

## **Arthur Phillip First Governor of New South Wales**

### **A review of 'Arthur Phillip: Sailor, Mercenary, Governor, Spy' Michael Pembroke. hardie grant books 2013**

On the 31st of August 1814, Arthur Phillip of Bennett Street, Bath, Admiral of the Blue, died aged 75. Some two hundred years later, on Commonwealth Day 2014, the values that unite the modern Commonwealth of Nations were reaffirmed in Westminster Abbey. At first sight, these two events seem unrelated, but closer examination shows a strong link; namely the founding of a colony in New South Wales, that was to lead, ultimately, to the creation of the Commonwealth of Australia, which is today a leading member of the Commonwealth of Nations, the values of which were affirmed in Westminster Abbey on the 10th March 2014. To understand Arthur Phillip's role in the founding of that colony, Michael Pembroke's excellent book 'Arthur Phillip - Sailor, Mercenary, Governor, Spy' is recommended reading (but I would advise reading the book with a world atlas close at hand to remind you of the geography of Phillip's adventures).

My aim in this short piece is two-fold: to review Michael Pembroke's book; and to compare and contrast Arthur Phillip's actions with the affirmations of the modern Commonwealth of Nations. This takes a lead from the Royal Commonwealth Society's strap-line: *A History in Common - A Future in Progress*.

As Michael Pembroke explains, Arthur Phillip lived in the age of enlightenment and I found myself considering whether Phillip's actions were simply a measure of the times in which he lived or would his actions stand up to the values of the modern Commonwealth, the affirmations being:

*We affirm that every person possesses unique worth and dignity. We affirm our respect for nature, and that we will be stewards of the earth by caring for every part of it, and for it as a whole. And we affirm our belief in justice for everyone, and peace between peoples and nations.*

As members of the Royal Commonwealth Society, we are interested not in Phillip's last resting place, but in the events between 1786, when Captain Arthur Phillip was appointed as commander of HMS Sirius and Governor-designate of New South Wales, and 1793, when Phillip returned to England and formally resigned as Governor of the state, the chapters which Pembroke entitles: Pioneer; Philosopher; Commander and Governor.

Pembroke's account of Arthur Phillip's life reads like a CS Forester or Patrick O'Brian novel, indeed the real-life Arthur Phillip appears the kind of naval officer who could have rubbed shoulders with the fictional heroes Horatio Hornblower and Jack Aubrey. As in all good novels, our real-life hero's career starts from the humblest of beginnings. Born in 1738, Phillip was the son of Jacob Phillip, a German born language teacher, and Elizabeth Breach, an English woman who before marrying

Jacob was the widow of an English seaman, James Herbert, who had died of yellow fever at Port Royal, Jamaica. Arthur Phillip was later admitted to the 'Charity School of the Royal Hospital for Seaman at Greenwich', the admission to which was limited to 'the Sons of disabled Seamen, or whose Fathers were slain, killed or drown'd in the Sea Service [the Royal Navy] and who were objects of charity'. Jacob Phillip had evidently fallen in the service of the crown.

Arthur Phillip's career up to promotion to Captain in 1781 was by no means conventional and the experience gained in those turbulent times were to create the necessary character, able to undertake the role of the pioneering Governor. Pembroke relates how Phillip first went to sea as a captain's servant aged 9, was later apprenticed in a whaling ship, and eventually joined the Royal Navy in 1755 at the age of 17. Phillip was once again a captain's servant, but progressed to midshipman and was eventually promoted lieutenant at the age of 25. This was the time of the Seven Years War during which Phillip saw action off Minorca (1756); but soon after promotion to lieutenant Phillip found himself on half-pay, the seven years war being over.

Whilst on half-pay, Phillip sought two periods of leave-of-absence from the Royal Navy, the first in 1773 to enable him to travel in France and again in 1774 when he was commissioned into the Portuguese navy, in effect as a mercenary. What Phillip's activities were in France are uncertain, although Pembroke alludes to the circumstantial evidence that he may have been acting as a spy. But it is his time in the service of the Portuguese that is of most significance to his later role as the first Governor of New South Wales. Phillip served in the South Atlantic, spending time in Rio de Janeiro, then a captaincy of the Portuguese empire, the centre of colonial administration and seat of the viceroy. Here he saw at first-hand the workings of a European colony, the city being populated by a combination of European settlers and merchants, military personnel, Jesuit missionaries, indigenous Indians, Portuguese convicts and African slaves. Pembroke records:

*"While Phillip was serving in South America, the heavy Portuguese dependence on slave labour was everywhere apparent. In Rio de Janeiro alone, slaves represented approximately half the total population, and the percentage was much higher on the plantations and in the mines."*

Phillip was to use this experience as a benchmark, but not a model in his future appointment. Pembroke continues:

*"Phillip describes the slaves working in line after line, bent over with pick and hoe, raking, sifting and washing the gravel, searching for the elusive gemstones, all the guarded by superintendents who used their whips freely. As one fell, another would take his place. Phillip's observations seem objective, eschewing judgement. But he would have been too discrete to record criticism of the Brazilian administration. It seems inevitable, however, that during his Brazil years he began to develop personal views about the institution of slavery."*

