

## GOVERNOR ARTHUR PHILLIP: FUTURE HOPE, PRESENT MEMORY



(Detail) Governor Arthur Phillip from commemorative brochure for Australia's sesquicentenary in 1938  
Courtesy of Roslyn Russell



Wedgwood medallion on display in the *Eternity* Gallery. Photo: George Serras

A medallion created by master potter Josiah Wedgwood in 1789, from pipeclay brought back from the infant colony of New South Wales, signifies Governor Arthur Phillip's hopes for the colony's future. The medallion, and the story of Phillip's role in the earliest days of European Australia, is on display in the Museum's *Eternity* Gallery under the theme of 'Hope'.

Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of naturalist Charles Darwin, responded to the allegorical scene depicted on the medallion in a poem, 'Visit of Hope to Sydney-Cove Near Botany Bay'. Darwin's poem expressed Phillip's vision for the new imperial venture rather than the pragmatic intentions of Britain's Home Office, headed by Lord Sydney, which was primarily concerned in the first instance to rid itself of the problem of excess convicts clogging up gaols and prison hulks.

Unlike his governmental masters, Phillip saw beyond the first wave of human material to be dumped on the shores of Botany Bay. His vision had at its heart the notion that free settlers should be encouraged to come to the colony once it had been established: 'I would not wish convicts to lay the foundation for an empire.'<sup>1</sup>

Darwin's poem, like Phillip's vision, focused on aspirations for the colony's future, rather than what would be, for most of the latter's five years as governor, the grim realities of survival in a penal settlement as far away as possible from England. It evoked Georgian town planning, agricultural abundance and mercantile wealth as the anticipated outcomes of the new foundation at Sydney Cove:

*'There shall broad streets their stately walls extend,  
The circus widen, and the crescent bend;  
There, ray'd from cities o'er the cultured land,  
Shall bright canals, and solid roads expand. –  
There the proud arch, Colossus-like, bestride  
Yon glittering streams, and bound the chafing tide;  
Embellish'd villas crown the landscape-scene,*

*Farms wave with gold, and orchards blush between. –  
There shall tall spires, and dome-capt towers ascend,  
And piers and quays their massy structures blend;  
While with each breeze approaching vessels glide,  
And northern treasures dance on every tide!* –

If such a vision were to be realised, Phillip was the right choice to begin its implementation. His biographers, Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw (who wrote under the composite author name of M Barnard Eldershaw) said of him that:

Phillip was a man of outstanding ability, an unusual man in his own or any day. He had that steadiness of mind that can embrace the most trivial detail without losing sight of the main issues; he had imaginative grasp allied with the most uncompromising common sense; he was completely honest.<sup>2</sup>

The story of Phillip's governorship of New South Wales is well known: from the arrival of the First Fleet at Botany Bay on 18 January 1788 and the realisation that it was not the best place to settle; the discovery of Port Jackson and the proclamation of the settlement at Sydney Cove on 26 January; the problems of unsuitable tools and difficult colleagues; the dismal realities of the convict system; the perilous survival of the colony under conditions of near starvation and the Governor's readiness to suffer privation with the rest; his wounding by an Aboriginal spear – these stories are all staples of every Australian history book and class. Suffering constant pain in his side, Phillip left the colony to seek medical attention in December 1792 after five years as governor, by which time the colony had weathered its most dangerous days. There would still be periods of hardship, but the worst was over. Phillip had established the British presence on the continent of Australia. The entry on Phillip in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* summed up his achievement:

His work in New South Wales has been widely commended and, given the circumstances under which he was obliged to operate, it is difficult to see how he could have accomplished more than he did. Many of his hopes ... were not realized. Despite these frustrations he retained his optimism to the end, displaying a fortitude and sense of duty that carried him through periods of great difficulty and physical pain.<sup>3</sup>

Had his health been better, Phillip would probably have returned to New South Wales. He retained a keen interest in its fate for the rest of his life, even while he was advancing through the upper echelons of the Royal Navy. At the time of his death at the age of seventy-six in Bath, he was an Admiral of the Blue.

How is Governor Arthur Phillip commemorated in this country and overseas?

The city of Sydney, his creation, has a Phillip Street, and a florid monument by sculptor Achille Simonetti in the Royal Botanic Gardens. Unveiled in 1897 to mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, the combined statue and fountain is surmounted by a 4.6 metre-high bronze figure of Governor Phillip.

Port Phillip Bay and Phillip Island in Victoria are other reminders of Australia's first British governor: Victoria itself was originally called the 'Port Phillip District'. He is commemorated in Canberra in the name of the suburb of Phillip.

In Bath, where Phillip died in 1814, the Australian Government in 1937 erected a monument in his honour in Bath Abbey. Surmounted by an Australian flag, the monument's text reads:

*In Memory of Admiral Arthur Phillip R.N.  
Founder and First Governor of Australia*

*To his Indomitable Courage • Prophetic Vision • Forbearance • Faith • Inspiration and Wisdom was Due the Success of the First Settlement in Australia at Sydney 26 January 1788.*

The house where Phillip died, 19 Bennett Street, Bath, is also marked with a plaque; and the stone over the graves of Arthur Phillip and his second wife, Isabella, in the church of St Nicholas, Bathampton, bears the phrase 'Founder of Australia'.

The appearance of the town of Bath itself recalls the words of Erasmus Darwin in the poem, 'Visit of Hope to Sydney-Cove Near Botany Bay':

*There shall broad streets their stately walls extend,  
The circus widen, and the crescent bend*

The Royal Crescent and The Circus are two of the best-known streets in Bath. There is also a Sydney Place. While modern Australia looks very different to Regency Bath, it owes its existence to the man who had so much faith in its future, and who is commemorated there. In Australia we remember his achievement in particular on 26 January – Australia Day. In the concluding words of M Barnard Eldershaw's biography: 'Australia is his monument'. 🇦🇺

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#### References:

<sup>1</sup> *Historical Records of New South Wales*, vol. I, Part II, pp. 50-54.

<sup>2</sup> M Barnard Eldershaw, *Phillip of Australia: An Account of the Settlement at Sydney Cove*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1938, this edition 1977, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> B. H. Fletcher, 'Phillip, Arthur' (1738-1814), Douglas Pike (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 2, 1788-1850, L-Z, Melbourne University Press, 1967, p. 332.



Monument to Governor Arthur Phillip in Bath Abbey, UK  
Photo: Harvey Broadbent