

Sydney-Portsmouth Sister City Committee – 13th May 2016

**An address to celebrate the 229th Anniversary of the sailing of the
First Fleet from Portsmouth on 13th May 1787**

**The First Fleet (1788) and The Re-enactment Fleet (1988)
Some Untold History**

Dr Wally Franklin

To begin, I would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the traditional owners of the land on which we meet; the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. It is upon their ancestral lands that the Sydney Town Hall is built.

Preamble: a Sense of History.

When the Re-enactment Fleet arrived off Sydney Heads on the morning of 26th January 1988 it was met by 2.3 million people watching from the shores of Sydney Harbour and greeted by over 10,000 boats on the water. Australia Day in Sydney 1988 was, and still remains, the largest Public gathering to have occurred in Australia. Moreover the day was marked by two significant events. Firstly, the very large gathering of Indigenous elders and representatives of Aboriginal Communities from all around Australia, who marched through the streets of Sydney to celebrate their survival, culture and heritage. Secondly the fact that, in spite of the incredible numbers of people gathered in Sydney for the Australia Day celebrations, it turned out to be a remarkably peaceful day. Shortly after Australia Day 1988 the Re-enactment Company received a moving letter from the Surgeon General of St Vincent's Hospital. In that letter he informed us that the Sydney hospital emergency services were geared-up and ready to handle unprecedented levels of emergency admissions, when in fact it turned out that Australia Day 1988 was one of the quietest

days ever experienced by emergency services in Sydney. He thanked the First Fleet Re-enactment Company, as he attributed the outcome on Australia Day to the focus of harmony brought to the celebrations by the arrival of the Re-enactment Fleet in Sydney harbour.

In time, Australia Day 1988 will be seen to be a turning point in Australia's history and its future, I'll have more to say about that shortly. As you all know the idea of re-enacting the First Fleet as a Bi-centennial event, was conceived by Dr Jonathon King in 1976, while he was in the England studying the life and role of his ancestor, Philip Gidley King, in the First Fleet.

Immediately upon his return to Australia Jonathon started work on the Re-enactment of the First Fleet as a major Bi-centennial event. It wasn't till September 1979 that I first met Jonathon. At the time I was National Marketing Manager for Trans-Australia Airlines and he was seeking support to travel around Australia to organise and drum up support for the Re-enactment project. I was able to provide support and did what I could to encourage broader corporate support for the First Fleet Re-enactment as a major Bi-centennial event. However from the outset it was clear that there was strong and intense opposition to the project from the Federal Government and the recently formed Australian Bi-centennial Authority, the ABA. Over the next five years I witnessed the remarkable lengths taken by the Federal Government and the ABA to destroy the re-enactment project.

The core of opposition to the Project was summed up in a report commissioned by the Federal Government: The Re-enactment Fleet would aggravate the Aboriginal issue by reminding us of the shame associated with the near genocide of Aboriginal communities across Australia; it would emphasise the convict beginnings of modern

Australia and it would bring into focus Australia's Paternal relationship with Britain. The ABA was committed to a 'historically neutral' Bi-centennial event, the gathering of 'Tall Ships' in Sydney harbour on Australia Day. In essence the Federal Government and the ABA wanted a 200-year celebration that denied the reality of Australian history.

In 1984 my career in the Australian Airline industry came to an end and Jonathon's partner Jane King, through my partner Dr Trish Franklin, asked if Trish and I would be available to become involved in helping Jonathon with the Re-enactment Project. You might be tempted to ask the question, that having been a witness to the powerful forces lining up to sink the First Fleet Re-enactment Project, why, in my right mind, would I get involved in a project that appeared to be doomed to failure!

