

Australia's Christian Heritage: Analysing popular stereotypes on the foundation of Christianity in Australia

An Address at the Service to commemorate
the First Christian Service in Australia
1:00 pm, 3 February 2015
by Associate Professor Stuart Piggin

The setting and the question:

We are at the site of:

- the First Christian service on Australian soil,
- the first sermon preached,
- the first church and
- the first schoolhouse

The preacher at that service, held under a 'great tree', beginning at 10 o'clock on 3 February 1788, a hot midsummer's day, was the Rev Richard Johnson, Australia's

- first minister,
- first educator,
- first carer for orphans,
- first carer for aboriginal children

With all those firsts, he was quite a pioneer – and John Newton, author of the much loved hymn 'Amazing grace', who recommended Johnson to MP William Wilberforce who recommended him to PM William Pitt, bestowed on Richard Johnson the title, 'Patriarch of the Southern Hemisphere', that is, if you will, founding father of the Christian movement in Australia.

Now, since this was the site of the first school house, it is surely fair to put a question to you. Here is the question: If Newton gave Johnson the title 'Patriarch of the Southern Hemisphere', what title did the Eora people, the Aboriginal people who lived in the Sydney Basin, give Richard Johnson?

Well, class, I don't see a forest of hands of those keen to answer the question. But I ask it to make a point. The basic question asked by the organisers of this event is:

'Does our heritage matter?' what they really mean is 'does our Christian heritage matter?'

Well surely we must know what our Christian heritage is before we can decide if it matters. But I doubt if we have ever found what our Christian heritage is – we are in great danger of losing it before we ever find it. Nobody has ever told us. Has anyone ever told us what title the Eora people gave Richard Johnson? I will tell you at the end of this address, but my point is that there are parts of our Christian heritage we just don't know because no-one has ever told us.

Then there are other matters which we think we do know. We have been told them so often they have become stereotypes. But maybe they are false stereotypes.

False Stereotypes?

And the event we are commemorating today focusses our consideration of some of these stereotypes which bear on the relationship between national health and religious faith. It is important to know – it matters – if these stereotypes are true or not.

So, answer true or false to the following stereotypes:

1. We are a secular nation in which Christian faith has never been central. We were settled after the Enlightenment and it was never intended that Christianity should be foundational to the new colony.
2. The founders of our nation were so uncaring about the Christian faith that they did not even bother to hold a church service on the first Sunday of settlement.
3. The preacher's sermon at that first service, like many sermons, was irrelevant to the future of the nation; the Rev Johnson was out of touch.
4. The settlement was the work of a callous government who, no longer able to offload their social misfits in America, now packed

them off to the remotest part of the globe and forgot about them, caring next to nothing for their material welfare and nothing at all about their spiritual welfare.

5. The State largely ignored the Church; we prospered anyway and the separation of Church and State is clearly very desirable and should be preserved at all costs.

1. We are a post-enlightenment secular nation and it was never intended that Christianity should be foundational to the new colony.

The first Governor, Arthur Phillip, was certainly influenced by the Enlightenment, but he was no secularist let alone a doctrinaire atheist. He seems to have believed in the importance of the role of the church in civilising and moralising the masses. We find evidence of this in at least two surprising places.

In July 1788 Governor Phillip ordered to be made a 'Sketch of Sydney Cove'. The Governor was dreaming of the settlement as a new 'Albion' (Britain). So it was not a map of what Sydney was really like, but it was a plan or sketch of what he wanted it to be like. It shows a straight, wide street built to the west of the Tank Stream, and on the western side of the street, between the hospital and the barracks, is a large site, central to the settlement, marked 'Ground intended for the Church'. In the few years Phillip was here as governor he did little to help Johnson build a church, but he always intended that there would be one.

The centrality of the church in the settlement is also evident from a medallion made to commemorate the landing of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove. It was made from white clay dug up in the Cove and sent by Governor Phillip to Sir Joseph Banks. Phillip wrote that this was the clay *...with which the Natives mark themselves, it is found in great plenty, a few feet below the surface ... the people use it to cover their Houses*. Banks in turn sent the clay to his friend Josiah Wedgwood, the potter, who designed a medal which became the first Great Seal of NSW approved by King George III in 1790.

The seal depicts Convicts landed at Botany Bay; their fetters are taken off (it was always assumed the convicts would become free – our nation was

never a gaol and would never be a place which practised slavery) and the freed convicts are being received by Industry, a female figure sitting on a bale of goods holding a distaff, a spindle for spinning wool or flax, with bee-hive, pick axe, and spade, nearby, and she is pointing to oxen ploughing (the freed convicts would prosper through industry and farming) and between the convicts and the female figure, at the centre of the whole design, **the steeple of a church on a hill.**

Australians would always be a free people, even if its convicts had to be redeemed, and the Christian faith would be central to that freedom and committed to that redemption.

