



*Naval power and European settlement I:  
The global extent of European expansion on  
the eve of British occupation of Botany Bay  
(see back endpaper map)*

# **The founding of Australia**

THE ARGUMENT ABOUT AUSTRALIA'S ORIGINS

Edited by Ged Martin

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## Contributors

ALAN ATKINSON teaches history at the University of Western Australia. He has studied in Britain and Ireland, and holds a doctorate from the Australian National University. His main interest has been the MacArthur family, and the nature of rural settlement in early Australia.

GEOFFREY BLAINÉY is professor of history at Melbourne University. His many publications include *The tyranny of distance* and *The triumph of the nomads*.

GEOFFREY BOLTON is professor of history at Murdoch University. His publications include *The passing of the Irish Act of Union* and *Britain's legacy overseas* as well as regional histories of north Queensland, and Western Australia in the depression.

MANNING CLARK is emeritus professor of history at the Australian National University. He is best known for his multi-volume *History of Australia*.

K. M. DALLAS taught economics at the University of Tasmania. His publications include *Trading posts and penal colonies* and studies of the role of water power and horse power in the development of the modern economy.

ALAN FROST teaches history at LaTrobe University. He took his doctorate in the United States, and has published in a wide range of journals from *Eighteenth Century Studies* to the *Australian Economic History Review*. He is working on a study of the impact of the Pacific on the European imagination.

H. T. FRY teaches history at James Cook University. He took his doctorate in Cambridge and is the author of *Alexander Dalrymple and the expansion of British trade*.

# 1 Introduction

On 18 January 1788, H.M.S. *Supply* of the British Navy sailed into Botany Bay, now the centre of the industrial area of Sydney's southern suburbs, then a wilderness. No European ship had visited the bay since it had been discovered by Captain Cook in 1770. Sir Joseph Banks, the naturalist who had accompanied Cook's expedition, had suggested it as a site for a penal colony in 1779, and other schemes had been put forward in the 1780s. In August 1786 the British government had decided to establish a penal colony in New South Wales.

For two centuries exile had been considered a merciful alternative to the death penalty for criminals, but the revolt of the American colonies had virtually closed the traditional outlet, and a settlement in Australia seemed the best way to empty the prison hulks which threatened disease and disorder in England.

Eleven small vessels (the 'First Fleet') were collected off Portsmouth, a retired naval officer of German extraction, Captain Arthur Phillip, placed in command, and the expedition despatched on 13 May 1787 (after a delay caused, perhaps prophetically, by a strike). A thousand people — three-quarters of them convicts — set sail in the happy belief that Botany Bay was an earthly paradise ripe for colonisation.

Captain Phillip had something of a shock when he first saw Botany Bay from the *Supply* eight months later. It seemed barren, swampy, uninhabiting and infertile. Within two days the entire fleet had arrived and Phillip hastily decided to move his headquarters to a small cove in the deepwater harbour of Port Jackson, a few miles to the north, where he proclaimed the colony on 26 January 1788. Thus began the city of Sydney and the colony of New South Wales. The convicts called the former 'Camp' and the British long continued to think of the latter as 'Botany Bay'.

Clearly, something had gone wrong in the planning: Australian reality did not fully measure up to British motives. But what exactly were British motives? For long, historians painted a simple picture: the British needed to rid themselves of their criminals, and after losing their American outlet in 1775, they turned to Australia. This view was ably sketched by Gonner in 1888 (3) and remained substantially the account given by Clark in 1960 (11).

In 1952 K. M. Dallas suggested that the colony might have been founded with the additional motive of opening up trade with Asia and the Pacific (5). This theory clearly went further than the simple explanation of 'dumping criminals' and argued instead that the use of convict labour was a means to an end. For almost twenty years most historians treated Dallas's theories politely, but pointed out that there seemed to be very little evidence to back them up. Dallas himself published a short book in support of his case in 1969 (*Trading posts or penal colonies*).

Then in 1971 H. T. Fry produced stronger evidence to connect the founding of New South Wales with British concern about trading access to the Chinese market (20), and in 1975 Martin added some supporting evidence from a London newspaper of the time (23). Dallas's original speculative suggestions about trading motives in the Asian-Pacific region were thus refined to an argument that New South Wales was founded as a base for trade with China.

In 1966, while Dallas's explanation was languishing for apparent lack of evidence, a new explanation was put forward by Geoffrey Blainey in his *Tyranny of Distance* (13). Blainey argued that *distance* was the major determinant of Australian history — distance from Europe, and distance both within the country and along its coasts. Blainey might perfectly consistently have stood by the traditional explanation for the founding of Australia — that convicts were dumped as far from Britain as possible — and used it in support of his thesis.

However, one of the most valuable points about this stimulating book was its stress on Australia's early maritime history — in distinction to most historians, who chronicle the country's development as one of spreading settlement inland. Blainey rejected the argument that the British had favoured Australia as a penal colony simply because it was so far away, and argued instead that it was chosen as a source of strategic raw materials for the British navy — particularly Norfolk Island pine for mast timber, and New Zealand flax which could be manufactured into ropes and sailcloth for Britain's fleet. Blainey's

theory had the merit of explaining why Norfolk Island was settled along with Botany Bay, and it was based firmly on one of the few documents known to have survived from British planning in 1786, the *Heads of a Plan*, which mentioned both flax and naval timber as inducements to the plan (see below, pp. 26-29).

Blainey's theory was quickly criticised by Bolton and Shaw, and a sharp (though still good-natured) exchange followed (14-18). Both felt that Blainey had placed too much emphasis on either flax or naval timber. In any case, more reliable supplies of such staples could have developed in other parts of the world, such as Canada, at less cost. These points were to be supported by Martin (22, 23).

However, Alan Frost subsequently drew on his wide-ranging and scholarly study of eighteenth-century exploration in the Pacific to provide a good deal of the evidence for Blainey's theory which his critics had demanded (26-28, 31). Just as Fry had refined Dallas's original broad theories into an explanation based on trade with China, so Frost refined Blainey's sweeping global hypothesis into an argument connecting the establishment of the new colony with British naval requirements in the Indian Ocean alone.