The answer is very simple; it was because of my partner, Trish Franklin. In fact without her the Re-enactment of the First Fleet may not have happened at all. Let me explain. I was born in Sydney and went to school in western Sydney. At that time I learned nothing about Australian History. I was given a blank map of the world and was shown how to colour in red those areas of the world, including Australia that were part of the British Empire. In my teens I moved to Coonabarabran, in western NSW, where I attended high school and again learned nothing about Australian history. Certainly I had no knowledge of the First Fleet and its consequent impact upon Aboriginal Australia. In 1957 I moved back to Sydney, shortly after I met Trish and by 1961 we were married. Trish had emigrated from England to Australia with her Parents in 1953. By the mid-1970's we had moved to Melbourne and had three school age sons. And still I knew nothing of Australian history. In 1976 Trish commenced an Art History Degree at La Trobe University, she was studying early

European/Aboriginal interactions in the Wimmera District of Victoria and she was able to focus me on the phenomenal impact of the arrival of the European population on Aboriginal communities across Australia. Her passion for Australian History and the knowledge she provided me, for the first time in my life, instilled in me an understanding of, and a real sense of, the true history of my country. It was this new found awareness that was at the forefront of my mind the day that Jonathon King visited me in my office at Trans-Australia Airlines in 1979, where he pitched to me his plan to re-enact a real part of Australia's history. Hence my keen interest in his project.

By 1984, when we received the request from Jane King asking if we would help Jonathon complete the Project, I had already finished with my Air Transport career and Trish had completed her Arts/History Degree with honours and had also been accepted into a Masters Honours Degree at Sydney University to study the people of the Bundjalung Nation of the northern rivers area. We had also decided that we wanted to commence work on raising awareness about Cetacea (Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises) as soon as possible; a cause that we had both become deeply interested in during the mid-1970s. Both Trish and I knew full well the challenges involved if we took on an involvement in the First Fleet Re-enactment Project, and we had no doubt that the probability of a successful outcome was very low given the intense Federal Government and ABA opposition. Also it was clear that the commitment to the re-enactment would defer our interest in whales and dolphins for at least five-years. We spent several weeks contemplating Jane's request to provide Jonathon help with the Project. Finally Trish declared that we should participate in the Re-enactment of the Voyage of the First Fleet as a vital living historic event. Although the Re-enactment would be seen as a second invasion fleet by Aboriginal Communities, it

had the potential to offer a potent platform for public involvement in and discussion of 'Aboriginal Issues' in Australia, leading up to, and after the 1988 Bi-centennial celebrations. We decided to make the commitment and the rest is history, as recounted in Jonathon's two books 'Battle for the Bi-centennial' and 'Tall Ships, Tall Stories' and also in Dick Tanner's speech to The Order of Australia Association in 2010. Hence it was because of Trish's remarkable passion for Australian history that we became involved in the Re-enactment of the Voyage of the First Fleet. Before I return to the role of the Re-enactment Fleet in 'Aboriginal Issues', there were two intriguing stories that caught out attention during the process of studying information from the British archives about the First Fleet.

The First Fleet - Two Untold Stories:

1 - James Mario Matra (1746 to 1806)

The first story concerns James Mario Matra who was born in New York in late-1746. He was the son of Corsican parents who had fled Italy to escape political persecution and had emigrated from Italy to the new British colony. Matra's parents wanted him to become a 'Fine English Gentleman' and decided a stint in the Royal Navy would help. At the age of 15, Matra entered the Navy in May 1761. On the 25 July 1768 Matra joined James Cook's *Endeavour* as a midshipman and sailed on the first great voyage of Pacific exploration. Cook visited Botany Bay in 1770. There is only one mention of Matra in Cook's journals when in May 1770, while sailing along the coast of NSW, he was implicated in the drunken cropping of the ears of Cook's Clerk and was suspended from duty. However, during the long voyage Matra formed a lifelong friendship with Joseph Banks. On the return of the *Endeavour* to England in July 1771, Banks aided Matra in obtaining a minor Government diplomatic post.

In 1776 the American Revolution occurred and half a million British loyalist were displaced and dispossessed of their assets, including Matra's Family. Around half the Loyalist emigrated to Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada while the rest returned to England, presenting an immediate political problem for the Government of the day. Over the next few years Matra undertook strong and persistent lobbying for the establishment of a colony in Botany Bay as a refuge for the displaced Loyalists and in frustration turned to his old friend Joseph Banks for help in getting his idea heard by Government. Banks is reported to have informed Matra that Botany Bay "was likely only fit for the Native's Cook found there," - an interesting observation considering the policy of 'Terra Nullius' later adopted by the British Government for the First Fleet. In response to Matra's persistence Banks finally agreed to assist and suggested that Matra put his idea in writing. On the 23rd August 1783 Matra penned '[*A Proposal For Establishing a Settlement in New South Wales*](#)', which was presented to the Portland and Pitt administrations in 1783 and 1784.