2. The founders were so uncaring about the Christian faith, that disgracefully they did not even bother to hold a church service on the first Sunday of settlement.

It is often said that it is a disgrace that there was no service on the first Sunday in the Colony. But that is an ill-informed judgement. It would probably have been a bigger disgrace if they did hold a service on the first Sunday. Why? Because it would have been a shambles. A semblance of order had to be created before the public worship of almighty God could be permitted.

There seems to have been plenty of care put into this service:

- A suitable site had to be chosen for the service at which about 800 would have been present. I imagine Johnson spent some time choosing this site – the first flat land large enough south of the Cove to contain this congregation
- the convicts were ordered to ‘appear as clean as circumstances will admit...’ and
- ‘No Man to be Absent On Any Account Whatever’,
- the guard was to be changed earlier than usual, so as to give those who had been relieved ‘time to cleanse themselves before Church’, and
- the ‘Church Drum’ was to beat at 10 O’clock.

Not a soul was absent – except the souls of the women convicts, for they did not disembark until 6 February.

A lot of thought went in to preparing for that service. And it was a far more impressive service than if it had been hurriedly arranged for the

first Sunday. Captain Watkin Tench reported in his diary that the behaviour of the convicts and troops who assembled for the first service ‘was equally regular and attentive’.

3. The preacher’s sermon at that first service, like many sermons, was irrelevant to the future of the nation; Johnson was out of touch

Lieutenant Ralph Clark, writing home to his wife:

3rd February, Sunday ... Had a very good sermon, and prayed for you and our dear boy.¹

What did Johnson say in this very good sermon? His chosen text was Psalm 116, verse 12: ‘What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?’

Benefits? You ask. What benefits? Surely the chaplain was out of touch choosing such an insensitive text.

Here they were –

- newly arrived in an unknown very strange land –
- with shrieking cockatoos and mocking laughing jackasses, and
- distorted trees called gum trees which lacked the beautiful symmetry of European trees,
- the Indigenous Australians welcomed them with cries of warra warra – go away.
- And there was no known source of food apart from what they had brought with them –
- and there were not enough women – 586 male convicts, and 192 women convicts and wives – which was bad news for the men and terrible news for the women.
- Benefits!!

No – the convicts would surely not have been conscious of any benefits.

Perhaps then, you might suggest, Johnson did in his sermon what typical Sydney Anglican ministers do today, namely he preached an expository

¹ G.A. Wood, ‘The Reverend Richard Johnson. Australia’s First Clergyman’, *RAHSJ*, 12.5, 1926, p.248n.

sermon, exegeting every verse of Psalm 116. That would make more sense – for there are verses in that Psalm which did more obviously apply to the lot of the convicts – for example, vs 3 ‘The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow.’

But no, in those days, ministers preached textual sermons – and Johnson almost certainly dwelt on one verse, vs 12 ‘What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?’ By benefits, he meant benefits. What benefits could he possibly have had in mind? This brings us to the 4th stereotype.

4. The settlement was the work of a callous government who, no longer able to offload their social misfits in America, now packed them off to the remotest part of the globe and forgot about them, caring next to nothing for their material welfare and nothing at all about their spiritual welfare.

So we tell ourselves, ‘The Poms, you know, they have never loved us – all they wanted to do was to get rid of us and forget about us.’ Some historians have fostered this stereotype. One has complained of:

The inefficiency, carelessness and idleness of the masters and servants of the ministries which all had a finger in the pie called the First Fleet... [he went on to say its] arrival in New South Wales rested more with an ill-chosen, ill-organised, contentious and unwilling body of what passed for public servants in a dozen ministries and institutions, and a venal and corrupt body of private contractors.²

That view should be no part of our heritage. For quite the opposite is true. The First Fleet was one of the **great maritime achievements of modern history** and the first settlement was **an extremely visionary reform experiment**. Johnson was aware of both, and he would have included both among all the benefits for which he thanked God in that first service.

² Charles Wilson, *Australia: the Creation of a Nation*, 1987

The First Fleet – a great Maritime achievement

The Fleet left Plymouth on 13 May 1787.³ After a 252 day, 16,000 mile voyage, made at the speed of a man walking, Phillip arrived in Botany Bay on 18 January 1788, and all 11 ships arrived within 2 days of each other. There was hardly any loss of life. In fact the convicts arrived in Sydney in better health (or at least they were heavier) than when they left England.

