrations would take place to New South Wales, not only from the old continent, but the new one, where the spirit of adventure and thirst for novelty were excessive,” Tench writes.
On land, Arthur Phillip casts one last eye over the Cape Town landscape and learns a lesson that will serve him well in Australia about “maintaining an establishment in a soil so burnt by the sun and so little disposed to repay the toil of the cultivator”.

“The example and success of this people may serve, however, as a useful instruction to all who in great undertakings are deterred by trifling obstacles,” he writes. “And who, rather than contend with difficulties, are inclined to relinquish the most evident advantages.”

Advantages or not found in Cape Town, he’s relieved to set sail on November 12, 1787.

“In the course of a month, the livestock and other provisions were procured,” he writes. “And the ships, having on board not less than five hundred animals of different kinds, but chiefly poultry, put on an appearance which naturally enough excited the idea of Noah’s ark.”

There are goats, cows and horses, turkeys and geese, ducks, dogs, chickens and pigeons. Women convicts and children occupying living space on board Friendship are forced to make way for an intake of valuable and life-sustaining sheep.

After a long journey across the Southern Ocean — deeply traumatic and difficult for the larger animals — some of the cows on board will escape their confines at Sydney Cove after a storm rips through the settlement. The loss of these cows will help bring the colony to the edge of starvation.

The freed and roaming cows will be seen months, even years, later luxuriating in the verdant hills 70km southwest of the colony in the Menangle-Camden area of Sydney.

They’re 6000 nautical miles from Botany Bay and the distance from home, from
wives and sons and daughters, from civilisation, weighs heavily on the fleet.

“The land behind us was the abode of a civilised people,” writes the new colony’s judge advocate David Collins. “That before us was the residence of savages. When, if ever, we might again enjoy the commerce of the world, was doubtful and uncertain ... All communications with families and friends now cut off, we were leaving the world behind us, to enter on a state unknown.”

Crossing the vast and dark Southern Ocean, Arthur Phillip splits the fleet, sending the fastest sailing ships onward to Botany Bay, equipped with woodworkers and labourers to make a start on constructing the penal colony before the arrival of the rear half of the fleet. Phillip transfers to the ship Supply, which will lead the three fastest transport ships, Alexander, Scarborough and Friendship, ahead on to NSW.

Mary Braund remains in the rear group with her newborn baby girl, Charlotte, named after the grimy, diseased prison ship in which she was born.

Charlotte rests in Mary’s arms and it’s in these arms that she will die almost five years from now. Having made their historic and impossible odyssey across Torres Strait, the escaped Bryant family will be captured after William Bryant reportedly drunkenly brags of his miraculous travels. Charlotte will die of fever in May 1792, while being escorted by Royal Marines back to England with her mother on board HMS Gorgon.

Mary looks down into the eyes of her child.

“Merry Christmas, Charlotte,” she says.
IT’S DECEMBER 25, 1787, and the marines on the Prince of Wales celebrate with a dinner of pork and apple sauce, plum pudding and rum, while their convicts below mark Christmas with a flash outbreak of scurvy that spreads through the prison deck.

Early January now and in the prison cells of Lady Penrhyn and Charlotte, whispers are shared about the nearness of the NSW coastline. They are close to the end. They can feel it. Botany Bay. Land. And land means survival. Land means a new beginning.

But Neptune, God of seas and southern oceans, is not finished with the First Fleet yet. He saves the worst for last, an unprecedented storm — the most devastating of the eight-month voyage — rising up from the deep blue to damage six of the seven ships in the rear convoy.

“The sky blackened, the wind arose and in half an hour more it blew a perfect hurricane, accompanied with thunder, lightning and rain,” writes surgeon Arthur Bowes Smyth.

“In an instant as we sat at table, the cloth just removed, the ship was laid alongside so very much that it alarmed everybody. Some prodigious flashes of lightning and loud thunder immediately followed … I never before saw the sea in such a rage, it was all over as white as snow … The convict women in our ship were so terrified that most of them were down on their knees at prayers.”

