

# Remembering Sydney Cove

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*For Simon Schaffer, upon his retirement—a small memento from Australia, like the print discussed here, to remind him of friends far away who always think of him fondly.*

More than seventy years after the death of Arthur Phillip, a “wardrobe dealer” called Mrs Lye was asked to clear out the remaining effects of the late Admiral from his final home in Bath. Phillip had served as inaugural governor of New South Wales from 1788 to 1793. His impressive collection of silver, jewels, and furniture had been despatched soon after he died in 1814. The fifth-floor attic of 19 Bennett Street, however, was left untouched at the point of sale to a local family. Only in 1890 did the new proprietor arrange to have it emptied. Mrs Lye recovered “dozens” of old books and one landscape print. Uninterested in the history of the prior occupant, she promptly had the books destroyed. The print, though, caught her business-woman’s attention. She sold it to a nearby auctioneer, G. W. Hawkins.<sup>1</sup>

What Hawkins did with the print is unclear. Fortunately, its title was recorded, and fortunately again, there are several existent copies. *A View of Sydney Cove* is an aquatint engraved by Francis Jukes in 1804, measuring 24 inches wide by 17 inches high. We don’t know whether Phillip’s was also hand-watercoloured like the one presently in the National Library of Australia or left uncoloured like the one now in the British Museum. We do know that Jukes created it from a drawing by Edward Dayes, with whom he often collaborated. Neither Jukes nor Dayes ever visited New South Wales. Dayes copied the image from a work probably brought to Britain in 1801 by the second governor John Hunter. In turn, Hunter had probably commissioned it a few years earlier from his friend the emancipated convict Thomas Watling.<sup>2</sup>

The print pointed to many of the changes that Hunter had overseen in Sydney. There were more houses, more garden crops, and, finally, some working cattle. Most of all, it showed evidence of a fledgling maritime construction industry, centering the half-framed hull of a new brig in dry dock. At the same time, the *View* also included some elements

<sup>1</sup> See George Mackaness, *Admiral Arthur Phillip: Founder of New South Wales 1738–1814* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1937), 460.

<sup>2</sup> Watling had been granted an absolute pardon by his fellow Scot Hunter in 1797. This was also the year that work started on the brig depicted here. Both Watling and Hunter had left the colony by 1800. On the brig, see <https://silentworldfoundation.org.au/object/view-of-sydney-cove-new-south-wales/>, accessed March 2022.

from Phillip's time. Government House in the far-left distance stood as before. Both Pitt's Row stretching to the horizon and the tall ship sailing in the harbour would have been familiar sights. Moreover, the Indigenous presence lingered as it had throughout the last decade. The family in the foreground represented the persistence of the Eora people in the place they called Warrane, despite the unrelenting advances of the British intruders.

A smattering of scholars has already discussed this print in terms of early Australian art.<sup>3</sup> I am more interested in the significance of its preservation in Phillip's attic. Did its survival indicate a special fondness on the part of the former governor? Did it serve as a sentimental or nostalgic reminder to him of his five years establishing a settlement in Europe's Antipodes? Such a conclusion would fit well with dominant understandings of Phillip's role in history. Because his efforts in New South Wales led eventually to the emergence of modern Australia, Phillip is now remembered as a kind of national founding father. Nationalist historiography would like to assume that the man who helped forge the Sydney colony somehow sensed its role in creating, one day, a proudly separate polity. It wants Phillip to have thought about Australia as much as Australia now thinks about him.

Of course, he didn't. That Phillip stored the print in a fifth-floor room signifies neglect rather than attachment. On a lower floor, he kept a large library of books, paintings, and over 400 drawings. His will had specified their immediate disposal to either named relatives or the auctioneer.<sup>4</sup> *A View of Sydney Cove* escaped everyone's attention because it had been earlier abandoned to the peculiar purgatory of attic storage.

This is not to suggest that Phillip felt the opposite of affection for the print. If there was any frustration involved, it would have been for the man who likely gave it to him, John Hunter. Phillip's successor had, it seems, commissioned the original image, and, still smarting from his brusque dismissal from office in 1800, was known to bend any handy ear about his under-appreciated accomplishments. Watling's depiction of maritime prosperity was designed to communicate Hunter's mark on New South Wales. Phillip may have become weary of the spiel.

