A superb history of Australia's founding

A review of The Fatal Shore by Robert Hughes

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Australian born Robert Hughes, currently an art critic at *Time* magazine, was seriously injured in a car crash on May 30 while filming a series for the BBC, with whom he has previously collaborated, based on his history of Australia, *The Fatal Shore*. Hughes remains in a critical condition.

Hughes is the writer of many works, including *The Shock of the New*, from a television series on modern art, and *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*. It is to be hoped that Hughes will make a full recovery and be in a position to resume work on the series at the earliest opportunity. In the opinion of this reviewer, a work based on *The Fatal Shore* would be of enormous interest—it reveals a chapter in world history that is not widely known, or that is usually presented largely in clichéd form.

First published in 1986, the book is horrifying and humorous, at times touching and at others inspiring, and is thoroughly absorbing. Hughes states his intention: 'To see the System from below, through convicts' testimony—in letters, depositions, petitions and memoirs—about their own experiences." In the 90 years of "transportation", (known loosely as "the System"), some 165,000 convicts were sent to Australia from Britain. Most "never wore chains, got their tickets-of-leave and in due course were absorbed into colonial society as free citizens". Most preferred "to stay and rejected the idea of going back to England." As Hughes points out, "the post-colonial history of Australia utterly exploded the theory of genetic criminal inheritance."

The book can broadly be seen as five sections:

* The historical, political and social reasons that led to transportation to Australia
* The hardships of the voyage and of the early years of the colony
* The make-up of the convict population
* The secondary detention centres such as Norfolk Island
* The established colonies and the moves toward abolition

The first of these gives a fascinating insight into British society at that time. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, Britain was changing dramatically. The population tripled between 1750 and 1850, and London's population doubled in the 20 years before Captain Cook landed at Botany Bay in what was to become Australia. It was a period of massive urbanisation, as the growth of the Enclosure system forced more and more people off the land. Armies of rats roamed the streets of London. Occupational diseases and child labour (from as young as age six) were commonplace. Gin, promoted by the gentry, was the escape (due to a surplus of corn there were no restrictions on its manufacture or sale).

Poverty, particularly in the cities, was extreme and crime was rife. As Hughes points out, "Poverty begets theft, monotonously and predictably." As the level of crime grew, so did the belief in "criminal masterminds" orchestrating crime and contaminating others. The emerging urban working class, seen as a "mob", was greatly feared. This "Georgian fear of the 'mob' led to Victorian belief in a 'criminal class'," Hughes notes.

England had many capital statutes (predominantly to protect property) and public hangings, which drew huge crowds, were the primary deterrent to crime. The Crown preferred to commute an increasing number of capital convictions to life imprisonment. This apparent leniency—known as the Royal Mercy—imposed gratitude and obedience, but also saved the crossroads of the realm from large numbers of hanging corpses which may have provoked riots. The proportion of capital convictions actually executed dropped from 69 percent in 1749 to 46 percent in 1788 (at the beginning of transportation). By 1808 it was down to 15 percent.

However, there was an increasing shortage of jails. Transportation therefore answered a number of problems. In Britain, it retained the Royal Mercy, got rid of prisoners and therefore the need for more prisons. At the same time it provided forced labour for Britain's colonial possessions.

Initially the convicts were sent to the New World of America and the Caribbean, until the American Revolution. Britain then used old rotting ships (known as "hulks"), moored in the docks, as jails, believing that America could not hold out for long. The "hulks" quickly reached crisis levels. With an extra 1,000 convicts arriving per year, Britain needed a new area for transportation. Thus "Australia was settled to defend English property not from the ... invader across the Channel but from the marauder within".

There were some early attempts to utilise the labour of Aborigines. In 1815, Lachlan Macquarie, Governor of New South Wales, established a farm near Sydney Harbour to employ Aboriginal labour. The venture did not prove a success and he concluded it was not worth trying to train them, when convicts were available as a source of labour.

To understand what banishment to Australia meant, one must understand the geographical knowledge of the day. In the late eighteenth century, the world was largely unknown to Europeans. The interiors of most continents were still unexplored, and even North America had only pockets of population. Australia and Antarctica were *terra incognito*. Hughes points out that it could hardly have been worse if the convicts had been told they were going to the moon, "at least one could see the moon from England".

Captain Cook landed at Botany Bay in 1770, 17 years before the First Fleet was sent there. The question of transportation to Australia had been resurrected in 1783, following the loss of the American colonies, and backed up by a belief in its potential as a strategic post in Britain's wars with France and Holland, over India and the East Indies respectively.

