



The
University
of Sydney



Sydney Sawyer Seminar

SESSION FOUR

The Experience of the Ocean: Transformative Voyages in the Antipodes

1–5pm, Friday, 21 August 2009,

Holme and Sutherland Rooms, Holme Building, University of Sydney

Convenors

Cassandra Pybus and Emma Christopher

Discussant/Chair

Cassandra Pybus

Speakers

Jeff Bolster (University of New Hampshire)

Sea Changes: Maritime Histories with the Ocean Included

Hamish Maxwell Stewart (University of Tasmania)

Shipmates unto death? The convict voyage and convict life in early 19th century Australia

Iain McCalman (University of Sydney)

A Laboratory of Islands: Charles Darwin's Pacific Project

Cindy McCreery (University of Sydney)

Loyalties and Royalty: HMS Galatea's voyage to Australia, 1867-68

The aim of this session was to stimulate debate and interaction from the audience. The structure of the seminar was informal, which proved highly successful as the more-than-capacity audience responded with vigorous discussion to all the presentations. The hubbub of noise during an extended tea break indicated the high level of intellectual stimulation that the seminar provided.

The seminar opened with a lively presentation from Jeff Bolster of The University of New Hampshire, once himself a sea captain and now a world leader in maritime history and the historical study of the ocean and oceanic travel. Bolster set the tone by discussing his research on the whaling ships from New England that spent up to three years in the Pacific and Southern Oceans in the nineteenth century. He raised intriguing questions about the sorts of transformations attending the experience of sailors and whalers who dared lengthy voyages from the Atlantic to the Pacific. He asked about the extent to which mariners were transformed by the nature of seafaring work, the polyglot ethnic composition of crews, and the experience of crossing dramatic cultural boundaries. Bolster also drew attention to the paradox that the ocean has long been assumed to work a “sea change” on those who travel it, and yet is seen to remain eternal and unchanged itself. Discussing his work with an interdisciplinary team of scientists, sociologists and historians on ocean ecology, he asked us also to consider the impact of those voyages on the ocean. How did harvesters in a pre-industrial era affect the living ocean and, in particular, what was the effect of removing great mammals from the sea?

The second speaker was Hamish Maxwell-Stewart of The University of Tasmania who held the audience spellbound with a brilliant powerpoint presentation of preliminary data from a five-year study on some 67,000 convicts who were transported to Van Diemen’s Land, later renamed Tasmania, between 1803 and 1853. These forced migrants were subjected to a transformative rite of passage of epic proportions in the voyage to the penal colony. By joining together the data on voyage and post-voyage experiences for male and female prisoners in Van Diemen’s Land, he was able to show how experiences at sea impacted upon health, discipline and convict attempts to restructure lives dislocated by the act of transportation. The striking difference between the male and female cohort was apparent, as was the fact that the experience of transportation meant better health and life outcomes for convicts than for their peers left behind in Britain.

Iain McCalman of The University of Sydney led off after the tea break with an elegant paper arguing for the intellectual significance of the last great leg of the *Beagle* voyage in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. He showed persuasively that Darwin’s sojourns among the

islands, island continents and coral reefs of the southern oceans constituted a distinctive and important phase in the development of his thought regarding both evolution by natural selection and the functioning of what he called the 'natural economy'. These southern islands acted as a peculiarly illuminating laboratory for testing Darwin's nascent ideas and also provided him with an opportunity to test his first and still ecologically pertinent scientific theory about the origins of corals reefs and their relation to island biota.

The seminar was concluded with a paper and powerpoint presentation from Cindy McCreery of The University of Sydney concerning the visit of the Prince of Wales to Australia in the Royal wooden steam frigate HMS *Galatea*, of which he was captain, in October 1867. McCreery focussed on the episode in March 1868 when Alfred was shot by an Irish Australian on the shores of Sydney Harbour, when Australian loyalties and identities were sorely tested. McCreery used cartoons concerning the *Galatea's* visit and the shooting as a way of exploring the complexities of contemporary conceptions of loyalty and identity in Britain's multi-ethnic and maritime empire.

Cassandra Pybus