Ironically the full text of Matra's proposal is not available in Australia, but is available online in New Zealand! Here I will summarise some of the key points Matra made to the British Government. The long eastern coastline of Australia is so fertile that 'valuable production' may one day have an impact upon European markets; the availability of the 'hemp or flax' plant in nearby New Zealand would provide Britain with essential navel supplies; high quality timber for ship building is readily available in both Australia and New Zealand; low cost labour would be available for the new colony from nearby South Pacific islands; the new colony would provide a strategic base for lucrative trade with southeast Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea and the Spice Islands; the opportunity for voluntary emigration may be of great service to Britain; The colony in New South Wales may offer a strategic base for

Britain against the incursions of other foreign powers into the region, such as the Dutch and Spanish; it is important to note that in the body of his text he reiterated Cook's report to the British Government that "the land is peopled by a few blacks". Finally, after talks with Lord Sydney, Matra added to his proposal that New South Wales may be a proper region for criminals condemned to transportation.

Nepean, under-secretary of State for the Home Office, in December 1784 wrote a memo titled 'Memo of matters to be brought before Cabinet'. In that memo he indicated that when Pitt's ministers considered; "The Erecting a Settlement upon the Coast of New South Wales, which is intended as an Asylum for some of the American Loyalists, and also as a place for the Transportation of *Young* Offenders who[se] crimes have not been of the most heinous nature", they were in fact considering Matra's plan. Matra's proposal to colonize New South Wales accorded well with the government's interests in disposing of the convicts, in building strategic resources in the Pacific Ocean and in establishing a trading network linking Asia and the Americas to Europe. One of the very few Europeans then alive who had actually visited New South Wales, Matra testified in May 1785 to the House of Commons committee enquiring into the resumption of transportation, only two years before the departure of the First Fleet. Matra offered himself for an administrative/diplomatic role in the new colony, which was not forthcoming. In disappointment in July 1786 Matra accepted the appointment of Consul at Tangier, Morocco; where he watched from afar the formation of the new colony in NSW that he had proposed, and where he remained until his death in March 1806.

Whilst historians argue over the complexities of the motives surrounding the British Governments decision to establish a convict colony in New South Wales, they are all

in agreement that Matra's proposal played a significant role in the process. His only recognition in the unfolding story of modern Australia is having a suburb on the foreshore of Botany Bay named after him 'Matrville'. Only one Australian historian, [Alan Frost](#) has written about Matra. Hopefully young future historians will offer Matra his due place in the history of modern Australia.

2 - Philip Gidley King (1758-1808 & Third Governor of NSW 1800-1806)

Jonathon King's ancestor Philip Gidley King joined the navy in December 1770, as Matra was travelling past Australia with Cook. His early service was in the East Indies then in American waters from 1775 during the years of the American Revolution. Subsequently he served in India under the command of Captain Arthur Phillip. In October 1786 when Phillip was nominated to command the First Fleet he chose Philip Gidley King as his second lieutenant aboard the Flag Ship *Sirius*.

British whalers had moved into northern Arctic waters throughout the 17th Century in fierce competition with other European whalers. By the late-1700s, whale populations in the Arctic had been devastatingly decimated, and large numbers of British whaling ships were lying idle in port. One of King's early assignments was to negotiate on behalf of the British Government with whaling interests for ships for the First Fleet. These were needed to complement the two-needle vessels *Sirius* and *Friendship*, and to provide transport for the convicts, soldiers and the few administrators destined for the new colony. The ship owners were offered lucrative whaling licenses for the Southern Oceans in return for low charter rates. Nine of the eleven ships of the First Fleet were chartered from the whaling industry.

Both British and American whaling ships sailed into the Pacific during the late 1700s. Samuel Enderby Jr., of the London based whaling company Enderby & Sons and a

friend of King, in a letter dated 17th January 1789, declared that ‘Lord Hawkesbury took the South Pacific Whale fishery under his wing in 1785... and that the number of vessels that returned to that fishery in 1788 were 45 sail’. He went on to say ‘nothing is wanting to make this Fishery compleat but an unlimited right of fishing in all seas’ ... and that ... ‘the British would soon explore the most distant parts . . . of the South Pacific Fishery . . . and the settlements of New Holland [Australia] would be often visited, as there are many whales in the sea’.

