

## The First Fleet Collections: Representations of the Colonisation of Australia

**Editor's Introduction** | The collections of artists George Raper, Thomas Watling and the unknown Port Jackson Painter have provided a precious and unique record of the environment and indigenous peoples of Australia in the late eighteenth century, at the time of colonisation by the first British convicts in 1788. Poor preservation of original specimens and records has made these collections invaluable in tracing an otherwise incomplete period of history. Christopher Mills, head of Special Collections and Readers' Services at The Natural History Museum, explores the significance of these collections to science as well as other disciplines, such as ethnology, art history and anthropology.

The First Fleet collections are 629 drawings created by convicts and sailors who were connected with the First Fleet of convicts that left England in the eighteenth century for New South Wales, Australia. These are represented in three quite distinct collections: the Watling Collection, the Raper Collection and the Port Jackson Painter Collection.

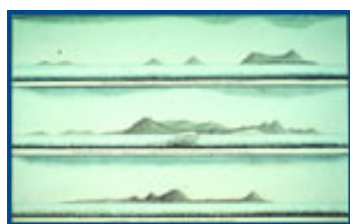
Understanding the history of the founding of the colony is important in relation to how we look at the collections today, and so it is necessary to provide the context of the events below. Understanding the popular interpretation of history provides us with important lessons on evaluating items in these collections.



The Natural History Museum  
View of the Needles, 1787.  
Drawing by George Raper.

The First Fleet left England on 13 May 1787, a voyage intended, primarily, to ship 780 convicts to New South Wales. It consisted of 11 ships under the command of Captain Arthur Phillip, designated in August 1786 to be the first governor of the colony of New South Wales. They reached their destination in January 1788, and George Raper, a sailor on the ship, provided the first collection of paintings, starting with locations they found en route to their final destination.

Several misconceptions have arisen about this period, namely that the colony of New South Wales was actually formed to solve Britain's convict problem at the time. The history is actually far more complex, and the convict problem had been an issue since Tudor times. The transportation of thousands of convicts abroad provided a good source of cheap labour in Africa, the Caribbean and India, and later North America, although the latter destination came to an abrupt end after 1776 and the American War of Independence. It was only then that Australia gained importance.



The Natural History Museum  
Cape Verde Islands.  
Drawing by George Raper.

In addition, the convict issue was but one the Pitt government was trying to resolve at the time. In the 1770s, France, keen on becoming a world power, allied itself with every other major nation in Europe, including Russia, against Britain. The threat to Britain and its empire (particularly to its colonies in the Far East and India) forced the government to consider options that would allow Britain to maintain its position and continue to compete on the world stage. A strategic location needed to be secured from which it could support its empire from French invasion. A safe harbour was also needed for the British fleet in the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean, from where, at short notice, supplies of food and other materials to its colonies could be made more cheaply. In addition, plantations were needed to grow hemp, especially for the supply of rope to the Navy, as was a new source of wood to counteract the effects of depleted English supplies, primarily for British Navy mast and spar repairs.

Finally, to resolve all of these pressing issues, the government agreed to the New South Wales site; a decision made largely on the urging of Sir Joseph Banks, the naturalist on Cook's first voyage on the *Endeavour*. He had seen Botany Bay, the original site for consideration, and had noted of Australia that the coast was thinly inhabited and the centre absolutely deserted. Strategically, it was thought ideal for both the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and nearby Norfolk Island appeared to have abundant supplies of hemp and a suitable species of pine. The placing of convicts was very much a secondary consideration, and arose largely from Banks's suggestion that the men would be a good source of cheap labour for the new colony.

Another common misconception is that Botany Bay was the final destination. Captain Phillip soon discovered that the soil around the bay was thin, arid and problematic for cultivation. So he sailed further up the coast, to Port Jackson, the place known today as Sydney, and the First Fleet landed at Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788.

Primary sources, such as government papers of the time, have since challenged this received wisdom, and Alan Frost, an Australian, was able to demonstrate a chronology that introduced the convicts at a later stage of planning. Nonetheless, the convicts were extremely important in the founding of the colony, in working to build it and in contributing to the artistic record represented by these three collections. The scientific work that came out of this voyage was really very much a by-product, but the collection would become an important testimony to this period of early settlement in Australia.



The Natural History Museum  
Aborigine. Drawing by  
George Raper.

