

The
STAMP

of **AUSTRALIA**

The story of our post—from Second Fleet to
twenty-first century

KELLY BURKE


ALLEN & UNWIN

First published in 2009

Copyright © Kelly Burke 2009

Original concept for *The Stamp of Australia*: Hammerklavier Productions.

All attempts have been made to locate the owners of copyright material.
If you have any information in that regard please contact the publisher
at the address below.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher. The Australian *Copyright Act* 1968 (the Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or 10 per cent of this book, whichever is the greater, to be photocopied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) under the Act.

Allen & Unwin
83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Burke, Kelly.

The stamp of Australia : the story of our post – from Second Fleet to
twenty-first century / Kelly Burke.

ISBN: 9781741756456 (hbk.)
9781741756449 (pbk.)
9781741756142 (pbk.)

Includes index.

Australia Post—History.
Postal service—Australia—History.
Australia—History.

383.4994

Index by Trevor Matthews
Internal design by Nada Backovic
Set in 12.5/16 pt Goudy Old Style by Midland Typesetters, Australia
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

10987654321

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	From a land of no return	1
CHAPTER 2	A most useful man	19
CHAPTER 3	News from El Dorado	39
CHAPTER 4	A wire to civilisation	61
CHAPTER 5	Growing pains	83
CHAPTER 6	Airborne	99
CHAPTER 7	From behind enemy lines	121
CHAPTER 8	Postwar progress	145
CHAPTER 9	Stamps of a new Australia	165
CHAPTER 10	Philatelic fixations	185
CHAPTER 11	Challenges of the electronic age	205
CHAPTER 12	Delivering to a nation	219



FROM A LAND OF NO RETURN

Isolation is the sum total of wretchedness to a man.

THOMAS CARLYLE (1795–1881)

A message is written, addressed to a speck on the other side of the globe, stamped and slid casually into a hole in the wall: a commonplace act of faith. Just why can we be so certain that letters like these will reach their destination? Because it's been happening like that for 200 years, delivered by sailing ships, bush horsemen, rattling coaches, precarious flying machines, and in World War II, even a Japanese bomber. It's quite a story.

With the dawn of instant communication, the gentle letter may have lost its unique power to stave off isolation and despair. But for two centuries, the handwritten missive was paramount, a salve to isolation for each wretched convict and homesick digger. The evolution of a sprawling postal network connected these strands of humanity across an arid continent

THE STAMP OF AUSTRALIA

spanning 4000 kilometres from east to west, and six times that distance to the place once called Home. Through bushfire and drought, devastating world wars and crippling depressions, the lines of communication were never severed. The mail got through.

The instinct for contact must have ached large in the hearts of every convict, soldier and merchant who left Portsmouth on 13 May 1787. The voyage, conveying one of the largest armadas in history, had lasted more than eight months, and its cargo of more than 1400 men, women and children had endured freak storms, lice infestation, dysentery and scurvy while crammed in foul conditions aboard the 11 ships. Landing on 17 January 1788, the predestined settlement to Botany Bay was quickly rejected by Captain Arthur Phillip, the colony's governor-designate. As a port for safe anchorage it was less than ideal, the soil appeared to be of poor quality and the supply of fresh water was inadequate. A search party was dispatched and eight days later the British flag was raised in Port Jackson.

For those who were literate, writing provided a refuge from the inhospitable environment and harshness of daily life. Their letters would form the first history of the colony, documenting a radical social experiment which was to continue for almost a century. For most, however, a two-and-a-half-year silence lay ahead before any familiar word from the outside world penetrated their isolation.

National Library of Australia researcher Judy Cannon marvels at the personal glimpses into early convict life gleaned from even the briefest of scrawls. 'Something of the writer's character—although a writer knew an official was likely to read it—seeps through, along with a sense of how an individual

really felt about being transported to the other side of the world, aware that return was unlikely,' she says. 'An acute need for news of home and families and perhaps reassurance that their own still care about them troubles the reader; there is a haunting echo of loneliness.'

Less than two months after the First Fleet dropped anchor in Port Jackson, Phillip received what is widely accepted as the colony's first letter, from HMS *Supply*. The message was a progress report from Second Lieutenant Philip Gidley King, who, no sooner having arrived in New South Wales with the First Fleet, had been dispatched with 15 convicts and seven guards to set up a second penal colony at Norfolk Island. In doing so, King George III could be reassured the island, possessing what was thought to be one of the finest supplies of timber in the world, remained beyond the clutches of the French. One of the first civilian letters, penned by an unknown female convict, records the impact of the departure of the *Supply* to Norfolk Island:

The separation of several of us to an uninhabited island was like a second transportation. In short, every one is so taken up with their own misfortunes that they have no pity to bestow upon others. All our letters are examined by an officer, but a friend takes this for me privately. The ships sail tomorrow.