London’s exiled sinners on their knees begging God — begging Neptune — to spare them from the tempest so they might live long enough to walk upon the shores of New Holland, if only to walk directly in to a prison cell. One hour later, the storm passes.
The sea calms and the skies clear and, from the deck of Arthur Phillip’s lead ship, Supply, officer Philip Gidley King sights land.

“Saw the land from WSW to NW and at the same time saw the hill resembling the crown of a hat,” he writes. “We stood within three miles of the shore … excepting a few sandy beaches, the cliffs of the shore are very steep and a great surf beats on it. The hills are clothed with a verdant wood and there are many beautiful slopes covered with grass. In running along shore we saw a number of cascades of freshwater falling into the sea from the hills.”

It’s night when Captain John Hunter, aboard the ailing Sirius, leads the rear convoy into Botany Bay. It’s the evening of January 19, 1788. The First Fleet ships are reunited and anchored beneath four stars in the night sky that twinkle in the shape of a cross.

It’s so black inside the prison deck of transport Charlotte that Mary Braund can’t see the face of her baby girl at her breast.

“Why have we stopped?” Mary whispers.

A female voice without a visible owner echoes across the darkness.

“We made it.”
HE’S HEARD SONGS ABOUT THESE STRANGERS. He once heard an Eora elder speak of the muri nowie, that spectacular enlarged wood canoe that carried James Cook and a vessel of white-skinned ghosts into this bay almost two decades ago. Those ghosts rowed ashore. They wrote notes in their books. They fired strange and powerful weapons, their geerubber, their fire sticks. And they sailed away. His people gave a name to those strangers. They were berewalgal. Now the berewalgal are back.

He doesn’t know it yet but the fleet of 11 ships he sees parting the morning mist of Botany Bay mean life for him and his family will never be the same again. But Joseph Banks was wrong about this man. Banks suggested the Eora were cowardly. He predicted the coastal inhabitants of Botany Bay would meekly retire from Arthur Phillip and his approaching marines of the First Fleet but this man has a warrior spirit that stretches back millennia to a time when the first Australians trudged across a land bridge that once stretched 1600km to connect Australia to New Guinea; a survival instinct as strong and indomitable as the 780
convicts desperate to see daylight beneath the slow-moving prison transports inching closer to this wondrous and wide continent.

The men aboard Supply spot this Eora man standing on the shore of the northern entrance to Botany Bay. There are other native men standing beside him and these men raise their arms and the British sailors are too distant from the shore to tell if they are being waved at or warned away.

On the deck of the prison ship, Charlotte, marine officer Watkin Tench breathes the southern air deep and takes a moment to acknowledge the end of a 17,000-mile odyssey.

“Ithaca itself was scarcely more longed for by Ulysses than Botany Bay by the adventurers who had traversed so many thousand miles to take possession of it,” he writes.

“Heavily in clouds came on the day which ushered in our arrival. To us it was a great, an important, day, though I hope the foundation, not the fall, of an empire will be dated from it.”

Arthur Phillip draws on the knowledge of his hallowed predecessor, James Cook, and anchors close to where the great Pacific discoverer and his men of the Endeavour had located a stream of fresh water.

The fleet’s judge advocate, David Collins, sailing aboard the Sirius, can’t help but reflect on the precision and planning of a captain for whom he has found a deep respect over “eight months and one week” at sea.

“A voyage which, before it was undertaken, the mind hardly dared venture to contemplate, and on which it was impossible to reflect without some apprehensions as to its termination,” he writes. “In the above space of time we had sailed 5021 leagues; had touched at the American and African continents ... without meeting any accident in a fleet of eleven sail, nine of which were
merchantmen that had never before sailed in that distant and imperfectly explored ocean: and when it is considered that there was on board a large body of convicts, many of whom were embarked in a very sickly state, we might be deemed peculiarly fortunate, that of the whole number of all descriptions of persons coming to form the new settlement, only thirty-two had died since their leaving England ... although previous to our departure it was generally conjectured that before we should have been a month at sea one of the transports would have been converted into a hospital ship.”

