

The Camp as 'New Albion': Early Visions and Views of Sydney

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'I see the future prospect of empire and dominion which now cannot be disappointed. Who knows but England may revive in New South Wales when it has sunk in Europe?' (Sir Joseph Banks to Governor Hunter, 1799)

In an early engraving of William Blake, known as 'Albion's Dance' or 'Glad Day' (1780), the figure of Albion, nude, young, and Christ-like, stands with arms outstretched on a mountain; between his feet a moth emerges from its chrysalis, and the text reads: 'Albion rose from where he labour'd at the Mill with Slaves: Giving himself for the Nations he danc'd the dance of Eternal Death'. (For a description of this engraving, see S. Foster Damon 13.) Albion was an ancient poetical name for England, one which had immense appeal for Blake, who wrote numerous allegorical and political poems about Albion's fall and resurrection. Governor Phillip did not, of course, know Blake's work, but his plan to name the first settlement on this continent 'new Albion' (White 140) was symptomatic of that period's preoccupation with the rise and fall of empire, also evident in Sir Joseph Banks' letter to Governor Hunter (see Dixon, *The Course of Empire: Neo-Classical Culture in New South Wales, 1788-1860*). This paper provides an account of some of the more fanciful thinking about the new society England believed it was building in New South Wales; it concludes with some comparative reflections on the French and British in New Holland.

In June 1791, a report appeared in the *Lady's Magazine* about the newly established penal colony in New Holland. Like so many of the reports of these early years, this one most definitely comes under the heading of 'Botany Bay lore':

Government is about to establish a spice plantation on the north west side of New South Wales, from which they are led to expect great commercial advantages.

We see here the dream that in settling New Holland, England would capture a share of the wealth of the East. The passage continues:

Letters have been received in town from Botany Bay, which contain the most favourable account of that infant colony. The arrival of the

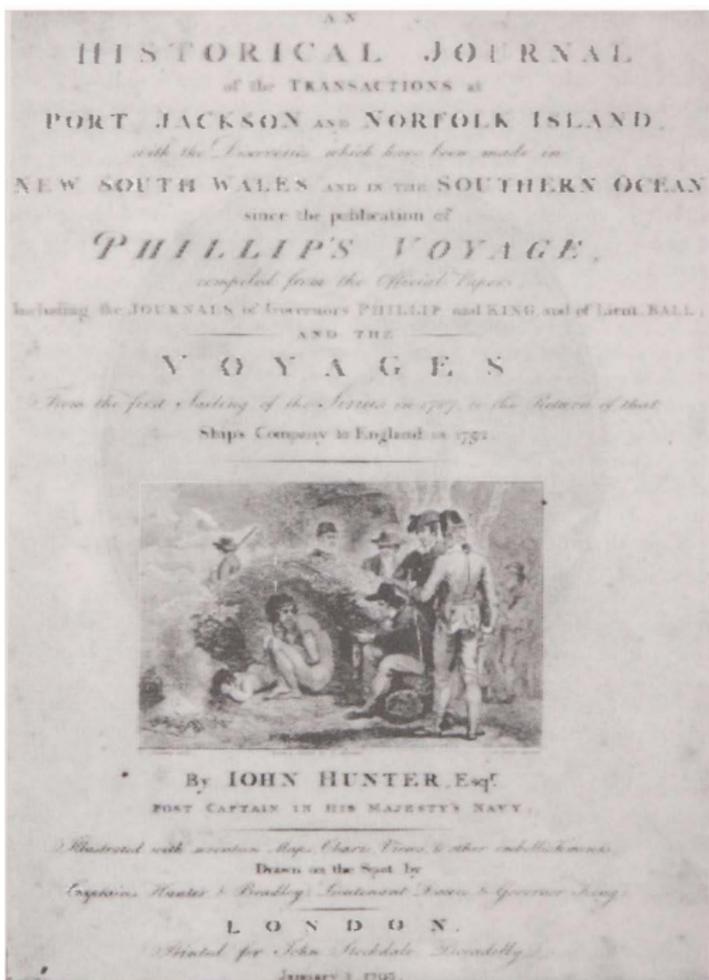
Scarborough, Surprize, Justinian, Lady Juliana, and Neptune transports, in the months of July and August, entirely relieved the colony from that distress it laboured under when lieut. King left it; and enabled governor Phillip to carry into execution those plans he had before concerted, for preventing in future any inconvenience arising from a scarcity of provisions. The number of additional hands he at the same time received, enabled him to cut several small canals for the purpose of watering the grounds, which he had cleared to a great extent, and had rendered, by proper cultivation, so fertile, that the little corn, &c. which he could afford to sow, had succeeded beyond his most sanguine expectations. The natives by kind treatment had been rendered perfectly docile, and had in a great degree been incorporated with the colony.