When the First Fleet vessel the *Alexander* set sail for the return voyage to England on 13 July, among the cargo was the first mail ever processed on Australian shores: Governor Phillip's first dispatch to the British Government, a handful of private correspondence, and a bundle of letters addressed

to the French Ambassador in London, regarding a French navy officer with an impressive-sounding name. Although the Governor of New South Wales and Jean-François de Galaup, Comte de La Pérouse, never met, Phillip agreed to the explorer's request to deliver his correspondence as a gesture of British goodwill. Having remained in Botany Bay with HMS *Sirius* and the fleet's transport ships on Phillip's orders, Captain John Hunter witnessed the arrival of La Pérouse's scientific expedition at Botany Bay just six days after the First Fleet's arrival, although the treacherous conditions prevented the Frenchman from anchoring for a further two days. La Pérouse accepted his runner-up status with equanimity and Hunter duly conveyed the letters back to Port Jackson. They were to be the last official records of the French expedition. On 10 March, La Pérouse bid Hunter farewell, set sail and disappeared. The fate of *La Boussole* and *L'Astrolabe* was to remain a mystery for another 38 years, until evidence of shipwreck was discovered off Vanikolo Island in the New Hebrides in 1826.

Back in Sydney, the colony's initial progress was less than auspicious. According to the records of the first Judge-Advocate, Captain David Collins, the Governor was obliged to read the riot act to his bedraggled convict mob less than a fortnight after landing in Port Jackson:

The convicts were order'd to sit down, and the Governor made an harangue to them, telling them he had try'd them hitherto to see how they were disposed, that he was thoroughly convinced they were many of them incorrigible, and that he was convinced nothing but severity w'd have any effect upon them to induce them to behave properly.

FROM A LAND OF NO RETURN

He also assure'd them if they attempted by night to get into the women's tents there were positive orders for the centry to fire upon them; that they had been very idle, wandering ab't the country, and not more than 200 out of 600 convicts were at work; that the industrious sh'd not labour for the idle; if they did not work they sh'd not eat; that in England if thieving poultry was to be punish'd w'h death in consequence of their being so easily supply'd, but here a fowl was of the utmost consequence to the settlement, as well as every other species of stock, as they were reserved for breed, therefore stealing the most trifling article of stock or provissions sh'd be punish'd with death; that however such severity might militate against his humanity and feelings, yet justice demanded such rigid execution of the laws, and they might implicitly rely upon justice taking place. Their labour w'd not be equal to that a husbandman in England endures who has a wife and family to provide for; they w'd never be work'd beyond their abilities, but everyone sh'd contribute his share in order to render himself and the community at large happy and comfortable; as soon as the nature of the settlement w'd admit of, that they sh'd be employ'd erecting houses for the different officers, the soldiers, and afterwards for themselves. After this harangue they were dismiss'd in the same form in which they were assembl'd. The Governor had a cold collation under a large tent, to which the general officers were invited.

The cattle, sheep and sacks of seed brought with the fleet proved a pitiful foundation for the genesis of a civilisation. Tended by novice convict farmers weakened by sickness and

starvation, the first crops failed. By the end of the first year of settlement, food rations had been cut back to subsistence level. And despite the ever-present deterrent of flogging and hanging, theft and assault were rife in a brute society where each and every wretched being was struggling for survival. When the British Government received a letter from Phillip saying the provision of more women was 'absolutely necessary' as a civilising influence on the colony, Sir Evan Nepean, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, agreed. Parliament needed little convincing that the presence of ladies—no matter how far that term might be stretched—would not only prevent the male convict population from engaging in 'gross irregularities', it would also supply the colony with much-needed human breeding stock. More than 200 female prostitutes, petty thieves, grifters and vagabonds, with at least five suckling infants in tow, were duly cleared from London's overflowing putrid prisons. The desperate flotsam were herded onto the *Lady Juliana*, and, along with fresh supplies and a further 800-odd convicts, a second fleet of six ships left England on 29 July 1789.

With a ratio of one female to every five males in the colony, a shipload of rugged young women sailing into Sydney Harbour on what history would dub the Floating Brothel would surely fill the heart of many a man watching from the shore with an instant lusty zeal. And indeed, more than half the women on board were chronologically ideal breeding stock, aged between 20 and 29. All but 23 were under the age of 39. But if the ladies of the *Lady Juliana* were expecting a welcoming ball, they were to be sorely disappointed. On the cusp of total collapse, the colony was expecting salvation in the form of

supplies, not more mouths to feed. Moreover, after 10 months at sea, many of the women, including seven bearing newborn infants, looked more starved and disease-ridden than the hungry convicts on shore. Phillip soon learnt that the Second Fleet's principal supply ship, the *Guardian*, stocked with most of the expedition's provisions, had struck ice. She would not be making it to Sydney Cove.