Historians' assumptions are often as important as their arguments and evidence. Both Dallas and Blainey assumed that Australia could not have been founded *simply* to get rid of British convicts. There had to be some more positive reason to explain why so large a venture was attempted in so faraway a place. Their critics did not share this bewilderment, and insisted that until more definite evidence was forthcoming, it was impossible to go beyond the simple 'dumping of convicts' explanation, however bizarre it might seem to the modern scholar.

Other historians saw even less reason to feel bothered by aberrations in British policy-making. T. R. Reese in 1961, while not discounting the possibility of more positive British motives, demonstrated that the decision to establish a colony for convicts in New South Wales in 1786-88 could be seen in the context of some equally random schemes for settlements in America earlier in the eighteenth century, notably the founding of Georgia in 1732 as a refuge for debtors. (*Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 8, pp. 186-193). A detailed analysis of schemes for a colony in New South Wales was made by Alan Atkinson, who showed how the various promoters played different roles in British politics. Insisting that historians must distinguish between the motives of the actual policy makers and 'the ideals of lesser and later men', Atkinson was content to see the decision to establish the colony as 'an

exercise in narrow conservatism' which was 'simply aimed to get rid of an awkward administrative problem' (25). Thus, twenty five years after Dallas had begun the modern controversy, historians seemed no closer to agreement: Atkinson argued that New South Wales was founded to dump convicts, Frost that it was designed to provide naval resources for the British navy in the Indian Ocean, Martin that it was intended to develop trade with China.

For many readers of Australian history, the controversy over the founding of Australia is an introduction to the way historians argue and debate. The articles in this book are not only 'history' but 'historiography' — the process of historical discussion. A few points are worth making about the techniques involved.

The first point to make is that any reader who has read and thought about the main points in dispute is just as entitled to a worthwhile opinion as the most distinguished professorial combatant. Historians may be learned scholars, but that does not make them infallible 'experts'. In fact, one of the major reasons for studying history is that it helps to equip people to judge the opinions of 'experts' in all fields — whether in politics, economics, car mechanics, or any of the other fields in which a twentieth century citizen has to make a judgment. 'Experts' often disagree, and the community has to choose among conflicting views. The study of a historical controversy can show at least what sort of common sense questions can be asked even about the most technical evidence.

Historians work mainly from 'documents' — which can include not only letters, despatches, diaries and account books, but in some circumstances, oral recollections, autobiographies and newspapers. Documents however have their pitfalls — the people who wrote them were not always concerned with the same problems as the historians who read them — and, worse still, sometimes almost no documents survive at all. Historians tackle these problems in different ways.

Take an absurd example: suppose the only private documents to survive about the Emperor Napoleon were his laundry bills. One school of historians might simply conclude that Napoleon was a very dirty person who constantly needed to have his clothes washed, but another school might interpret the laundry bills as evidence of an obsession for cleanliness. A third group of historians might then proceed to ask why only the laundry bills have survived. Had there been other personal papers about Napoleon, which had been either lost or destroyed? If so, why were they not available? Napoleon's fictitious laundry bills may

seem a silly illustration, but in fact the problem facing the historian of the founding of Australia is that little more than the government's laundry bills survive from 1786-88.

A couple of schemes survive from *before* 1786 (2, pp. 9-21) attempting to persuade the government that New South Wales should be settled. The historian has to ask — did the promoters of these schemes influence the decisions of 1786 and, if their arguments were so persuasive, why were their initial schemes rejected?

One precious document exists from 1786, the *Heads of a Plan*, which was actually enclosed with Lord Sydney's letter to the Admiralty of 18 August 1786, which first announced the decision to form a colony in Australia (see below pp. 22-25). For long historians assumed that this document was either Lord Sydney's own work, or at least closely reflected his motives. But Bolton (14) suggested in 1968 that the *Heads of a Plan* might have been put together by an imaginative government clerk to justify a decision which had already been made. In 1974 D. K. Mackay (*Historical Journal*, vol. 17 pp. 487-492) argued that the *Heads of a Plan* was very similar to other plans drawn up by Sir Joseph Banks, and was probably not an official document at all. There is still no agreement about this, but it illustrates how historians can ask different questions, and thereby develop different assumptions, in the process of controversy.

A different problem arises when the discovery of new documents appears to challenge some of the assumptions founded on the old ones. Thus Roe discovered a draft letter from the British government to its junior partner in Dublin, the Irish government, outlining its plan to colonise New South Wales (9[7]). The draft contained a section, apparently drawn from the *Heads of a Plan*, describing the economic and commercial benefits hoped for from the settlement, but this whole passage was deleted from the final letter. Did this prove that the economic and commercial considerations were the fantasy of a junior clerk — or did it mean that this aspect of the plan was too important to share with the Irish government? The mere fact that a 'document' dated in 1786 may confidently announce what the government was up to, should put the historian on his or her guard. Who is making the claim, and what inside knowledge did they have?

Where adequate documentation does not exist, historians are forced to 'pad out' the evidence in various ways. One of these is to attempt to see a problem in a wider context. Can clues about the settlement of Australia be found in more general British imperial activity in the

1780s? But this approach rarely offers clear-cut conclusions. Supporters of the theory that Botany Bay was designed as a base for trading with China point to British attempts in the same period to establish similar posts around Malaya and the East Indies — to which opponents reply that there was therefore no need for such a base at Botany Bay. Opponents of the theory that New South Wales was settled to provide vital naval stores point to the lack of British government activity in exploiting similar resources in other parts of the world — to which supporters reply that once New South Wales was founded, the British government saw no need to look elsewhere. Once again, it is likely that any reader who has followed the debate will have as worthwhile an opinion as the most eminent professor.