THE EXACT LOCATION of where Arthur Phillip first sets foot on Australian soil will be debated for centuries to come. Some will say he walks on to the beach at Yarra Bay, on the northern side of Botany Bay, now part of the suburb of Phillip Bay, named in the intrepid captain's honour. Others will say his feet first touch the beach at Congwong Bay, east of Yarra Bay. James Callam, surgeon on the Supply, can see the natives hollering from the shore. They’re running along the beach, children among them. The older men raise wood spears spiked with fish bone.

“Seven of them came opposite to the ship, brandishing their implements of war,” Callam writes. “Throwing their bodies in threatening postures, called out in harsh notes, ‘Warraw! Warraw! Warraw’!”

Second lieutenant Philip Gidley King and Lieutenant William Dawes row a small boat to shore with Captain Phillip.

The fleet leader already suspects this bay is not suitable for the settlement he sees in his head. His near-50-year-old sailor bones tell him so. The blowy wind against his hat tells him so. But for now he’ll keep his burdens where he keeps his dreams, to himself alone.
“We landed near a party of the natives which we saw from the vessel sitting in a group, but on our approach they went away,” King writes. “We found this side of the Bay covered with small trees and a brush underwood which was not more than 60 yards wide and behind it was an extensive marsh or swamp. The soil was nothing but sand, with long grass growing between the trees, we went into the boats and rowed along this (the north side) of the bay to look for the stream of fresh water which Capt. Cook describes, but not finding any, we returned to the shore abreast of the Supply, where we observed a number of the natives had assembled together.

“The boats were put on shore near where we saw two canoes were lying, on which the natives (who before were sitting down) got up and called to us in a very menacing and vociferous tone of voice, at the same time poising their spears or canoes as if intending to throw them at us.”

Orders from King George III are firm in Phillip’s mind. Foundational instructions to build a home with, ideally in harmony and consultation with the Eora. “Conciliate their affections.” “Live in amity and kindness with them.”

Punish anyone who should “wantonly destroy them, or give them any unnecessary interruption in the exercise of their several occupations”.

“The Governor showed them some beads and ordered a man to fasten them to the stern of one of the canoes and on our rowing off the shore they fetched the beads,” writes King.

“We then made signs to them for water to drink, on which they pointed round the point on which they stood. On landing, they directed us, by pointing, to a very good stream of fresh water. The Governor advanced toward them alone and unarmed.

“An old man walked to meet him but would not go near enough to receive the
beads which the Governor held out for him, but seemed very desirous of having them and made signs for them to be laid on the ground, which was done.

“He (the native) advanced with fear and trembling and, at the same time, solicitous that we should not think he was alarmed. He took the beads up but did not express any sensation of pleasure or curiosity. By degrees he as well as some of the rest came so near as to receive looking glasses and seemed astonished at our clothing, they being all quite naked. We were soon after very great with the old man.”

MEANINGFUL CONNECTION. Peaceful connection. Phillip wants to know what the old man knows. About food. About water. About the dangers of the land and its riches. But Botany Bay is not the fertile paradise Cook’s and Banks’s vivid journals had planted in his mind.

“I began to examine the bay as soon as we anchored, and found that, though extensive, it did not afford shelter to ships from the easterly winds,” he writes. “The greater part of the bay being so shallow that ships of even a moderate draught of water are obliged to anchor with the entrance of the bay open, and are exposed to a heavy sea that rolls in when it blows hard from the eastward. Several small runs of fresh water were found in different parts of the bay, but I did not see any situation of which there was not some strong objection.”

