

Chapter 1

PLUCKED FROM THE PUTRESCENT PILE

In the spring of 1846, the grand old man of Australasian politics, William Charles Wentworth, compared the rotting ships that housed British convicts to decaying dumps of dead animals. ‘There can be no aggregations of humans . . . in hulks,’ he told the New South Wales Legislative Council, ‘without calling this putrescence into existence.’ Although Wentworth himself had been conceived in just such conditions, on board the *Neptune*, the worst convict transport ever to set sail, he now recommended that transportation to New South Wales, abolished in 1840, be renewed.¹

William Charles Wentworth’s long life was to be littered with such paradoxes, beginning with his ancestry and the mysterious circumstances of his birth.

The man who claimed to be his father, D’Arcy Wentworth, was descended from one Robert of Wentworth Woodhouse, who lived in Yorkshire in the thirteenth century. Members of the Wentworth family had subsequently migrated to Ireland, where D’Arcy was born in 1762. Three years later, a member of the family’s English

branch, Charles Watson-Wentworth, Marquis of Rockingham, became British Prime Minister. But even though he had inherited great wealth and titles through the female line of his family, Rockingham always acknowledged D'Arcy's poor commoner family as the senior male line of Wentworths.²

During his brief tenure as Prime Minister in 1765–66 Rockingham repealed the infamous American Stamp Act, which had introduced a direct tax on a range of documents, and angered many of King George III's American subjects. This action, in turn, angered the King, and Rockingham was soon dismissed from office. Over the next fifteen years, when he was not breeding his horses or betting on them at the Newmarket races, Rockingham led the Whig Party (which believed that the power of the Crown had to be balanced by the power of Parliament) in opposition to the King's war against the Americans. After General George Washington's victory over the British Army at Yorktown in 1781, Rockingham again became Prime Minister and forced George III to recognise American independence.³

Exhausted by this struggle Rockingham died in July 1782, whereupon his enormous estate passed to his nephew, William Wentworth Fitzwilliam. At the age of thirty-four, Lord Fitzwilliam now had a total annual income of £60,000 pounds, the equivalent today of \$8 million. But D'Arcy Wentworth, the son of a Porta-down innkeeper, shared in none of it. Instead, at fifteen, he became apprenticed to a local surgeon, before going to London to continue his medical studies. After qualifying as an assistant surgeon in 1780, D'Arcy tried to copy Fitzwilliam's expensive London lifestyle. Living way beyond his modest surgeon's income, he was soon in trouble with the law.⁴

In January 1787, D'Arcy was arrested for a number of highway robberies on the Blackheath and Kentish roads. A surprised editor of *The Times* noted that although the accused was from a good family and trained as a surgeon, he now faced the death penalty

owing to 'a destructive connection' with 'bad characters at the Dog and Duck'. At his trial three months later, D'Arcy was acquitted thanks to the ingenuity of his barrister. Some of D'Arcy's London contacts, including an MP named James Villiers, then tried to get him a job overseas. One rumour had it that D'Arcy was to be a surgeon on the First Fleet convict transport *Charlotte* but that he ran away before the ship sailed in May 1787. Whatever the case, D'Arcy had another narrow escape on 11 July as he sat in the public gallery at the Old Bailey to watch the trial of young Thomas Alger who, as *The Times* put it, 'used to attend upon Wentworth [at the Oxford Coffee House] and carry messages to his ladies who were pretty numerous'. Moments after Alger had been sentenced to death for highway robbery, a barrister who had been the victim of another robbery pointed to D'Arcy in the public gallery, identifying him as his assailant. Seized immediately, D'Arcy was brought to the front of the court. However, six months had passed since the robbery and upon closer inspection of D'Arcy, the barrister became uncertain about his identification. So D'Arcy was released. But no sooner had he left the court than the person who had taken his place in the public gallery dropped his handkerchief on the floor. While stooping to pick it up he discovered a gold watch, which had been advertised as stolen on Hounslow Heath by a person fitting D'Arcy's description.⁵

Although a warrant was immediately issued for D'Arcy's arrest, he managed to avoid apprehension for five months until he faced trial for yet two more highway robberies. In the first of these trials, the victim and his companion struggled to identify the highwayman, who had worn a black silk mask. 'He appeared to be a man of rather large size, a lusty man,' one said, 'but I . . . could not distinguish him.' So the prosecution called D'Arcy's landlord to try to trace the stolen property, which D'Arcy's live-in lover was accused of receiving. Cross-examining the landlord himself, D'Arcy got him to concede that he had never seen any suspicious people visit

the accused, 'who behaved . . . and paid his way like a gentleman'. Duly impressed, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty. The second trial was much tougher because D'Arcy had been caught near the scene of the crime in possession of a pistol, a black silk mask and a purse. This time, D'Arcy wisely retained a barrister, who managed to get the victim to agree that the highwayman was 'a different person' from the prisoner in the dock. Again, the verdict was not guilty.⁶

