THE SETTLEMENT OF

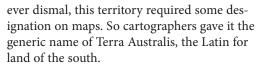# AUSTRALIA

BY EUGENE FINERMAN

Established in the late 1700s as a
penal colony for Britain's outcasts, Australia
was built on cheap convict labor

I n 1606, Dutch explorer Willem Jansz discovered a large landmass south of New Guinea. From his tentative exploration, he found nothing to merit further interest. The land was swampy, and the natives poor and hostile. It would be another 36 years before the Dutch ventured a second expedition to this land. Abel Tasman sailed along the western and southern coasts of what proved to be a very large island. He found the lands there to be arid and uninhabitable. Yet, however dismal, this territory required some designation on maps. So cartographers gave it the generic name of Terra Australis, the Latin for land of the south.

Not until 1770 did anyone bother to explore the east coast of Australis. British explorer James Cook found its land to be surprisingly habitable. The climate was temperate and the soil seemed arable. Eastern Australis could provide the basic requirements of a European colony. Claiming the land for Great Britain, Cook named the territory New South Wales. So Britain now had a distant island that offered a meager sustenance—and that proved exactly what Britain wanted.

In politics and science, 18th-century Britain certainly was in the forefront of the Enlightenment. But that energetic progress did not extend to British justice. There the gallows was the usual recourse, dispatching thieves as well as murderers. Still, there was some leniency in the system. Shoplifters, poachers, prostitutes and debtors really did not deserve to hang. For stealing food, seven years in prison was sufficient retribution.

The problem was that the prisons were teeming with these petty criminals. Britain could make better use of them by transporting them to its far-flung colonies. There, the felons could labor on government projects or be sold as indentured servants, working as slave labor for the length of their prison sentence. The American colonies had served as a useful dumping ground for these criminals. Indeed, Georgia had been founded expressly as a penal colony. However, since 1775, those colonies proved completely uncooperative with any

British explorer Capt. James Cook (1728-1779) was the first to explore the east coast of Australia. He claimed the land for Great Britain and named the territory New South Wales.

British policies. With America lost, Britain found a use for New South Wales.

On Dec. 6, 1786, the British government authorized an expedition to establish a penal colony in Australis. Under the command of Arthur Phillip, a captain in the royal navy, 11 ships—known in Australian history as the "First Fleet"—departed from Britain on May 13, 1787. On board were 772 prisoners (including 189 women), 247 marines as guards, and supplies to sustain the colony for its first year. Sailing around Cape Horn and through the Indian Ocean, the fleet reached New South Wales on Jan. 18, 1788. They first landed at an inlet called Botany Bay but the site lacked a source of fresh water. Sailing a short distance north, the fleet found a more promising site for settlement. Phillip named it after Britain's home secretary: Lord Sydney.

Sydney was not anyone's idea of Eden. The immediate area offered little in the way of food or building materials. Phillip rued: "No country offers less assistance to first settlers." Hungry, the colonists were depending on the arrival of the Second Fleet. Its six ships arrived a year later, but brought more prisoners rather than supplies. Worse, the conditions on that fleet were so wretched that 267 prisoners had died on the voyage, and 486 of the 750 survivors were sick. The Second Fleet also carried a new company of guards who were to be permanently stationed in the new colony. Ironically, these soldiers, the New South Wales Corps, were no better than the convicts. Many of the guards had been "recruited" from military prisoners; their officers were the rejects from more reputable regiments. Australia was as much an exile for them as the convicts.

Each year brought another cargo of prisoners, but by the fourth year the new farms of Sydney were capable of

DIXON DOWN UNDER

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Below: The area named for Britain's home secretary Lord Sydney, which offered so little to its first settlers, is today home to the sprawling and prosperous Sydney Harbour.

sustaining the colony. Sydney itself was developing from a prison camp to a proper British town. Among the convicts were carpenters and brickmakers, and they could rent their skills to the highest bidder. Indeed, any prisoner with education or a marketable talent could negotiate his role in the fluid society of Sydney.

George Howe, a convicted shoplifter, had worked as an apprentice printer. Arriving in Sydney in 1800, he was the official government printer by 1801. Two years later, he published the first newspaper in Australia: the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*. All the while, Howe was still a convict; he would not be officially pardoned until 1806.

The settlement soon grew beyond the immediate vicinity of Sydney. By 1813, New South Wales covered southeastern Australia, an area 150 miles long and 50 miles wide. As part of their pay, the officers of the New South Wales Corps received large and usually the best tracts of land. This made them Australia's aristocracy, and they very much acted the part. Convicts worked

as serfs on their masters' estates. This medieval system was especially brutal on Tasmania, then known as Van Diemen's Land.

The harsh servitude did incite some convicts to escape; the vast and unexplored outback offered a haven to the fugitive and outlaw. Most convicts, however, endured their punishment because the government offered them hope. Unlike in Britain, the penal system in the Australian colonies was lenient. Few convicts served their full term. Good behavior would reduce a sentence by half. Australia also pioneered the parole system, where convicts—although still under sentence—earned increasing degrees of freedom. The country needed settlers, not a caste of embittered pariahs. These rehabilitated individuals—emancipists as they were called—were welcomed and enfranchised citizens in Australia.

By the 1820s, Britain was ready to settle the rest of the continent. A penal colony called Brisbane was established 700 miles north of Sydney. Around it grew the future territory of Queensland. To establish a British presence on the west coast of Australia, the army built a base and named it after a city in Scotland: Perth. To turn the camp into a town, convicts provided the labor.

In 1834, the British government authorized the foundation of a new colony: South Australia. It was founded by free settlers, and its charter forbid the use of penal labor, making South Australia distinct among the continent's colonies. New South Wales itself had become so large that administrative efficiency required it to be divided into several territories; its southern lands were organized as the colonies of Tasmania and Victoria. By the end of the 19th century, Australia had become seven self-governing colonies. Each had a bicameral legislature and any free man or emancipist had the right to vote—in Queensland so could women. In 1900, the colonies agreed to a federation and merged into one nation: the Commonwealth of Australia.

The deportation of convicts had ended in 1868. British public opinion, reflecting Victorian sensibilities, now opposed the practice; and the flourishing colonies no longer needed cheap convict labor or coerced settlers. But those shackled men and women were the founders of Australia: 162,000 of them had been transported there. Today, the Commonwealth has a population of 22 million. Four million of them are descended from those convicts—the First Families of Australia—and it is a matter of pride. ☙