Clearly the *Lady's Magazine* has taken up the colony's cause. The report on progress in itself functions as a kind of sponsorship. But instead of a penal settlement with alien norms, what we read about here is a civil settlement governed by polite norms, overseen by an improving projector, Governor Phillip. The cutting of several small canals is not an embryonic Snowy Mountains river scheme, designed to reverse our eastward flowing rivers into the dry interior; indeed, in this period there was little conception of New Holland as a dry, drought-prone continent, in need of irrigation. The canals function instead as a metaphor for the circulation of wealth through the body politic of this remote new colony, connecting it to the mother country; in facilitating commerce and trade, canals had also become synonymous in the late eighteenth century with the promotion of civilisation and refined manners in outlying areas. Such, at any rate, was the discourse on canals in Britain, where canal building was still, in 1791, something of a mania (Ellis 141–45).

Another influence on the passage may have been John Hawkesworth's immensely popular translation of the oriental romance, *The Adventures of Telemachus* (1769), with its description of a garden-like and fecund country 'watered with an infinite number of canals' (Dixon 21). Canals also appear in Erasmus Darwin's optimistic and visionary poem, 'Visit of Hope to Sydney-Cove, near Botany-Bay', published two years earlier than the *Lady's Magazine* report. In the first book on the penal colony, John Stockdale's *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay* (1789), we read the following lines from Darwin's poem:

There shall broad streets their stately walls extend,
 The circus widen, and the crescent bend;
 There, ray'd from cities o'er the cultur'd land,
 Shall bright canals, and solid roads expand. (Phillip, *Voyage* v)

The advanced agricultural scheme plotted out by the *Lady's Magazine*, so out of touch with the realities of clearing and sowing in this period, is all part of a package which makes no specific mention of the convicts, is self-deceived regarding



Title-page of John Hunter, An Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island (London: John Stockdale, 1793).

the natives, and very fuzzy about geography (where is the 'north west side' of New South Wales, exactly?). Just as fanciful is the etiquette of colonisation represented visually in the title-page of another of Stockdale's books, Captain John Hunter's *Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island* (1793). This large and expensive book sports on its title-page the vignette (reproduced below) engraved by the distinguished artist, Thomas Stothard.

The vignette alludes to Hunter's story about a seventeen or eighteen year old native girl discovered at Broken Bay, cold, wet, just recovering from small pox, and abandoned by her tribe when the explorers inadvertently set up camp nearby. A number of the chief officer-gentlemen of the First Fleet are represented here: Governor Phillip, Captain Hunter, Judge-Advocate Collins, Principal Surgeon John White, assistant surgeon Mr Worgan, Newton Fowell, a midshipman on the *Sirius*, and Captain Johnston of the Marines. Hunter's account is heavily invested in the discourse of chivalry; he emphasizes the way in which they all tenderly look after the girl, as though she is an injured animal, keeping her warm and feeding her. The passage most relevant to the vignette reads as follows:

on our speaking to her, she raised herself up, and sat on the ground with her knees up to her chin, and her heels under her, and was at that moment, I think, the most miserable spectacle in the human shape I ever beheld: the little infant could not be prevailed on to look up; it lay with its face upon the ground, and one hand covering its eyes. (Hunter140-41)



Detail of title-page of John Hunter, An Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island (London: John Stockdale, 1793).

