

David Hill, *1788: The Brutal Truth of the First Fleet* (Random House, 2008)

With a title like *1788*, David Hill is clearly depicting a moment of origin for Australia. The subtitle claims to narrate the ‘brutal truth’ of this episode of history, and readers will readily identify this as a common refrain in depictions of Australia’s convict period. A further sub-title refers to ‘the biggest single overseas migration the world has ever seen’. However, Hill is not much concerned with the socio-cultural or political legacies of such a significant transnational migration.

David Hill has had a successful career leading organisations such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the Australian Football Association, the State Rail Authority NSW and the Sydney Water Corporation. In a talk given in October, 2008 at Mosman Library, he distanced himself from academic historians and conveyed his passion for the story of the First Fleet. He argued that by using only primary sources he could depict the period in a ‘fresh’ way, and felt that he could effectively tell the story through the eyes of those who experienced it. At the same time, however, he acknowledged that the lack of source material relating to women, convicts and Indigenous people was a problem, but asserted that he still had enough material to piece together how they lived. The resolution of this apparent contradiction is made possible by his avowed lack of interest in interpreting or analysing – this is a real problem, for some readers at least. A simple interest in ‘just a terrific yarn’ is not necessarily innocent in a context of forced migration and colonial settlement.

1788 enters a somewhat crowded market: 2008 saw the publication of convict histories by Hamish Maxwell-Stewart and Babette Smith, as well as Kate Grenville’s new novel, set during the early settlement of Sydney. This is all in the shadow of works by well-known authors such as Robert Hughes and Thomas Keneally. While the field is not quite saturated, it is certainly well-covered, and this provides both an opportunity – in that there is ongoing interest in the convict period – and a threat, in that a new book must clearly distinguish itself from its predecessors.

Like Hughes and Keneally, David Hill writes popular history: the prose is very readable and peppered with engaging phrases like, ‘The preparation for the First Fleet’s departure from Portsmouth was characterised by chaos, disease, promiscuity and death’ (68). The book’s accessibility is something the author is rightly proud of: *1788* has a useful Index, a chronology, and notes pointing towards extensive primary sources. The series of glossy colour images in the centre of the book enhances its overall appearance, although they are mostly portraits of the principal actors of the story with some exciting shipwrecks, original charts and colonialist representations of Australia’s traditional custodians thrown in for good measure.

This accessibility is reinforced by structural features of the book: Hill adheres to a very strict timeframe which revolves mainly around 1788. There is some depiction of the situation prior to this, such as the state of England at the time and the role of the American War of Independence in making the need to find a new penal colony more pressing, as well as some concluding material on the period after the departure of Arthur

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Phillip. Apart from this, the narrative focuses solely around the social and political processes leading to the 'Botany Bay Decision' and the role of Phillip in establishing the colony, as well as related events around Norfolk Island and the departure of the First Fleet ships. This gives the book a narrative focus so that its chronological structure unfolds quite neatly, for the most part.

However, for a reader familiar with the material, this straightforward presentation of the story can be problematic. Hill's historical narrative unfolds on what Paul Carter calls the 'stage of history' in *The Road to Botany Bay*. As engaging as the story is, it is presented as unproblematic, uncontested, and dominated by the usual cast of characters. There is not much attempt to give voice to the convicts, because of the lack of primary sources. Indeed, within the narrative itself there is no reference whatsoever to secondary sources, and even the secondary reference list has nothing by Macintyre, Windschuttle or Manne. It seems unusual to write Australian history with no mention whatsoever of how that history has been so vigorously debated, discussed, and contested within the public realm.

This is a particular problem (predictably) with the book's treatment of the Indigenous presence. Throughout the book they are referred to collectively as 'the Aboriginal People', with only one reference to the Gadigal nation (220). Admittedly, this is better than the dehumanising noun, but surely an author familiar with Australia's contact history could be more precise in nomenclature. This is symbolic of a more pervasive myopia in the narrative as a whole. For instance, there is very little on the Indigenous experience of European settlement, although there is some mention of resistance (especially the famous spearing of Phillip) and the abduction and 'education' of Arabanoo and Bennelong. For the most part the story is told entirely from the perspective of the British establishment. The convicts themselves languish between the lines, while Indigenous Australians are barely in the margins.

These problems become more stark when 1788 is compared to other recent histories of the convict period, even (perhaps especially) those by non-academics. Tom Keneally's *The Commonwealth of Thieves* (2005) is more balanced, moving beyond the simple tropes of culture clash to acknowledge the diversity of contact experiences, including the active resistance of Pemulwuy and the cruelty of John McIntyre, the colony's first hunter. Babette Smith, in her *Australia's Birthstain* (2008), interrogates the historiography of early settlement: she is primarily concerned with gaps, absences and amnesia. Indeed, the great unspoken shame she identifies, homosexuality, is hardly mentioned by Hill at all, although he certainly acknowledges heterosexual relationships across barriers of class and station. Several authors (Smith herself as well as Sian Rees) have found it possible to give depth to convict women's experience by using primary sources. These pretexts demonstrate that it is quite possible to write popular, accessible Australian history that is also analytical. Hill's attitude explains the note of triumphalism in the book's final lines: 'The story of the First Fleet, however, turned out to be one of success against the odds. In an expedition remarkable for its courage, hardship, famine

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and misadventure, perhaps the remarkable thing is that this new colony and its people survived at all.' (329)

1788 is good as far as it goes – it is an accessible, entertaining and highly readable history of the settlement of Sydney. It would be ideal for an international or lay audience, or readers who are unfamiliar (or unconcerned) with the social and political issues precipitated by the settlement of New South Wales. However, its obvious anti-interpretive bias will antagonise other readers who might prefer a more critical edge, and will regret its lack of engagement with contemporary debates around Australia's past. The best that might be said by one such reader is that it is an excellent example of a particular type of history-making that has gained increasing traction in Australia in the last decade or two.

Chad Habel