The British whale-ship ‘*Emelia*’ - commanded by Captain James Shields with First Mate-Harpooner Archaelus Hammond, both ‘Yankee Whalers’ from Nantucket - was the first whaler to round Cape Horn from east to west in 1789 and enter the South Pacific Whale Fishery. In November 1791 an American Nantucket Man, Captain Bunker, took the British Whale Fishery across the Pacific to the Australian coast for the first time via Cape Horn. Twenty-nine or more whale-ships, both British and American, had entered the Pacific via Cape Horn by 1793. So as King was about to take up his commission as Governor of NSW in 1800, the ‘Yankee Whalers’ were already present in large numbers in the southern waters of Australia and around Van Diemen’s Land.

As previously mentioned nine of the eleven ships of the First Fleet that arrived in Australia in 1788 had licences to whale in the Southern Ocean fishery. Five of the ships of the Third Fleet that arrived in 1791 were whalers, who after the arrival of the Third Fleet were bound, under licence, for the Chile and Peru whaling grounds. Both Governor Phillip and Philip Gidley King reported in late 1791, to the Government in London, that the decision of the five Third Fleet whaling ships to alter their plans and

whale along the east coast of Australia, may mean: ‘that a whale fishery on the New South Wales Coast will succeed’.

The initial poor results from these early whaling voyages off the east coast of Australia, together with the restrictive monopoly held by the East India Company over trade in the South Pacific, hindered the development of early Australian Whaling. However this changed with the appointment of Philip Gidley King as the third Governor of NSW in September 1800 and an Act passed by the British Parliament in 1801, which opened all Australian waters to whaling.

Governor King was a strong supporter of the whaling Industry. In a letter to the Duke of Portland dated 28th September 1800 he wrote, ‘merchants in England are now satisfied that spermaceti whales are equally if not more plentiful on [the NSW] coast than they are on the coast of Peru.... much advantage will arise to this Colony from the frequent intercourse with whalers... and also the advantage of bringing convicts and stores out on lower terms than have hitherto been’. King was also able to write to his friend in London, Joseph Banks that, ‘the spermaceti and common oil fishery goes on very well’.

Soon after his appointment as Governor of NSW King reported to his Superior in Britain, that the presence, of the ‘Yankee Whalers’ around Tasmania, was a serious strategic threat. He recommended the establishment of a settlement in Tasmania that he argued could become a major centre for a Southern Ocean whale fishery and suggested that the settlement be named ‘Hobart’ in honour of his superior, Lord Hobart. King formed a whaling partnership with the Yankee Whalers and the first southern right whale was taken in the Derwent in 1806. At the peak of global pelagic sailing-ship whaling in 1850, Hobart was considered, ‘the greatest whaling port in the

British Empire'. King also established whale-processing infrastructure in partnership with Yankee Whalers at Little Sirius Cove near Mosman in Sydney.

King's influence led to the establishment of whaling as Australia's first pre-industrial wealth-generating industry, which has been overshadowed in Australian history by MacArthur and his sheep. The 1858 statistical returns of the NSW Government showed that between 1830 and 1850 whaling made a significant contribution to the NSW economy. Australia's involvement in the whaling industry persisted into the 20th century with whaling stations at Byron Bay and Tangalooma during the 1950s and into the early 1960s, while the last Australian whaling station at Albany in Western Australia did not close until 1976. At the end of the final phase of coastal and Antarctic pelagic whaling in the early 1960s, of the estimated pre-whaling number of over 40,000 eastern Australian humpback whales, only an estimated 150 individual whales survived. These were in fact the ancestors of the eastern Australian humpback whales Trish and I would go onto study in the twenty-five years following completion of our involvement in the Re-enactment of the Voyage of the First Fleet in 1988.

The First Fleet Re-enactment Voyage - A turning point in Australian history?