The second section gives an impression of the enormity of the undertaking. The First Fleet, with Governor Arthur Phillip at the helm, consisted of 11 ships and nearly 1,500 passengers, of whom 736 were convicts. Some of the convicts had already been on the ships four months before the fleet set sail. It then took another eight and a half months to reach Botany Bay. Some of the convicts had died whilst still in England and about 3 percent died en route. The Second Fleet (the worst of all) lost 41 percent of the 1,006 convicts who sailed. Following reforms suggested by William Redfern (a popular surgeon of the colony and himself an ex-

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convict) the death rate would drop from 1:31 to 1:122.

Having decided that Botany Bay was unsuitable, the fleet established the first settlement to the north, at Port Phillip (Sydney) in January of 1788. With no skilled labour, few tools and thin soil, it was a struggle to survive the first years. The soldiers received the same rations and punishment as the convicts, which caused severe resentment. It was over two years before a relief ship arrived (with meagre supplies) .

Governor Grose, who arrived in 1792, reverted to military rule and restored larger rations for the soldiers, as well as giving each soldier a land grant and the ability to purchase more. In 1793 a US ship arrived carrying supplies and 7,500 gallons of rum. The captain insisted on the sale of the rum before any of the supplies could be sold. The soldiers bought the lot, by borrowing against future pay. This created a monopoly, which was then able to charge what it liked. A gallon of rum costing 6 shillings sold for between £2 and £4 (a 600-1,200 percent increase). This pattern was followed with subsequent cargoes.

The Rum Corps (as the soldiers became known), poured their profits into land purchases. They were also able to pick the best land, the most skilled convict labour and could purchase tools, seed, and so on, at cost. As alcoholism was rife, and most emancipated convicts had no agricultural knowledge, most of them went bust, at which point the Rum Corps bought them out. The Rum Corps became more powerful than the governor. It overthrew Governor Bligh (of “The Bounty” fame) in 1808, and installed a junta for two years.

Coinage, particularly British Sterling, was extremely rare in the colony. Most transactions would operate through a system of barter. Convicts were paid for their free labour in “store goods”. Rum (as most spirits were referred to), was the most sought after commodity. Any commodity bartered was known as “currency” as opposed to “sterling”. This terminology was also used to refer to the people of the colony. Free settlers who immigrated to Australia were referred to as sterling (hence 'a sterling fellow'), whereas children born in the colony to emancipated convicts were called 'currency'.

The third section of the book looks at the makeup of the population. Fully 80 percent of convicts were transported for crimes against property, compared to only 3 percent for “crimes against the person”. A further 1.5 percent were deported for “political” crimes (treason, conspiracy to riot, trade union membership, etc). There were examples of most of the working class movements of the period—Luddites, Swing rioters, Chartists. Almost 20 percent of Irish convicts could be called social or political rebels. The System treated them particularly badly “for fear of mutiny”.

The section also deals with the particular fate of women under the System. Some 24,000 women were transported, about 1 in 7 deportees. The System considered almost all of them to be prostitutes (though this was never a transportable offence). In fact, just about any woman who was not in a Protestant marriage was considered a whore. Though never policy, the practice was to send women of marriageable age, and marriage was certainly encouraged. Soldiers and officials would invariably have first pick. Since this might mean the end of their sentence or at least a reduction, most women agreed to it.

The high ratio of men to women (“4:1 in the city and 20:1 in the bush”) and enforced segregation ensured that homosexuality was widespread. It was considered an “unforgivable crime” on a par with murder, though it was difficult to prove. There are few mentions of homosexuality in the records until about 1830, when there are many references to it due to the desire of Abolitionists to demonstrate how the System “depraved” the convicts.

The section also looks at those who attempted to escape, which was easy, though survival was extremely difficult. Most died within a few days through lack of water and food. There was a popular belief that China lay just to the North and many attempted to escape there. Many would also stow away aboard supply ships. In the later years, particularly in Van Diemens Land (Tasmania), when guns were more readily available, convicts would escape to the bush, becoming “bushrangers”. These outlaws were seen as heroic figures by the convicts and in popular literature.