When historians are forced to construct arguments in the absence of evidence, their assumptions become even more important. One historian may feel that British strategic or commercial needs were so obvious that it would be pedantic to look for documents to prove the point: but another might start from entirely different assumptions, and disagree violently. It is often worthwhile for a reader to ask 'what are the unspoken assumptions behind this argument?' when reading an article. This will sometimes reveal more about the writer's approach than the writer himself was aware of!

It is also important to remember that although historians study the past, the questions they ask about it are often subtly shaped by the concerns of the present. There is no harm in this, so long as we do not attempt to pass a present judgement on past events. In fact, asking questions coloured by our own contemporary problems can throw into sharp relief just how different the past really was. In a way, the historiography of the founding of Australia tells us almost as much as the history itself. Surely it is remarkable that it was not until 1952 that anyone seriously questioned the old 'dumping of convicts' arguments? Of course, until the 1950s Australian universities were very small, understaffed, and remote from the European archives. But the truth is that it suited Australians to believe that their great country had been founded for squalid motives and in a shambling manner. Thus Blair's general *History of Australasia* in 1879 wrote angrily:

It is impossible to think or write without indignation of the shortsightedness of the British Government, when planning a settlement in the new world which the genius and enterprise of Cook had opened up to the British people.

Paradoxically, the convict tradition could be made into a focus for a growing Australian pride: the more sordid and cynical the British motives for starting the country, the greater the Australian achievement in making it such a paradise of mateship.

The way in which the British squandered Australian troops at Gallipoli tended to confirm this myth in the ANZAC legend: of course the British simply dumped their convicts in Australia — that was how they always slighted Australian interests. To have argued that the British might have had more positive reasons for settling Australia would have been tantamount to suggesting that Australia had failed the expectations of the motherland, and not vice-versa.

Not until the war against Japan did it occur to a historian to link Australia's foundation with possible access to Asia. Perhaps the slowness with which Australian historians came to terms with Dallas's ideas about the China trade owes something to the isolation of Communist China through the 1950s and 1960s. As the world hardened into heavily-armed great power blocs, so international politics increasingly revolved around the control of strategic raw materials. Is it just a coincidence that it was in 1966, in the early stages of the Vietnam war, that a historian began to stress Britain's need for masts, sailcloth and ropes to maintain her navy as the most powerful in the world?

To suggest these connections is by no means to denigrate the historians who have stimulated the debate. It is merely a reminder that historians are ordinary mortals, who tackle the past with assumptions, prejudices and points of view. History is not a series of authoritative pronouncements from on high by 'experts'. It is a process of discussion and debate in which no answer is ever final. This collection starts with the main documents over which historians have argued for a century. The articles which follow show how different interpretations have been suggested, attacked, defended and modified over the years. Together, they may provide the reader with the basis of his or her own answer to the question 'why was Australia founded?' Even if there seems to be no answer, they will at least show how the trade of history is carried on.



## 4 Botany Bay as a trading base

On 28 May 1952, K. M. Dallas, lecturer in economics at the University of Tasmania, addressed the Tasmanian Historical Research Association on 'The first settlements in Australia: considered in relation to sea-power in world politics'. Dallas has rejected the description of a 'theory' for his paper, regarding the word as a suggestion that his arguments were merely speculative. Instead, he saw his contribution as the elaboration of a *theme* of British naval expansion in the Indian and Pacific oceans, applied specifically to the problem of the foundation of Australia.

The *Papers* of the Tasmanian Historical Research Association were at the time one of the few regional historical publications in Australia. Unfortunately, they were produced with limited resources, and the published version of Dallas's paper did not do full justice to his arguments. However, it is reprinted here (5) in its original form, since that has been the version which later writers have commented upon. Dallas gave a fuller exposition of his views in 'Commercial influences on the first settlements in Australia' (*Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers*, vol. 16, 1968, pp. 36-49) and in his book *Trading Post or Penal Colonies* (Hobart 1969).

Dallas linked the settlement of New South Wales with four areas of trade — China, the North American fur trade, trade with South America, and whaling and sealing in the Pacific. Subsequent discussion has tended to emphasise the first of these.

## 6 The response to Dallas

The Tasmanian Historical Research Association organised a symposium to comment upon Dallas's paper (5). Four historians — John Reynolds, M. D. McRae, D. A. Davie and N. J. Holland — offered critiques which are summarised here. They are published in full in 'The reasons for Australian settlement', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association Papers*, 1952, no. 4, pp. 5-16, which also includes a brief comment by K. M. Dallas.

The four critics complained that Dallas's ideas were based more on inference than evidence. They saw no evidence of existing trade in the South Pacific, and thought it unlikely that any British government would venture into an unknown area merely for commercial motives. They criticised the idea that New South Wales could act as base against distant Spanish South America, and were content to accept the settlement of Norfolk Island as a mere penal venture with no obvious commercial advantages. McRae stressed that to safeguard the East India Company's monopoly, trade from New South Wales was actually forbidden. Similarly they saw no connection between New South Wales and the American fur trade, and pointed out that Vancouver's expedition came nowhere near Australia. They were similarly critical of Dallas's emphasis on whaling, arguing that there was no evidence that the Enderby company had any influence in government circles, and pointing out that the development of whaling in Australian waters after 1788 was not welcomed by Governor Phillip and was apparently coincidental.

Dallas's critics were also unimpressed by the China argument. They pointed out that the Dutch had never thought it necessary to have a base in Australia, and suggested that Singapore would have been a better location for a trading base than Sydney, which never developed as a major link with China.

There was general criticism of the notion that the British government was particularly expansive in the 1780s. The four critics argued that 'mercantilist' ideas were in decline, and that naval expenditure was being cut back. Phillip was left apparently almost unsupervised to prepare the First Fleet for sailing, which would hardly have been the case had the government planned a major commercial venture, and such evidence of advance planning as Dallas had been able to cite was probably the result of Phillip's own initiative. Holland pointed out that commercial adventures then seemed politically unpopular — Warren Hastings, the former governor of Bengal, was on trial in London for alleged rapacity, and a very vocal parliamentary opposition, led by Charles James Fox and Edmund Burke, would surely have denounced the government for corruption had the scheme been intended as a commercial venture.

