



## U3AM at Home

### **THE DARKEST DAY IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY**

**BY JIM POULTER**

25 March marks the anniversary of the most momentous, but least known day in Australian history. It is the day in 1789 that smallpox was deliberately released to the Australian public, by the Lieutenant Governor of the Sydney colony, Major Robert Ross.

Being a disease-free environment, Australians had no resistance to European diseases. Even the common cold could kill. The smallpox therefore spread rapidly through the whole continent, and like it had done when introduced into South America, North America and Southern Africa, it killed 90% of the local population.

With a base population of at least three million people, this means that the 1789 smallpox plague killed at least two and a half million Australians. Little meaningful study has been made of this catastrophe, so tracking down how it occurred was rather like the plot of a detective novel.

The disease suddenly appeared on 15 April 1789 and everyone was mystified. Was it already here? Could the French have brought it? Did the First Fleet Chief Surgeon, John White, bring bottles of smallpox scabs with him from England?

Captain Arthur Phillip immediately questioned White, who cryptically replied that he had one bottle, but the seals were intact. That may well have been technically true right then, but what medico would purchase only one bottle when there were 1,400 people in the First Fleet to immunise?

Captain Watkin Tench, in fact, noted in his diary that the surgeons had bottles in their possession, but there had been no sign of the disease in the seventeen months since they had quit the Cape of Good Hope. Now why would Tench mention the Cape of Good Hope, unless that was where bottles were bought? Tench was actually speaking from firsthand knowledge, because he was a passenger on the *Charlotte*, the same ship as White.

So why and how had the smallpox suddenly appeared fifteen months after the First Fleet landed? The key to answering this question lay in a seeming contradiction. Some history books said that *no white man* died in the plague, whilst others said *one sailor* died.

The ship passenger lists gave the answer and both statements proved to be correct. Joseph Jeffries, a sailor from the ship *Supply*, became symptomatic with smallpox on 2 May, two weeks after it broke out. He was however not a white man. Jeffries had been recruited in the stopover at Rio and was, in fact, a Native American Indian. I knew from personal experience that Native American and Native Australian people get on famously, because they have similar cultures.

When I then read the circumstances of his death, what was *not* said came through the loudest. No surprise or disapproval was expressed about him having visited the local native people, and this can only mean that he had approval, because it was mandatory. This approval could therefore have only come from Captain James Campbell, who was the sole delegated authority.

The plot thickens. Captain Campbell was in fact the only friend and ally of the Lieutenant Governor, Major Robert Ross, who was implacably opposed to Governor Phillip. Ross believed that Phillip was soft and incompetent and that war with the natives was inevitable.

Ross and Campbell knew what needed to be done. They had both served fifteen years before in the American Indian Wars, when General Amherst had handed out smallpox infected materials to the Indians.

Fortunately the First Fleet was the most documented event in human history, so if you know what you are looking for, it is all there. All the disparate, seemingly disconnected information suddenly unravelled to show the pattern.

Surgeon White had bought jars of scabs in Cape Town and all except one ended up in the government store. Six Marines, who were supposed to be guarding the store, were caught robbing it in March 1789. Ross and Campbell did an inventory, found the jars and decided to release it, thereby avoiding the need for war.

Campbell knew that Joseph Jeffries had formed friendships with the local people and always took presents when he visited. Jeffries arrived back from Norfolk Island on the ship *Supply* on 24 March and Campbell gave him the clothing and blankets that he and Ross had infected.

This infected material was then given to the local Australians on 25 March 1789, the same day the Marines were hanged. The virulence of the scabs is much reduced, so the first people who caught it had a greater chance of survival, but they then passed it on in full virulence over a longer period to greater numbers.

The incubation period for the disease is seven to seventeen days, but commonly ten to twelve days. It then takes about a week to die. The arithmetic is simple and compelling. Jeffries arrived back on March 24 and the disease broke out a fortnight later.

## IMAGINE CORONAVIRUS 100 TIMES WORSE

Nowadays, social media can spread information (or misinformation) about important events, but back in 1789 the Australian social media was song, dance and message-stick. It was essentially the same in medieval Europe, when wandering minstrels sang witty songs to local audiences, about the political or social news of the day. The nursery rhyme 'Ring a Ring a Rosie' was, for instance, about the 14<sup>th</sup> century Black Death Plague. The first sign of the plague was sneezing, and we all still say 'Bless you' because you were as good as dead if you sneezed.

When the smallpox pandemic suddenly and inexplicably broke out in Sydney in early April 1789, the suffering was catastrophic. Australia had been a disease-free environment and not even the common cold was present. Suddenly, people became feverish and pus-filled sores broke out all over their bodies. They suffered in indescribable pain for about ten days then died in relentless numbers.

First Fleet officer David Collins visited some campsites with his native friend Arabanoo and graphically recorded the following:

*'...those who witnessed his expression and agony can never forget either. He looked anxiously around him in the different coves we visited; not a vestige in the sand was to be seen of a human foot; the excavations in the rocks were filled with the putrid bodies of those who had fallen victim to the disorder; not a living person was anywhere to be met with. It seemed as if, flying from the contagion, they had left the dead to bury the dead. He lifted up his hands and eyes in silent agony for some time; at last he exclaimed, 'All dead, all dead' and then hung his head in mournful silence.'*

Smallpox had scourged Europe over the whole of the eighteenth century, so the First Fleet doctors were well practiced in quarantine procedures. History therefore proudly records that 'no white man died of the plague' after it broke out in April 1789. However, it spread inexorably along the coast and through the river systems to reach every corner of Australia.

