

AUSTRALIA HOUSE

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‘Arthur Phillip – Sailor, Mercenary, Governor, Spy’

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I set out to write this book because the adventure, the glamour and the rags to riches story of orphan boy to Admiral of the Blue, excited and enthused me. The reading and research enabled me to range across the whole of Phillip’s life, traverse the length of the eighteenth century from the War of Spanish Succession to Regency Bath, and investigate Georgian culture and society.

But as I read more, and pondered over the significance of some of the information that came to me, I realised that there was more to the story than just the colour and dash of naval adventure and social advancement. Yes, there is plenty of Hornblower and Patrick O’Brian, and a dash of Jane Austen. But the unforgettable core of the story is the extraordinary idealism and the influence of the Enlightenment that accompanied the founding of Australia.

For many years that story has remained hidden, buried by the prejudices of writers and historians who saw nothing good in what Great Britain sought to achieve in founding the colony of New South Wales. The last in a long line of writers in that vein was the late, great Robert Hughes. In his attractive, engaging and inimitable style, he single-handedly invented the notion of an antipodean ‘gulag’.

More considered writers and historians have not adopted that approach. We owe a great debt to Alan Frost, Alan Atkinson, Grace Karskens and Andrew Tink for a different, more accurate perspective. Alan Atkinson’s retort to Robert Hughes is simple but effective and I have adopted it as an epigraph:

‘Botany Bay, it has been argued, was meant as a Gulag before Gulag . . .
Nothing could be further from the truth.’

The reality is that the expedition to found a colony in New South Wales was an absurdly ambitious manifestation of the optimism that marked the Enlightenment. Nothing like it had been done before. It was a quest to build a new society in an alien land, on virgin terrain. In the process, it was hoped that the convicts would be improved and reformed; that the men would become peasant farmers and women would raise children; and that the land would be settled and cultivated. These goals were infused by a utopian ideal of a simple

rural society, without money or slaves, where convict men and women would receive land grants and be reborn through hard physical labour and subsistence farming. And as far as the Aborigines were concerned, Phillip and his officers were instructed to live in ‘amity and kindness’ with them. And they strived to do so – understandably with mixed success. But the Eora people of Port Jackson had a better friend in Phillip than they could have known.

Phillip was chosen to implement this plan, to conduct the experiment and lay the foundations of the intended new society because he was thoughtful and cerebral, experienced and persistent. Above all, he was humane, compassionate and egalitarian. And he had a grand vision. He thought that the colony would be the ‘Empire of the East’ and ‘the greatest acquisition Great Britain ever made’. We owe more to him than most Australians could possibly realise.