In this sentimental and sensationalist engraving of the abandoned and suffering woman, succoured by gallant and tender men, we see projected a strong image of Britain's colonising mission in New Holland.

In sensibility and general outlook, Governor Phillip was a man of his times. Take, for instance, his strong anti-slavery views. In 1787, in a memo sketching out his plans for the penal colony, he stipulated in no uncertain terms that the settlement was to be a 'free land': 'The laws of this country [England] will, of course, be introduced in New South Wales, and there is one that I would wish to take place from the moment his Majesty's forces take possession of the country – that there can be no slavery in a free land, and consequently no slaves' (*HRNSW*, 41). Despite these views, within the first year of settlement Phillip had kidnapped an Aboriginal hostage, Arabanoo. Given the Governor's desire to impress on the natives the newcomers' friendly intentions, this action was described by Stockdale, his publisher, as probably 'the kindest piece of violence that could be used' (Phillip, *Voyage* 79). Captain Hunter's description of his first meeting with Arabanoo at Government House is similarly paradoxical, worth quoting at length for its subtle ironies, and for its complex play with notions of civility and barbarity:

I went on shore to wait on the governor, whom I found in good health; he was sitting by the fire, drinking tea with a few friends; among whom I observed a native man of this country, who was decently clothed, and seemed to be as much at his ease at the tea-table as any person there; he managed his cup and saucer as well, as though he had been long accustomed to such entertainment . . . This man, whose name was *Ara-ba-noo*, was taken . . . by force, and in the following manner [describes the scene] . . . The terror this poor wretch suffered, can better be conceived than expressed; he believed he was to be immediately murdered; but, upon the officers coming into the boat, they removed the rope from his neck to his leg, and treated him with so much kindness, that he became a little more chearful. He was for some time after his arrival at the governor's house, ornamented with an iron shackle about his leg . . . this he was taught to consider as *bang-ally*, which is the name given in their language to every decoration; and he might well believe it a compliment paid to him, because it was no uncommon thing for him to see several . . . every day shackled like him; the cause of which he could not of course understand. (Hunter 132–33)

Hunter is never overtly rebellious against Phillip's regime, but clearly the barbarity is not all on Arabanoo's side. Hunter's retrospective telescoping of events has an unsettling power: 'sitting by the fire, drinking tea – a rope round his neck, and dragged in a moment down to the boat – ornamented with an iron shackle about his leg'. Originally, Phillip had hoped that the Aboriginals would settle nearby and thereby gain 'a high opinion of their new guests' (*HRNSW* 39), but their curiosity had quickly turned to aversion and the guests were now taking their

hosts hostage. Hunter's image of the black man amongst the tea-drinkers would have had a very particular resonance for his readers. The possession of black African servants in England was the very height of fashion, signifying the wealth and high status of their owners. Black servants were particularly associated with the polite ritual of drinking tea, sweetened with sugar, a ritual which had become much more affordable and available to all classes, but which still retained connotations of luxury (see Walvin 1997). In hundreds of cartoons and caricatures in the late eighteenth century, rituals involving exotic colonial products such as tea, coffee, sugar were presided over by black, liveried servants, often ornamented with neck collars. Arabanoo's ornament is the iron shackle he sports, convict-like, on his leg. At other times he appears to have been hand-cuffed. Hunter's set-piece stops short of telling us what we learn from Captain Watkin Tench: that Arabanoo did indeed come to understand the meaning of his various ornaments. Of Arabanoo, Tench writes:

To prevent his escape, a handcuff with a rope attached to it, was fastened around his left wrist, which at first highly delighted him; he called it '*Ben-gad-ee*' (or ornament), but his delight changed to rage and hatred when he discovered its use. (Tench 141)

The literal shackling of Aborigines often passes into their rhetorical shackling with convicts, as can be seen in the following letter, written in London in May 1789. The letter-writer is the Reverend Weedon Butler, a genial, learned, and worldly Anglican clergyman who believed it was his avuncular duty to ginger up his desponding nephew Daniel Southwell, midshipman on the *Sirius*:

