

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

The Admiral Phillip Commemoration

Monday 21st January 2019 at 11.30am

Address by Scott Bevan, author of *The Harbour*

and presenter/director of *Arthur Phillip: Governor, Sailor, Spy*

This is a huge honour for me to be speaking before such a distinguished congregation in the Church of St Mary-le-Bow. I was hoping that by virtue of speaking in here, right under these famous Bow Bells, that this Australian could become an honorary Cockney. But I'm told it doesn't work that way. I thought there may be a reciprocal arrangement. After all, many a Cockney has become an honorary Australian, even though quite a few of them in earlier days didn't really want to be.

It could be argued that the first Cockney to become an honorary Australian is the man we're here to commemorate today: Arthur Phillip.

Phillip was, of course, an Englishman. And what he did, what he achieved, was for Britain. But to many Australians, he is seen also as one of us. For he not only founded the colony that would grow into a nation, he also had the vision to foresee that this rough settlement – populated by some even rougher characters – would blossom into somewhere, and something, extraordinary.

As Phillip himself forecast, the colony would become the empire of the East, and that this country would 'prove the most valuable acquisition Great Britain has ever made'.

To better understand Phillip's vision, all we need to do is add water. More specifically, a body of water that Phillip knew as Port Jackson, but what the world has come to know as Sydney Harbour.

That very name – Sydney Harbour – immediately paints a picture in the mind's eye. Whether you have ever actually been to Sydney or not, whether you have actually seen the harbour or not, it doesn't really matter. Because it is one of the most famous - and one of the most stunning - bodies of water on earth.

When you say 'Sydney Harbour', people see the Bridge and the Opera House. They see a Ken Done painting. They see fireworks reflected in the water on New Year's Eve, or the helter skelter of yachts and all manner of other craft on Australia Day, the national event commemorating that January day in 1788 when the 11 ships of the Phillip-led First Fleet were all together in Sydney Cove, and their human cargo was disembarking.

These are the images that have helped sell not just Sydney but Australia to the world.

And when people around the world see those images, the one word that is said perhaps more often than any other is 'beautiful'.

Everyone knows Sydney Harbour is beautiful, and they celebrate that beauty. Well, almost everyone. Is anyone here from Melbourne?

As many of you would know, there is a friendly rivalry in Australia – older than the nation itself – between the cities of Melbourne and Sydney as to which is better.

If a Melburnian and a Sydneysider are facing off in conversation or debate on this topic, the Melbourne person will often say something like, ‘We’ve better coffee and restaurants, our theatres are better, our football code is more interesting and less barbaric. Our citizens are more interesting and less barbaric.’

And at this point, you can rely on a Sydneysider to reply, ‘Sure, but you don’t have the harbour, do you?’

It’s as though that stunning harbour is all that counts to a Sydneysider, that sheeny skin of water covering a multitude of sins and a host of shortcomings.

As a friend of mine, Tim Freedman, who plays in a popular Australian band, The Whitlams, wrote in a song about Sydney, ‘You gotta love this city for its body and not its brain.’ And the most distinguishing feature of that body, its most prominent beauty spot, is the harbour. It bedazzles and blinds visitors. It always has.

When members of the First Fleet became the first white people – as far as we know – to pass between those great sandstone sentinels at the entrance to Sydney Harbour, and they saw what was before them, they were rhapsodic. The expedition’s chief surgeon, John White, declared it to be, ‘without exception, the finest and most extensive harbour in the universe’. Not just on earth. The universe! Take that, Melbourne.

White’s fellow officer and surgeon, George Worgan, noted the shoreline ‘exhibits a Variety of Romantic Views, all thrown together into sweet Confusion by the careless hand of Nature’. Phillip himself was not quite as poetic, but in his earliest dispatches back to Britain, he told the man after whom he’d named the cove where he had established the colony, the Home Secretary, Lord Sydney, that he had ‘the satisfaction of finding the finest harbour in the world’. And this is a man who had seen many harbours around the world in a long and eventful naval career. And it was that experience that allowed Phillip to see this harbour with something more than rose-coloured glasses.

In the archives of the Mitchell Library in Sydney, just up the hill from where Phillip stepped ashore at Sydney Cove, is a letter the founding Governor wrote to the Marquis of Lansdowne, about five months after the fleet arrived. I remember seeing that letter. In a rather florid handwriting style across that fragile paper, Phillip explained why he had chosen this site in Port Jackson for the colony, rather than the original plan of settling by Botany Bay; in other words, why the birthplace of Australia came to be where it was.

‘Here,’ he wrote, a Thousand Sail of the Line may ride in the most perfect Security.’

That one line alone also makes it clear that Phillip saw what he was creating as much more than a vast open-air prison, with a harbour as a moat to keep the convicts from escaping. From the outset, Phillip saw the strategic value of this place. And he saw so much more.