I return to the main theme of this presentation. Why is the Re-enactment of the First Fleet a turning point in Australia history? I have already explained that it was, more than any other factor, an awareness of the 'Aboriginal Issues' that motivated Trish and myself to commit to the Re-enactment of the Voyage of the First Fleet. From the outset of our involvement it was clear that the Re-enactment Fleet would invoke and focus the aboriginal issue of being seen as a second invasion fleet. Early in the process we were asked to a meeting with Aboriginal Elders in Newcastle to explain

why we were involved in the Re-enactment Fleet. Our explanation to Aboriginal Elders was always consistent. If Australians were not aware of the true nature of Australian history following the arrival of the First Fleet and the devastating impact upon Aboriginal communities across Australia, how could we as a Nation deal with the issue? Whilst the Aboriginal Elders we met acknowledged the integrity of our position, they took great pains to inform us that Aboriginal Australia regarded the First Fleet as an invasion Fleet and in all conscience they could not ‘celebrate’ Australia Day on January 26th 1988! As one Elder put it ‘it would be like accepting an invitation to a wedding party to celebrate the killer of the bride’. Throughout the period leading up to the departure of the Re-enactment Fleet in May 1987, as Trish had predicted the affairs of the Re-enactment Fleet were being constantly covered in all forms of media. Each, and every coverage, of the Fleet in the media was associated with accompanying discussion of Aboriginal issues. Trish quietly adopted the role of resident historian for the Re-enactment Fleet and meticulously documented the joint media coverage of the Fleet and Aboriginal issues, from 1984 through to completion of the Project in late 1988.

Aboriginal Australia was present in many forms throughout the process of the Re-enactment Fleet. A few examples will suffice. When we arrived in England in 1987 to prepare for the departure of the Fleet a Royal event was held in the main square of the City of Portsmouth a few days before the departure. Trish and I had the privilege of sitting behind the Queen and Prince Phillip to watch an Aboriginal Cultural Dance Group perform at the event. The day before the departure from Portsmouth Harbour a major event was held at the Portsmouth dockside to formally farewell the Re-enactment fleet, involving the Mayoress of Portsmouth and the most senior Admiral of the British Navy. The world’s media were present including a British TV Crew

who had been following Trish and I throughout the week leading up to the departure. At the height of the event a strong voice rose above the gathered crowd of media. It was a young Aboriginal activist, artist and filmmaker, Tracey Moffatt, who publically challenged the right of the Re-enactment Fleet to fly the Aboriginal flag! The world's media turned their attention on Tracey, and the TV Interviewer who had been following us posed the question 'What does this mean for the Re-enactment Fleet?' The headlines around the world that day were not about the departure of the Re-enactment fleet from Portsmouth but about the Aboriginal protest of the First Fleet as an invasion fleet. Regrettably Tracy Moffatt spent the night in jail, but she had achieved her aim using the Re-enactment Fleet to raise worldwide awareness about Aboriginal issues in Australia. At our first stop in Tenerife another Aboriginal Cultural Group was involved in Public performances and participants in the Re-enactment Fleet voyage met with them to discuss their feelings and thoughts about the First Fleet.

Throughout the eight-month Voyage of the ships of the Re-enactment Fleet to Australia Aboriginal issues were constantly discussed among those travelling aboard the Re-enactment Fleet. This was clearly shown in the four-hour documentary about the Re-enactment Fleet 'Rite of Passage' which was produced by Dick Tanner and went to air on Channel 7 over the two nights prior to Australia Day 1988. On Australia Day 1988, as we sailed from Botany Bay and entered the heads to an unbelievable and totally unexpected welcome, the thing that struck Trish and I – who were aboard the second ship in the line of the Fleet 'Our Svanen' - was a very large Aboriginal banner draped from North Head declaring 'We Have Survived'! Many people aboard the Re-enactment Fleet ships that day were wearing black-arm bands in support of Aboriginal Australia. As the eleven ships of the Re-enactment Fleet were

moving slowly into Farm Cove past Lady Macquarie's Chair, a young man aboard 'Anna Kristina' Michael Balsom, took a megaphone up the mast of the ship, called to the young Aboriginal men and women gathered to protest the Fleet and, asked for their permission to enter Country! The request had an electric effect and completely defused feelings and emotions. The newspaper and television coverage of the events on January 26th 1988 were intense and worldwide. However the arrival of the Re-enactment Fleet had to share the headlines that day with our dear Aboriginal friend 'Burnham Burnham' who was in the UK and planted the Aboriginal flag on Dover Beach, staking an Aboriginal land-claim of Britain! Finally as I have already mentioned Elders and Representative from Aboriginal Communities' from across Australia gathered and marched in Sydney as the Re-enactment Fleet arrived.

