

1788

History's Turning Points: 1788

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1788 is one of the historical dates most Australians find easiest to remember: we commemorate 26 January 1788 as “Australia Day” and this is probably as good a day as any to commemorate the foundation of British settlement on the east coast. Captain Arthur Phillip was something of an accidental hero who was appointed to lead the expedition of about 1000 men, women and children, three-quarters of them convicts, which set out for Botany Bay without any particular recommendation for his personal character and qualifications. When they arrived Philip quickly decided that Port Jackson was a better site for a settlement than sandy Botany Bay and moved his people.

26 January is therefore not the day of the arrival of the First Fleet, or (as students sometimes tell me) the day Australia was discovered by Captain Cook or anyone else: it was simply the day that the first British governor of the colony decided he had found a good place for the settlement. Philip reported that the climate was “as healthy as any in the world”; the natives numerous and only occasionally aggressive (they would become more so as the year went on), and prospects looked good for the establishment of a second settlement at Norfolk Island. We do not know how enthusiastic the convicts felt about their new home, but on 26 January the officers ran up a flag on the shore of Sydney Cove and drank the king’s health.

Was it a turning point in history? If it was, it must count as a pretty low-key one. Philip’s arrival does not, of course, mark the first human settlement of Australia: the British were anticipated by anything up to 40,000 years by Indigenous settlers whose culture and society was adapted to the climate and landscape of the Australian continent in ways that the British were slow to understand. The scientific work of “discovery” (leaving aside the Indigenous discoverers of Australia) and settlement was also not the work of the first British settlers: on the west coast that was largely accomplished by Dutch and Portuguese navigators in the 17th and 18th centuries, and on the west coast by James Cook on his first voyage of discovery in 1770.

So why do we remember 1788? Does this year have any significance to the wider world beyond Australia?

The answer to this question is both yes, and no – as historians are annoying prone to say. While Australians are right to recall 1788 as a year associated with the founding of their own British settler society, the wider world had many competing calls on its attention as the First Fleet was enduring the long first year of British settlement on the edge of the Australian continent.

The three greatest territorial and maritime powers of the age were France and Great Britain, an ongoing hostility which extended to overseas colonies. A third power, the United States, was only just on the rise. As these powers were competing for control

of the world's trade, colonies and oceans, the arrival of a 1000 souls to establish a convict colony on the far side of the world was not something that struck the attention of any but a small number of the general public. Even in London, once the fuss of funding and despatching the expedition was out of the way, few gave them much thought until the first reports began to trickle in up to a year later.

In 1788, the British were still preoccupied with the aftermath of the American War of Independence which had led to the loss of most of its north American colonies. Indeed, the Americans' refusal to accept any further convicts was an important factor in pushing the British to establish a penal colony in Botany Bay. The American Declaration of Independence, mostly written by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, celebrated the equality and liberty of all men and their entitlement to live their lives free from imperial constraint. By 1788, the American constitution was ratified enshrining many of these rights into law. These ideas were to have some influence on the little community stranded in Botany Bay.

For France, no less than for Britain, the year 1788 was a time of colonial expansion. Within days of the arrival of the First Fleet, the settlers were surprised to find two ships from the French exploring expedition, led by La Pérouse, appeared in the harbour. While the La Pérouse expedition was tragically lost without returning home, Australia may well have received many additional French exploring parties but for the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. The foundation of Australia by British settlers is therefore squeezed between events of much greater significance.

Despite this, 1788 marks a year in which the sixth continent was brought to the attention of the northern world. Once British settlers set up a convenient supply station on the east coast of Australia it became part of the imperial and colonial network of the British world. Some might also say that this year marked the end of independence for the Aboriginal peoples of the east coast of Australia. In fact, the real turning point for Indigenous Australians is not 1788 but the gold discoveries of the next century which enormously increased the number of European settlers. For all Australians, black and white, 1788 is a year to remember but it was more of a starting point than a turning point in history.