

# ***Convict Colony: The Remarkable Story of the Fledgling Settlement that Survived against the Odds* by David Hill**

(Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2019), 368 pp

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Australia's colonial history remains as relevant as ever. On 29 April 2020, the nation commemorated the 250th anniversary of Captain James Cook's landing at Botany Bay. It was Cook's fateful voyage on HMS *Endeavour* that led to the establishment of a British colony in Australia with the arrival of the First Fleet at Port Jackson on 26 January 1788. The Australian Government planned numerous events to mark Cook's arrival, but a global pandemic drastically limited the commemorations.<sup>1</sup> Still, there was debate in mainstream and social media over the meaning of Cook's arrival in 1770, with some of its themes echoing the perennial controversy over Australia Day (26 January)—the anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet—that has given rise to a 'Change the Date' movement. Given the continuing significance of this period of history in public debate, it seems timely that David Hill has published another work documenting the first decades of European settlement in Australia.

Hill, with his lively and engaging *Convict Colony*, joins a plethora of academic and popular historians writing in recent decades on the topic of Australia's early colonial past. *Convict Colony* covers the same period as Grace Karskens's *The Colony* (2010) and Alan Atkinson's *The Europeans in Australia, Volume One* (1997), spanning the period between the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 and the end of Macquarie's governorship in

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Communications and the Arts, '250th anniversary of Captain Cook's voyage to Australia', accessed 13 January 2020, [www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/cultural-heritage/250th-anniversary-captain-cooks-voyage-australia](http://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/cultural-heritage/250th-anniversary-captain-cooks-voyage-australia).

1821, but provides an account more suited to a popular audience. Hill's latest book remains in the territory of Australian history, as his previous eight books did. A significant drawback of this book is its lack of engagement with other historians, as this causes Hill's arguments to become rather one-sided. This is particularly apparent in his discussion regarding the selection of Botany Bay as a location for a future colony. However, a notable virtue of the book is its coverage of subjects that interest current academic historians and from which public audiences will gain a greater knowledge of the period. These are mainly the experiences of convict women and the effects of colonisation on Aboriginal Australians.

Accounts of Australia's early colonial history have historically tended to favour either the stories of male colonists or the plight of Aboriginal Australians. Despite there being a well-justified effort to understand colonisation from a purely Aboriginal perspective, there is also merit in acknowledging this position alongside the challenges encountered by colonists—both men and women—in pursuit of Britain's broader imperial mission. Hill facilitates a discussion of these issues by juxtaposing the problems of the colonisers with the severe consequences of their presence for Aboriginal communities. Further, Hill notes the peculiarities of being a woman in the early Australian colonies. By recounting this history with regular extracts from key primary sources, Hill vividly describes the many events and circumstances that threatened the survival of both the British colony *and* Aboriginal populations in Australia during the first decades of European settlement. In doing so, Hill addresses several arguments of critical importance to the historiography on European settlement in Australia. However, in the case of his discussion of the early colony's establishment, Hill unfortunately reveals his often-limited engagement with extant academic debates.

Hill argues that the British venture to colonise New South Wales was one of high risk, the failure of which could have been brought about by any one of several challenges faced by colonists during the first three decades of settlement. A central theme of *Convict Colony* is the adversity faced by all who were connected to the colony, including free colonists, convicts and Aboriginal people. Hill describes how the British faced problems before leaving England, including the logistical challenge of gathering enough supplies for the long journey and to sustain the new colony until it was self-sufficient. Upon its establishment in Australia, the new colony was subject to bushfires, floods and drought that, combined with the tough soil, made producing sufficient food near impossible for

the British. Unable to maintain sustainable food sources, and with limited contact with the outside world, the new colony was soon on the verge of starvation.

Hill demonstrates that a plethora of other problems also plagued the early colony. Initially, the arrival of women into the colony placed a greater strain on British supplies, as they were not generally assigned to work on farms to produce food and their presence was associated with the proliferation of prostitution and illegitimate children. This strain on supplies was exacerbated when the colony was later administered by the corrupt New South Wales Corps, which redistributed rations to favour non-convicts and assumed the powers held by magistrates. Problems regarding the governing of the colony escalated (first with an uprising of Irish convicts in 1804) until Governor William Bligh was overthrown by the corps in a coup d'état in 1808. The unstable governance of the colony left it vulnerable at a time when fears of imperial rivalry were heightened. The colonisation of Australia, and imperial expansion within it, were motivated by British fears of French imperial ambition in the region. Another competing interest came from the Spanish who, as early as 1796, had plans drawn up to invade Sydney. These issues of security and governance added to the domestic problems that threatened the survival of the colony, which included the inevitable escape of hundreds of transported convicts and conflict between Europeans and Aboriginal people.