This brought the four critics back to emphasising the importance of the government's need to get rid of its prison population. The 1780s were years of rising crime, and the government had to act. New theories stressed rehabilitation rather than punishment as the main aim of penal policy, and this explained why the government itself organised a colony, instead of selling convicts as semi-slave labour to private employers, as had happened in the American colonies before 1775. That alone disproved the charge that convicts were simply 'dumped' and the involvement of the government, rather than a private venture, showed that penal policy took precedence over commercial possibilities.

The critics believed that New South Wales had a positive advantage as a penal colony in being so far from Britain, and this, together with the mild Australian climate, explained why Botany Bay was chosen in preference to sultry Africa or the freezing Falkland Islands. It was unfair to dwell on the cost of the new colony because in 1786 the British government had genuinely believed that it would become self-sufficient.

The four critics also referred to authoritative statements made in the past which indicated that penal needs were uppermost in British consideration. Sir Joseph Banks in 1806 had criticised New South Wales for being a penal colony and no more, while Lord Stanley, the British colonial secretary, had written in 1844 that Van Diemen's Land had been settled with the 'primary and great object' of forming a penal colony. Davie cited the views of two historians, Eris O'Brien and Dr H. V. Evatt, who both argued that Australia had only been settled because the British needed to dispose of their prison population. Since

in addition to being distinguished historians, O'Brien was also a Roman Catholic archbishop, and Ewart was also leader of the Labor party, the range of agreement on the point seemed wide.

Thus far the debate had simply ranged over known evidence from a new point of view. However, at the same time Michael Roe discovered a copy of the draft letter sent in 1786 by the British government to the Irish government, explaining its plans for New South Wales (7). But there was a problem in interpreting this new evidence, for although in draft form the letter mentioned various commercial advantages expected from the new colony, these references were deleted from the final version. Did the omission mean that the British government thought the commercial inducements were very secret — or did it mean that they thought them very silly?

## 7 Motives for Australian settlement: a document

MICHAEL ROE

K. M. Dallas has written in the third number for 1952 of this journal that

The decision to establish a penal settlement [in Australia] has been misconstrued by historians. The dumping of convicts view is too simple.

The document following is rather relevant to this point.

I came upon it in the microfilm reproduction (reel 56 of the National University-Mitchell Library series photographed in the Public Record Office, London) of Colonial Office papers, 202/5, covering the first four folios. This series comprises instructions, dispatches, commissions etc. from the Secretary of State to the Governor of New South Wales for the period 1786-1801, and is thus as appropriate a repository for the document as any.

The history of the original discovery of the document is indicated in a covering note from one A. J. Eagleston, evidently an official in the Home Office, to a counterpart in the Colonial Office. He writes:

9/7/06.

Dear Mr. Lucas,

I enclose a copy of the letter as to the administration of New South Wales which I mentioned to you the other day. I am only authorised to send it *for Colonial Office use*; but if you think it worth publishing either by sending it to the Australian Government, or otherwise, I do not think any difficulty would be made about giving permission, but you would have to apply for it. If you think of doing so, all that is necessary is to send a note to Byrne, whom you no doubt know,

Yours truly

A. J. Eagleston.

surmise that this comment does appear in the original draft, although this may not be so if Eagleston had both draft and fair copy before him and was merely copying the more complete. But if this was the case one would have expected him to say so in the note to Lucas. This emphasises the more obvious problem — how did the *draft* come to survive at all? The simple answer would seem to be an administrative error.

Whether the significance of the paragraph is either enhanced or diminished by its eventual omission is a very open question.

## 8 The 'Swing to the East'

In 1954 Oxford University's professor of imperial history, V. T. Harlow, published the first volume of his massive study *The founding of the second British empire, 1763-1793* (subtitled *Discovery and revolution*). A second volume, subtitled *New continents and changing values* was completed in 1964 by a collaborator after Harlow's death. Any reader who wishes to appreciate the overall efforts made by the British to break into the Pacific should consult Harlow, but the best summary and commentary of his argument is to be found in a review article by Ronald Hyam, 'British imperial expansion in the late eighteenth century' (*Historical Journal*, vol. 10, 1967, pp. 113-124). Hyam's criticisms denied Harlow's sweeping theories, but for a decade after 1954 they were treated with great respect by most historians.

Broadly, Harlow argued that the American war of independence caused a shift in British interests from the western hemisphere to the east, with India and China replacing America as a focus of interest and activity. Disillusion with colonies after the loss of America led the British to prefer small trading posts to vast colonial territories. At first sight, Harlow's argument that British activity after 1783 was directed mainly at the establishment of trading posts to develop commerce with Asia, seemed to offer just a supporting framework for Dallas's ideas. However, Harlow's 1500 pages contained few references to Australia, and he seemed unaware of Dallas's work — a reminder that even the greatest historian is not necessarily omniscient.

Michael Roe attempted to establish a connection between Harlow's theories and the founding of New South Wales ('Australia's place in the swing to the east' 1788-1810, *Historical Studies*, vol. 8, 1957-59, pp. 202-213; extract in (9)). Further material was contributed by Barbara Atkins (*Historical Studies*, vol. 8, 1957-59, pp. 315-318). However, although these studies illuminated the 'background' by showing that

European powers were interested in the Pacific, the evidence was not conclusive in relation to the foundation of New South Wales. Roe's conclusion (9) is not only worth reading for its part in the debate, but shows that a good historian is not afraid to admit that, however interesting his material may seem, it does not necessarily provide definite proof for any theory.

## 9 Australia's place in 'the swing to the East' 1788-1810

MICHAEL ROE

Was Australia consciously founded in the hope that she would fulfil a grand commercial purpose, either as the bastion of a Pacific trading empire or the supplier of some essential commodity? The preceding account inevitably prompts that question, although for our answer to be fully informed we must push back before 1788. A *prima facie* affirmative case is established by the Colonial Office's receipt and consideration during the mid-eighties of three plans for the settlement of N.S.W., all of which emphasized commercial arguments. Furthermore, one of them was submitted to a group of merchants, after which, in the ambiguous words used by its designer (Sir George Young) when writing to one interested party years later, 'it was immediately adopted in the manner you so well know'.<sup>1</sup> One wonders whether the Enderbys were concerned.

