

Grose Valley in the Blue Mountains: tough terrain for convicts hoping to find China beyond the heights

WORDS DAVID LEVELL

Australia's runaway convicts were convinced salvation was just around the corner.

Run to paradise

CHINA IS MANY things to Australia today – biggest overall trading partner, second-largest export market, fourth-largest source of immigration, Olympic host nation. But for considerable numbers of the country's earliest – and most reluctant – settlers, China loomed large in mind for a very different reason.

Ignorant of global geography and longing for any chance to escape, many convicts gambled with their lives on bizarre rumours that China, Timor and even a mysterious “white colony” could be found a few days' walk from Sydney. These unseen neighbours, it was said, would offer sanctuary and even a way home. As the fledgling colony relied on isolation and the daunting bush barrier to contain its convicts, such liberational fantasies proved very disruptive.

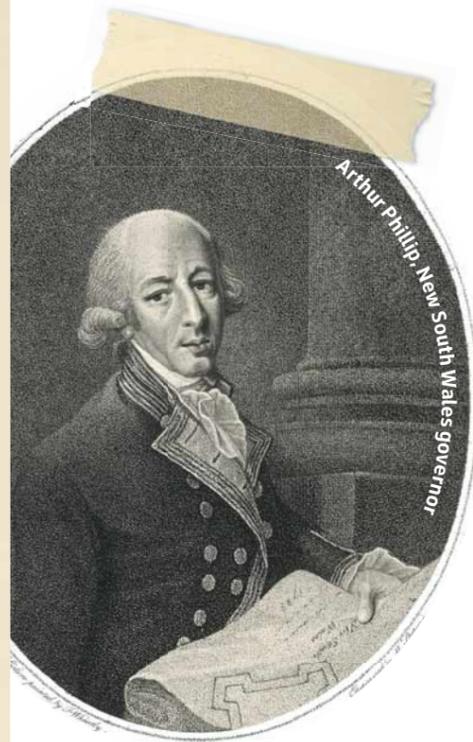
The myth arose among the first convicts from Ireland, who arrived in September 1791 when Sydney was less than four years old. Five

weeks later, 20 Irishmen and a pregnant woman fled the penal farms near Parramatta. Passing some ex-convict farmers, they let slip they were going “to China”, and pressed on despite strenuous attempts to dissuade them. A few days later, the woman was discovered, alone, on the North Shore. Her convict husband turned up the next day, badly affected by the November heat. Later, 13 others were rescued in the bush, languishing on the brink of starvation. Another three, arrested near Narrabeen Lakes, ran again, to vanish for good.

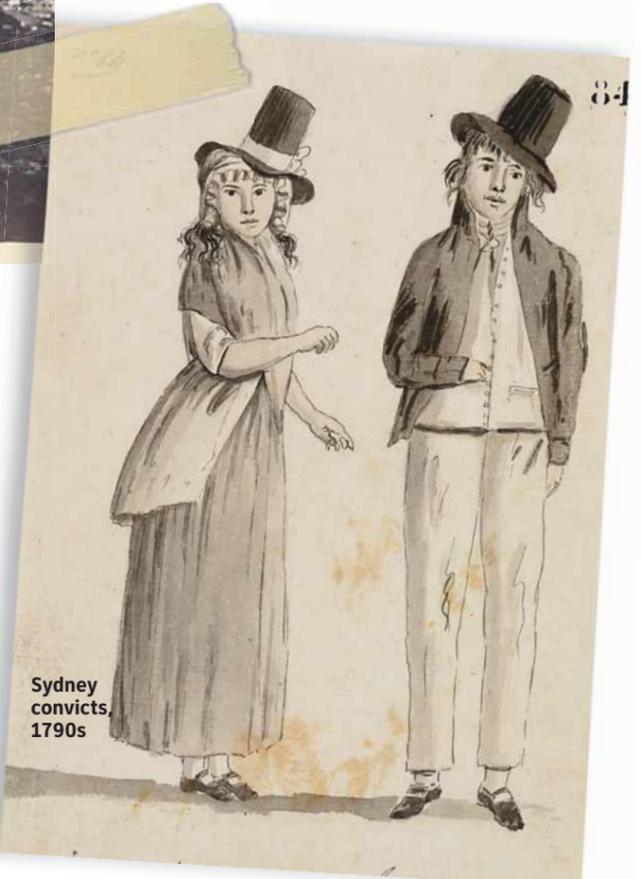
Despite such lack of success, waves of imitators were soon setting out – a muster taken early in the new year showed more than 50 convicts missing. Marines captain Watkin Tench interrogated four hospitalised Irishmen, wounded by Aborigines during a failed bush-walk to China. Two others hadn't made it back – one collapsed and died of “fatigue” and another was fatally speared near Broken Bay. While struggling back to surrender, they had met six more convicts

ARTHUR PHILLIP ENGRAVING (W. SHERWIN) & GROSE VALLEY PHOTOGRAPH: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

CONVICIOS EN LA NUEVA OLANDA (JUAN RAVENET); DIXON GALLERIES, STATE LIBRARY OF NSW



“Despite their scorn for the convicts' wild geography, officials favoured an equally false theory of an inland sea or strait



Sydney convicts, 1790s

walking to China and persuaded them to turn back. Tench said they believed “the back part of China” lay to the north, a land where “copper-coloured” people would “receive and treat them kindly”.

Canton (Guangzhou) – the only Chinese port open to foreign trade – was a frequent stop-off for homeward-bound shipping. But if this led the runaways to think it was nearby then they bungled badly, placing it no more than 150 miles (241km) north along the coast.

Although Governor Phillip considered the belief “an evil which will cure itself”, it took firm root in the convict dreaming. Eventually taken up by English convicts, the fabled overland China also shifted location to beyond Sydney's Blue Mountains. As late as 1828, *The Sydney Gazette* found it “surprising how infatuated too many of the unfortunate prisoners” became with ideas “they might penetrate to China through the interior, or succeed in reaching New Guinea”.

Exasperated authorities tried hard to quash the troublesome myth, which greatly encouraged absconding and bushranging. Governor Hunter even let a select team of convicts search for their “fancied Paradise” in 1798, escorted by soldiers. But they neither found nor gave up their dream. Almost five years later Governor King adopted a similar tactic, sending an expedition to “the king of the mountains”.

He also upped the punishment for escaping to 500 lashes, to no avail.

Despite scorning the convicts' wild geography, colonial officials favoured an equally false theory that the unknown interior was dominated by an inland sea or strait. The evidence was very similar to some of the rumours behind the bush-

China and “white colony”. The explorer Matthew Flinders, for example, wondered if shipwrecked Malays might explain Aboriginal stories of olive-complexioned outback farmers. He speculated their presence would support ideas of a nearby strait stretching to South-East Asia. Yet in 1803, a convict tried for absconding inland was mocked for having “no doubt of arriving to a sea-side”.

Aborigines often spoke of “copper-coloured” settlers and unknown white societies in the bush. While puzzling, these stories seem related to the vital problem of incorporating whites into their world view. But were the convicts who seized upon such tales simply irrational, as their overlords assumed? Or was a crude, misinformed logic at play, based on an imperfect knowledge of the dimensions and possibilities of their new world? And why were Irish convicts the first and most persistent believers? Did the Irish nurse hopes that China would see them as victims rather than transgressors of British justice?

This strange corner of Australian history poses many questions. But it is also a reminder of the fascinating extremes to which imagination – and sheer desperation – have sometimes gone in shaping the course of our national story.



David Levell is the author of *Tour To Hell: Convict Australia's Great Escape Myths* (UQP, \$35). www.davidlevell.com