Herein lies the essential difference between the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 and the arrival of the Re-enactment Fleet in 1988 and why Australia Day 1988 will be seen as a turning point in Australian history. In 1788 the British choose to ignore and deny the sovereignty and existence of Aboriginal Australia; in 1988 Australia celebrated the Bi-centennial in full awareness of the impact of the arrival of the British on Aboriginal Australia and, Aboriginal Australia were present on the day to celebrate Aboriginal Heritage, Aboriginal Culture and the survival of the Aboriginal People. Thus two separate but equally important ceremonies took place side by side, in the same place at the same time, and in harmony and peace. This was indeed a turning point in Australian history.

Earlier this year Noel Pearson, an imminent indigenous Leader and activist, gave a presentation to the National Press Club. When discussing Australia Day, in contrast to the earlier assertion by the previous Prime Minister Tony Abbott, that the defining

moment in Australian history was the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, Pearson pointed out, that in his view, there were three defining moments in the history of modern Australia. Firstly the crossing of Torres Straits by the first indigenous peoples 53 thousand years ago, secondly the arrival of the British on the First Fleet on the 26th January 1788 and thirdly the final abolition of the White Australia policy in the mid-70s, opening up Australia's emigration policy. He was then asked the question 'Should Australia Day be celebrated on some date other than January 26th? His answer was surprising. He said that rather than change the day or date we should change the focus of Australia Day. Rather than being about the arrival of the First Fleet, Australia Day could and should be transformed into a triune celebration of Australia's Indigenous Heritage, Australia's British Heritage and Australia's Emigrant Heritage. It is these three core elements he argued that define modern Australia.

Apart from documenting the media coverage of the Re-enactment Fleet and the Aboriginal issue, Trish Franklin also maintained and organised the correspondence of The First Fleet Re-enactment Company, which documented the incredible trials and tribulations of the process of successfully organising the Re-enactment. Upon completion of the project in 1988 she organised both the media coverage and the company records into a formal archive and presented them in perpetuity to the [NSW State Library](#). Recently Dr Jonathon and Jane King added their extensive archive on the Re-enactment Fleet to the NSW State Library. Also Jonathon worked with the Family of Bill Fairbanks to have Bill's extensive archive of material and notes from his time at the Australian Bicentennial Authority, also gifted to the NSW State Library. Together these three archives provide a comprehensive historical resource for some young historian at some future date looking into the significance of Australia

Day 1988, the impact of the Re-enactment of the Voyage of the First Fleet and the importance of the gathering of Aboriginal Australia, in Sydney on 26th January 1988.

In retrospect, if Australia Day 1988 is viewed as a first step towards Pearson's vision of the 26th January being a day on which to celebrate the triune aspect of modern Australia - Australia's Indigenous Heritage, Australia's British Heritage and Australia's Emigrant Heritage - then the First Fleet Re-enactment Voyage will have played a vital role in Australia Day 1988 being a turning point in Australian history.

A final historical footnote

Recently my Sister decided to investigate the ancestry on my Fathers side of the Family. A part of my history I knew nothing about. It turned out our Great Great Grandfather, John Franklin, stole two books worth 5-shillings in 1830 and was sentenced at the Old Bailey to seven years transportations. He spent 3 years aboard a convict hulk in Portsmouth Harbour before being transported to Sydney aboard a convict ship 'The James Cook' in 1833. He was, as Nepean had eloquently described, one of those "*Young Offenders who[se] crimes have not been of the most heinous nature*". After obtaining his ticket of leave John Franklin became a successful businessman, entrepreneur and pillar of his western NSW community. He ironically made reparation for stealing two books worth 5-shillings, as a Director of the successful Ebenezer Mining Company, which was capitalised with shares sold at 5-pounds each! Consequently the First Fleet Re-enactment Voyage was successfully organised by a descendent of one of the British officers of the First Fleet and in partnership with a descendent of a British convict, supported by their English emigrant partners, Jane King and Trish Franklin. Thank you.

Dr Wally Franklin: wally@oceania.org.au / PO Box 646 Byron Bay NSW 2481