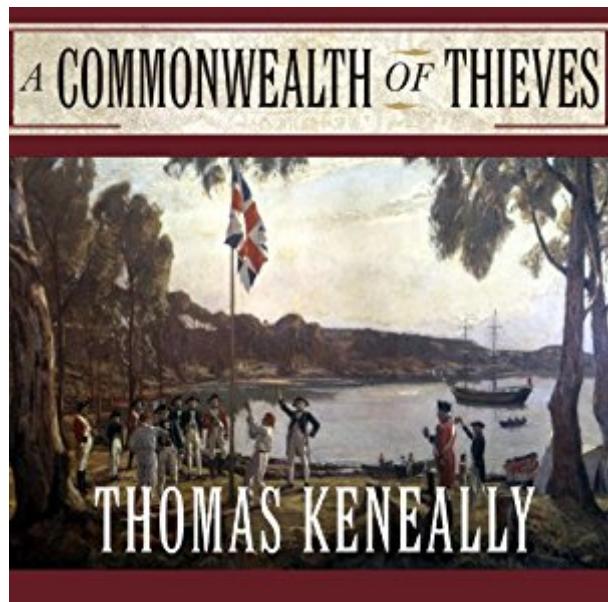


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A Commonwealth Of Thieves: The Improbable Birth Of Australia



Synopsis

It was 1786 when Arthur Phillip, an ambitious captain in the Royal Navy, was assigned the formidable task of organizing an expedition to Australia in order to establish a penal colony. The squalid and turbulent prisons of London were overflowing, and crime was on the rise. Even the hulks sifting at anchor in the Thames were packed with malcontent criminals and petty thieves. So the English government decided to undertake the unprecedented move of shipping off its convicts to a largely unexplored landmass at the other end of the world. Using the personal journals and documents that were kept during this expedition, historian/novelist Thomas Keneally re-creates the grueling overseas voyage, a hellish, suffocating journey that claimed the lives of many convicts. Miraculously, the fleet reached the shores of what was then called New South Wales in 1788, and after much trial and error, the crew managed to set up a rudimentary yet vibrant settlement. As governor of the colony, Phillip took on the challenges of dealing with unruly convicts, disgruntled officers, a bewildered, sometimes hostile native population, as well as such serious matters as food shortages and disease. Moving beyond Phillip, Keneally offers captivating portrayals of Aborigines, who both aided and opposed Phillip, and of the settlers, including convicts who were determined to overcome their pasts and begin anew. With the authority of a renowned historian and the narrative grace of a brilliant novelist, Thomas Keneally offers an insider's perspective into the dramatic saga of the birth of a vibrant society in an unfamiliar land. A Commonwealth of Thieves immerses us in the fledgling penal colony and conjures up colorful scenes of the joy and heartbreak, the thrills and hardships that characterized those first four improbable years. The result is a lively and engrossing work of history, as well as a tale of redemption for the thousands of convicts who started new lives thousands of miles from their homes. . --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

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Customer Reviews

The founding of European Australia has suffered [and survived] a wide variety of accounts. Why should another be necessary? Chiefly, because few of those histories approach the level of human interest given that event in this book. The most famous of the other narratives, Hughes' "The Fatal Shore", flogged the inhumanity of the British prison system almost as sternly as colonial commanders did the felons. Keneally's story is far more balanced, since he understands better the situation of the times. He makes no excuses for the British prison system at a time when its major colonial effort was breaking away. For him, it is the human stories he wishes to relate, and with his writing background to help, he succeeds admirably. Keneally has touched on the early years of the Port Jackson [Sydney] convict colony before, most notably in his novel "The Playmaker". Here, shedding fiction for fact, he describes the voyage of the First Fleet, the landing at Botany Bay and the discovery that Cook's description was inadequate and the relocation further along the coast to the "best harbour in the world". In doing so, he brings to life a man not often enough recognized, Arthur Phillip, commander of the Fleet and first Governor of the colony. Phillip's initial success, bringing the crews and convicts nearly intact across vast stretches of ocean, stands in stark contrast to later transports. The Second Fleet proved a scandal of bad planning, mismanagement and inefficiency. Far worse for the potential of the colony's success was the inadequate supply mechanisms. Instead of immediately returning to a supply port, the prison ships went to Asia for tea to return to England. The prisoners and their keepers were left to shift for themselves.

"A Commonwealth of Thieves - The Improbable Birth of Australia" covers the establishment of the first English settlement in New South Wales (i.e. Australia), and the stories of the convicts, free men, and military personnel who played a role. He also has some stories of the unfortunate aboriginal population who were the first to encounter the European settlers. The book is divided into two sections. The first section covers the decision to send the convicts, the preparation for the first fleet, the voyage of the first fleet, the evaluation of where to build the colony, and the establishment of the colony by the members of the first fleet. The second section covers additional shipments of convicts to the area, the continued growth of the colony and the interactions with the native population, and concludes with the departure of the colony's first governor, Arthur Phillip. This is one

of the balanced historical accounts on any period of history that I have ever read. Thomas Keneally does an exceptional job of relating the stories of the people and events without choosing sides. There is, of course, ample opportunity to criticize the Europeans, or to defend their actions, but Keneally stays away from that discussion, and simply relates what happened. He does offer the historical perspective of the time on the events as gathered from numerous resources. For the rest, he leaves the reader to make their own conclusions. The research that Thomas Keneally did for this book is also superb. He draws from official historical records, as well as numerous personal journals from a fairly large number of the people involved. From these sources he builds a history which not only covers the settlement, but then blends that with biographical sketches.

Tom Keneally's *The Commonwealth of Thieves* is an excellent read, well researched and written in a smooth and economical style that gives the reader a thorough introduction to the early history of the Botany Bay settlement. My sole complaint is that it essentially ends in 1793 with the return of Captain Phillip, the colony's first governor, to Britain, the colony having after much difficulty and doubt finally become a viable settlement. Keneally's style is so engaging and the events so intriguing that it leaves you wanting more, beyond the epilogue in which he relates what became of some of the key individuals (and their descendants) who survived the difficult times of the early years. But while Keneally's history is limited in its breadth, it compensates for that in its depth. His thorough research brings to life the conditions of Britain's legal and penal system that led to the idea of the Botany Bay project, the difficulties that the transportees faced in the ships where so many died before even setting foot in the utterly alien land they were sent to, the hardships faced in the early years where the colony was repeatedly faced with the prospect of starvation, and of particular interest, the difficulties between the British intruders and the native Eora (the aborigines). I learned quite a few things from this book, one of which was how it was the American Revolution that indirectly led to the Botany Bay experiment. Prior to the Revolution, Britain had for decades used its American colonies as a method of reducing its prison population by transportation, and when the Revolution put an end to that outlet, it became necessary to find another. The dates tell it all: the American Revolution ended in 1783, and the first convict fleet departed for Australia in 1787.

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