

Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia
An exhibition developed and presented by the
National Museum of Australia

OBJECT BIOGRAPHY

First Fleet Memento

The first Irish to arrive in Australia came on the First Fleet but material relating to the Fleet is extremely rare and this small 74 millimetre medal depicting the convict transport Charlotte is an important starting point in the exhibition *Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia*.

The First Fleet, as it became known, departed England in May 1787 and consisted of two small naval ships *HMS Supply* and *HMS Sirius*, six convict transports Alexander, Charlotte, Scarborough, Prince of Wales, Friendship and Lady Penrhyn and three store ships, Golden Grove, Borrowdale and Fishburn. After departing from Cape Town, Captain Phillip transferred to *HMS Supply* and split the convoy into three. *Supply* would proceed alone; the three fastest transports, Alexander, Scarborough and Friendship would follow at full speed; and *Sirius* would escort the remainder of the Fleet. The *Supply* arrived at Botany Bay on 18 January 1788, the Alexander, Scarborough and Friendship followed within twenty-four hours, and the remainder of the Fleet arrived the following day.

The silver Charlotte Medal was struck onboard the Charlotte on 20 January 1788 while moored in Botany Bay. The Charlotte was one of the First Fleet vessels that had sailed from London to establish a penal colony on the east coast of New Holland. The medal records the nautical details of the voyage and dates the arrival of the Charlotte in Botany Bay as 20 January 1788.

Despite Captain Cook and Sir Joseph Bank's glowing recommendations of Botany Bay it proved to be unsuitable for permanent settlement and on 21 January, Governor Phillip and a small party went to examine Port Jackson for a more suitable place for the establishment of the colony while



The Charlotte Medal is on display at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra in the exhibition *Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia*. The Charlotte Medal, 1788, attributed to Thomas Barrett, is on loan from the Australian National Maritime Museum.

the remainder of the Fleet were moored at Botany Bay. The Charlotte remained at Botany Bay.

It is believed that General Surgeon John White, commissioned the medal from a convict named Thomas Barrett. There is no mention of the medal in White's published journal; however he does mention an incident involving the production of counterfeit coins being passed by some of the convicts and a marine in Rio de Janeiro harbour that suggests an origin for the medal. White writes:

"Thomas Baret (sic), a convict, had, with great ingenuity and address, passed some quarter dollars which he, assisted by two others, had coined out of old buckles, buttons belonging to the marines, and pewter spoons, during their passage from Tenerife. The impression, milling, character, in a word the whole was so inimitably executed, that had their metal been a little better, the fraud, I am convinced, would have passed undetected....The adroitness, therefore, with which they must have managed, in order to complete a business that required so complicated a process, gave me a high opinion of their ingenuity, cunning, caution, and address: and I could not help wishing that these qualities had been employed to more laudable purposes"

It has been argued that White found 'more laudable' employment for Barrett in the form of the production of the medal. It is feasible that White had the silver available from his medical supplies and the nautical information from his journal.

Surgeon John White was a major figure in the establishment of the colony at Port Jackson and one of the First Fleet Journalists. White, was born in County Fermanagh, Ireland, began his naval career in 1778 as third surgeon's mate on *HMS Wasp* and received his diploma from the Company of Surgeons on 2 August 1781. In October 1786, on the recommendation of his patron Sir Andrew Snape Hamond, he was appointed chief surgeon for the intended settlement at Botany Bay.

In March 1787 he joined the transports of the First Fleet at Plymouth and was placed onboard the Charlotte. He succeeded in getting supplies of fresh meat and vegetables for the convicts, and arranged that they be allowed up on deck in relays to obtain fresh air. He supervised the measures insisted upon by Governor Arthur Phillip to ensure high standards of hygiene and sanitation. Under White's sensible and humane treatment, the mortality rate for convicts on the voyage out was only 3%. Mortality rates reach nearly 25% during the voyage of the Second Fleet, with many more dying on arrival in the colony from the appalling conditions endured onboard the ships.

White's Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales was published in 1790 and is considered one of the essential foundation books on Australia. In July 1795 White returned to England citing the derangement of his financial affairs. Reluctant to return to the colony, White resigned his position in August 1796. He lived on his half-pay pension at Brighton until his death at Worthing on 20 February 1832 aged 75 years.

Thomas Barrett was convicted at the Old Bailey on 11 September 1782 for stealing a silver watch, steel chain, stone seal, metal watch key, hook, two shirts and a shift. He became the first convict to be executed in the colony on 27 February 1788 for stealing provisions. A plaque commemorating Barrett now stands near the site of his execution on the north-east corner of Harrington and Essex Street.

References:

The First Fleet Voyage 1787-1788 <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~firstff/story.htm> (accessed April 2008)

Surgeon John White, Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales, London, 1790, pp44-46

Dr John Chapman, 'The Solution of the Charlotte Enigma' in Journal of the Numismatic Association of Australia, Vol.9 July 1998, pp28-33

Hamond's letter to Under Secretary Nepean describes White as 'a young man of much credit in his profession, and of that sort of disposition and temper that render him a very proper person for such an establishment.' HRNSW, Vol.I, part 2, p.25.

Rex Rienits, 'White, John (1756? - 1832)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 2, Melbourne University Press, 1967, pp 594-595.

Ibid

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Not Just Ned: A true history of the Irish in Australia is on show at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra from 17 March-31 July 2011. Admission charges apply.

For more information about the exhibition visit www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/irish_in_australia

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