Some times my dear Dan, it cannot but recur to one of any Reading to ask himself, What *are* they *doing*, and what *is* to be *done* by the Migration to New Holland. In the first Place the ready Answer is, God only knows; For in his Mind only rests the Idea, the Progress and the Events of Things whether temporal or eternal: But the still more ready Answer is, like the Welchman's, the Proposal of another Question, what was Rome? what was America? (25 May, 1789, BM Mss, JCP M f. 42-42v)

What I like about this quotation is the Welchman's answer, the proposal of another question, two questions in this case: 'what was Rome? what was America?'

The parallel with Rome, which had founded a great civilisation on the detritus of other societies, had a certain currency in the early years of settlement in New Holland. Bernard Smith, noting the parallel, quotes from James Tuckey's book of 1805:

When I considered the motives; when I contrasted the powers, the ingenuity, and the resources of civilized man, with the weakness, the ignorance and the wants of the savage he came to dispossess, I acknowledged the immensity of human intelligence . . . These thoughts naturally led to

the contemplation of future possibilities. I beheld a second Rome, rising from a coalition of banditti. I beheld it giving laws to the world, and superlative in arms and in arts, looking down with proud superiority upon the barbarous nations of the northern hemisphere. (Smith 179)

What interests me here is the tension which co-exists between three different figures: the civilised man, the native Aboriginal (the savage the civilised man 'came to dispossess') and the convict transportees (the 'coalition of banditti'). Tuckey's vision of a glorious future for Botany Bay is premised on the distance established between the benighted savage and the civilised man, but of course there is some slippage between the civilised man and the convicts, who have been romanticised into 'banditti'.

Weeden Butler had also based his vision of the glorious future of Botany Bay upon the vanquishing of the native savage:

Your first Difficulties, in a few years, I think will be your only ones. A few years will give a powerful Predominance over Native Barbarity and the ferocious Feebleness of dark, untutor'd Minds; and, aided, as I trust your Colony will faithfully be, by the Mother Country, it seems very probable, that the Asiatic and the European World will in the Series of Time be mixed in Interests and perhaps in advantages with your new Settlement. This may seem *Utopian* that is to say whimsical and flattering. I am sure it is possible. (Butler to Southwell, May 1789)

That the new settlement was composed of transportees did not daunt Butler any more than it was to daunt Tuckey. Butler may not romanticise them into banditti, but he does indulge in some fanciful imagining of the transformative effects of arriving in the new world. To his nephew Southwell he writes, approvingly: 'I observe no Mention in your last Letters, of *Convicts*, but of *Colonists*: the Distinction is become just, and should be kept to: It should be supposed that from setting foot on Shore, they changed, if not their *Natures*, at least the opprobrium of their *Appellation*; nor would I have the odious Epithet evermore applied to one, who was landed on the Coast' (30 Jan, 1791).

Butler appears to be drawing an analogy between New Holland convicts and the legal position of slaves brought by their masters into Britain. The much publicised Mansfield decision of 1772, which concluded that the runaway slave James Somerset could not, in England, be sold abroad by his master, led to the popular (albeit erroneous) perception that slaves, as soon as they stepped onto English soil, were no longer enslaved (Walvin 1992 15–16). Furthermore, at the time of Butler's writing, the Government in Britain was giving its imprimatur to the establishment of a 'free' colony for ex-slaves on the West coast of Africa, at Sierra Leone. Reflections upon the powerful anti-slavery movement at home and upon the new colony at Sierra Leone have added a positive gloss to Butler's conception of the penal colony, although of course the simultaneous establishment of these

two new colonies could be read quite differently, and was so by Butler's more sceptical contemporaries. In 1787 a cartoon appeared entitled, 'The Poor Blacks going to their Settlement', in which the free and convict settlements are satirically combined (Print no. 7127, Jan. 1787, George 387). Certainly the poor Blacks of London took fright, and many who had initially signed up for Sierra Leone were much 'deterred' from embarking, believing that Government really intended them for Botany Bay (Coleman 7–21). At any rate, as far as Butler and his nephew were concerned, transportation, with a view to reformation, was a far better solution than judicial execution. Indeed it was a widely held belief of libertarian thinkers like Georg Forster that thieves and other criminals 'cease to be enemies to society whenever they regain their full human rights and become cultivators and proprietors of land' (Frost 264).

