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ABORIGINES - WAS IT SMALLPOX?

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When the fleet of British warships and transports led by H.M.S. *Supply* entered Botany Bay on the 18th of January 1788, the white invasion of Aboriginal Australia had begun. Captain Arthur Phillip in *Supply* was followed over the next two days by H.M.S. *Sirius*, six transports and three store ships. On the 26th January the Frenchman, La Perouse, with the ships *La Boussole* and *L'Astrolabe*, arrived at Botany Bay and remained there until the 10th of March, 1788. Because of the open nature of the bay, its shallow water and the lack of plentiful fresh water, Phillip decided to move the settlement, and on the 25th January sailed to Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour) in *Supply*, with the transports following on the 26th of January. The white invasion and occupancy of Australia started in reality when the whole of Phillip's fleet and colonists were anchored at the east of Sydney Cove. On board Phillip's eleven ships came 736 male and female convicts, 17 convict children, 211 marines accompanied by their wives and children.

Also surviving the voyage to Australia were 9 horses, 6 cattle, 44 sheep, 3 goats, 28 pigs and diverse ducks and chickens.

Two days later, on the 28th of January 1788, the governor's comfortable house had been erected, a convict had been flogged for insolence and the landing of the main party began. Two days later, on the 30th January, the first Black resistance of what was to be a two-hundred year story of conflict began when some Aboriginal men threw stones at a fishing party of the British. On the day of the 6th January 1788, a thunderstorm was to form the background to a grim carnival when the male convicts got to the women and the rum. The chronicles record that to a background of lightning and thunder the birth of the British colony was celebrated in debauchery and riot.

The next day the governor's warrant was read, the colony proclaimed, the marines paraded and the history of white conquest of this continent really began.

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Accompanying the British but more deadly than their firearms, military organisation and technology were a range of enemies to which Aboriginal society could not have, nor did they have, any answer. These were the invisible passengers which came in every ship; the pathogens of European society. The bacterium and viruses of the diseases endemic to England and Europe but totally unknown to the Aborigines living in eastern Australia. These included such diseases as the common cold, influenza, measles, tuberculosis, typhus, cholera, syphilis, gonorrhoea, and smallpox. To these diseases the Aboriginal people had no resistance and so were to fall victim to them in great numbers. The latest research puts the Aboriginal population of Australia at 800,000 to 1,000,000 at the time of initial white invasion. By 1830 it was probably as low as 40,000. The major cause of this terrible killing was the diseases brought by the Europeans which spread unchecked from tribe to tribe.

One of the great killers of the early colonial years was smallpox. Its origins and spread from Sydney Cove remain a mystery which will be examined later in this article.

Firstly, we need to examine the disease. Smallpox is the only disease which modern medicine has eradicated. It has disappeared from the earth due to the work of the World Health Organisation (W.H.O.) It was, until 1977 when W.H.O. declared it eradicated, one of the world's most dreaded plagues. Smallpox is an acute, highly infectious disease caused by a virus. It has an incubation period of from 10 to 16 days. It is characterised by a three day fever which is followed by a general eruption of blisters all over the body but especially on the face, arms and legs. These blisters quickly become pus-filled though, for those who recover, they begin to dry after about eight days. The death rate for an unexposed population is often as high as 90%. Europeans were very familiar with smallpox.

The first cases of smallpox amongst the Aboriginal people were reported by Lieutenant Tench, in April 1789. The disease appeared suddenly without any outbreak amongst the whites. When Captain John Hunter returned from a voyage to the Cape of Good Hope on the 9th of May 1789, he noted in his journals that on his arrival in Sydney Harbour not a single Aborigine or canoe was to be seen as his ship sailed up the harbour. He was not long in discovering the cause. He wrote -

As we have never yet seen any of these people who have been in the slightest degree marked with the smallpox, we had reason to suppose they had never before been affected by it. Some have been found sitting on their

haunches, with head reclining between their knees; others were leaning against a rock with their heads resting upon it.

William Bradley, after whom Bradleys Head is named, wrote :

From the number of dead natives found in every port of the harbour...the small pox has made dreadful havoc amongst them. We...were told that scarce any [Aborigines] had been seen lately except lying dead in and about their miserable habitations whence it appears that they are deserted by their companions as soon as the disorder comes out on them, or whether they were strangers to it before is doubtful.

Bradley further reported that the governor, in June 1789 while exploring Broken Bay, found in caves human skeletons and loose bones, presumably of smallpox victims, as the bones had not been removed. The white records state that -

The tribe of Colby was reduced to three people so that the survivors were forced to unite with another tribe.

The disease, called by Aboriginal people *gal-gal-la*, spread from the Sydney area to surrounding tribes and preceded white men across the Blue Mountains. Wherever it struck tribes were decimated. Those amongst whom the death rate was highest were the children and the aged - the future and the custodians of law and knowledge. Even before the white men dispossessed the people they were battling against the collapse of society as they knew it as, in a period of a few weeks, more than half of a tribe could die of a strange and awful disease never experienced before.

The great mystery is how the disease came to Australia. With its short incubation period of 10-16 days anyone carrying the disease would have certainly had the disease well before reaching Australia - Cape Town, the last port of call was over two months away and if the disease had appeared on any of the ships then it would certainly have been recorded. The First Fleet arrived in January 1788, and La Perouse stayed until March 1788, yet the smallpox epidemic was not noted until April 1789. Phillip states definitely that smallpox did not occur in the First Fleet on the voyage out. Several explanations are possible. Tench reports that "the surgeons had brought out various matter in bottles", presumably for vaccination purposes. Perhaps this was the source.

If so, was it accidental or, even worse, introduced on purpose?

Another, and I believe more likely explanation is that it was not in fact smallpox at all which killed the Aborigines at that time. Remember that flu and measles, a common disease of childhood, killed great numbers of Aborigines, and later Polynesians in the Pacific Islands because the people had no inherited resistance to them.

Though the records of the early white settlers would be sure to mention smallpox they would hardly mention chickenpox - for white children it was a mild disease of childhood. However, if this virus was loosed on a population without any resistance it could be as deadly as measles and its effects to the European observers would be indistinguishable from smallpox. Remember there was no outbreak of smallpox amongst the whites.

I believe then, that one explanation for the terrible death toll amongst Aborigines in the early days of contact may be that an introduced epidemic of chickenpox, not smallpox, swept through the tribes, its effects every bit as deadly as if it had been smallpox.

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