The one saving grace on the *Lady Juliana* was letters. Watkin Tench, a 31-year-old Marine officer and son of a Cheshire dancing instructor, was on the first boat which rowed out to reach the vessel. In his account of the settlement of Port Jackson, which was later to become a best-seller for the London publisher Debrett, Tench described how hardened criminals wept, as two and a half years of interminable silence from the home country were shattered.

'Letters, letters!' was the cry. They were produced, and torn open in trembling agitation. News burst upon us like meridian splendor on a blind man. We were overwhelmed with it: public, private, general, and particular. Nor was it until some days had elapsed, that we were able to methodise it, or reduce it into form.

Among those such as Tench with sufficient education to comprehend the significance of social and political events in Europe, much of the news from home would have astounded them. When the passengers of the First Fleet set sail from Portsmouth in May 1787, to all public knowledge their king was sane. Within four months of the fleet's departure, rumours had spread widely that George III was gabbling constantly and

incoherently, and had taken to the habit of shaking hands with trees, in the mistaken belief he was meeting the King of Prussia. As England went about transporting another 38,000 slaves to the New World each year, William Wilberforce and the Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, had taken a stand in Parliament, introducing a motion for the abolition of the slave trade. Fletcher Christian had led a mutiny on HMS *Bounty*, setting its captain, William Bligh, and 18 sailors adrift in the South Pacific. A newspaper called *The Times* had hit the streets of London, and by the time the Second Fleet sailed into Port Jackson, the paper's editor, John Walter, was already facing a year's imprisonment in Newgate Gaol, having been convicted of libel against the Duke of York. The introduction of designated left and right shoes had taken London's footwear fashion by storm, with the novel concept of shoelaces following close behind. The ladies would have been horrified to learn that their countrywomen's buttocks were no longer safe in public, as a knife-wielding stalker dubbed The Monster terrorised London, reportedly choosing only the most beautiful young female rumps to jab. With the promise of a £100 reward for his capture, armed vigilantes had taken to the streets. And the gentlemen would have been relieved to hear that the rules for cricket had finally been set, with the opening of Lord's and the foundation of the Marylebone Cricket Club.

Letters were also bursting with news of political upheaval among England's neighbours and former colonies. The storming of the Bastille in Paris heralded the beginning of the French Revolution, an event signalling the death of unlimited monarchies; worse still, it had scarpereed much-anticipated plans for the English cricket team's first overseas tour. The

Ottoman Empire had declared war on Russia. The ink was dry on the Constitution of the United States and the people of America had voted in George Washington as their first president. Reports of newfangled ideas emerging from this New World would have intrigued the First Fleet settlers; an observance called Thanksgiving appeared to have supplanted the overarching social significance of Christmas, while a distilled beverage called bourbon—made from corn of all things—was threatening to topple rum as the tippable of choice. And a founding father of that New World had made his timeless observation: that in this life, nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes. Benjamin Franklin, who uttered this depressingly frank observation a year before his own demise, was speaking from experience. Some 25 years earlier, he had unsuccessfully attempted to thwart the British Empire's attempt to lob its first revenue-raising tax on the colonies—the stamp tax. Franklin went on to be the driving force behind the creation of the United States Postal Service in 1775, but the stamp tax stayed.

While taxes were yet to become an irrefutable fact of life in New South Wales, death was omnipresent, no more so than when the full horror of the Second Fleet's voyage slowly unravelled over the course of June 1790. The exhilaration of the mailbags was soon extinguished, as the remaining ships arrived and disgorged their grim cargo. The First Fleet had lost just 48 passengers during its eight-month voyage, a death rate of about 3 per cent. More than 270 perished on the second voyage—almost a third of the convicts the fleet was carrying. It was to be the highest mortality rate in Australian transportation history. Some

161 men, women and boys died on the *Neptune* alone, while virtually all the survivors were either on the point of death or too weak to work. An article published in the *Sydney Cove Chronicle* on 30 June 1790, titled 'Diabolical Condition of the Convicts Thereon', reported:

The landing of those who remained alive despite their misuse upon the recent voyage, could not fail to horrify those who watched. As they came on shore, these wretched people were hardly able to move hand or foot. Such as could not carry themselves upon their legs, crawled upon all fours. Those, who, through their afflictions, were not able to move, were thrown over the side of the ships; as sacks of flour would be thrown, into the small boats.