Contemporary Australian historians generally reject the argument that commerce was a vital influence behind the original settlement: 'there is no shred of evidence', declares Dr. E. M. O'Brien, the most authoritative writer on the subject, 'that if the gaols of England had not been unwontedly full, the colony would ever have been founded when it was'.<sup>2</sup> He points out that there was no alternative repository for convicts once a project in Africa had been carefully considered and necessarily rejected. Further, the Act of 1784 which re-established the ancient concept of transportation pre-dated the formulation of Young's plan; O'Brien fully agrees that men thought out ways of making the colony productive, but sees this merely as a natural consequence of the decision to settle, not as the preliminary impulse. A Commons' committee of 1785, appointed to consider the implementation of the previous year's Act, ridiculed the idea of a purely convict settlement, and went on to comment: 'however . . ., should His Majesty think fit to establish a new settlement for enlarging the commerce of His subjects, the labour of

<sup>1</sup> Endnotes to this chapter begin on page 274

## 10 Manning Clark and 'the evil of overcrowded gaols'

Manning Clark's article, 'The choice of Botany Bay' (11), published in 1960, foreshadowed the first volume of his *History of Australia*, which appeared in 1962. Clark's approach to Australian history has been controversial, but few of his critics would accuse him of being either unimaginative, or lacking in grandeur of conception. However, although he did not cite Dallas's work (5), he was evidently out of sympathy with those who emphasised 'the mundane benefits from an expansion of commerce'. He regarded the commercial arguments as 'tossed off' by pamphleteers and 'tacked on' to the *Heads of a Plan* (above, pp. 26-29) 'in a perfunctory, slapdash way'. Although Clark embodied in his account one of his favourite themes, the transplantation of the European enlightenment to a new society, his article amounted to an authoritative restatement of the 'convict dumping' argument. It is a useful exercise to compare it with Gonner's similar account of 1888 (3).

## 11 The choice of Botany Bay

MANNING CLARK

The proposals for the use of a southern continent had a history almost as long though by no means so distinguished as the history of its discovery. Some saw it as land dedicated to the Holy Spirit; some saw it as the home for the refuse of society, on the principle that the political body, like the human body, is often troubled with vicious humours, which one must often evacuate<sup>1</sup> — for just as the quest for a southern continent promoted the alpha and omega of human behaviour, so the discussion of its use revealed all the bewildering variety of human aspirations. In the reign of Elizabeth two proposals were made for trade in the south seas. In 1625 an eminent London merchant petitioned the King for the privilege of erecting colonies in *Terra Australis* in return for granting such lands to him, his heirs and assigns, which would have conferred on him the distinction of becoming the world's largest holder of land. Early in the eighteenth century Captain John Webbe proposed to form a company to carry on trade with *Terra Australis*. In 1718 Jean Pierre Purry urged the Governor-General of the Dutch East India Company in Batavia to begin a colony in Pieter Nuyt's Land, pointing to the advantages for their commerce.<sup>2</sup> But all such schemes came to nought, only to be resurrected from the waste-paper-basket of history by the coming of European civilization to Australia.

The preoccupation with the material benefits of trade in the second quarter of the eighteenth century quickened European interest in the south seas. Thus Campbell, who published an edition of Harris' *Collection of Voyages and Travels* in 1744, believed labour might improve, arms might extend, but only commerce could enrich a country, and urged the English to establish a colony at New Britain in the Solomons to open up trade with *Terra Australis*.<sup>3</sup> In 1756 de Bosses had urged the use of New Holland as a receptacle for criminals, on the grounds

Even a few weeks before the selection of Botany Bay, the government believed that the most suitable place of exile was Das Volas Bay, which would be a port of call on a major trade route, and so would facilitate the return to England of convicts who had served their sentence of transportation. While Lord Sydney could legitimately explain in August 1786 that the remoteness of Botany Bay was in one sense an advantage, because it would prevent homesick convicts from returning to England, he was making an observation rather than stressing a vital advantage. The entire previous history of transportation (and even Lord Sydney's own attitude until the *Nauticus* returned with reports on Das Volas Bay's aridity) shows that extreme isolation was not considered a vital determinant of a place of exile. The evidence suggests strongly that isolation was normally considered rather a disadvantage. An extremely isolated place of exile usually offered, by definition, none of those commercial or strategic gains which had always accompanied the British system of transportation.

History is hard enough to practise. We all do odd things, and Shaw's oddities would not matter much if underneath them all was not a confusion of questions. He regards England's crowded gaols and the attractions of naval stores as rival explanations, and so he attacks the one in order to strengthen the other. I suggest that they are complementary explanations, the one explaining why England sought a place for a convict settlement, and the other explaining why England selected Australia rather than some other place.

I am grateful to Professor Shaw for the evidence he gathered in London; most of it is completely new to me, although little of it seems very relevant. In my opinion his article helps my interpretation as much as hinders it, but my opinion could be wrong.

## 19 The 'trading post' theory revived

The debate of the founding of Australia had moved away from Dallas's 'trading posts' during the 1960s, first with Manning Clark's authoritative restatement of the 'convict dumping' theory (11), and then with the fresh challenge of Blainey's 'flax and naval timber' explanation (13-18). Dallas had linked the settlement of New South Wales with British trading and strategic ambitions in four areas: China, the Pacific, North America and Spanish South America. Because little supporting evidence could be found for the last two, historians had tended to discount Dallas's whole argument, thus making the mistake that because he could not prove *all* he had argued, there was no need to consider *any* of it.

In 1971 Howard Fry demonstrated that a case could be made for one of Dallas's four suggestions — that Botany Bay had been seen as a possible port of call on a new sea route to China. Fry's article (20) followed from his study of Alexander Dalrymple, a cantankerous but able man who had been hydrographer (compiler of scientific charts) to the East India Company and a champion of British commercial expansion in Asia. Fry's book, *Alexander Dalrymple and the expansion of British trade*, was published in 1970.