Later, marine officer Watkin Tench briefly disembarks the transport Charlotte to explore the shore with a small group that includes the seven-year-old son of a fellow marine. Within five minutes on land, the group is approached by Eora locals.

“The child seemed to attract their attention very much, for they frequently pointed to him and spoke to each other,” writes Tench. “And as he was not
frightened I advanced with him towards them, at the same time baring his bosom and showing the whiteness of the skin. On the clothes being removed they gave a loud exclamation and one of the party, an old man with a long beard, hideously ugly, came close to us. I bade my little charge not to be afraid and introduced him to the acquaintance of this uncouth personage.

“The Indian, with great gentleness, laid his hand on the child’s hat and afterwards felt his clothes, muttering to himself all the while. I found it necessary, however, by this time to send away the child, as such a close connection rather alarmed him, and in this, as the conclusion verified, I gave no offence to the old gentleman. Indeed it was but putting ourselves on a par with them, as I had observed from the first that some youths of their own, though considerably older than the one with us, were kept back by the grown people.”

Meanwhile, relentlessly priggish and saccharine officer Ralph Clark aboard the Friendship hears word of the peaceful interactions between Phillip and the Eora. “The Supply boat has been on shore and often had intercourse with the natives who they say are very friendly, but I will not trust them,” he writes to his beloved Betsey Alicia. “Thanks to my good and gracious God for his kindness to your Ralph in preserving me in health and welfare and from the dangers of the sea and has brought me safe to the place of our destination. Oh, my beloved Betsey, return thanks and prayers to him for his kindness to me and I hope that he will befriend me still.

“I cannot say from the appearance of the shore that I will like it. The only thing I ask is that it may be a healthy place.”

On another small boat exploration of the bay, officer Philip Gidley King has a remarkable interaction where the Eora locals appear to find humour in his British properness.

“A number of women and children were sitting all in puris naturalibus,” he writes. “But it is to be observed that the heel of the right foot answers the end of a fig-
leaf when in this position. The natives round the boat made signs for us to go to them and made us understand their persons were at our service, this mark of their hospitality I declined but showed a handkerchief which I offered to one of the women. Pointing her out she immediately laid her child down and came alongside of the boat, when I applied the handkerchief where decency seemed to demand it. The natives on the shore and round the boat set up another very great shout and my female visitor retired.”

On Monday morning, January 21, Arthur Phillip departs Botany Bay with a scouting party, sailing 12km north in search of a more suitable settlement site. He’s placing his own fragile hope and the success of this grand social experiment in a small passage he’s read so many times in James Cook’s Endeavour journals that he could say it by heart.

“Having seen everything this place afforded we at day light in the morning weighed a light breeze,” Cook wrote of departing Botany Bay.

“Steered along the shore NNE and at noon we were by observation ... about two or three miles from the land and abreast of a bay or harbour wherein there appeared to be safe anchorage which I called Port Jackson ... I had almost forgot to mention that it is high water in this bay at the full and change of the moon at about eight o’clock and rises and falls upon a perpendicular about 4 or 5 feet.”

Phillip’s scouting party of three small boats reaches Port Jackson with enough light in the day left to gaze upon the shimmering wonders beyond its entrance.

Newspapers back home will later tell the world about this glorious moment, quoting from the official British government reports of how “all regret arising from the former disappointments was at once obliterated; and Governor Phillip had the satisfaction to find one of the finest harbours in the world, in which a thousand sail of the line might ride in perfect security”. 

THE AUSTRALIAN
IT'S A MOMENT IN TIME worth slowing down for. Three small boats gently rowing in and out of the many different coves of this great body of deep blue water, all 55sq km of it, where one day a grand white opera house will sparkle in the setting sun that will bounce off its curved exterior shaped like the blowing sails that carried these foolhardy voyagers to this breathtaking land. Native birds overhead.