The spread of the disease was also unwittingly aided by the social media of the day. In Sydney a song was created, replete with ghoulish shrieks and groans to convey the pain and suffering involved. Messengers were sent out with the song to warn other tribes. The only problem was the messengers had been incubating the disease and passed it on with the song.

It is a standard protocol in traditional Australian society that a song is never translated when it is learnt. It must always be sung in the language of the people who created it. So imagine my surprise in finding that Jimmy Dawson, an early settler at Warrandyte in 1840, had recorded the words of the smallpox song that had originated in Sydney. Jimmy has shifted to Part Fairy in the Western District in 1844 and began a lifelong process of documenting the cultural information he was given. The chilling words of the song (without the ghoulish shrieks and groans) are translated as follows:

*Red hot Echidna spikes are burning me  
Piercing me until pain overwhelms me  
Comfort me my sisters  
I am a grinning, grinning, grinning skull  
I am a grinning, grinning, grinning skull  
I am a grinning, grinning, grinning skull*

The fact that this original song was recorded in the Western District of Victoria, some sixty years after the plague had swept through, is testament to the accuracy of Aboriginal oral history conveyed in story and song. All that is required is some basic understanding of the cultural symbolism embedded in the story.

Some historians have opined that the smallpox plague never reached Victoria, but this is at odds with Aboriginal oral history. The Woiwuring language people of the Melbourne area recount the legend of the Mindye and describe the devastation wrought.

The Mindye is described as being a ten mile long, serpent like creature with the head of a dog, a mane and the tail of a possum. It spat poison and moved at such speed it was invisible, but the poison was in the dust that followed. The pock marks left on any survivors were referred to as *'the cups of the Mindye'* and other scarring as *'the scales of the Mindye'*.

In my 2016 book *'The Dust of the Mindye'* I estimated that the death rate from the 1789 smallpox was around 90% of the Australian population. With a minimum base population of three million, that means the death toll was at least 2 ½ million Australians. It is a sobering comparison to our present predicament.

## **THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF OUR GREATEST PANDEMIC**

Although the disease was new to Australia, in Europe and other parts of the world there had been rolling plagues of the smallpox virus through the entire eighteenth century. Any survivors gained lifetime immunity, so the overall death rate was usually 30% to 40%.

In populations experiencing their first exposure to smallpox, such as North America and South America in the sixteenth century and South Africa in the seventeenth century, the death rate was always around 90%.

Australians were even more vulnerable as this was a completely disease-free environment. There was no resistance to European diseases and even the common cold could kill. The resulting Australian death rate from the 1789 smallpox plague was therefore at least 90%, with the actual numbers killed being at least 2½ million Australians. The enormity of this figure is hard to comprehend, even if it happened today.

This article will therefore begin to explore the social effects that accompanied this massive depopulation. This is something I have never seen attempted before by any previous author, and one can only wonder at the reasons for this.

The first point to understand is that, like the present day Covid-19 virus, the smallpox virus was not an equal opportunity disease. Some people who caught the disease survived, but this was only the fittest 10% of people from later childhood and up to middle age.

Like the present Covid-19, the elderly were particularly vulnerable to smallpox. Unlike Covid-19 however, young children were also particularly vulnerable. For those who caught smallpox in Australia, the harsh reality was as follows: if you were under six years old you were dead; if you were over sixty you were dead; if you were a pregnant woman you were dead.

I often use the term 'Druidic Meritocracy' to describe the nature of traditional Australian society. This means that people were promoted to authority in society solely on the basis of both their religious and secular knowledge. Both male and female Eldership was therefore achieved solely on merit, and through meeting the twin tests of knowledge and character.

So just think about the implications from that aspect for a moment. Suddenly in one fell swoop, a whole generation of Elders, both men and women, is wiped out before the next generation of Elders have completed their training. Nothing could have prepared them for this dislocation.

At the other end of the scale the youngest generation has also been wiped out, along with every pregnant woman. This meant that suddenly there were more men than women and there was a dearth of women of marriageable age. Not only that, but there was going to be a dearth of marriageable women for the next generation.

In traditional Australian society men had no say in who married who. Marriage was controlled by women a generation ahead by a process of mother-in-law gifting. Men had to be proven hunters and providers before they could marry, so were usually in their mid-twenties or later when they did. On the other hand, girls were married at about fourteen, so a husband might be ten or fifteen years older than his wife.

This meant that a man was around the same age as their future mother-in-law. Both grew up knowing each other, and knew that the as yet unborn child of the girl would be the future wife of the boy. So to make sure there was no possibility of a sexual attraction between a future mother-in-law and her future son-in-law, he was never allowed to look at her face. He would rather blunder into a tree than look at his mother-in-law. Some might think it is an excellent rule.

However in the apocalyptic post-smallpox world of Australia, these generation-ahead marital arrangements were thrown into chaos. Female authority was consequently a prime casualty of the smallpox plague. A man's marital prospects now depended almost solely on either elopement or abduction, and this had two results.

First, previously unknown levels of domestic violence now became an institutionalised norm, and in some communities this result is still being felt more than two hundred and thirty years later. Second, as the rate of wife abductions increased, so did intertribal conflict.

Inter-tribal killings reached heights never seen before, prompting settlers and historians to falsely conclude that, like domestic violence, this was an age-old traditional norm. Historians have even gone so far as to count up the number of frontier period deaths recorded, to conclude it exceeded the deaths of Australian soldiers in the First World War. And this proves exactly what?