While the regular and close integration of key primary sources is to be commended, too often Hill's arguments are presented without acknowledging the historical debates concerning the subject in question. For example, according to Hill, one source of adversity for 'the new settlement in Sydney was that many of the convicts—men, women and children—were totally unsuited to building a new life in the harsh Australian bush'.<sup>2</sup> He further argues that this was because the convicts transported on the First Fleet 'were not chosen with any regard to their fitness for the long voyage, or to their ability to build a new colony once they reached Botany Bay'.<sup>3</sup> In making these claims, Hill firmly positions himself within a prominent debate in Australian historiography, one that rests on whether Australia was merely a 'dumping ground' for convicts or

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2 David Hill, *Convict Colony: The remarkable story of the fledgling settlement that survived against the odds* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2019), x.

3 Hill, *Convict Colony*, 30.

was intended to survive to become an outpost of empire. Implicit in this debate is the question of whether those who embarked on the First Fleet had been selectively chosen and, if so, by what criteria.<sup>4</sup>

According to Frost, there is evidence to suggest that, for the male convicts at least, there was some selection according to skills and fitness. In February 1787, Sir Evan Nepean selected 100 convicts to be boarded onto the *Scarborough*. Of these, Captain Watkin Tench reported that the majority were husbandmen or mechanics who had been 'selected on purpose by order of Government'.<sup>5</sup> Further, 44 of the 76 convicts transported on the *Friendship* were recorded as having trades, which included weavers, carpenters, brickmakers and farmers, all skills that would be needed in the new colony. Duncan Campbell, who was overseer of the convicts held on the River Thames hulks, excluded those who were sick or injured from transportation. When sending some to be loaded onto the *Scarborough*, Campbell held back seven out of 191 convicts selected for transportation. He maintained a careful watch over the convicts, ordering those 'who from sickness and other causes were thought unfit to be removed with the other prisoners'.<sup>6</sup> In fact, a significant portion of convicts are believed to have had a rural background, with many having been farm labourers, servants, ploughmen, and shepherds, with the ubiquitous generic label 'labourer' likely to have also applied to farming work. The accumulation of individuals with these skills and experiences resulted in the creation of a workforce capable of transforming Australia into a primary producer.<sup>7</sup>

Another instance in which Hill's narration is hindered by his lack of reference to historical debates is the decision-making process behind the identification of Botany Bay as a site for a penal settlement. Historians have usually attributed this decision to four key factors: 1) that North America ceased to be a place for transporting convicts, 2) problems associated with the increasing number of prisoners in Britain, 3) the lack of any other viable place for sending convicts, and 4) that the distance from Botany Bay to Britain would make escape extremely difficult.<sup>8</sup> To his credit, Hill commendably explains all of these factors in detail, regularly

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4 Alan Frost, *The First Fleet: The Real Story* (Collingwood: Black Inc., 2012), 69–70.

5 Frost, *The First Fleet*, 70.

6 Frost, *The First Fleet*, 71.

7 David Meredith and Deborah Oxley, 'The convict economy', in *The Cambridge Economic History of Australia*, ed. Simon Ville and Glenn Withers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 107.

8 Alan Frost, *Botany Bay: The Real Story* (Collingwood: Black Inc., 2012), 216–217.

quoting from the relevant primary sources. There are, however, other variables that some historians argue had an impact on the selection of Botany Bay that are not addressed by Hill.

Historians such as Alan Frost and Geoffrey Blainey have argued that, aside from being a mere dumping ground for convicts, the decision to establish a penal colony in Australia was also influenced by military and economic motivations.<sup>9</sup> Their main evidence comes from Lord Sydney's letter to the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury, dated 18 August 1786, which Hill also quotes from. In this letter, Sydney points out that another advantage of the Botany Bay site is that it would make it possible to cultivate the New Zealand flax plant. Doing this would further strengthen Britain's naval dominance, as British manufacturers were 'of opinion that canvas made of it would be superior in strength and beauty to any canvas made of the European material'.<sup>10</sup> The Royal Navy would also benefit through 'procuring from New Zealand any quantity of masts and ship timber for the use of our fleets in India'.<sup>11</sup> Keeping in mind these other advantages of convict transportation to Australia, it is apparent that the Botany Bay scheme was not purely about establishing a dumping ground for convicts, but that the plan also catered to Britain's strategic and commercial aims in the South Pacific.<sup>12</sup>

A third group of historians argue that the First Fleet and the founding of a British colony in New South Wales was a direct product of Enlightenment thinking. The colonisation of Australia, as David Malouf writes, resulted from a mindset:

Interested in other forms of conquest, the conquest of time and the conquest of space ... It was a product of mind, in its active form as discovery rather than a by-product simply of empire.<sup>13</sup>

New South Wales was just one of a series of planned settlements throughout the British Empire that were designed in accordance with both domestic and imperial politics. At the core of these settlements was an Enlightenment notion, namely that bodies and souls could be

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9 Frost, *Botany Bay*, 220.

