The Biography of Arthur Phillip

Address by the Honourable James Spigelman AC QC

on the launch of Michael Pembroke

Arthur Phillip: Sailor, Mercenary Governor, Spy

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Sydney's Powerhouse Museum is the home of one of the most significant cultural objects in Australia. The Boulton and Watt engine is the oldest rotative steam engine in the world. Originally installed in 1785 at Whitbread's Brewery, London, it operated for a century: grinding and lifting malt, stirring vats and pumping water and beer. It was on its way to the scrap-yard in 1887, when a Trustee of what became the Powerhouse acquired it as a donation.

The engine arrived in Sydney in 1888 on the Centenary of the foundation of modern Australia and was a feature of the original Museum for decades. After a full restoration, it was given pride of place in the new Powerhouse Museum, opened for the Bicentenary in 1988. The engine represents a critical turning point in the industrial revolution. It was the first commercially successful stationary power plant that operated without wind, water or muscle. In the case of Whitbread Brewery, it replaced a horse wheel.

The importance of this innovation was recognised at the time. King George III came to inspect this marvel of the new age in 1787, a public relations triumph for the brewery. Its historical significance was recognised two years ago when the Bank of England issued a £50 note displaying portraits of the entrepreneur Matthew Boulton and the engineer James Watt, together with an image of the Powerhouse Museum's engine.

Here on display in working order is a visual image of the nation which had the confidence and the competence to dispatch over 1000 people in 11 wooden boats over thousands of miles to create an open air prison and found a new colony, at a place about which virtually nothing was known. No other object in Australia so powerfully represents this extraordinary period of British history.

The Boulton and Watt engine – created at the time of the Founding, acquired on the Centenary and re-installed on the Bicentenary - joins other national treasures which celebrate our British heritage.

I refer to the *Endeavour Journal*, the handwritten account by Captain Cook of his first Pacific voyage, bought in 1923 for the then huge sum of £5000, to great controversy, at the direction of Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce, on display in the Treasures Gallery of the National Library.

I refer also to the copy of the Magna Carta, acquired by Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies in 1952, for the sum of £15,600, on display at Parliament House in Canberra. This is one of only two original versions in existence of the reissue of Magna Carta by Edward I in 1297. This version is of greater practical significance than the original, somewhat different, Charter of 1215, of which four originals exist. It was the 1297 version that became the first piece of legislation in the English statute book and is, accordingly, of greater constitutional significance than the mediaeval peace treaty of 1215, the 800th anniversary of which will, I trust, not be overwhelmed in Australia by popular enthusiasm for the Gallipoli Centennary.

A third example is the colossal 50 foot high fountain in Sydney's Botanic Gardens, with its 15 foot high statue of Governor Arthur Phillip, surrounded by four classic bronze figures, representing Commerce, Agriculture, Navigation and Mining and featuring four marble consoles with bronze plaques of Aboriginal Australians. Commissioned by Sir Henry Parkes from an Italian born and trained resident of Sydney, Achille Simonetti, it suffered years of controversy over both style and cost, particularly after Parkes lost office. It was eventually unveiled on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in

June 1897. It cost £14,000, about $1.5 million in today's dollars. It is probably the most expensive statue in Australia.

This monumental fountain in Sydney is the only significant memorial to the outstanding achievements of an extraordinary man, so well documented in Michael Pembroke's new biography.

A few years ago, on the basis of a ruling by the Consistory Court of the Church of England, which permitted the remains of a national hero to be returned to the nation he had served, Geoffrey Robertson QC led a campaign to bring Phillip's remains to Australia, if they could be found after the change of orientation of the plaque in the modest church in Bathampton where Phillip is buried. The church, as Geoffrey put it, in his inimitable style, had literally "lost the plot". However, if we can find Richard III, I suppose we can find Phillip.

Laying the foundations for a successful nation in Australia was, all Australians would agree, Phillip's crowning achievement. Phillip has never received appropriate recognition in England. His treatment does not suggest that there is any sense of pride in England about Australia's success. Indeed, often it appears that the British attitude to us is that we are too successful for our proper station in life, of which we need to be reminded from time to time. (As is happening in

the current cricket test series). This is, unfortunately, the same as our own attitude towards the success of New Zealand.

Past indifference in England will change next year, on the 200th anniversary of Phillip's death.

Most significantly, a memorial stone is to be placed in Westminster Abbey, to commemorate his service to the Royal Navy and as the first Governor of Australia. Joining many of the most famous names in British history, this is a high, and entirely appropriate, form of recognition. Under the Abbey Statutes, the Dean of Westminster has authority to direct the creation of memorials. I am informed by the Abbey that the Dean has approved such a memorial after representations by the Britain -Australia Society, supported by the Australian High Commission.

