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## **Invasion not intended, but trouble was inevitable**

By David Hill  
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British colonisers took away Aboriginal life

When King George III declared to the British parliament in January 1787 the decision to send convicts to Botany Bay, he said it was driven by the need to find somewhere to dispatch excessive numbers of convicts and "remove the inconvenience" of overcrowded British jails and prison hulks.

The original destination of Botany Bay as a prison had been recommended by botanist Joseph Banks, who had been on the only British expedition to Australia's east coast 17 years before, in 1770, with Captain James Cook on the Endeavour.

Banks said the site was suitable because the convicts would have difficulty escaping and the soil was fertile enough for them to grow enough food to survive. Cook made it quite clear the settlement would not require an invasion force when he reported that the indigenous people were "timorous" and "inoffensive" and not a "warlike people".

It is useful to revisit the facts surrounding the First Fleet after Malcolm Turnbull agreed, while on the campaign trail, that the colonisation of Australia by British settlers could be described as an "invasion".

When Commander Arthur Phillip was given his detailed instructions for the establishment of the penal colony, he was -ordered by King George to make friends with the local people.

"You are to endeavour by every possible means to open an intercourse with the natives," he was told, "and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all our subjects to live in amity and kindness with them." Soon after landing in Sydney Cove, which he found more suitable than Botany Bay, Phillip gave strict orders that the Aboriginal people should not be "offended" or "molested" and should be "treated with every mark of friendship".

The 11 tiny wooden sailing ships that left Portsmouth on May 13, 1787, packed with 1500 people on the largest overseas migration the world had seen, hardly -resembled an invasion fleet. In addition to 800 convicts, 200 of whom were women and 19 of them pregnant, the fleet included naval officers and officials, several wives and children, the ship's crews and more than 200 marines to act as jailers in the new convict colony. The ships were loaded with thousands of utensils, tools and equipment to build a new world and carried two years' supply of food.

On the way they stopped at Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town to collect more seeds, seedlings and fruit trees (and 65,000 litres of rum for the officers and marines'

ration). By the time they left Cape Town in November to cross the Great Southern Ocean, they sailed with 500 farm animals, including pigs, chickens, goats, cows, bulls, ducks, geese and horses, as well as several pet dogs belonging to the officers.

Arriving in January 1788, the First Fleet struggled from the start to clear the dense Australian bush, pitch tents and start building a new life. For several years most of the new settlers had no proper chair to sit in, no table to eat at and no bed to sleep in.

Within weeks of arriving there was a new outbreak of scurvy, since most of the settlers had no fresh food for almost a year and were dependent largely on a ration of salted meat and hardtack bread.

Within months the fledgling settlement was sliding into crisis. Many of the farm animals had died or had wandered into the bush and were lost, and the first -attempted harvest produced enough grain to last only a few weeks. Phillip had no choice but to progressively reduce the food -ration, and after the first two years the settlement was starving; only the arrival of the Second Fleet in June 1790 saved the settlement.

The initial contact between the Europeans and the Aboriginal people had been friendly enough, but within months several convicts and Aborigines were killed in violent clashes that some of Phillip's officers said were caused by convicts stealing food from the indigenous people.

Very soon, the locals started avoiding the newcomers.

From the moment the British started clearing back the dense bush for their settlement, they began the process of destroying the fragile ecosystems that provided the Aboriginal people with most of their food.

Within months, much of the wildlife had been shot for fresh meat and much of Sydney Harbour fished out.

After only a year, an outbreak of smallpox killed an estimated 50 per cent of the local indigenous population but only one of the -settlers. The British could not -account for the outbreak although it must have been brought into the area by the First Fleet. For the next two centuries, assorted other Euro-pean diseases and alcohol combined to devastate the Aboriginal civilisation.

The dissipation of local tribes continued with the spread of white farming and the taking of traditional lands along the Parramatta, Nepean and Hawkesbury rivers in the Sydney basin. Any -opposition to the takeover was -violently repressed, since there was no regard for the Aboriginal people who lived there and no one to protect them.

The problem became much more widespread a quarter of a century after the arrival of the First Fleet and following the -successful crossing of the Blue Mountains in 1813. There was no recognition of Aboriginal land rights and the savage clearing of land for farming involved the -abduction and rape of Aboriginal women and indiscriminate killing of locals by settlers across the largely lawless hinterland.

By 1837, and on the eve of 50 years of colonisation, a British House of Commons committee report acknowledged that while violent invasion might not been the

intention, devastation of the Aboriginal people had been the consequence of white settlement.

"Too often, their territory has been usurped; their property seized; their numbers diminished; their character debased; the spread of civilisation impeded. The injuries we have inflicted, the oppression we have exercised, the cruelties we have committed, the vices we have fostered, the dissolution and utter ruin we have caused, stand in strange and melancholy contrast with the enlarged and generous exertions we have made for the advancement of civil freedom, for the moral and intellectual improvement of mankind. Every law of humanity and justice have been forgotten or disregarded.

"Through successive generations, the world of spoliation and death has been carried on."

*David Hill is author of 1788, The Making of Australia and The Great Race.*