Fry's article indicated not only why Australia might have seemed important to Britain's trade with China in 1786, but also suggested why it subsequently, and very quickly, proved largely irrelevant too. Thus Dallas's original 'trading post' suggestion was narrowed to a 'China route' theory — a shift in emphasis which Dallas himself had foreshadowed in his book *Trading posts or penal colonies* (1969).

## 21 The debate in the 1970s

In 1975-76 three new protagonists entered the controversy, each championing and elaborating the existing arguments — Alan Atkinson ('convict dumping'), Alan Frost ('flax and naval timber') and Ged Martin ('China route').

Martin's contribution followed the lines argued by Fry (20). His essay 'The founding of Botany Bay, 1778-1790' in Ronald Hyam and Ged Martin, *Reappraisals in British imperial history* (1975), pp. 44-74, surveys the debate up to that stage, with an emphasis on the 'China route' theory. He also published 'Convict transportation to Newfoundland in 1789' in the Canadian journal *Academica* (vol. 5, 1975, pp. 84-99) which examined a badly planned venture by the Irish government to dump its own convicts overseas. This led him to a survey, 'The alternatives to Botany Bay' (22) which argued that the British government could have sent its criminals elsewhere, had it not been seeking to use them to ensure access to the Chinese market. Students may wish to ask themselves whether this survey really contributes more than a fresh series of speculations to the debate. Alternative sites for convict transportation had already been discussed by Bolton (14), by A. G. L. Shaw, *Convicts and the colonies*, chapter 2, and in a useful short article, 'Botany Bay revisited' by Joseph Remyeni in the *Melbourne Historical Journal*, vol. 10, 1971, pp. 10-14. Furthermore, for all Martin's global speculations about where the British might have sent their convicts, he had little to say about Das Volgas Bay in south-west Africa, which was series of speculations to the debate. Alternative sites for convict transportation had already been discussed by Bolton (14), by A. G. L. Shaw, part of his article, 'Direction and purpose in British imperial policy, 1783-1801'. *Historical Journal*, vol. 17, 1974, esp. pp. 487-492.

Martin's other article reprinted here, 'A London newspaper on the founding of Botany Bay, August 1786 to May 1787', (23) was based on

a survey of a single newspaper, the forerunner of *The Times*, and its reporting of the scheme to settle Australia. The article adds a good deal in contemporary comment on the decision — but the reader must ask whether journalists really were likely to know what motives lay behind government action.



report that a ship would be sent out six weeks ahead to find a safe landing on the island, and Phillip's instructions to grow flax—and only samples at that—still apparently referred to the mainland only.<sup>56</sup>

In the event, criticisms of Botany Bay which had been vocal in late 1786 were not voiced when Parliament met in January 1787. The bill to permit transportation to New South Wales and establish courts there received an unopposed second reading. It had been expected that Sheridan might exercise his wit from the Whig benches, and his silence was attributed to reluctance to employ stale jokes.<sup>57</sup> It is equally likely that the Whigs realized that any scheme for getting rid of convicts was popular and that in four months the public mind had got used to the idea of a colony at the ends of the earth. Moreover, the eighteenth century did not accept that the job of the opposition was to oppose, and the *Register* severely observed that criticism of Botany Bay 'can proceed from such only, as are determined at all events, to thwart the measures of Government, right or wrong'.<sup>58</sup> Sheridan's energies were absorbed by the impeachment of Warren Hastings against whom he delivered a philippic nearly six hours in length on 7 February 1787, and much parliamentary time was spent on the trade treaty with France. Perhaps the opposition was anxious not to appear factious, but perhaps it feared to raise an issue which might enable the government to defend both its eastern and commercial policies. A further incentive to silence on their part was the intervention of Lord George Gordon, the mob leader of 1780. On 12 February 1787 he appeared in the court of King's Bench charged, *inter alia*, with 'having written certain inflammatory papers, stimulating the prisoners in Newgate to mutiny against the sentence of transportation to Botany Bay'.<sup>59</sup> A Parliamentary opposition could not risk identification with an extra-parliamentary rabble rouser.

The *Daily Universal Register* had displayed a series of reactions to the Botany Bay scheme. It had shown great interest in the southern continent in September 1786, and then for two months steadily defended the decision. In December it had briefly wavered in the face of rising criticism, but soon came to accept the expedition as a settled fact. Gradually through 1787 it lost interest in the merits of the scheme, and gave only occasional reports of preparations. Perhaps because its Portsmouth correspondent sailed with the First Fleet, the *Register* did not even report the departure for New South Wales on 13 May 1787.

## 24 Alan Atkinson and the politics of convict transportation

In 1976 Alan Atkinson published his 'Whigs and Tories and Botany Bay' (25). Atkinson was a research student studying the role of the Macarthur family in the politics of early New South Wales: his entry into the founding of Australia debate proved that working for a Ph.D. did not have to narrow a historian's interests.

Atkinson's article was a valuable corrective to those who had tended to seize upon any contemporary British comment about transportation and Australia as evidence of the motives of Pitt's government. He carefully showed how the various proposals of the 1780s could be associated with different political parties and factions, and consequently demonstrated which were likely to have influenced or reflected the government's ideas, and which the opposition's. Atkinson was also able to show how the earlier campaigners for a New South Wales colony had shifted their arguments to meet what they thought were government motives.

There can be no doubt of the scholarly value of Atkinson's work. But the reader may ask whether its conclusions are unduly negative. By stressing the lack of firm evidence of government interest in economic or commercial advantages, Atkinson's argument was taken to be a reaffirmation of the 'convict dumping' argument. Is Atkinson right to rule out all unofficial comment on the settlement of Australia?

an awkward administrative problem without disturbing, if they could possibly help it, the commercial and political interests on which their own power rested. The ideals of lesser and later men are another matter.

