

THE SECOND SMALLPOX PLAGUE OF 1828

The first pandemic in Australian history was the smallpox plague of 1789. Before that, Australia had been a disease free environment. The death rate from the 1789 smallpox plague was therefore horrendous, killing 90% of the Australians who caught it.

With a base population of at least three million people, this meant that at least two and a half million Australians died of this one disease. But smallpox is not an equal opportunity disease. As well as killing a swathe of healthy adults, it killed all people over sixty, all children under six, and all pregnant women.

This meant that a whole generation of Elders was wiped out. There were also more male than female survivors, so marital arrangements fell into chaos, and intertribal relationships deteriorated markedly. However, over the next forty years tribes readjusted their marital rules and tribal life gradually restabilised.

This was despite the inexorable expansion of British colonisation and the spread of other diseases. Even the common cold could kill. Then suddenly and inexplicably, just like the first plague of 1789, a second smallpox plague swept around Australia in 1828.

In the 1970's the eminent Australian virologist, Frank Fenner, led a World Health Organisation program to eradicate smallpox and this was achieved by 1980. In Fenner's multi-volume world history of the disease, he claimed that the cause of the second Australian smallpox plague in 1828 had never been determined. Fenner enjoyed the highest possible world status, so his claim has been accepted without question by historians.

Fenner was however quite demonstrably wrong, and the information confirming the origin of the 1828 plague was readily available to Fenner. Public records of the day, including newspaper reports, quarantine records, and the published history of the Manly Quarantine Station, all confirm the cause of the 1828 outbreak.

Fenner's failure therefore cannot be explained as a simple oversight. If it was not a deliberate omission of facts, then the only other explanation is an arrogant cultural blindness.

The public records clearly show that the new outbreak of smallpox had its origins in the arrival of the convict ship the 'Bussorah Merchant' at Sydney Cove on 26th July 1828. The Bussorah Merchant had left England in February with its cargo of convicts, and the disease was clearly not present when it left.

At a stopover on the voyage however, a new crew member was taken on board. The new sailor subsequently became symptomatic with the disease when the voyage was underway, resulting in others on board becoming infected. While the ship was still on its way to Sydney the sailor died, along with another crew member, two convicts and the child of a guard.

On arrival at Sydney Cove on 26th July 1828 the colony was warned of the presence of smallpox on board the ship and it was not allowed to dock. The ship was instead placed in quarantine on the north shore of Sydney Harbour at Spring Cove, in what is now Manly.

This was the first time in a subsequently long history that Spring Cove was used as a quarantine station. Spring Cove in fact fulfilled its quarantine function right up until 1972, only eight years before Frank Fenner in 1980 certified for the W.H.O. that smallpox had been eradicated from the face of the earth.

Following its mooring at Spring Cove in Manly, the Bussorah Merchant was then kept in quarantine for the next seven weeks. A local tribal leader, Boongarric, was paid as a guard to keep local Aboriginal people away and convicts were also delegated as guards to the quarantined civilians on the north shore. It would seem that Fenner and others have consequently assumed that these measures were quite watertight.

There are still current historical accounts that claim the quarantine measures were successful in containing the outbreak. Well yes, as long as you don't count Aboriginal people.

Paying Boongarric to keep his tribal relatives and friends away was of course an entirely misconceived plan. It is abundantly obvious that he would have been obliged to pass on any items of clothing or material that could be of use to his tribe.

It would have been of no concern whatsoever to the convict guards, or to officialdom for that matter, if Boongarric was giving out infected clothing. The fact that it happened and the disease spread from there around Australia is indisputable. It was even the subject of a newspaper report at the time. On August 15th 1828, the Sydney Gazette reported with the page two headline: **'Smallpox epidemic strikes Aboriginal people'**.

Like the 1789 plague the effects of the 1828 plague were also witnessed by early settlers as well as being recorded in Aboriginal folklore. Although no colonist in Sydney caught the disease in 1828, there was however one white man in Victoria who did. The escaped convict William Buckley caught smallpox in 1828, but survived. Buckley was facially disfigured by the disease and knew it was smallpox. He recounted in 1852 that the disease caused *'...a dreadful swelling of the feet and ulcerous sores and taking many lives.'*