The early days of settlement saw considerable co-operation between the governor and the local Aborigines (known as the Eora), and this good rapport only broke down once Captain Phillip left. Many of the governor's supply requests were ignored, and so on arrival in Australia Phillips found many of the problems he had foreseen: no information about the convicts, no supervisors or supplies, and insufficient and poor quality provisions: "I am without one botanist, or even an intelligent gardener in the colony," he wrote. "I have no account of the time for which the convicts are sentenced, or the dates of their conviction. The tools they have provided me with are of poor quality. Most of the axes, spades and shovels are the worst I've ever seen." However, he still managed to mould a community before he departed in December 1792, thus leaving an important legacy behind him.

One of the captain's closest companions on the voyage was the surgeon John White, and his interest in natural history influenced some of the artistic work produced. The three principal artists on board were George Raper, midshipman on the HMS *Sirius*; one intriguingly known only as the Port Jackson Painter, because his identity was never formally established; and Thomas Watling, a convict. Watling, a trained artist from Scotland, earned his conviction for forging banknotes and was placed by Captain Phillip under White's stewardship, to produce pictures he deemed necessary of the new colony.

This collection, part of Sir Joseph Banks's library, has remained a mystery. The artists' identities are ambiguous, although expert opinion has suggested we are left with three people's work. Clearly some of the paintings were actually done in the Port Jackson area, but it is quite likely that one of the artists at least never left Britain and worked from specimens (both plant and animal) and sketches that were brought back. This was quite common practice but it was a difficult task for artists to obtain good representations, particularly of animals they had never seen alive. Pictures were often not "claimed" by their artists and were left unsigned, and this resulted in the same drawing being repeated in a number of different ways--for example, the three images of the Australian dingo--and making it difficult to trace the artists concerned.



The Natural History Museum  
**Dingo, copy by an unknown artist of the original drawing in the Port Jackson Painter Collection.**

The collection consists of 69 drawings, and was originally bound into one volume. It consists of 15 plants, three mammals, 32 birds, five fish, nine reptiles, one arthropod and four ethnographic studies.



The Natural History Museum  
**Aborigine woman healing a child. Drawing by Thomas Watling.**

The least contentious of the collections in terms of the artist's identity, this collection consists of 72 drawings, with all but 10 signed by Raper. His style reflects the tradition at the time where all midshipmen were required to learn the elements of draughtsmanship, seen for example in the pink, lined frames. It is thus quite easy to identify his work (as with parts of the Port Jackson collection), and Watling's work was also seen to adopt a similar convention in time, which also caused later confusion with identification.



The Natural History Museum  
**Bird of Port Jackson, drawing by George Raper.**

The drawings were mostly completed in New South Wales and bound into a single volume. Of the 72 drawings made, just one is a plant; 41 are of animals and 30 depict topographical and ethnographic subjects. Raper was regularly unable to identify his subjects, and although the paintings are accurate representations of real specimens at the time, they are labelled in such a way to make later identification more problematic. For example, many are labelled simply "Bird of Port Jackson." Much of the identification work took place later in Britain. The ethnographic subjects include intricate details of the implements used by the Aborigines when fishing, hunting or engaged in warfare.

The largest of the three collections with 121 of the surviving 488 pictures signed by Watling, it is quite clear that many are by the anonymous Port Jackson Painter. Watling was a trained artist, and

there is a superior quality to his work. The collection comprises 59 pictures of plants, 271 birds, 16 mammals, 15 fishes, nine reptiles, 17 molluscs, 13 arthropods and 88 topographical and ethnographic subject pictures.

Working under White's influence, the style of drawing is very typical, and a convention of the time was to place all birds on a stump, staring to the right, for example. Hence it is known as the "stump and stare style." As a result, it is difficult to know how much of this is convention and how much is accurate observation.



The Natural History Museum  
View of Sydney from the east.  
Drawing by Thomas Watling.

Watling's drawings of landscapes and people, when compared with Raper's, employ far more style and technique, and he has clearly taken care to portray an accurate composition in a way that Raper's naval convention style cannot offer.

The 629 drawings in the three collections represent 60 per cent of the known drawings of the early period covering the first 20 years of the settlement. Many of the others are to be found in the Mitchell Library and the National Library of Australia.

Dr. White's journal gives an extensive account of both the voyage and natural history collections, and his elaborate pictorial collection was put together with enormous care and craftsmanship. The animal drawings in particular made an incredible impact in Europe at the time--people had never seen creatures such as these before.