How do we explain such astonishing success? It was a success with a surprisingly long pedigree in Christian history and Johnson would have been well aware of that, too. The reason for the astonishingly generous provisioning of convicts on the First Fleet may be traced directly back through the abolition of the slave trade movement to the Evangelical Revival under John Wesley and George Whitefield. And it may be traced to a woman. One converted under Whitefield's impassioned preaching during the revival was Margaret Gambier who came from a family of Huguenot émigrés, devout French Protestants.

She transfused her faith into a midshipman, Charles Middleton (1726-1813), whom she married. He became Comptroller of the Navy Board. On Prime Minister William Pitt's instructions, Middleton built up the Royal Navy so that it became stronger than it had ever been before.

³ It reached Santa Cruz, Teneriffe, Canary Islands, W of Morocco, on 3 June and stayed there until 10 June, replenishing stores. About a week later, the Fleet passed the Cape Verde Islands, and Phillip decided not to call in as it was all going so well with the prevailing winds behind them. From early August to 3 September they were in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, stocking up oranges, lemons, pineapples, bananas, guavas (all of which = vitamin C). The Fleet was in Cape Town, South Africa, from 13 October to 11 November. They took on animals in pairs, each ship becoming another Noah's Ark. Then they left the known world, sailing for Botany Bay. On 26 January 1788 Phillip came across a cove which, he said, had a good spring of water (the tank stream) and which was so deep that ships could anchor 'so close to the shore that at a very small expense quays may be made at which the largest ships may unload'. He added: 'This cove which I honoured with the name of Sydney is about a quarter of a mile across and half a mile in length'.

Pitt considered him ‘the best man of business’ he knew. There was no doubting Middleton’s contribution to the professionalization of the public service, using religion as his instrument. ‘Without religion there can be no public principle’, was his stated belief. As Comptroller, Middleton was responsible for finding the eleven ships of the First Fleet, only one of which was more than six years old, and he supervised their fitting out and their equipping with stores and provisions. He was passionate about doing this properly to maximise its chances of success.

Middleton’s spiritual guide, apart from his wife, was his minister, the Rev James Ramsay. It was he who started the movement for the abolition of the slave trade. Ramsay was known as ‘the pioneer abolitionist’. And it was Ramsay (who had been a surgeon) who was responsible for selecting the team of surgeons for the voyage and for establishing medical facilities in the new colony to ensure that the population of the new settlement remained alive and healthy.

The contractor for the First Fleet was William Richards Jr, a friend of Middleton and a devout Presbyterian. Far from being ‘venal’ and ‘corrupt’, he honoured his contract with the government both in spirit and in the letter. He ensured that convicts and marines on the First Fleet were so well provisioned. He was subsequently engaged to transport 100 convict women on the *Lady Juliana*, and they arrived ‘healthier and happier than they had ever been in their lives’.

For the second and third fleets, by contrast, the contractor was Camden, Calvert and King, a firm engaged in the slave trade. They were both disasters: 267 of the 1006 convicts on the second fleet perished. So William Richards was re-engaged as the contractor for the three ships which arrived in 1792 after the third fleet, when only one life was lost.

The First Fleet, then, was a quite magnificent Maritime and humanitarian achievement, and deserves to be understood as part of our Christian heritage.

The Sydney settlement is best understood as a visionary reform experiment

Australia was settled, the secular historians tell us, as a dumping ground for convicts. But there has been right from the beginning the suspicion

that it was more than that. Far from being an ill-considered and neglectful act by a callous, uncaring government, the whole enterprise should be understood as a visionary reform experiment.

Europeans so understood it at the time. Its sheer originality was evident to impressed contemporaries. A German Classics scholar who was also an expert on the Pacific, Christian G. Heyne, declared in 1791:

This is a totally new concept. It has no modern parallels and no precedents in history. Indeed, it could only have been thought up by a people oriented towards the sea and possessed of a great naval power.⁴

Christian Heyne in 1791 waxed prophetic:

A new human culture may arise and develop its distinctiveness out of this island. . . [these] deportees could now be sowing seeds of a great empire, which will come along centuries later.

The courts of this new Wales may well go on to banish their own convicts – to Britain!⁵

That the British settled Port Jackson consistent with a vision of global dimensions was also the conviction of the Spaniard, Alexandro Malaspina, who visited the settlement in 1793. He realised that to relieve crowding gaols was only a pretext. The hidden secret was that NSW was settled to be a stepping stone of Empire. Malaspina cited the ‘elegant journal’ of Captain Tench that ‘Extent of Empire demands grandeur of design’.⁶

Pitt’s evangelical Christian friends – Wilberforce, Newton, Middleton and Ramsay already mentioned and Venn, Macaulay, Stephen and Lord Teignmouth whom we have time only to name – they had their own grand design, involving big plans for India, and Africa, as well as the Pacific. They had a tripartite vision for the NSW settlement:

4 Quoted in E.A. Judge, ‘C.G. Heyne’s Address on Roman Deportation: A 1791 Comparison with Botany Bay’, *Ancient History: Resources for Teachers*, 29.2, 1999, 139.