Hawks and herons and crows. Cockatoos in the trees on shore, even the odd emu at the water’s edge. Marines and sailors so awed by the place the best tribute they can give it is their silence.

In one cove in the northern reaches of the harbour, a party of indigenous men wade into the water and approach Phillip’s boat. They are unarmed but also unafraid. Hard men, muscular and fit. An adjective immediately enters Phillip’s mind: “Manly.” He dubs this inlet Manly Cove.

“There then coming on dark we landed on a beach on the south side and there pitched our tents for the night,” writes the dashing American adventurer Jacob Nagle, one of Phillip’s oarsmen. “This place was called Camp Cove. The marines were put on their posts and the sailors were employed variously, some getting out the cooking utensils, some making fires.”

Conscious of the 1400 starved and frustrated souls still languishing in the fleet ships anchored in Botany Bay, Phillip rows some 6km further into Port Jackson the next morning and spots what Nagle calls “a run of fresh water running down into the centre of the cove”.

The three small boats move cautiously to the shoreline of a cove that Phillip quickly considers so pristine and mercifully suitable for settlement he names
it after the man he’s been writing letters to for the past three years, the driving force behind Phillip’s bold mission: Thomas Townshend — Lord Sydney.

While Phillip and his officers explore the edge of the cove, Nagle keeps watch on the boats, passing his time by casting a fishing line into the still waters before him. Phillip returns to the boats some time later — buoyed by his discovery of his new home for the next four years — and is joyfully taken by the fulous black bream resting in Nagle’s boat. He turns to the Yank sailor who has found himself an unlikely feature player in the story of modern Australia’s birth. Phillip smiles: “You are the first white man to catch a fish in Sydney Cove.”

“The boat returned on the evening of the 23rd with such an account of the harbour and advantages attending the place that it was determined the evacuation of Botany Bay should commence the next morning,” writes marine Watkin Tench. “In consequence of this decision, the few seamen and marines who had been landed from the squadron were instantly re-embarked, and every preparation made to bid adieu to a port which had so long been the subject of our conversation.”

The fleet readies to set sail for Sydney Cove the following morning, January 24, but Phillip wakes at first light to a destructive high wind pushing walls of water toward his ships.

He postpones the fleet’s laboured exit from Botany Bay to January 25. But what the fleet rises at first light to see beyond their anchorage on this morning defies belief.

The sun has barely risen and Captain Watkin Tench is still getting dressed when an excitable sergeant bursts into his cabin, breathless and uneasy, speaking of impossible visions seen from the deck of their vessel. “At first I only laughed, but knowing the man who spoke to me to be of great veracity, and hearing him repeat his information, I flew upon deck.”
Tench finds other marines on deck looking out to sea. A chilling sailor’s call echoes across the ship.

“Another sail!”

Tench pierces his eyes.

“Confounded by a thousand ideas which arose in my mind in an instant,” he writes. “I sprang upon the barricado and plainly descried two ships of considerable size standing in for the mouth of the bay.”

Tench has imagination enough to consider the wildest possibilities. Are these the ghost ships the first Australians speak of around fires along New Holland’s east coast? Are they the bloodthirsty pirates of the Pacific? Are they monster ships sent from the vengeful belly of mighty Neptune? Tench looks harder at the vision. No, it’s something far more troubling than pirates and monsters. It’s the French.
JOHN HUDSON DREAMS OF ENGLAND. The young chimneysweep who found himself swept up among the 780 convicts exiled to Botany Bay would take the icy winter sleet of any London gutter over the motionless oven of the Friendship's crowded prison deck in the high summer of the Great South Land.

It’s midday in Botany Bay, January 25, 1788. The kind of New South Wales summer swelter the fleet will come to realise often precedes a storm.

Young Hudson's ears tune to the murmurings of two older male cons.

“Two ships spotted at the mouth of the bay,” one convict grumbles.

“Where from?”

“Don’t know.”
“Maybe they come from home? Maybe they’ve come to bring us a message?”

