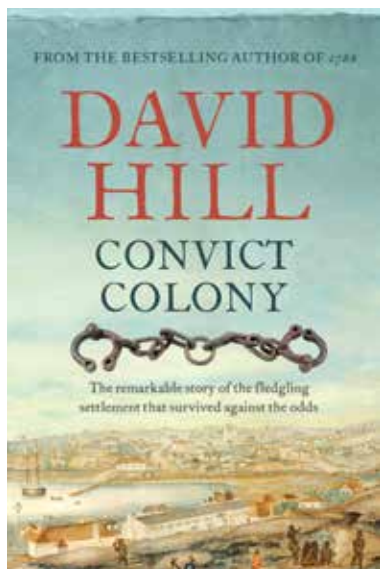


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Convict Colony

By David Hill

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Allen & Unwin

368 pages

Reviewed by Jane Herbert
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Historian David Hill's *Convict Colony*, which details the early years of European settlement in New South Wales, is a highly readable and engaging text for those wishing to improve their knowledge about this important period of Australia's history.

Hill's story begins with the British Parliament's solution to the surge in prisoner numbers in its gaols following the loss of its American colonies in the mid-1770s, and concludes with the governorship of Lachlan Macquarie, 'the father of Australia,' in the decade from 1810.

The convergence of the Enlightenment period, 'judicial leniency' and advocates for prison

reform saw a vast reduction in offenders being sent to the gallows in favour of transportation. In 1777 the British parliament legislated for the reintroduction of transportation, setting the scene for the establishment of a convict colony in Australia.

Botanist Sir Joseph Banks, who sailed on the *Endeavour* in the 1770s, was consulted about a suitable location and he praised Botany Bay for its fertile soil and plentiful water. Curiously, Banks' journals contradict this assessment and, as author David Hill shows, after a challenging eight-month journey, Governor Arthur Phillip found Botany Bay to be totally unsuitable due to its inadequate water supply and exposure to strong winds. Aware of Port Jackson 12 kilometres to the north, Phillip set off with a small party and found its location considerably more favourable.

Hill's text is highly detailed, and his narrative brings to life not only the treacherous voyage but the challenges of the day-to-day life in the new settlement as the settlers and convicts battled the harsh conditions and the elements.

The thunder and lightning are astonishingly awful here, and by the heavy gloom that hangs over the woods at the time these elements are in commotion and from the nature and violence done to many trees we have reason to apprehend that much mischief can be done by lightning here.

George Worgan, Surgeon,
the *Sirius* from his *Journal of a First Fleet Surgeon*

As well as the struggles to tame the bush and keep crops alive as the settlers awaited the arrival of the much delayed Second Fleet, Hill details Phillip's largely failed attempts to engage with the First Australians. Despite instructions

from King George III to 'endeavour by every possible means to open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all our subjects to live in amity and kindness among them,' relations between the settlers and Indigenous people quickly turned sour, and then hostile, as land dispossession and the destruction of traditional hunting grounds and food sources saw hungry Aboriginal people turn to desperate measures for survival. Judge Advocate David Collins reported that the killing escalated into 'open war' that struck terror across both cultures.

Hill devotes a chapter to the 'troublesome convict women' who were widely reviled by those in authority, from the incumbent governor to the lowliest marine. Few employment options were available to these desperate women, and many were forced to turn to prostitution to survive. Failed government policy did nothing to aid their plight.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of David Hill's *Convict Colony* is the liberal use of primary sources. His text is enlivened with observations from the journals and letters of well-known members of the First Fleet: Chief Surgeon John White, Judge Advocate David Collins and Governor Arthur Phillip. Furthermore, Hill has illustrated his highly detailed history with short anecdotes from the settlers and convicts as they negotiated their new life in New South Wales.

David Hill's *Convict Colony* is a must-read for anyone interested in early European settlement. For teachers of Australian History, its detail and fascinating anecdotes provide an ample resource to engage students. It should also be on the pre-reading list for VCE Australian History.