Further, suitably etched glass doors will be installed at the entrance of the church where he is buried, to enhance access to the Memorial Chapel and the Phillip ledgerstone. A new tribute sculpture is to be erected, across from his former house, in the garden of the classical Upper Refreshment Rooms – of great social significance, as Michael tells us - in the Bath of Phillip's day.

From an Australian perspective, the greatest interest is Phillip's remarkable contribution to our history. For me, two aspects of this contribution stand out. First, the high level of organisational skill involved in ensuring the proper provisioning of the First Fleet and its safe journey across more than half the world, to Sydney. Secondly, the strength of Phillip's humanitarianism and sense of moral responsibility. This was manifest in his early rejection of the possibility of allowing slavery in the new colony, in his empathetic dealing with subordinates, in his efforts to ensure good relations with indigenous Australians and in his regime for convicts based more on the principle of rehabilitation than that of punishment. He set a high moral tone and promoted an egalitarian ethos for the colony, which proved to be resurgent despite subsequent regimes with a contrary persuasion.

Michael Pembroke's biography is not, however, a book only about Australia. Other historians set out and assess Phillip's contribution in that respect in great detail. This is a biography in the true sense: a story of a man's life in his times, with equal weight being given to each phase of that life. Phillips's life is placed in its context. That context is British. The Australian years are only one part of his life.

In 2009, when I delivered the Annual History Lecture on the Bicentennial of Lachlan Macquarie, I sought to place the Bigge Reports in their British context, rejecting the parochial perspective of most Australian writing on the subject. Michael's book is another example of the importance of that historical context.

Unlike so much history writing, this is an exceptionally readable book. The narrative never flags and the reader is borne along effortlessly through the personal chronology, whilst absorbing an enormous amount of detailed information about the incidents of life in the 18th century.

The author takes us through the contemporary streets of the city of London, to the Hampshire countryside, to Rio de Janeiro and to Cape Town – when the former was full of Catholic churches and the latter had only two churches, one Lutheran and one Calvinist. We are introduced to fashions in music and clothes, to the virtues recognised in Enlightenment England, to the legal incidents of a marriage breakdown, to the development of London's pleasure gardens, to the presumed health benefits of the hot springs at Bath and to the difference between a subscription library and a circulating library. We are given short vignettes on the conduct of whaling operations, on the textile trade and on the uses of cochineal, providing the dye essential for the red coats of British soldiers.

Although all this detail is fascinating and informative, the life of Arthur Phillip is dominated by one central theme: the Royal Navy. This is the world within which he made his life, from a young recruit with origins in genteel poverty until his final rank as a full Admiral of the blue, at the top of the nine ranks of British Admirals.

The key to the long-term success of the Royal Navy was that, within the limits of an aristocratic culture, it was a meritocracy. Contrast this with the British Army where commissions were available for purchase, until the costs became manifestly too great after the incompetence displayed in the Crimean War. That is not to say that patronage, in accordance with the standards of a status-bound society, was not important in the Navy. Phillip's career manifests such, both received and given. Nevertheless, this book records the story of a man promoted on merit.

I am reinforced in the view I have earlier expressed about the importance of the financial incentives, by way of prize money, to the success of the Royal Navy over the centuries. To this I was able to add information, of which I was hitherto unaware, about the monetary rewards for the successful deployment of fire ships.

This book provides considerable insight about an institution at the heart of English power and Empire, a fascinating array of fact that drives the narrative and entrances the reader. We learn of the employment of young boys, as Phillip was when first recruited, and the operations of the charity school he attended. We are introduced to the operation of press gangs, to the duties and entitlements of different levels of the complex hierarchy of ranks in the Navy, to the differentiation of kinds of ships and the rating system of vessels based on number of cannons. There are short but incisive descriptions of the rhythms of shipboard life, of the symptoms and treatment of scurvy, of the mechanics of cannon firing and of battle tactics.

The reader is also given sketches of the crucial international disputes in which Phillip was involved: including the Seven Years War, the Third Colonial War between Spain and Portugal, the American Revolutionary War and the Napoleonic War. Phillip served on secondment to the navy of Portugal, England's oldest ally, and was involved in the border disputes of the Plate estuary in South America, where, we are informed, his capacity for covert work developed. We are told of the espionage priorities in his subsequent secret missions in France.

And always there is the sea: the currents and winds of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, the perils of the Cape of Good Hope and of Cape Horn, the dramatic perils of the Southern Ocean and the tactics involved in saving a ship in huge seas.

This was a life lived in service of the Royal Navy. An honourable distinguished life. It is well told and I commend this biography to you.