“What message?”

“King George the Turd has pardoned the lot of us. All is forgiven. He wants us to come home!”


ON THE DECK of the Supply, second lieutenant Philip Gidley King points a spyglass to the mouth of Botany Bay.

“At daylight two strange ships were seen standing in for the bay,” he writes. “One of which had a white broad pendant at her main top mast-head and the other a common white pendant from which circumstance we judged them to be the two ships under the orders of Monsieur de La Perouse.”

Jean-Francois de Galaup La Perouse is a French explorer with a list of wartime achievements and near-death adventures as long as his name. Arthur Phillip knows of his skill and his daring: his wounding in the Seven Years War; his commanding of ships in North America; and his successful battles against the British in Hudson Bay, northeastern Canada, in which, Phillip is quick to recall, La Perouse showed himself to possess a compassion not unlike his own when he left the surviving English enough arms and provisions to survive a brutal winter.

“In the course of the day (an) officer returned and brought intelligence that the ships were the Boussole and Astrolabe, sent out by order of the King of France and under the command of Monsieur La Perouse,” writes Captain Watkin Tench. “The astonishment of the French at seeing us had not equalled that we had
experienced, for it appeared that in the course of their voyage they had touched at Kamchatka (in Russia’s far east) and by that means learnt that our expedition was in contemplation.

“They dropped anchor the next morning, just as we had got under weigh to work out of the bay, so that for the present nothing more than salutations could pass between us.”

When they were boys, most of these British marines and sailors learned to hate the French before they learned to love God, but here, in the waters of the great unknown southern land, old hostilities are put aside in favour of something both La Perouse and Phillip value above all else: knowledge. A dozen of La Perouse’s men have been attacked and killed in the islands of Samoa. He needs safe harbour.

“Europeans are all fellow-countrymen at such a distance from home,” writes La Perouse, who will spend six weeks in Botany Bay making repairs on his ships that have criss-crossed the Pacific and ventured as far north as Alaska. His men will construct an observatory and plant gardens in their brief settlement in the area Sydneysiders now call the La Perouse peninsula.

So enthralled by La Perouse’s odyssey is its benefactor and co-planner Louis XVI that five years from now, in January 1793, on his way to be executed by guillotine — a key event in the French Revolution — he will famously ask, “What news of La Perouse?”

There will be no news to give the soon-to-be-headless king after La Perouse and his crew depart Botany Bay in the direction of France but then vanish without trace somewhere inside the vast and deadly belly of Oceania.

Phillip is anxious to have the British colours raised. He has a secret in his head he instructs his men to withhold from La Perouse. That secret is Sydney Harbour, the gleaming azure gateway to the new nation he saw in his bright
mind 17,000 nautical miles back across the world in Portsmouth.

HISTORY, LIKE LIFE, unfurls in infinite perspectives. Every member of the First Fleet will watch this day — January 26, 1788 — unfold from unique and distinct vantage points. Some might remember this day for the weather, the ceaseless and enraged winds the fleet must fight against on its laboured exit from Botany Bay. Some officers, years from now, will look back upon this day and recall how nervous their great Captain Phillip had grown about the French leaving Botany Bay before him; that they might beat him to Port Jackson and become the first to raise colours in Sydney Cove. The Eora people standing on shore will recall how the British ships left and the French ships stayed. Some will remember the calamitous flurry of fleet ships being swept off course in that January 26 blow, how Charlotte nearly smashed against rocks; how the Lady Penrhyn later nearly ran aground; and all the anger subsequently directed at Arthur Phillip.

“Every one blaming the rashness of the Governor in insisting upon the fleets working out in such weather,” writes surgeon Arthur Bowes Smyth. “And all agreed it was next to a miracle that some of the ships were not lost, the danger was so very great.”

Writes officer Ralph Clark: “If it had not been by the greatest good luck we should have been both on shore on the rocks and the ships must have been all lost and the greater part, if not the whole, on board drowned.