## 26 Alan Frost and new evidence for the 'flax and naval timber' theory

The contributions of Atkinson and Martin were quickly overtaken by a series of articles by Alan Frost. Frost combined the skills of a historian with a training in literature, an example of the way in which a blend of two scholarly techniques can illuminate a subject. His major interest was the impact of the Pacific ocean on the European imagination. His publications include 'The Pacific ocean: the eighteenth century's "new world"' (*Studies in Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, vols. 151-155, 1976, pp. 779-822), and an examination of the New South Wales colony in Europe literature, 'As it were another America' (*Eighteenth century studies*, vol. 7, 1973-74, pp. 255-74).

Frost's study logically led to an interest in the reasons behind the founding of New South Wales. His article, 'The choice of Botany Bay: the scheme to supply the East Indies with naval stores' (27), proclaims his support for Blainey's 'flax and naval timber' theory, and adds much contemporary evidence. Frost however modified Blainey to emphasise the supply of naval stores to British shipping in Indian waters, which tended to cut the ground from under those critics who had dwelt at length on superior flax and timber resources available in Europe and North America.

Frost's use of contemporary and unofficial comment was totally at variance with Atkinson's stern insistence on the need to keep strictly to government motive. However, in 'The East India Company and the choice of Botany Bay' (28), Frost published previously unknown correspondence between government departments in 1786 (which supplemented the documents in (2)). But the reader must ask — what do these new documents prove?

## 29 The debate concluded?

Atkinson, Frost and Martin had burst into print independently of each other, and clearly their arguments were at cross-purposes on some points. Martin took up the challenge in 'Economic motives behind the founding of Botany Bay' (30), which drew 'A further comment' from Frost (31) and 'A counter-riposte' from Atkinson. (32).

Readers may wish to compare this exchange with the Blainey-Bolton-Shaw debate a decade earlier. Are historians better informed in the 1970s than they had been in the 1960s? If so, has greater knowledge brought greater clarity? Are we any closer to a convincing explanation of the founding of Australia?

The reader will notice several points in this concluding exchange. Both Frost and Martin appear to modify their positions: is this attempt at consensus successful? Martin accepts that hopes were entertained for a flax supply from New South Wales, but still refuses to see this as a motive for settlement. Frost, while defending the 'flax and naval timber' theory, closes by moving towards Dallas (5) in his new emphasis on Botany Bay as a refitting base. Both Frost and Martin continue to draw freely on unofficial sources, despite Atkinson's stern warning that only government documents can reveal government motives. Atkinson and Frost agree, however, in seeing the East India Company as a powerful force independent of the government. Martin rejects this view: has he perhaps over-stressed the government's power because it is convenient for his argument?

Historians always run the risk of choosing the assumptions and selecting the evidence which best suit their arguments. In fact, they can even draw diametrically opposed conclusions from the same documents, as Frost and Martin have done with the documents published in (28). Once again, only the reader can decide.

## 30 Economic motives behind the founding of Botany Bay

GED MARTIN

After several years of quiescence, the Botany Bay controversy has come to life again, with a series of essays restating the opposed theories that the colony was founded as a depot for naval stores or as a trading base for China. A notable contribution has come from Alan Frost, in two articles which leave all students of the subject in his debt.<sup>1</sup> Dr Frost has undoubtedly presented the most convincing case so far for the theory that 'a central consideration' behind the establishment of the colony was the desire to provide naval stores — flax and hemp for sail-cloth and ropes, timber for masts — for British shipping in eastern waters. In this he has provided the same valuable service for the theories of Geoffrey Blainey which H. T. Fry previously performed for those of K. M. Dallas. In addition Dr Frost has significantly amended Blainey's global hypothesis by emphasizing that the evidence points primarily to the supply of fleets in India rather than export to Europe, and this modification will certainly simplify debate. Besides emphasizing the argument relating to naval stores, Dr Frost has also published fresh evidence on government planning in 1786.<sup>2</sup>

In another important contribution, Alan Atkinson has recently reconstructed the background to the 1786 decision to form a penal settlement in New South Wales.<sup>3</sup> Dr Atkinson differs from Dr Frost in that he places relatively little emphasis on flax and naval timber resources as inducements. The chief merit of his article is that it explains how references to these commodities were carried over into the planning of the Botany Bay settlement from previous projects. Dr Atkinson argues that the plan to settle New South Wales began as a complex scheme worked out in 1785 by Sir George Young and Lord Sydney, which involved the settlement of both Botany Bay and Norfolk Island by a new chartered company. Norfolk was to be exploited as a source of naval stores, and convict labour was to be employed in both settlements. This scheme

## 33 Summary and suggestions for further reading

*The founding of Australia* takes the argument to the year 1977, 25 years after K. M. Dallas began the modern controversy over the motives behind the British decision to establish a colony in New South Wales. How far have historians come in these 25 years? No neat solution can be offered: to survey the debate would simply be to re-state the different theories. Two points can however be made.

First, the historians of the 1970s have more evidence over which to argue. Thanks mainly to Roe (7) and Frost (29), students know more about the actual working of the British government in those crucial months of 1786, even though there remains disagreement about interpretation. Thanks to Atkinson (25) the documents which had been available since Gonner's time (2, 3), can now be read in their context. Other historians have added contemporary material, although once again there has been no agreement about either the status or relevance of the new evidence. Yet it is appropriate that Atkinson should close the last section (32) with a reference to important private papers which are still missing and may never be found. It is just possible that one day someone will discover a document which tells all about the reasons for the settlement of New South Wales, but even then it is unlikely that it will satisfy every historian. History is about evidence, but it is even more about the interpretation of evidence.

The second point about the 25 years of debate is that the original bold theories have been steadily refined within more precise limits. Dallas (5) saw Botany Bay as a trading base which might penetrate Asia, the Americas, the Pacific and the southern oceans. Fry (20) modified the theory to concentrate on showing the possible link between the new colony and the China trade. Blainey (13) pictured Australia as a source of naval supplies to Britain's world-wide navy. Frost (27) scaled down

the claim, stressing Australia's potential for supplying British fleets in India.

