

THE DARKST DAY IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

March 25th marks the anniversary of the most momentous, but least known day in Australian history. It is the day in 1789 that smallpox was deliberately released to the Australian public, by the Lieutenant Governor of the Sydney colony, Major Robert Ross.

Being a disease free environment, Australians had no resistance to European diseases. Even the common cold could kill. The smallpox therefore spread rapidly through the whole continent, and like it had done when introduced into South America, North America and Southern Africa, it killed 90% of the local population.

With a base population of between three million and five million people, this means that the 1789 smallpox plague killed at least two and a half million Australians. Little meaningful study has been made of this catastrophe, so tracking down how it occurred was rather like the plot of a detective novel.

The disease suddenly appeared on 15th April 1789 and everyone was mystified. Was it already here? Could the French have brought it? Did the First Fleet Chief Surgeon, John White, bring bottles of smallpox scabs with him from England?

The Governor, Captain Arthur Phillip immediately questioned White, who cryptically replied that he had one bottle, but the seals were intact. That may well have been technically true right then, but what medico would purchase only one bottle of smallpox scabs when there were 1,400 people in the First Fleet to immunise?

Captain Watkin Tench in fact noted in his diary that the surgeons had bottles in their possession, but there had been no sign of the disease in the seventeen months since they had quit the Cape of Good Hope. Now why would Tench mention the Cape of Good Hope, unless that was where bottles were bought? Tench was actually speaking from first-hand knowledge, because he was a passenger on the Charlotte, the same ship as Surgeon White.

So why and how had the smallpox suddenly appeared fifteen months after the First Fleet landed? The key to answering this question lay in a seeming contradiction. Some history books said that **no white man** died in the plague, whilst others said **one sailor** died.

The ship passenger lists gave the answer and both statements proved to be correct. Joseph Jeffries, a sailor from the ship Supply, became symptomatic with smallpox on May 2nd, two weeks after it broke out. He was however not a white man. Jeffries had been recruited in the stopover at Rio and was in fact a Native American Indian. I knew from personal experience that Native American and Native Australian people get on famously, because they have similar cultures.

When I then read the circumstances of his death, what was **not** said came through the loudest. No surprise or disapproval was expressed about him having visited the local native people, and this can only mean that he had approval, because it was mandatory. This

approval could therefore have only come from Captain James Campbell, who was the sole delegated authority.

The plot thickens. Captain Campbell was in fact the only friend and ally of the Lieutenant Governor, Major Robert Ross, who was implacably opposed to Governor Phillip. Ross believed that Phillip was soft and incompetent and that war with the natives was inevitable.

Ross and Campbell knew what needed to be done. They had both served fifteen years before in the American Indian Wars, when General Amherst had handed out smallpox infected materials to the Indians.

Fortunately the First Fleet was the most documented event in human history, so if you know what you are looking for, it is all there. All the disparate, seemingly disconnected information suddenly unravelled to show the pattern.

Surgeon White had bought jars of scabs in Cape Town and all except one ended up in the government store. Six Marines, who were supposed to be guarding the store, were caught robbing it in March 1789. Ross and Campbell did an inventory, found the jars and decided to release it, thereby avoiding the need for war.

Campbell knew that Joseph Jeffries had formed friendships with the local people and always took presents when he visited. Jeffries arrived back from Norfolk Island on the ship Supply on March 24 and Campbell gave him the clothing and blankets that he and Ross had infected as soon as they knew the ship had arrived back.

This infected material was then given to the local Australians on March 25 1789, the same day the Marines who had robbed the store were hanged. The virulence of the scabs is much reduced, so the first people who caught it had a greater chance of survival, but they then passed it on in full virulence over a longer period to greater numbers. The incubation period for the disease is seven to seventeen days, but commonly ten to twelve days. It then takes about a week to die. The arithmetic is simple and compelling. Jeffries arrived back on March 24 and the disease broke out a fortnight later.