

BECKE LOUIS

THE BEGINNING OF THE
SEA STORY OF
AUSTRALIA

Louis Becke
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THE BEGINNING OF THE SEA STORY OF AUSTRALIA

To many people in England the mention of Australia conjures pictures of tented gold-fields and tall, black-bearded, red-shirted bushrangers; of mounted police recruited from "flax-haired younger sons of good old English families, well-groomed and typically Anglo-Saxon"; of squatters and sheep runs; of buckjumpers ridden by the most daring riders in the world; and of much more to the same purpose; but never is presented a picture of the sea or sailor folk.

Yet the first half-century of Australian history is all to do with the ocean. The British sailor laid the foundation of the Australian nation, and, in the beginning, more than any other class, the sailorman did the colonising—and did it well. This, however, is the story of most British possessions, and generally it is gratefully remembered and the sailor duly credited and kindly thought of for his work. But in these days the dry west wind from the back

blocks seems to have blown the taste of brine and the sound of the seethe of the curling "white horse" out of the mind of the native-born Australian; and the sailing day of a mail boat is the only thing that the average colonial knows or cares to know about salt water.

To write on such a subject as this, one has to leave out so much, that it is necessary to begin almost in the middle in order to reach an ending. Sea exploration and coast surveying opened the ways; whaling—it may surprise the reader, but it is nevertheless true—was once the main support of Australia and New Zealand; and runaway sailors formed a very considerable part of the back country population, such men making handier and better farm labourers, stockmen, and, later on, miners, by reason of their adaptability to strange surroundings, than ticket-of-leave men or the average free emigrant.

The first four successive Governors of Australia—in the beginning, be it remembered, the continent was one colony—were captains in the Navy. Governing in those rough days was not a mere master-of-the-ceremonies appointment, and Phillip, Hunter, King, and Bligh, if they made mistakes, considering their previous training, the populations they governed and the times in which they lived, amply justify Palmerston's words that if he wanted a thing done well in a distant part of the world; when he wanted a man with a good head, a good heart, lots of pluck, and plenty of common sense—he would always send for a captain of the Navy.

Phillip, the first of these Governors, was sent out to found "a penal settlement at Botany Bay, on the coast of New Holland," and did the work in such fashion, in spite of every discouragement from the forces of nature, the Home Government, and his own officers, as to well entitle him to a place among the builders of Greater Britain. What was known of Australia, or rather New Holland—the name of Australia was still in futurity—in 1788, when Phillip first landed on its shores?

Let us say nothing of Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch voyages; of wrecks and piracies; of maroonings, and massacres by blacks; of the discoveries of Dampier and of Cook, but sum the whole up thus: the east coast of Australia, from its northernmost extremity to its southernmost, was practically unknown to the world, and was absolutely unknown to Englishmen until Cook's first voyage. Cook, in the *Endeavour*, ran along the whole east coast, entering a few bays, naming many points, and particularly describing Botany Bay where he stayed some little time; then he sailed through Torres Straits, and thence, *via* Batavia, home to England, where he arrived in June, 1771. The English Government took no advantage of his discoveries until 1786, when Botany Bay was fixed upon as the site of a new penal settlement; and this choice was determined, more than anything else, by the advice of Sir Joseph Banks, who, from the time of his voyage with Cook in the *Endeavour* till his death, took the keenest interest in the continent; and colonists are more indebted to the famous naturalist for his friendly services than to any other civilian

Englishman of the time.

Phillip's commission ordered him to proceed to Botany Bay, but authorised him to choose another site for the settlement if he considered a better could be found. He arrived with his fleet of transports in 1788, after a voyage of many months' duration, so managed that, though the fleet was the first to make the passage and was made up of more ships and more prisoners than any succeeding fleet, there was less sickness and fewer deaths than on any of the convoys which followed it. Phillip made a careful examination of Botany Bay, and finding it unsuitable for planting, the settlement was removed to Port Jackson. After landing the exiles, the transports returned to Europe *via* China and the East Indies, and their route was along the north-east coast of Australia. The voyages of these returning transports, under the navy agent, Lieutenant Shortland, were fruitful in discoveries and adventures. Meanwhile Phillip and his officers were working hard, building their homes and taking their recreation in exploring the country and the coast for many miles around them. And with such poor means as an indifferent Home Government provided, this work of exploration went on continually under each naval governor, the pressing want of food spurring the pioneers ever on in the search for good land; but that very need, with the lack of vessels, of men who could be trusted, of all that was necessary for exploration, kept them chained in a measure to their base at Sydney Cove.

Phillip, white-faced, cold and reserved, but with a heart full

of pity, was responsible for the lives of a thousand people in a desolate country twelve thousand miles from England—so desolate that his discontented officers without exception agreed that the new colony was "the most God-forsaken land in the world." The convict settlers were so ill-chosen, and the Government so neglected to supply them with even the barest necessities from Home, that for several years after their landing they were in constant distress from famine; and disease and death from this cause alone was an evil regularly to be encountered by the silent, hard-working Phillip. The only means of relief open to the starving settlement was by importing food from Batavia and the Cape of Good Hope, and to procure such supplies Phillip had but two ships at his disposal—the worn-out old frigate *Sirius* (which was lost at Norfolk Island soon after the founding of the settlement) and a small brig of war, the *Supply*—which for many weary months were the only means of communication with civilisation.

The Home Government, when they did despatch a second fleet, instead of sending supplies for the starving people under Phillip's care, sent more prisoners, and very little to eat was sent with them. The authorities seem to have had an idea that a few hundred shovels, some decayed garden seeds, and a thousand or two of Old Bailey men and women criminals, were all the means needed to found a prosperous and self-supporting colony. How Phillip and his successors surmounted these difficulties is another story; but in the sea history of Australia the work of

the naval governors occupies no small space in it. Remember, too, that the Torres Straits route and the Great Barrier Reef, now as well charted as the Solent, were only then being slowly discovered by clumsy old sailing craft, whose masters learnt to dread and avoid the dangers of the unknown coast as children grow cautious of fire, by actually touching it.

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