Unlike Butler and Tuckey, Governor Phillip was not given to visions of Botany Bay as a second Rome, reared on the back of criminals. Before setting out for New Holland, he commented on the necessity of keeping the convicts separate from everyone, and from the natives in particular, whose weapons 'will be very formidable in their hands, the women abused, and the natives disgusted' (*HRNSW* 39). Phillip even envisaged a permanent separation of the convicts from the garrison, commenting: 'As I would not wish convicts to lay the foundations of an Empire, I think they should ever remain separated from the garrison and other settlers that may come from Europe, and not be allowed to mix with them, even after the seven or fourteen years for which they are transported may be expired' (*HRNSW* 40–41). We can see here the influence of Sir Francis Bacon's dictum in his essay, 'Of Plantations', that it was 'a Shamefull and Unblessed Thing, to take the Scumme of People, and Wicked Condemned Men, to be the People with whom you *Plant*' (Bacon 106).

Governor Phillip liked drawing boundary lines. In his first despatch from the colony, dated May 15, 1788, he describes the success of his first encounter with the natives at Manly Cove, so called on account of their manly behaviour at this time. But as the soldiers were attempting to prepare dinner on the beach, 'their curiosity made them very troublesome . . . I made a circle round us; there was little difficulty in making them understand they were not to come within it, and they then sat down very quiet' (*HRNSW* 283). Tench, writing of the new shyness, indeed aversion that the natives displayed soon after, mentions this episode as a promising beginning which seemed to lead nowhere. 'It seems, that on that occasion, they [the natives] not only received our people with great cordiality, but so far acknowledged their authority as to submit, that a boundary, during their first interview, might be drawn on the sand, which they attempted not to infringe, and appeared to be satisfied with' (Tench 40). The whiff of irony here about Phillip's magus-like pretensions is unmistakable.

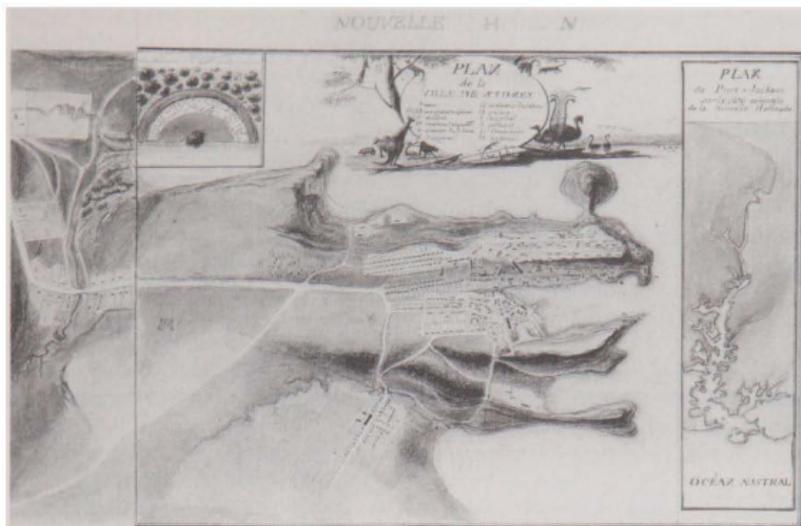
One of Phillip's last acts as Governor was to draw another line, every bit as unsuccessful in its outcome as his first. This was a straight line from the head of Woolloomooloo Bay to the head of Cockle Bay. This line can be seen on the 1792 'Survey of the Settlement in New South Wales, New Holland'.



'Survey of the Settlement of New South Wales, New Holland', Dec. 1792; map SZ430, with permission of State Records, New South Wales. Note Phillip's signature (bottom right of upper right quarter).