He was a product of the Thames, a child of the maritime history and traditions that flow along this great river. But Arthur Phillip quickly realised that what cradled his ships, and what lay all around him, on the other side of the globe was fathomless opportunity.

Phillip and the almost 1500 souls on board those 11 ships may have been the first British people to sail into Port Jackson, but they were hardly the first to appreciate the beauty, and recognise the value, of this harbour.

The first Australians had lived around the harbour for many generations. Indeed, they were here before the waters rose at the end of the last Ice Age to form the harbour.

Professor Dennis Foley, who is a member of the Cammeraygal people, on the north side of the harbour, told me how, thousands of years ago, his forebears walked those valleys now covered in water. Dennis still carries the knowledge of where his people trekked.

The water came in, the harbour was formed, and the Indigenous people lived beside it, and drew sustenance from it. The importance of the harbour as a traditional fishing ground can be seen in some early colonial paintings, depicting Aboriginal people in their canoes, which they also used to move around. As Dennis Foley says, Sydney was the Venice of Australia.

The harbour has also fed Indigenous culture. At a place called Balls Head, from where you can look across to the Bridge and the CBD, there is a very old rock engraving of a whale, about five metres long; it is stunning to see. And the harbour's significance flows into present culture. An Indigenous dance group called Jannawi Dance Clan does this most beautiful performance called *Net Fishing Dance*, honouring the women who used to fish these waters with equipment they'd make themselves, from shells, plants and tree fibres.

Of course, once the British arrived, with their large nets, scooping up fish, there was competition – and conflict. While the new settlement was to be a predominantly agricultural one, with land grants, and convicts turned into farmers, the importance of the harbour as a food source was quickly realised by the new arrivals.

These days, no one can commercially fish the harbour, and recreational fishers are warned to be sparing with what they eat. The legacy of the harbour shores' industrial development, which bloomed in the 19th and 20th centuries, is heavy metals and dioxins in the muddy bed. And when the bed is stirred up, the past potentially poisons the present.

So beneath that beautiful face of the harbour, there are long-standing environmental problems. By the way, not far from here, in Eltham, rests the remains of one of the original harbour people. When Phillip sailed out of Sydney Harbour in 1792, returning to Britain after almost five years in

the colony, he was accompanied by two Indigenous men, Bennelong and Yemmerrawannie. They were, as the lawyer and writer Geoffrey Robertson calls them, Australia's first expatriates in Britain. Bennelong returned to New South Wales, homesick, in 1795. Yemmerrawannie never did. The teenager died here, and so he's buried half a world away from the harbour and culture that nurtured him.

Water – as Phillip knew, as we all know – is a conductor of human energy and achievement. It carries us to new adventures, to discoveries. It connects one land, one culture, one economy, to another. It takes us from the past and into the future.

Water also washes and cleanses. But initially there were some officers in the First Fleet who were concerned this ancient natural land they'd arrived at by water would be sullied by the convicts' past, or, as the Judge Advocate David Collins put it, 'by the introduction of vice, profaneness and immorality'. But as many a backpacker visiting Sydney would perhaps know, the harbour city simply wouldn't be as much fun without that vice, profaneness and immorality. Indeed, without those elements, Sydneysiders would run the very real risk of being just like Melburnians.

For so many, from the First Fleet through to the post-Second World War ships carrying migrants from Europe, life beside the harbour presented the opportunity to wash the slate clean, to begin again. And as surely as the swell of the southern Pacific rolls in through the Heads, so have hope and possibilities for many new arrivals. In turn, those new arrivals have carried the skills and ambition, the diversity of experience and cultures, and the dreams, for helping build a nation. That entwining of the post-war migrant experience and the harbour city, and how each enriched the future of the other, has been played out in glorious, warm colours in a recent Australian film, titled *Ladies in Black*, directed by a dear mate and harbour kayaking buddy of mine, Bruce Beresford.

The film is set in late 1950s Sydney, and the harbour has a starring role, not only in looking ravishing in quite a few scenes, but in helping the characters negotiate their way around the city and through the gentle story.

That's another gift of the harbour. It inspires creativity, and what's created inspires us and becomes part of us.

Jumping back, no sooner had the First Fleet sailed through the Heads than Phillip and others were concerned about who else might enter the harbour. After all, something this good would be wanted by others. To ward off threats, defence installations were gradually built on headlands. And when a threat was realised, during the Second World War, it did arrive by water, when Japanese midget submarines attacked Sydney Harbour on the cusp of winter in 1942. So the very thing that had developed the city, and that had defined it – the harbour – had carried the enemy right into its heart.

The forts and gun emplacements built in the 19th Century, and into the 20th, ended up protecting vast tracts of Sydney's bush-covered shoreline from a marauding invader that continues to attack the harbour city: building development.