What had gone so appallingly awry? The *Lady Juliana* and her five fellow Second Fleet vessels had been contracted out by the British Government to private operators. Camden, Calvert & King was a company which had made its fortune and staked its reputation on the transportation of slaves to America. The company had been paid a flat rate for every convict it took on board, regardless of whether they arrived dead or alive at the other end. Government regulations stipulated that prisoners should be supplied with adequate food and given access to fresh air each day, yet many in the Second Fleet had spent the voyage shackled in chains below decks where dysentery, typhoid, scurvy and smallpox took hold. Virtually all the surviving convicts disembarking on Australian shores were severely malnourished.

Once news of the convict death fleet reached England,

popular outcry among emancipists demanded an inquest. Charges were laid against some of the crew but not a single conviction ensued. Quite possibly it was Governor Phillip himself who dobbed in the slave ship company to the British authorities. A letter from an unnamed female convict written in Sydney Cove on 24 July 1790, suggests as much:

Oh! If you had but seen the shocking sight of the poor creatures that came out in the three ships it would make your heart bleed . . . They were almost dead, very few could stand, and they were obliged to fling them as you would goods, and hoist them out of the ships, they were so feeble; and they died ten or twelve a day when they first landed . . . The Governor was very angry, and scolded the captains a great deal, and, I heard, intended to write to London about it, for I heard him say it was murdering them. It, to be sure, was a melancholy sight.

The letter was more than a year old by the time it reached the pages of *London's Morning Chronicle*.

The letters of these early colonists, both free and bonded, serve as the first history of Australian white settlement—letters which paint a harsh picture of Australian life, yet not lacking in optimism. The level of literacy among convicts has been historically underestimated, and all prisoners were granted free delivery of their letters. Authorities were clearly aware of the rehabilitation possibilities associated with personal correspondence, with taskmasters such as Fremantle Prison's superintendent, Thomas H. Dixon, decreeing that prisoners might write one letter upon arrival and subsequently another

every two months. They were also permitted to receive one prepaid letter every two months, but were warned that ‘all letters of an improper, or evil tendency either to, or from the prisoner, or containing “Slang” or other objectionable expressions will be suppressed’.

According to Australian academics Stephen Nicholas and Peter Shergold, the proportion of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers among the early convicts differed little from the general British workforce from which it was drawn. Yet the overall literacy level of Australian convicts was significantly higher than the general literacy of the British and Irish working class. A ‘labour aristocracy’ among convicts—those with high levels of literacy and skills—was thought to comprise almost one in five convicts by the 1840s, affording this group greater work autonomy and opportunity for generating private income outside their hours of indentured servitude. Certainly, as the industrial revolution gathered momentum in England throughout the early 19th century, many convicts were working fewer hours than their free counterparts back home, and in a far healthier natural environment. By the mid-19th century, Australia had a higher fertility rate and significantly lower child mortality rate than most of the industrial cities of Britain. And after the subsistence rations which characterised the early years of the colony were raised, convicts were generally well fed, if only to maintain their productivity. The weekly government rations for male convicts in New South Wales in 1811 was 7 pounds (3 kilos) of salt beef, 4 pounds (1.8 kilos) of pork, 6 pounds (2.7 kilos) of wheat, and 15 pounds (6.8 kilos) of corn.

The threat of harsh punishment for transgression, however, played heavily on their minds, particularly those assigned to

unskilled, labour-intensive work. The crack of the cat o' nine tails and the hangman's noose were ever-present incentives to maintain productivity, and in the early days, justice, administered through a court-martial system, was swift and erratic. Samuel Payton, a 20-year-old convict, wrote this letter to his mother in England on the eve of his execution, in June 1790:

My dear mother! With what agony of soul do I dedicate the last few moments of my life, to bid you an eternal adieu! My doom being irrevocably fixed, and ere this hour tomorrow I shall have quitted this vale of wretchedness. I have at last fallen an unhappy, though just, victim of my follies. Banish from your memory all my former indiscretions and let the cheering hope of a happy meeting hereafter console you.