Its purpose is clearly explained in Phillip's own handwriting on this survey: the line was to mark out the extent of the 'Land reserved for Government'. He emphasised: 'It is the Orders of Government that no ground within the Boundary line is ever granted or let on Lease and all houses built within the Boundary line are and are to remain the property of the Crown'. In other words, all the ground to the north of the line was Crown property. This was the line which began the tug of war between public and private interests in the colony, with Phillip's successors disregarding his directions and Bligh attempting to reinstate them in 1807 in the interests of the Crown. The wrangle was to be decided in favour of the colony's leading citizens and bullish officers of the New South Wales Corps, such as John Macarthur. But before that decisive victory, Elizabeth Macarthur, irked at the stumble in her family's frontier entrepreneurship, was provoked into conceiving one of her most striking images:

Liberty has retired from amongst us into the pathless wilds, amongst the poor native inhabitants, who certainly maintain their independence,

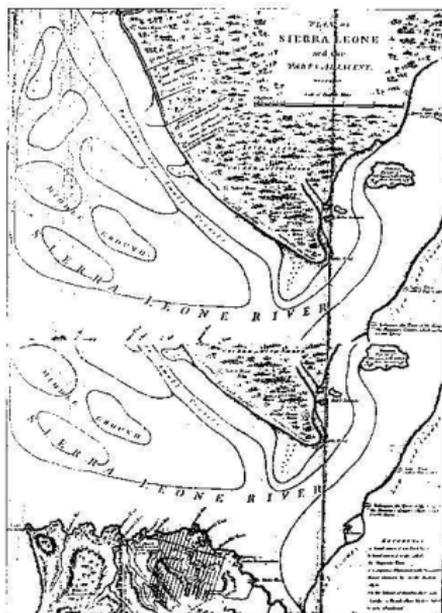
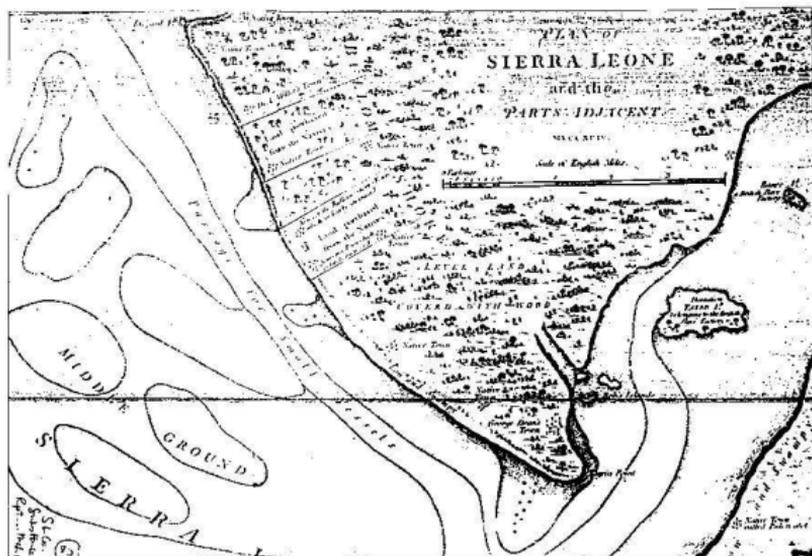


Print taken from page 60, Susan Hunt and Paul Carter, Terre Napoléon: Australia through French Eyes, 1800–1804.

and have hitherto resisted any infringement on their rights. Nor will they become servants, for any continuance, whatever temptation may be offered them. (Macarthur-Onslow 137)

Elizabeth Macarthur was a cool-headed person, certainly not given to rhapsodising or great eloquence in her letters. Rhetorically, this passage stands out; particularly striking is her romanticisation of the natives, now in possession of that liberty which has withdrawn itself from the town to the bush, that place where there are no lines.