In recent years, much of that Defence land that had been set aside has been handed back to the people. So along pockets of the harbour's north shore, in particular, it is possible to imagine what the First Fleet sailors saw when they entered the harbour 231 years ago. It is a magical experience to sit there in a kayak, looking into the bush, listening to the water lap against the hull, and to think you're only a few kilometres away from the CBD in a city of more than five million people. I spent a lot of time in my kayak on the harbour, paddling as research for my book, titled *The Harbour*. I wanted to see more than just its beautiful face. Because that's the problem when you're staring at something so beautiful. You're often content to stop at the surface. That beauty is, in that respect, the curse of Sydney; people don't get to know the place better.

But that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to know what was happening under the harbour's skin, to better understand its personality, its idiosyncrasies, and its challenges. So I spent the best part of a year paddling around the harbour's 316 kilometres or so of shoreline, in and out of the coves and bays and around its islands.

To learn about the character of the harbour, I'd pull up on the shore and speak to those who live, work and play by, and on, the water. I spoke to everyone from scientists to historians, from boat builders to artists and fishing folk.

And as I journeyed around the harbour, I would sometimes think, 'If he could come back now, what would Arthur Phillip make of this?'

For one thing, I think Phillip would be surprised at how this harbour that he identified as ideal for ships has comparatively little commercial shipping on it these days. That trade has been largely transferred to other ports along the coast. And the shipyards that sprouted along the shoreline and on the islands have all but gone. The 'working harbour' has largely slid into history. It has become, as one long-time resident said to me, an ornamental lake for the rich. Its waters have become a mirror for the well-off to gaze into from harbourside homes and see a flattering reflection of themselves. After all, in Sydney life, the harbour view is the pinnacle of success.

If Phillip were to sail into Sydney Cove now, he would see great cruise ships, disgorging cashed-up tourists rather than bedraggled convicts. Still, these ships are helping connect Sydney with the world, just as this cove has done for more than two centuries. From here, exports enriching the colony, then the nation, were shipped across the globe.

Many young Australians also set off from here on their great adventures - particularly to Britain. Some didn't return home. The poet and cultural commentator Clive James sailed out of Sydney Cove in 1961. While he made a name and home for himself here, the harbour has remained anchored to his imagination. At the end of his wonderful book, *Unreliable Memoirs*, James

reminded about the yachts racing on the crushed diamond water under a sky the texture of powdered sapphires. And he wrote, 'It would be churlish not to concede that the same abundance of natural blessings which gave us the energy to leave has every right to call us back.' It's the same energy that Arthur Phillip tapped into. The energy that shapes a city in ways I think he would love, from the bathers on the beach at Camp Cove, where he and his crew apparently spent their first night when they were exploring Port Jackson, through to the sailboats on the harbour, as craft tilt away from the wind and into the sun through summer.

Phillip, I think, would be astounded by the Opera House on the point where his Indigenous friend Bennelong had a hut – it is known as Bennelong Point.

And I think this man of vision would be disappointed by the head of Sydney Cove, where the ferries arrive and depart at a place called Circular Quay. Phillip had plans to highlight the harbour, and its connection to what was being built on the shore, with a waterfront public square. Instead, where the colony was founded and, in effect, a nation was born, the gateway from water to land, the threshold from the Old World to the New, is effectively blocked – and, in the eyes of many, besmirched – by an overhead expressway and rail line.

Sydney could do much better than that in respecting and honouring the harbour. Which is like so much of the story of Sydney, in regard to its relationship with the harbour. We could do better.

But then you look at the water, and the flow of the shoreline, from the cockpit of a kayak, from the deck of a boat or from the veranda of a home or restaurant, and you think that Sydney couldn't do any better than be beside this harbour.

When the American writer Mark Twain sailed into Sydney in 1895, he – like everyone who has ever seen the harbour – was taken by what he saw.

Twain observed the harbour was beautiful, but it was made more so by the city. With respect to the great writer, I think he got it the wrong way round. Sydney is beautiful *because* of the harbour. Somehow the harbour remains undiminished, despite the too many examples of ugly, unsympathetic architecture to be found around it and the terrible environmental pressures we've brought to bear on it. And the great architecture would be sorely diminished without the harbour. Even the Bridge and the Opera House wouldn't be the same without the harbour. The city wouldn't be the same without the harbour. How Australians see themselves, and the world sees them, wouldn't be the same. Indeed, Sydney probably wouldn't be where it is without the harbour. Arthur Phillip may well have said, 'Let's stick to Plan A. Let's settle in Botany Bay'.

But plans were changed, history was written, and the seeds of a city and nation were sown when that master mariner sailed through the Heads and had 'the satisfaction of finding the finest harbour in the world'.