As the grand theories have become more subtle, so the distance between them has narrowed. Blainey did not rule out the possibility that Dallas might also have been right. Martin (30) conceded that there might be something in the case marshalled by Frost. The argument had become one of emphasis and degree, rather than a simple right-or-wrong: the British government may have been interested both in naval stores and a trading post, and the question might merely be which possibility weighed most.

As the protagonists of Dallas and Blainey have moved closer, the reader may have noticed convicts creeping in again at the back of the stage. Only Shaw (17) and Atkinson (25) in recent years have taken the old orthodox view that since the documents do go beyond convict disposal, the historian should not either, although it is worth remembering that this was the authoritative view of Manning Clark as late as 1960 (11). In the heat of controversy in the 1960s and 1970s, the fact that New South Wales was almost entirely a convict settlement tended to be overlooked. Both the 'flax and timber' theorists and the 'China route' party have had to admit that the early years of the New South colony did not triumphantly vindicate their arguments: Australia produced precious little flax and stimulated no great trade. The historians of the 1980s may well once again stress Britain's overwhelming need to get rid of her prison population as the driving force behind the founding of Australia, although this will still not entirely answer the question: why Australia rather than somewhere else?

*Further reading:* Two important accounts of the events leading to the colonisation of Australia are C. M. H. Clark, *A history of Australia*, vol. 1 from the earliest times to the age of Macquarie (Melbourne 1962 and subsequent editions), pp. 59-72, and A. G. L. Shaw, *Convicts and the Colonies* (London 1966 and subsequent editions), pp. 38-57. A useful factual account is R. A. Swan, *To Botany Bay... if policy warrants the measure* (Canberra 1973).

For two surveys of the debate, see N. B. Nairn, *The selection of Botany Bay*, in G. J. Abbott and N. B. Nairn, eds., *Economic growth of Australia, 1788-1821* (Melbourne 1969), pp. 46-56, and Ged Martin, 'The foundation of Botany Bay, 1778-1790' in R. Hyam and G. Martin, *Reappraisals in British imperial history* (London 1975), pp. 44-74.

Articles not reprinted in this collection include J. Remenyi, 'Botany Bay revisited', *Melbourne Historic Journal*, vol. 10, 1971, pp. 10-14; D. L. Mackay, 'Direction and purpose in British imperial policy, 1783-1801', *Historical Journal*, vol. 17, 1974, pp. 487-501; T. R. Reese, 'The origins of colonial America and New South Wales: an essay in British imperial policy in the eighteenth century', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 7, 1961, pp. 186-97 and Ged Martin, 'Convict transportation to Newfoundland in 1789', *Academienis* (University of New Brunswick, Canada), vol. 5, 1975, pp. 84-99.

It is hoped that Alan Frost, '*Of great consequence: Britain's strategic concerns 1775-1806 and New South Wales*', will be published in 1979. Frost's book is likely to be the next major step in the debate.

General background reading on British imperial policy in the Pacific must start with V. T. Harlow's massive study, *The founding of the second British empire 1763-1793*, especially vol. 2, subtitled *New continents and changing values* (London, 1964). Two shorter studies in Abbott and Nairn, eds., *Economic growth in Australia* are useful: D. K. Fieldhouse, 'British colonial policy' (pp. 9-30 and R. M. Hartwell, 'The British background' (pp. 31-45). H. T. Fry, *Alexander Dalrymple and the expansion of British trade* (London 1970) deals specifically with Dalrymple's part in the penetration of the Pacific.

The old orthodox view of the country's origins is to be found in E. M. O'Brien, *The foundation of Australia*. There are editions from London (1937) and Sydney (1950), the latter edited by John M. Ward.

For British policy in the East Indies and Pacific and its relation to convict transportation, see V. T. Harlow and F. Madden, *British colonial developments 1774-1834: select documents* (Oxford 1953), pp. 1-77, 426-37.

O. Rutter, *The First Fleet* (London 1937) is a collector's edition of documents, including some material not printed in the earlier *Historical Records of New South Wales*, vol. 2, part 1. For a brief selection, see Manning Clark, *Select documents in Australian history 1788-1850* (Sydney 1950 and subsequent editions), pp. 15-41.

## Endnotes

- 3 **The settlement of Australia** E. C. K. Gonner
- 1 19 Geo. III. c. 74.
- 2 *V. infra*, p. 630.
- 3 *Commons Journals*, vol. xxxvi.
- 4 Appointed 17 March, and reported 1 April 1779. But the returns mentioned had been ordered 16 Dec. 1778, and were sent into the house 25 Jan. 1779.
- 5 *Commons Journals*, vol. xxxvii. p. 306 &c.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 311, 314.
- 7 He was with Captain Cook in 1770.
- 8 *Commons Journals*, xxxvii. 314.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.* xxxix. 1040. 1784.
- 11 *Ibid.* xl. p. 954 &c. 1161 &c., respectively 9 May and 28 July.
- 12 *History of Discovery of New Holland* (Brit. Mus. 798 c. 1).
- 13 *History of Discovery of New Holland*, Pref. p. v.
- 14 This is the document cited as 'a curious pamphlet in *The First Twenty Years of Australia*, by Mr. James Bonwick.
- 15 *Whitehall Evening Post*, 19 Sept. and 30 Nov. 1786.
- 16 *Morning Post*, 13 Oct. 1786.
- 17 *History of New Holland*, p. 33
- 18 *Whitehall Evening Post*, 30 Nov. 1786.
- 19 January 1787.
- 20 21 Nov. 1786. No. 6174.
- 21 *General Evening Post*, 6 Jan. 1787.
- 22 27 Geo. III. c. 2.
- 23 For account of voyage and settlement see Phillip (A.), *Narrative of Expedition to Botany Bay*, 1789; Hunter (John), *Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson*, 1793; Collins (D.), *Account of English Colonies in N.S.W.* 1798; Tench (Watkin), *Account of Settlement at Port Jackson*, 1793.