The collections also highlight how good the relations were between the white settlers and the indigenous Aborigines at this first moment of colonisation. Watling's drawings are highly sympathetic and technically accomplished, often of people who assisted the settlers during the early days of the colony. It is recognised, however, that the collections are incomplete and selective of subject. It is suggested that there were other species found in the Sydney region at the time, now extinct, that were unfortunately never drawn. Artefacts were rarely preserved, so the drawings of musical instruments or weapons provide invaluable records.

The collections illustrate how artists' representations were often inaccurate, particularly with animals alien to Europe. We see this in many early depictions, such as those of the giraffe or rhinoceros from Africa. Raper's kangaroo has been tempered down as if in sheer disbelief, and the shortening of several features makes the drawing inaccurate despite his undoubted contact with the animals himself. The alien culture and environment of Australia in the late eighteenth century would have had a big impact on the outlook of those arriving with the First Fleet, carrying with them a fixed set of belief systems prevalent in European society at the time. This would in turn have greatly affected the artistic interpretations made.



The Natural History Museum  
Kangaroo. Drawing  
by George Raper.



The Natural History Museum  
**Native climbing tree.**  
Drawing by the  
Port Jackson Painter.

In addition, the collection is important in highlighting the errors. On Norfolk Island, pine trees were considered ideal for making good masts for the Fleet. However, once cut down and dried, the wood tended to split, and it could not be used. They settlers did not have the ability to investigate this beforehand, and so a whole industry was set up on the island, only to fail miserably.

The example of the painting of natives climbing a tree raises some issues of great interest in this analysis. The bat hangs while the men climb up, cutting footholds with a stone club. Would the noise and vibration have not caused the bat to leave? The snake looks as if it is trying to escape, but the small mammal just seems curious. It's a fascinating picture, but how authentic is it? You might not get a scene exactly like this, but it is nonetheless a depiction, we believe, of the real events: how Aborigines were able to gather necessities from difficult and perhaps dangerous locations. It reveals the harsh conditions of climate and terrain under which these people existed, and in that sense it is very revealing. It also tells us much about how the observer in turn tried to relate that story.



The Natural History Museum  
**Lord Howe Island pigeon,**  
now extinct. Drawing  
by George Raper.

Often the drawing created from the specimen was of more use than the specimen itself, certainly for popular dissemination. The collections have made an enormous contribution to knowledge of Australian zoology. Of the mammals that existed in Australia at the time of the First Fleet voyage, it is estimated that 70 per cent are now extinct. The collections of rare drawings are thus an important record, particularly where specimens have not survived.



The Natural History Museum  
**Aborigine montage. Drawing  
by Thomas Watling.**

The fields of ethnology and social anthropology have also benefitted, particularly because the study of both was very unsophisticated in the late eighteenth century. Artefacts were not collected and preserved for study in any systematic way, and inevitably many "souvenirs" brought back were lost. The Eora people of the Sydney area became extinct within 20 years of settlement, after having been hunted by successive governors or killed off by disease. The paintings are therefore the only record of them and their way of life.

The collections have benefitted history and historical geography with accurate plans and charts of the area, including some from which it is possible to reconstruct both the landscape before and after the earliest settlements. For the art historian, the quite different styles show both a remarkable degree of skill and a certain naivety at the same time, especially Raper's work, certainly compared with work being done in Europe at the time. However, considerable skill and technique was needed to accurately portray many of the specimens, and Watling in particular was able to demonstrate this in his work.

An important part of both British and Australian cultural history and identity is included within the First Fleet collections, and they form some of the earliest and most valuable representations of the Australian continent by European artists. Whilst the connection with nature is most evident in the works, the connections are also seen to branch out into an infinite range of other areas of study.

## **Books:**

Title: Voyages of Discovery : Three Centuries of Natural History Exploration

Format: Paperback

Author: Tony Rice

Date: 06-JAN-00

ISBN: 1902686063

Title: Drawing in Australia: Drawings, Water-Colours, Pastels and Collages from the 1770s to the 1980s

Format: Hardcover

Author: Andrew Sayers

Date: 26-OCT-89

ISBN: 0195549201

Title: Images from Nature

Format: Paperback

Author: The Librarians of The Natural History Museum

Date: 01-JAN-98

ISBN: 0565090291

Title: The Art of the First Fleet & Other Early Australian Drawings

Format: Hardcover

Author: Bernard Smith, Alwyne Wheeler

Date: 01-JUL-88

ISBN: 0300041187

Title: Australian Painting 1788-1990

Format: Paperback

Author: Smith, Bernard

Date: 15-JUL-93

ISBN: 019553476X