The fourth part describes the harshest of conditions inflicted on the convicts. These are remembered by popular history, although incorrectly, as being most representative of the System. Only a minority of convicts were ever held in the secondary detention centres, “but they were absolutely integral to the System: they provided a standard of terror by which good behaviour ... would be enforced.” The authorities needed secondary detention centres for those who committed offences whilst in Australia (“the Botany Bay of Botany Bay”). Initially they used Norfolk Island, which is some 1,000 miles east of Australia. Port Arthur and Macquarie Harbour, both of which are in Van Diemens Land, followed later.

Major Foveaux (from the Rum Corps) ran Norfolk Island at one point, and held convicts in utter contempt. To Foveaux, convicts included even those who had served their time and become emancipated. Accounts of his brutal methods (which he described as “vigorous if not exactly conformable to law”) survive in the journals of his head jailer Robert Jones. He describes Foveaux as one of those “who believe in the lash more than the Bible”. As Hughes states, “25 lashes (known as a *tester* or a *Botany Bay dozen*) was a draconic torture, able to skin a man's back and leave it a tangled web of criss-crossed knotted scars.” Jones gives an account of the fate of one prisoner who had received so many lashes that his back appeared “quite bare of flesh, and his [collarbones] were exposed looking like two Ivory Polished horns. It was with some difficulty that we could find another place to flog him.”

There were only two ways to leave Norfolk Island, by death or by committing a crime that would have to be tried in Sydney. Many murders were committed solely so that the convict would see the mainland once more. He would subsequently be executed but might see his friends one last time and perhaps get a last smoke.

The final section takes us through to the end of the System. By the late 1820s and early 1830s there were moves toward abolition. There were three main reasons for this—growing opposition from English reformers, the development of an alternative penitentiary system and also opposition from within Australia as it became a more established and respectable colony. By 1840 transportation to New South Wales had ceased. The general tendency then, particularly from the “well-to-do”, was to collectively forget about or bury the convict past.

Following the end of transportation to New South Wales, convicts were still sent to Van Diemens Land and Norfolk Island for another 13 years. Opposition to transportation continued to grow, but it was the gold rush of 1851 that sounded its death knell. Most free settlers and huge numbers of ex-convicts from Van Diemens Land went to the diggings in New South Wales and Victoria. There was also a flood of settlers emigrating from Britain, and the feeling grew that, since people were paying to emigrate, it hardly constituted a punishment to send convicts for free. The fiftieth anniversary of settlement in Van Diemens Land saw the formal end of transportation there. In an effort to whitewash the stain of the past, it was renamed Tasmania. The past, however, lived on in the fabric of its society for another 30 years as the “old crawlers” worked out their sentences. Laws remained on the statute books, which retained the rights of master over convict servant until 1882. Tasmania longed for Britishness, but as one of the convicts put it, “the only proper coat-of-arms would be ‘a fleece and a kangaroo with its pocket picked'.” The last shiploads of convicts would go to the fledgling settlement in Western Australia in 1868.

The centenary in 1888 wished to look to the future, not to the past. A poem of the day summed up the prevailing mood:

Is it manly, fair or honest with our early sins to stain

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What we aimed at, worked for, conquered—aye—an honest, noble name?
And those scribes whose gutter pleasure is to air the hideous past,
Let us leave them to the loathsome mould in which their mind is cast.
Look ahead and not behind us! Look to what is sunny, bright—
Look into our glorious future, not into our shadowed night.

As a way of forgetting its own history, Australia embraced British history as its own. Courthouse records, etc., were often destroyed to hide a family's connection to a convict past. Buildings that had played a part in convict history were pulled down. Hughes suggests that this past has "made Australians cynical about Authority; or else it made them conformists. As so many Australians are conformist sceptics, the 'convict legacy' is seen to be all the more pervasive."

Britain "had hoped that ... [transportation] would do four things: sublimate, deter, reform and colonise." By removing the criminals they hoped to purify Britain. This clearly had to fail, as the causes of crime lie within the society and not the criminal. Deterrence failed for similar reasons and also because Australia was perceived as a land of opportunity, certainly more so than nineteenth century Britain. Reform appeared to have failed, since convicts and emancipists (convicts who had served their time of punishment in a penal colony) committed the majority of crime. However, post 1840 New South Wales was still a police state, which treated ex-convicts as if they were still convicts.

Colonisation, Hughes concludes, would have occurred even without the "experiment". It would have taken longer, but it "was foreordained from the moment of Cook's landing at Botany Bay in 1770".

The Fatal Shore does not aspire to be a comprehensive study. What it does so well is provide a vivid portrayal of the human cost of Britain's colonial venture and how these experiences have helped shape modern Australia. It should be widely read for this reason.

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