“We should have gone to pieces in less than a half of an hour but how good the Almighty is to us. I return Him my most sincere prayers for his kindness to us.

“Thank God we have got clear out, as have all the ships and hope to be in the
course of a few hours at Port Jackson.”

Phillip is already in Port Jackson with a small group of marines and skilled convicts, who will act as a work party to immediately clear land for the settlement. Phillip’s ship, Supply, was agile and tough enough to depart Botany Bay yesterday afternoon despite the menacing weather. Around sunset he had drifted into the jewel of Sydney Cove.

Standing with him was an awed Philip Gidley King.

“The settlement lies about six miles from the entrance of the harbour,” he writes. “The safety and extent of this harbour makes it the first port in the world ... A stream of fresh water runs into the head of Sydney Cove, which appears sufficiently large for culinary purposes.

“In the harbour are eight or nine small islands which are covered with rocks and trees and these islands, with the headlands of the different coves and the rocks, form a picturesque appearance which has a pleasing effect. We anchored in Sydney Cove at seven in the evening of the 25th.”

At daylight on January 26, while the rest of the fleet is still negotiating its exit from Botany Bay, Phillip and his early work party rows to shore.

“The marines and convicts were landed from the Supply and the latter began clearing away a piece of ground to erect the tents on,” writes King.

Phillip needs encampments for the guards and their willing convicts, who set to work in earnest, relieved to be on land, relieved to be doing something useful with their weak and long-idle hands. Axes swing. Blades cut through the untouched Sydney undergrowth. Thoughtful judge advocate David Collins watches a tall tree fall and is struck by a moment of existential clarity, pondering how long these trees have stood along this golden shore before the arrival of men possessing inventions cunning enough to fell them in minutes.
“The spot chosen for this purpose was at the head of the cove, near the run of fresh water, which stole silently along through a very thick wood,” he writes. “The stillness of which had then, for the first time since the creation, been interrupted by the rude sound of the labourer’s axe, and the downfall of its ancient inhabitants; a stillness and tranquillity which from that day were to give place to the voice of labour.”

The 10 remaining fleet ships drift gradually into Sydney Cove. Tench is struck immediately by the “scene of business” evolving before his eyes.

“In one place a party cutting down the woods; a second setting up a blacksmith’s forge, a third dragging along a load of stones or provisions,” he writes. “Here an officer pitching his marquee, with a detachment of troops parading on one side of him, and a cook’s fire blazing up on the other.

“Through the unwearied diligence of those at the head of the different departments, regularity was, however, soon introduced and, as far as the unsettled state of matters would allow, confusion gave place to system.”

It’s some time “after noon”, according to King, to the sounds of fortified wine being poured into glasses and joyous rifle fire, that modern Australia is informally born. “The Union Jack was hoisted on shore and the marines being drawn up under it, the Governor and officers to the right and the convicts to the left,” writes King.

“Their Majesties and the Prince of Wales’ health, with success to the Colony was drank in four glasses of Porter, after which a feu-de-joie was fired and the whole gave three cheers.”

Phillip sees what others can’t see in this place. Some standing beneath that flag see a fledgling penal colony in development.
Phillip sees a nation in development: a complex land he will turn into a home for the 1500 members of this indefatigable fleet. He will govern this commonwealth of thieves in accordance with King George III’s orders.

“You are to endeavour, by every possible means, to open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all our subjects to live in amity and kindness with them.

“And if any of our subjects shall wantonly destroy them, or give them any unnecessary interruption in the exercise of their several occupations, it is our will and pleasure that you do cause such offenders to be brought to punishment according to the degree of the offence.

“You will endeavour to procure an account of the numbers inhabiting the neighbourhood of the intended settlement, and report your opinion to one of our secretaries of state in what manner our intercourse with these people may be turned to the advantage of this colony.”