10 'Lord Sydney to the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury, 18 August 1786 and Enclosures including Heads of a Plan', in *The Founding of Australia: The Argument About Australia's Origins*, ed. Ged Martin (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1978), 28.

11 Martin, *Founding of Australia*, 29.

12 Frost, *Botany Bay*, 227.

13 David Malouf, 'Australia's British Inheritance', *Quarterly Essay* 12 (2003): 33.

transformed and renewed, particularly through their displacement across vast distances. Elaborating on this position, Alan Atkinson argues: 'Such schemes [as Botany Bay] were the product of a pen-and-paper culture. They were part of a new science of human nature.'<sup>14</sup> In writing his account of the lead up to Botany Bay, Hill missed an opportunity to discuss the possible connection between Australia's colonisation and the Enlightenment, a subject that he touches on in establishing the context in which the First Fleet was organised.

While Hill's work may be limited with respect to its lack of engagement with historical debates on certain topics, it is to be commended for the way in which it engages with subject areas of interest to current academic historians. One of these areas is Aboriginal history and the adversity faced by Aboriginal people as a result of colonisation, particularly through the frontier wars. Hill begins his chapter on this subject by forthrightly arguing that the European 'settlement in Australia was to have dire consequences for the Indigenous population' as Europeans 'dispossessed local peoples of their ancient lands, [drove] them from their traditional sources of food and exposed them to devastating diseases to which they had no immunity'.<sup>15</sup>

Hill's account of the experiences of Aboriginal people under European colonisation reflects the arguments made by several prominent historians in this area, including Richard Broome, James Miller, Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan.<sup>16</sup> These historians share Hill's contention that much of the conflict that occurred during the frontier wars was based around food, with Aboriginal people attacking settler property and stocks both as a means of sourcing food and in retaliation to European attacks.<sup>17</sup> As well as the loss of their traditional lands, Hill further acknowledges that British expansion brought with it the 'abduction and rape of Aboriginal women and indiscriminate killings of local Aboriginal people across the hinterland', leaving Aboriginal people disposed of their traditional lands and culture.<sup>18</sup> However, recounting the relatively amicable coexistence

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14 Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia*, 51.

15 Hill, *Convict Colony*, 113.

16 Greg Blyton, 'Hungry Times: Food as a source of conflict between Aboriginal people and British colonists in New South Wales 1804–1846', *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 11, no. 3 (2015): 300.

17 Blyton, 'Hungry Times', 300.

18 Hill, *Convict Colony*, 134.

that occurred in the first few months of the Port Jackson settlement, Hill notes that there were limited times of peace between Europeans and Aboriginal people.<sup>19</sup>

While historians have been engaging with these issues for decades, there is evidence to suggest that, as a nation, we are yet to overcome what anthropologist Bill Stanner termed the ‘great Australian silence’.<sup>20</sup> As historians Matthew Bailey and Sean Brawley have recently demonstrated, public knowledge and school education systems are yet to fully incorporate the violence and dispossession of Australia’s colonial past.<sup>21</sup> This suggests that popular understandings of Aboriginal colonial history are lagging behind that of contemporary academic historians, who are seeking to explore the ways in which Aboriginal people practised agency in the face of colonisation. An example of this can be found in the recent publication of a new biography on Truganini, in which the eminent historian Cassandra Pybus explores how this renowned woman was not simply a victim of her time but was someone who responded to the challenges she faced to make the best of her situation.<sup>22</sup> While the absence of any discussion of Aboriginal agency in Hill’s book is regrettable, the inclusion of an overview of the violence that occurred between Aboriginal people and Europeans in a work of popular history should reduce some of the ongoing ignorance of this subject. The inclusion of narratives regarding the various forms of Aboriginal agency and activism is a goal that future popular histories can work towards.

Another area of convict history featured in *Convict Colony* that is of interest to many contemporary historians is the experiences of women in the colonial period, with an emphasis on the challenges they both faced and posed to the colony’s survival.<sup>23</sup> Hill argues that convict women were worse off than their male counterparts, as they faced limited chances of

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19 Hill, *Convict Colony*, 117.

20 W. E. H. Stanner, ‘The Boyer lectures: after the Dreaming’ (1968), in *The Dreaming and other essays*, ed. W. E. H. Stanner (Collingwood: Black Inc. Agenda, 2010), 188–89, 191.