5 Judge, ‘C. G. Heyne’s Address on Roman Deportation’, 157.

6 King, *The Secret History of the Convict Colony*, 95. The reference is to Tench’s journal. See Watkin Tench, *Sydney’s First Four Years: Being a Reprint of a Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and a Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1961), 103.

- a base for a determined reform experiment for the reclamation of society's outcastes, and
- a base for missions to the indigenous people and
- a base for missions to the peoples of the South Seas.

Those are the facts about our history which should form part of our heritage which matters, namely that the first fleet was an outstanding maritime achievement and the Sydney Cove settlement was an extremely visionary reform experiment.

5. The State from the first largely ignored the Church; we prospered anyway and the separation of Church and State is clearly very desirable and should be preserved at all costs.

That the first two men in charge of the colony, Phillip then Grose, were not as sympathetic to the chaplain as he would have liked, did not become the rule in church/state relations in NSW.

It is significant that penultimate governor Bashir is with us today and our current governor will attend Evensong at Christ Church St Laurence this year on the Sunday nearest to Anzac Day. The support which governors give to the church has been the norm in NSW history.

Chaplain Johnson and his wife Mary were not the only representatives of vital Christianity and humane civilisation in the new colony. Present at that first service were two future governors of the Colony, also committed Christians: Captain John Hunter, who was 2ic to Governor Phillip and became governor of the colony from 1795 to 1800, and Lt Philip Gidley King, destined to follow Hunter as governor from 1800 to 1806. Both gave considerable support to the church.

It would make a good PhD thesis to study the religious role of governors in NSW history. It has been considerable. It is a myth to believe that Australia is committed to the rigid separation of church and state if by that it is meant that they must have nothing to do with each other.

Of course, no one wants a church in the pocket of the government or a government in the pocket of the church. A free church in a free state is good polity. But the best outcome for society and the church is when there is a complementarity of church and state when the cause is right. So we

have today in Australia extensive co-operation between church and state in education, welfare and health, a cooperation in the best interests of our community.

But the most truly remarkable member of the First Fleet's contingent was yet another evangelical Christian, Lieutenant William Dawes, astronomer and surveyor. He befriended the Indigenous Eora people, especially an Aboriginal girl called Patyegarang. He attempted to learn their language. His notebooks have survived and they reveal his wonder at aspects of Aboriginal culture and his sensitivity to their plight.

Dawes even stood up to Phillip when the latter, worn out by the difficulties of the new settlement, temporarily lost his own humanity, and ordered the capturing and execution of six Indigenous men in retaliation for their killing of his gamekeeper. Dawes was appalled, and though under orders, made sure that he and his search party found no Aboriginal people to imprison or kill. And our Aboriginal brothers and sisters made sure that they co-operated with Dawes and not with the governor in that matter.

Dawes later became (three times) governor of the freed slave settlement of Sierra Leone. He also became the first person appointed by the Church Missionary Society to teach its prospective missionaries. He offered to teach them 'a native tongue picked up at Botany Bay'.

There was evidently a close relationship between chaplain Johnson, astronomer Dawes, and the Aboriginal people. On one occasion one of Patyegarang's friends invited her to go with her for a swim. Patyegarang explained that she was on her way to Mrs Johnson's house to have her petticoat and jacket washed.⁷ On another occasion, she asks 'Waruŋa píaba waruŋa domine buk?'

There are two words there which are not from the Eora language – buk and domine. 'When will domine [that is Richard Johnson] read the Bible to us?'⁸

In calling Johnson 'domine', Patyegarang must have been using the title commonly used of Johnson among the white population and picked up by

⁷ Notebook B, 29.

⁸ Notebook B, 21.

the Eora people who knew him. 'Domine' is the vocative case of the Latin 'dominus', meaning 'Master', and it then referred to a clergyman, specifically in the Reformed Protestant churches, and was also commonly used in Scotland as a title for schoolmaster.⁹ So that would have been the title given to Johnson by the Eora people.

Today we honour the heritage Domine Johnson bequeathed to us, as minister of the gospel, teacher of the young, and friend, admirer and protector of the Eora people.

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⁹ *The Macquarie Dictionary*, 2001.