According to the records of Sydney's first Surgeon-General, John White, Payton was sentenced to hang for 'feloniously entering the marquee of Lieutenant Fuzer, on the night of the fourth of June, and stealing from thence some shirts, stockings and combs'. Caught red-handed by another officer, Payton was beaten senseless. On 24 June, he and another convict, Edward Corbett, were 'brought to the fatal tree'. Corbett had been found guilty of stealing a frock, and suspected, but not convicted, of making off with four cows—which at this early point comprised the colony's entire herd. In his journal, White conceded the cattle had in all probability simply strayed off, 'in this endless wild, as to be irrecoverably lost'. White writes poignantly of the contrition both men displayed at their makeshift gallows:

THE STAMP OF AUSTRALIA

They (particularly Payton) addressed the convicts in a pathetic, eloquent, and well-directed speech. He acknowledged the justice of his sentence, a sentence, which (he said) he had long deserved. He added that he hoped and trusted that the ignominious death he was about to suffer would serve as a caution and warning to those who saw and heard him. They both prayed most fervently, begging forgiveness of an offended GOD. They likewise hoped that those whom they had injured would not only forgive them, as they themselves did all mankind, but offer up their prayers to a merciful REDEEMER that, though so great sinners, they might be received into that bliss which the good and virtuous only can either deserve or expect.

They were now turned off, and in the agonising moments of the separation of the soul from the body seemed to embrace each other.

Letters from the grave travelled the high seas in both directions. The length of the eight-month journey upon which they were carried was only to improve with the introduction of clipper ships in the 1840s. When mail arrived for every officer but George Harris in August 1804, the man who would later go on to co-found Hobart Town sat down and penned a plaintive letter to his brother, begging for a word from home. His mother obliged, but the sending and reciprocation of the correspondence had taken almost three years.

The letters which formed the earliest narrative history of a fledgling society were not solely focused on the hardship and despair of convict life. For many, transportation promised a

fresh start, and once their sentence had been served, a chance to better their position in a society free from tradition and class strictures. Fremantle convict Griffith Bowyer wrote to his parents telling them he liked ‘this Colony very well’ and had been assured by the Governor that good conduct and willing industriousness would be rewarded with an early ticket of leave. And upon earning his freedom, Bowyer wrote, a man ‘may do very well if he is only steady and keeps out of bad company’.

For many of the female convicts, life in the colony was an improvement on their impoverished existences in the old country and the fetid conditions of London’s prisons. An analysis of female convict data by Australian historian Deborah Oxley has found that far from being a class of professional criminals, the majority of females flagged for transportation had no prior convictions and had most likely been driven to transgress through low wages or the inability to find paid work. The overwhelming majority had been found guilty of crimes of property theft, and well over half of these types of offences involved stealing basic necessities such as clothing, yarn, pots and pans, bedding and food.

For those prepared to loosen the strictures of Georgian morals, better food and sleeping arrangements could be secured on the voyage out, by agreeing to become a ‘wife’ of one of the ship’s crew. The sex trade was flourishing as much in Georgian England as it was on the floating brothels of the early fleets, or on the mud of Sydney’s rudimentary streets.

Mary Haydock was just 14 years old when, as an orphan runaway disguised as a boy, she was caught stealing a horse and sentenced to transportation for seven years. She arrived

THE STAMP OF AUSTRALIA

in New South Wales on the *Royal Admiral* in October 1792, and was immediately assigned to nursemaid duties in the household of Major Francis Grose.

My Dear aunt

We arrived here on the 7th and I hope it will answer better than we expected for I write this on Board of ship but it looks a pleasant place—Enough we shall but have 4 pair of trowser to make a week and we shall have one pound of rice a week and 4 pound of pork besides Greens and other Vegetaibles the tell me I am for life wick The Governor told me I was but for 7 years wick Grives me very much to think of it but I will watch every oppertunity to get away in too or 3 years But I will make my self as happy as I Can In my Pressent and unhappy situation . . . Mr Scot Took 2 Ginnues of me and said he would get me My Libberty . . .

Possibly it was the '2 Ginnues' which secured Mary's freedom less than two years after writing this letter. She went on to marry and bear seven children to Thomas Reibey, a wealthy merchant trader, and upon his death in 1811, assumed sole control of his numerous business enterprises. Mary Reibey became a woman of considerable wealth, opening warehouses in George Street, extending her husband's shipping operations, and amassing an impressive real estate portfolio in and around Sydney. She gained added respect in Sydney society for her charitable works, devotion to the church and promoting education. In 1825 she was appointed a founding governor of the Free Grammar School, which was later to become Sydney Grammar. Upon her retirement, she built a house in

FROM A LAND OF NO RETURN

Newtown, where she lived until her death at age 78. She had outlived five of her seven children. One of her grandsons, also named Thomas Reibey, would go on to become the 11th premier of Tasmania.

Today, Mary Reibey's face features on the Australian \$20 note, an attestation of the radical transformation that was indeed possible in this precarious new world.

As Thomas Carlyle so aptly observed: 'Man is, properly speaking, based upon hope; he has no other possession but hope; this world of his is emphatically the place of hope.'