21 Matthew Bailey and Sean Brawley, ‘Why Weren’t We Taught? Exploring Frontier Conflict Through the Lens of Anzac’, *Journal of Australian Studies* 42, no. 1 (2018): 19–33.

22 Cassandra Pybus, *Truganini: Journey through the Apocalypse* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2020).

23 Many of the works on the subject have been published by the Convict Women’s Press, which include among many others: Lucy Frost, ed., *Convict Lives at the Ross Female Factory* (Hobart: Convict Women’s Press, 2011); Lucy Frost and Alice Meredith Hodgson, eds, *Convict Lives at the Launceston Female Factory* (Hobart: Convict Women’s Press, 2013); Alison Alexander, ed., *Convict Lives at the George Town Female Factory* (Hobart: Convict Women’s Press, 2014); Lucy Frost and Colette McAlpine, *From the Edges of Empire: Convict Women from Beyond* (Hobart: Convict Women’s Press, 2015).

finding paid employment and owning land. If they were not caring for children, convict women often worked for board and lodging, as hut keepers and domestic servants. Hill goes on to argue that the 'lack of any real opportunities for women and their dependence for survival on men led to large numbers of illegitimate children'.<sup>24</sup> This phenomenon has been documented by several historians, including Tanya Evans. In her book *Fractured Families*, Evans explains that, upon arrival in the colony, many convict women 'moved quickly from the ships into marriage, because a man provided [them] with the potential for economic security and personal protection in a land where men far outnumbered women'.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to highlighting the challenges they faced, Hill posits that a minority of convict women were able to overcome their circumstances and build for themselves a successful life.<sup>26</sup> To illustrate this point, Hill outlines the well-known story of Margaret Catchpole. At 33 years of age, she was transported to New South Wales in 1801 for horse stealing. Once in Australia, Catchpole decided not to marry at a time when women were reliant on men for financial security, instead opting to work for several prominent farming families.<sup>27</sup> She boasted that her 'living all alone as before in a very honest way of life' meant that 'not one woman in the colony lives like myself'.<sup>28</sup> This was of course not the case, as there were other convict women who became independently successful. One such woman was Judith Simpson, who after a series of relationships later acquired a business and property. As well as owning land in Windsor, Simpson acquired a spirit licence for her property in Chapel Row, Sydney, and a beer licence in 1818 for Castlereagh Street. As historian Grace Karskens argues, Simpson's 'own talents and skills had left her well-off, propertied and respected'.<sup>29</sup> Another female convict who achieved success independently was Mary Reibey, a colonial business woman who, through 'persevering and enterprising in everything she undertook, became legendary in the colony' and 'rose to respectability and affluence in the new emancipist society'.<sup>30</sup> By exploring some of the challenges

24 Hill, *Convict Colony*, 146.

25 Tanya Evans, *Fractured Families: Life on the Margins in Colonial New South Wales* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2015), 26.

26 Hill, *Convict Colony*, 141.

27 Hill, *Convict Colony*, 141–43.

28 Hill, *Convict Colony*, 141.

29 Grace Karskens, *The Rocks* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1998), 77.

30 G. P. Walsh, 'Reibey, Mary (1777–1855)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, [adb.anu.edu.au/biography/reibey-mary-2583/text3539](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/reibey-mary-2583/text3539), published first in hardcopy 1967, accessed online 12 January 2020.

faced by European women in colonial Australia, Hill demonstrates the precarious nature of the early colony and the challenges faced by all who were involved.

In *Convict Colony*, David Hill has told the ‘remarkable story of the fledgling settlement that survived against the odds’ in a clear and interesting manner.<sup>31</sup> As Frost argued, the venture to establish a colony in New South Wales was a ‘scheme that carried considerable risks’ but that nonetheless succeeded ‘despite the early difficulties’.<sup>32</sup> With an easily digestible writing style that is complemented by regular extracts from detailed primary sources, Hill examines Australia’s colonial history in a way that provides the reader with a comprehensive overview of the ‘early difficulties’ hinted at by Frost. In doing so, he brings together several well-known aspects of this period and integrates them with subject areas of interest to current historians to produce a holistic and contemporary history of this period.

Just as this book looks back at Australia’s colonial history, so too will its intended audience. The 250th anniversary of Cook’s arrival and the continuation of the ‘Change the Date’ campaign will no doubt cause many Australians to reflect on the nation’s colonial past. The timely publication of *Convict Colony*, written as a popular history, will help to ensure that a wide audience is better informed of the complex history that underlies these events.

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31 Hill, *Convict Colony*.

32 Frost, *Botany Bay*, 227.

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