Apparently returning to a quieter life, D'Arcy managed to avoid the courts for almost two years. When he next appeared before a magistrate, charged with yet another hold-up, *The Times* described him as 'the famous D'Arcy Wentworth' and no less than King George III's brother came to watch. Immediately after the hold-up the victim, John Heywood, a barrister who had met D'Arcy, told his travelling companion, 'if D'Arcy Wentworth were in the kingdom, I would say that he was'. D'Arcy tried to explain that he had been nabbed when he was 'just about to set sail [as a surgeon] for Botany Bay, where a birth [*sic*] had been provided for him by his friends'. After being duly committed for trial, D'Arcy stood in the dock of the Old Bailey as Heywood said under oath, 'I do verily believe the prisoner to be the man that committed the robbery,' recalling the highwayman's strong Irish brogue, 'as you will hear if you hear him [D'Arcy] speak'. This time, the wind had blown at the highwayman's mask. '[It] flew up and I saw the lower part of his face very distinctly, about as far as his nose.' But D'Arcy's counsel got Heywood to admit that he had not seen enough of the highwayman's face. And of his earlier meeting with D'Arcy, Heywood conceded that he was 'a very agreeable young gentleman . . . of an excessive good family in Ireland'. Sensing the prosecution's difficulty the judge, who had heard D'Arcy's brogue at a previous trial, asked him if he would like to say something. 'No, my Lord,' his counsel answered, 'I would not advise him to.' The jury returned a verdict of not guilty, whereupon D'Arcy's lawyer said, 'My Lord, Mr Wentworth . . . has taken a passage . . . in the fleet to

Botany Bay . . . as Assistant Surgeon, and desires to be discharged immediately'. In committing himself, D'Arcy would have been aware of Watkin Tench's best selling and generally positive account of his voyage with the First Fleet. But he was probably unaware that, in order to cut costs, the government had appointed a slavery firm to organise the fleet he would be travelling with.⁷

While D'Arcy had been in court, the transport ship *Neptune* had been loading convicts at its berth on the Thames. Among them was seventeen-year-old Catherine Crowley, who had been sentenced to seven years' transportation for stealing sheets and clothes, valued at £1.11.0, from the house of her employer.

After weighing anchor, the *Neptune* made for Plymouth to load 300 male convicts before sailing to Portsmouth to join the Second Fleet to the colony. During this short trip Lieutenant John Macarthur, of the New South Wales Corps, complained about the swearing of the convict women and the stench of their toilet buckets, which upset his wife Elizabeth. With a reputation for being 'proud and haughty', Macarthur became so angry that he fought a duel with the *Neptune's* captain, Thomas Gilbert. This resolved nothing, and before long the escalating fights and death threats among the female convicts led to Gilbert's replacement. But Macarthur was soon complaining about the new captain for ignoring his concerns that Elizabeth had to share a passageway with convicts. For Catherine Crowley, the long voyage ahead could only get worse.⁸

According to one account D'Arcy Wentworth boarded the *Neptune* on 12 December 1789, although as late as 30 December *The Times*, which had developed a keen interest in his fate, reported that he was still ashore. If he did remain ashore a little longer, it was no doubt to enjoy for one last time the delights of London. After all, he was leaving a vibrant city of almost a million people at the centre of the civilised world for a settlement of about 1000 souls, three-quarters of them convicts, perched on the edge of a continent

whose coast had not yet been fully mapped. Whenever D'Arcy did finally board the *Neptune* for what was then the longest voyage in the world, to be sailed at the pace of a person walking, his status as a private passenger guaranteed him the sort of accommodation that Catherine Crowley could only have dreamed about.

Unlike the male convicts, the females aboard the *Neptune* were not chained and were given access to the poop and quarter deck. It was probably here, early in the voyage, that something about Catherine caught D'Arcy's roving eye. As no picture or description of Catherine exists, just what the attraction was remains a mystery. But knowing D'Arcy, she was no doubt pretty or voluptuous or both. For her part, Catherine wanted to escape her violent convict companions, who were 'abandoned creatures' covered in filth and vermin. So D'Arcy plucked her from this putrescent pile into his quarters. After a few weeks the Macarthurs, exasperated with the conditions on board, undertook a hazardous transfer to the *Scarborough* by rowboat at sea.