But his resolve will be tested nightly and his great vision for New South Wales will be broken by the weight of the extraordinary social experiment he will wake to daily — building a prison for the unwanted 17,000 nautical miles from the place of their petty crimes. Blood will spill. Disease will spread. The lash will crack. Dead men will swing.

Some 230 years from now, Australians will speak of a “gap” that exists between indigenous and non-indigenous Australia, a social chasm, a complex space between two races that will first widen here, in the increasing distance the Eora people keep from that raised flag and this redcoat colony they cannot understand, spreading deeper into the lush Sydney bush with every cut gum tree.

Crops will die and provisions will vanish. The fleet will starve but the fleet will carry on. That deadly voyage from Portsmouth has taught these convicts how to live through times when dying seems the wiser option. Supplies will be sent
from England and more convicts will be sent with them. Farms will begin to flourish. A second fleet will arrive, bringing British army officer John Macarthur with it. Six years from now, on a farm on the upper reaches of Parramatta River, Macarthur will begin experimenting with wool production, crossbreeding sheep imported from the northern hemisphere.

And the world will come to realise the great south land is something far greater than a home for hungry London thieves like John Hudson.

MORNING, FEBRUARY 7, 1788. Thirteen-year-old Hudson sits among the convicts of the First Fleet, encircled in a makeshift parade ground by armed marines. The boy is watching Arthur Phillip make a speech that reflects on the events of last night when a severe lightning storm appeared to give rise to an impulsive night of unbridled passion between landed sailors and female convicts, some strange atmospherically charged orgiastic purging of eight months of collected fear and tension forged by all who sailed that sea.

“What a scene of whoredom is going on there in the women's camp,” wrote officer Ralph Clark, battling primal urges in private. “No sooner has one man gone in with a woman but another goes in with her. I hope the Almighty will keep me free from them as he has hither to done.”

“The men convicts got to (the women convicts) very soon after they landed,” writes Bowes Smyth. “And it is beyond my abilities to give a just description of the scene of debauchery and riot that ensued during the night.”

Australia does strange things to a person.

“Licentiousness was the unavoidable consequence and their old habits of
depravity were beginning to recur,” writes Tench. “What was to be attempted? To prevent their intercourse was impossible, and to palliate its evils only remained.”

But Phillip has a solution. From the huddle of convicts, Hudson looks up at the tireless voyager. The boy hangs off the captain’s every word. They’re both orphans, John and the governor. London boys born into nothing who somehow found themselves here, in this raw utopia a little further south of the end of the world.

Phillip speaks in this moment about bright futures. The potential of this strange experiment. He gives an impassioned public reading of the king’s commission. He then speaks about how wrongdoers in the colony will be punished with the heaviest hand of execution.

In England, he says, thieving poultry is not punishable by death, but here it is because one single fowl is of “the utmost consequence” to the settlement. Those who don’t work, don’t eat, he says.

But hard work and good behaviour will be granted the greatest reward: a life of purpose in a land of endless possibility. In the subtext of his oration rests the wonder of turning one’s life around, making something out of nothing. Turning a monumental negative — 780 convicts exiled 17,000 nautical miles to a prisoner island — into the undeniable positive that is this land called Australia in 2018.

“Marriage,” Phillip says.

It’s his most perfect and plainest solution. Formal relationships among the convicts through the sanctity of marriage. Love and devotion and loyalty and faithfulness. Notions so powerful they could stop the spread of disease; make a man want to go to work; make a seasoned London toffer want to make something out of nothing.

Within days of Phillip’s speech, a series of convict marriages take place in the
settlement. Within a month, about 30 couples are wedded to one another for life and Phillip's watchful eyes like what they see because he knows, heart and soul, that it won’t be wood and nail that will form the nation he sees in his mind.

That place in his head will be built on something far more profound, something this thoughtful and solitary captain is yet to find in all his endless and brave voyaging. Family.