Most probably, Phillip felt nothing much at all for Jukes' aquatint. When Hunter visited him, he'd just retired, begrudgingly, from his dual role as Inspector of Naval Impressment and Supervisor of the Sea Fencibles. He'd only undertaken these roles after being discharged from active service in 1798. In total, Phillip devoted nine years to the British campaign against Revolutionary France. This was nearly double the time he'd spent as a colonial governor. Before New South Wales, too, Phillip had worked close to four years in Brazil, either on secondment or as an allied agent to the pro-British Portuguese navy. He'd operated as a spy or state provocateur for at least three years through Britain's war

<sup>3</sup> Ian McLean, "Sense of Place: Edward Dayes's and Thomas Watling's Pictures of Sydney Cove," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 2, no. 1 (2001): 11–26; Olivia Barr, "A View of Sydney Cove," in *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*, ed. Alisa Bunbury (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 82–3.

<sup>4</sup> See Louise Anemaat, *Natural Curiosity: Unseen Art of the First Fleet* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2014), 79.



FIGURE 1. • Francis Jukes and Edward Dayes (after), *A View of Sydney Cove*, aquatint, 43.8 \* 62 cm, 1804. Canberra: National Library of Australia, PIC Drawer 16 #S45.

against American revolutionaries and had earlier served in the British navy for nearly five years through the Seven Year's War.<sup>5</sup> When scanning Phillip's whole career, his governorship is not necessarily what stands out. If anything defined Phillip's loyalties and passions, it was the promotion of Britain's power abroad. Phillip's life was defined by and only makes sense through the lens of the aggression and expansion of the eighteenth-century British empire. It was not focused on just one spot.

Moreover, and in consequence, when Phillip looked at images of Sydney Cove, he saw an effect of imperialism, not the start of a new polity. When he viewed Sydney's many buildings, he saw housing for convicts and officials, not homes for free settlers. When he registered a growth in agriculture and livestock, he saw sustenance and a potential for exports, not the promise of independent prosperity. When he clocked ships in the harbour or in dry dock, he saw an increase in connections between outposts of the British empire, not the dawn of a fresh mercantile enterprise. Reimagining Sydney Cove in the late eighteenth century through Phillip's eyes reminds viewers that New South Wales existed as an extension and handmaiden to empire. To see it instead as a distinct place burgeoning into its own future – one remembered tenderly by its earliest mak-

<sup>5</sup> See Kate Fullagar, *Phillip and Bennelong: A History Unravelling* (Sydney: Simon and Schuster, forthcoming 2023).

ers – is to diminish the critically reactionary and global contexts of its foundation. Phillip's forgotten print prompts us to recognise that Australian beginnings owed chiefly to the world-wide assertion of British power against imperial rivals, colonized peoples, and revolutionary ideals.

Revising the role of New South Wales in Phillip's life, and with it the role of the colony in Australia's past, also recasts one other related subject. This is the role of Indigenous people in the history of the colony. In *A View of Sydney Cove*, the role is represented by the Eora family in the foreground. Most scholarship on the early portrayal of Indigenous peoples in colonial art argues that its idealization and traditionalization evokes the erasure that settlers would soon enact.<sup>6</sup> This is a convincing proposition, given later behaviours in New South Wales. It's doubtful, however, that Phillip would have been taken in by these tactics. To the originator of the imperial outpost, Indigenous people never looked like they might just fade away. Phillip had dedicated at least half of his energies while governor to establishing some understanding with the Eora, however imperfectly executed. He had done so because he knew that every other British colony before his had forged at some point a treaty with First Nations. Phillip ultimately failed to formalise an agreement – the Home Office refused to meet with his chosen go-between, Bennelong, in 1793, and soon afterwards he lost the authority to rectify the situation. But the importance of noting the critical counterpart to empire – the undeniable existence of Indigenous people – was always in his mind. To see Phillip and early New South Wales as signs of the neglected power of imperialism in shaping Australia is also to see – perhaps paradoxically – the central role played by the Indigenous people who faced invasion.

Phillip was no champion of Indigenous rights in New South Wales: his mission had been to establish a colony for the empire and he pursued it with dogged, unflagging resolve. Nevertheless, his efforts in engaging Indigenous leaders spoke at least to the way he always understood that they were the constant and unmissable foil of his masters' plans. In forgetting the imperial dimensions of Australian foundation, modern commentators too often also forget the towering significance of empire's biggest existential challenge – prior Aboriginal occupation.

Mrs Lye's discovery of *A View of Sydney Cove* in Arthur Phillip's former attic could help underscore the popular view of Australia as a country birthed in 1788 by a devoted paterfamilias. It could, however, better prompt a recognition that Australia rather emerged from a colony forged by the twinned forces of relentless British expansion and unyielding Indigenous persistence.

<sup>6</sup> See McLean, "Sense of Place," 21, and Rod Macneil, "Time after Time: Temporal Frontiers and Boundaries in Colonial Images of Australian Landscape," in *Colonial Frontiers*, ed. Lynette Russell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 47–67.