For those who remained on the *Neptune*, especially the convicts, the voyage degenerated into a living hell as illness swept the ship. The miasma below decks nauseated the prisoners and turned the officers' shiny metal buttons black. Despite his medical qualifications, D'Arcy did not help. Like everyone else on board he was cowed by the captain, a violent man who was later tried for the murder of the *Neptune's* cook. But this did not stop the Navy's Commissioners from later trying to exculpate themselves by saying that in addition to a surgeon and surgeon's mate, there was 'a passenger of the [medical] faculty on board'.

When the *Neptune* finally arrived at Sydney on 29 June 1790, its bilge sloshing with disease-laden sewage and its holds crawling with rats, one observer said of her convicts that 'they were almost half dead, very few could stand . . . and they died ten or twelve a day when they first landed'. The *Neptune* had lost 147 men and eleven women, or 31 per cent of those aboard, the worst record of

any convict transport ever to sail to Sydney. One anonymous female convict later claimed she overheard Governor Arthur Phillip say that the convicts' deaths amounted to murder. But in the middle of all this misery some small miracles occurred, including, apparently, Catherine Crowley's pregnancy.⁹

As D'Arcy and Catherine soon found out, the tiny Sydney settlement, established just over two years earlier, was in a desperate state. It was so short of food that many of the colony's residents were now eking out an existence ten miles to the west, at Rose Hill, or 1000 miles to the northeast, on Norfolk Island. As a result, Sydney's population had shrunk from 1000 to fewer than 600 starving inhabitants, who dressed in rags and sheltered in shacks. Although Governor Phillip was responsible for the whole of eastern Australia, from roughly today's Western Australian border to the east coast, as well as for Van Diemen's Land, those who dined with him at his modest little abode overlooking the mud flats of Sydney Cove had to bring their own bread rolls.¹⁰

The Second Fleet swelled Sydney's already hard-pressed population to over 1700. Many of the emaciated new arrivals now lay dying in tents pitched along a grassy slope on the western side of Sydney Cove. To relieve this pressure, Governor Phillip sent the healthiest new arrivals, including D'Arcy and Catherine, to Norfolk Island. Despite their past brushes with the law, New South Wales gave the couple the opportunity for a fresh start. Apart from Elizabeth Macarthur, just about every woman in the colony had a convict background. And of D'Arcy, the Colony's Deputy Judge Advocate, David Collins, noted in a book published eight years later that:

There came out in the *Neptune* a person by the name of Wentworth, who being desirous of some employment . . . was now sent to Norfolk Island to act as an assistant to the surgeon there, being reputed to have the necessary requisites.

Many in the colony would have been aware of D'Arcy's past thanks to a combination of gossip and newspapers like *The Times*. Therefore Collins probably thought that D'Arcy's trials were so notorious that they required no mention, or that in a colony full of convicts no one cared anyway.¹¹

As D'Arcy set out with the heavily pregnant Catherine for Norfolk Island on board the *Surprise* on 1 August 1790, he turned his back on his family in Ireland. His brother and sister later complained about his failure to respond to their letters. For Lord Fitzwilliam and his London agent Charles Cookney, it was a different story. D'Arcy began with them a remarkable correspondence which helped to sustain him and his sons well into the next century. Prior to Darcy's departure from England, Fitzwilliam had arranged for Cookney to act as D'Arcy's agent as well as his own to look after their respective business affairs in London. Both men wanted D'Arcy to succeed and were delighted when he later did so.¹²

Early victualling records clearly show that when D'Arcy and Catherine arrived on Norfolk Island in mid-August, they were accompanied by the infant William Crowley. But when that infant, later known as William Charles Wentworth, died in England in 1872 in his eighty-second year, his obituary in the *Illustrated London News* said he was born in 1794. By then, his date of birth had become a source of confusion and embarrassment. If he was born on the *Surprise*, then either his birth was premature or he was conceived before Catherine and D'Arcy met. Perhaps someone else in the *Neptune's* putrescent pile was his father. The first alternative is more likely, since the only known image of D'Arcy indicates a strong physical resemblance to William and they shared a number of buccaneering character traits. Whatever the case, D'Arcy acknowledged William as his son and doted on him for the rest of his life.¹³

William was thus Australian born. He was one of the first 'currency lads', a term used by a regimental paymaster to distinguish

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native-born Australians of European descent from their British-born counterparts, and so named because at the time the pound currency was inferior to the pound sterling. William's parents had survived extraordinary perils to arrive off Norfolk Island; now he joined them in facing new hazards as they disembarked from the *Surprize* for a dangerous small boat ride through the island's surf.¹⁴