

## FINANCIAL REVIEW

### Sex on the fatal shore is no laughing matter

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**Julie McCrossin** takes issue with a new history book containing some very old attitudes

You often learn more about the present than the past when people write about historical events. *The Birth of Sydney* (Text Publishing) by bestselling author Tim Flannery is a classic example. This selection of eyewitness accounts of the early history of white settlement, edited and introduced by Flannery, will seduce the most reluctant reader into a passion for Australian history. Flannery's reputation for writing and speaking with passion and authority about conservation, mammals and natural history will ensure a receptive audience for this engaging work.

But anyone sensitive to issues surrounding the depiction of women in history will be disappointed, and possibly infuriated. When it comes to gender relations, Tim Flannery should stick to tree kangaroos and possums, and leave the sheilas to people who have given it a bit more thought.

He tells us about the first night spent ashore by the women convicts of the First Fleet, after they scrambled off the long boats on February 6, 1788. The ship's surgeon responsible for the women, Arthur Bowes Smyth, reports in his journal that the sailors asked for a double issue of rum "to make merry with upon women quitting the ship". The rum was issued and Flannery describes the result as a time of "amusement, singing, fighting and fucking". It was a "party" that continued despite Governor Phillip's orders the next morning to shoot anyone who attempted to get into the women's tents.

Flannery seems to represent this night of sanctioned sexual assault on a group of women heavily outnumbered by men (189 of the 732 convicts were women) as a kind of release from repression. "It was a salty, saucy and insolent affair full of irony, colour and sex," he writes. "It was as if the constraints of old Europe had been irrevocably left behind ... and the unbuttoned nature of the town, which remains characteristic, was stamped indelibly on it from the first." During an interview this week on ABC Radio, this "first night of debauchery" was discussed with laughter by Flannery and his male interviewer.

Flannery also describes how a ship's carpenter and a young cabin boy were evicted a few days later from a female convict's tent. The soldiers marched them out of camp to the tune of *The Rogue's March*. Their hands were tied and the boy was forced to wear petticoats. Was the boy an aggressor or a victim? Governor Phillip's brutal commitment to stamping out homosexuality is well documented, but the reports of this particular incident are ambiguous. Yet this punitive parade before mocking convicts and red-coats is described by Flannery as "a sort of prototype for Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras". It is a strange and insensitive comparison. Mardi Gras celebrates sexual freedom, whereas the 1788 parade in the scrub at Port Jackson was socially sanctioned ridicule. The Mardi Gras reference appears to be designed by Flannery to reinforce his characterisation of the first night for the convict women as indicative of a new colonial freedom.

A wild night it certainly was. A violent electric storm hit at nightfall just as the last women landed, splitting a tree and killing precious livestock. However, other writers have portrayed the experience that night in very different terms.

For Robert Hughes in *The Fatal Shore* (Collins Harvill), the women "floundered to and fro ... pursued by male convicts intent on rape" and "as the couples rutted between the rocks ... the

sexual history of colonial Australia may fairly be said to have begun". It is a history with little good news for indigenous women as well. Stuart Macintyre in *A Concise History of Australia* (Cambridge) cites "sexual relations" as a "recurrent cause of conflict" with the Aborigines.

Anne Summers in the updated version of her 1975 classic *Damned Whores and God's Police* (Penguin), presents a compelling case that "imposed sexual slavery" was "de facto British policy at the time" and the label "whore" was a weapon used for the subjugation of all women, in conjunction with physical violence.

These interpretations are supported by some of the eyewitness accounts Flannery includes in his new book, such as the surgeon's description of the "scene of debauchery and riot" after the women came ashore and the men "got to them very soon after", and also Lieutenant Ralph Clark's lament about the "Seen of Whoredome" in the women's camp that he compares to "Sodom". But the tone of Flannery's introduction directs us away from a tough, critical assessment of that night. He calls Lieutenant Clark "prudish". And with this, and his laughter on radio while discussing rape, he misrepresents the brutal history of the women's experience.