Phillip returned home in 1778, with Great Britain engaged in the American Revolutionary wars, and France and Spain having entered the war with the aim of supporting the Americans and to capture British territory in the West Indies. Phillip was recalled to active service in the Royal Navy, initially being given command of a small fire-ship. Promoted Captain in 1781, he was given a series of more significant commands, including *HMS Europe*, a 64 gun ship. *HMS Europe* was deployed to the South Atlantic as part of a squadron to engage in actions against the Spanish. It was through this deployment that Phillip developed a relationship with Thomas Townshead, the secretary of State for Home and American Affairs, who was responsible for the expedition against Spanish America. After his return to England, Phillip remained in close contact with Townshead, now Lord Sydney, and the Home Office Under Secretary, Evan Nepean. Between 1784 and 1786, Pembroke records how Phillip worked for Nepean, travelling in Europe, being able to use his linguistic skills to disguise his true origin, to spy on French naval activity at a time of increasing tension between the two countries.

Also at this time, Lord Sandwich, the former First Lord of the Admiralty, and Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society, proposed the establishment of a British colony in New South Wales to counter the Spanish presence in Chile and Peru and to exploit Australian raw materials, such as flax and timber available. In 1786, Captain Phillip was appointed to command *HMS Sirius* and named Governor-designate of New South Wales, the proposed British colony of the east coast of Australia. Phillip was to lead 11 ships, carrying 772 convicts, mostly petty thieves from the London slums, plus a company of marines and a limited number of officers to administer the colony. Phillip's aims as Governor-elect are best summed up by Michael Pembroke:

*"Phillip's opinions as the Governor-elect were naturally sought and the whole process was necessarily consultative. He commented on drafts of his instructions and provided the administration with a detailed statement of his hopes, expectations and proposals for both the voyage and the establishment of the colony. In doing so, he revealed his own developing thoughts on matters that would affect the conduct of society in the new settlement. His approach was humanitarian and pragmatic. He made no mention of religion or church, of which there is no evidence of personal interest, but expressed preliminary views on more worldly topics such as relations with the Aborigines, convict prostitution, capital offences and slavery.*

*Phillip rightly thought that the Aborigines might be more numerous than Cook had observed. It would be a great gain, he wrote, if he could proceed 'without having any dispute with Natives'. His approach was philanthropic, characterised by an Enlightenment benevolence. He assumed the best, not the worst. He said he would endeavour to persuade a few of the Aborigines to settle near us so that he could 'furnish [them] with everything that can tend to civilize them'. He hoped to impress them and 'to give them a High Opinion of their New Guests.' However, he did not expect that the Aborigines would be impressed by the crews of the transport ships or the convicts.*

*Indeed, he thought it would be 'necessary to prevent the Transports Crews having any intercourse with the Natives if possible'. The convicts, he said, 'must have none'. Significantly, when it came to homicide, Phillip regarded the life of an Aboriginal man as the equal of any Englishman, recording memorably, 'Any man who takes the life of a Native, will be put on his trial as if he had kill'd one of the Garrison. This appears to me not only just, but good policy'.*

Some two hundred years later, these aims would seem to stack up well against the twenty-first century Commonwealth affirmations.

On the 26th January 1788, Phillip landed at Sydney Cove, named after Lord Sydney, but the settlement at Sydney Cove was no ordinary convict colony. As Pembroke continues:

*"There was no stockade. And Phillip did not confine the convicts behind prison walls. Nor did he require them to wear leg irons, unless they re-offended. He even allowed them to wear their own clothes and build their own huts of cabbage tree or wattle and daub"*

Phillip's priorities were to make the colony self-sustaining, in particular in relation to food. One man who was key to this aim was Henry Dodd, who as Pembroke describe, was a *'rural expert and had a serious claim to agricultural proficiency'*.

This was however, the far side of the world, and perhaps not surprisingly Phillip's ideals could not be realised in full. Phillip made great endeavours to establish good relations with the Eora, the aboriginal people who lived close to the colony. However, following a misunderstanding Phillip was speared in the shoulder by an aborigine, the wound from which was nearly fatal but Phillip ordered that no retaliation should be taken. A further set-back occurred in 1790 when Phillip's game keeper, John McIntyre, was speared by an aborigine and died from the wounds. This seriously challenged Phillips ideals who this time sough retribution on the tribesman.

By late 1792, Phillip was in poor health, no doubt due to diet compounded by the effects of his wound, and he was given permission to leave New South Wales. The European population of the colony on his departure was 4,221, of whom 3,099 were convicts.

On his return to England Phillip formally resigned as Governor of the State and resumed his naval career, holding a number of appointments, and being promoted Rear Admiral in 1799. He retired from the navy in 1805, aged 67 and spent most of the rest of his life in Bath, dying on the 31st of August 1814.

'Arthur Phillip - Sailor, Mercenary, Governor, Spy' provides an well written biography of Australia's founding father who, some two centuries later, still gives us an example of the importance of the affirmations of the modern Commonwealth of nations.