The 'pathless wilds' reflect a fairly general belief that New Holland was an 'untrodden country', only lightly touched, if touched at all, by Aboriginal presence. Phillip commented on the shallow burial practices of the natives, as though this too reflected their tenuous relationship to place: within days of arriving he had a grave opened, concluding, 'From the appearance of the ashes, the body must be laid at length only a few inches below the surface, and is, with the wood ashes made by burning the body, covered slightly over with mould, fern, and a few



(above) Map details from *Sierra Leone Company*, Substance of the Report of the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company to the General Court, held at London on Wednesday the 19th of October, 1791 (London: James Phillips, 1792).

(left) Map details from *Sierra Leone Company*, Substance of the Report delivered by the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company, to the General Court of Proprietors, on Thursday the 27th March, 1794 (London: James Phillips, 1794).

stones' (*HRNSW*, 287). The French were also curious about the natives' burial places; but their curiosity was shot through by a certain reverence, and even awe for what they found. This can be seen in Péron's account of stumbling upon an Aboriginal monument to the dead on Maria Island, an altar raised (he surmised) by 'filial piety, by affection, and gratitude' (Péron, 209). For Péron the monument is one 'consecrated by Nature herself', a burial place which shared with other such spots a similar topography – a small hillock by a stream providing fresh fish and diverse edible herbs and vegetables. This is the spot where the native 'longest fixes his abode, and to that spot he more frequently returns'. In fact the site on Maria Island reminded him of the 'semi-circular bower' he had seen 'on the barren western shores of New Holland' (in the Geographe Bay area, south of Perth), a sacred grove drawn by Charles-Alexandre Lesueur and curiously inserted into his remarkable bird's-eye 'Plan of Sydney' (1802).

Péron was uncertain as to the purpose of this spot, whether for burial, worship, or debate, but he pondered its intricate design – three semi-circles within the outermost ones, twenty-seven seats scalloped out of a fine lawn facing the river, numerous geometrical sand carvings and rock paintings and concluded that the Aborigines possessed complex spiritual beliefs (Péron 62–65).¹

Of course, being runners-up in the race to colonise these new shores, the French could afford to feel sanctimonious about the British invasion of New Holland. In 1802, the French naval captain Nicolas Baudin wrote to Governor King that he had 'never been able to conceive that there was justice or fairness on the part of Europeans in seizing, in the name of their governments, a land seen for the first time, when it is inhabited by men who have not always deserved the title of savages or cannibals'. Both France and Britain would be better occupied in moulding for society their own inhabitants rather than improving natives by 'seizing the soil which belongs to them and which saw their birth'. This is blunt enough, we might have thought, but the sting in the tail is still to come, in Péron's reflections on the abominable penal code which had led to Britain's foundation of a colony on 'men branded by the law and made criminal by the fault of a government which has neglected them and abandoned them to themselves'. To the wickedness of having unlawfully seized the natives' land, the British colonisers must add the crime of 'having transported on to a soil where the crimes and diseases of Europeans were unknown all that could retard the progress of civilisation' (Horner 271–72).

Phillip may have stood firm with Bacon on the principle that scum should not be used to plant new societies, but he seems not to have taken to heart Bacon's dictum about dispossession: 'I like a *Plantation* in a Pure Soile; that is, where People are not *Displanted*, to the end, to *Plant* in Others. For else, it is rather an *Extirpation*, then a *Plantation*' (Bacon, *Essayes*, 106). Phillip may have liked to think of Botany Bay as a free settlement, perhaps on the model of the abolitionist colony, Sierra Leone, but the difference between the two colonies can be seen

1. Péron also drew a sketch of the grove. See 'Baie du Geographe' in P.B. Milius, *Recit du Voyage aux Terres Australes*, eds J. Bonnemains and P. Hauguel, Planche 5.

very simply and clearly on early maps. There are no British town plans or maps of Botany Bay, like these of Sierra Leone, which describe tracts of land as 'Purchased from the Natives'.²

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2. It should be noted here that 'Purchased from the Natives' is misleading, since the native chiefs of Sierra Leone never consented to selling their lands. The proper description of these lands should be 'Rented from the Natives'.