

The Sydney Cove naval surgeons 1788 – 1794

by Bruce Short

*North Bank: Bellingen, NSW; 2024; 160 pp.; ISBN 9780645773101 (paperback)*¹



Four naval surgeons were despatched by the Home Office in England with the First Fleet sent to establish a penal colony at Botany Bay in 1788. John White was to be Governor Arthur Phillip's chief health adviser, known as the 'surgeon to the settlement' – White later adopted the style, 'surgeon general'. The three other surgeons were commissioned as assistant surgeons. White designated Dennis Conisden as the first assistant surgeon, Thomas Arndell the second assistant surgeon and William Balmain the third assistant surgeon. This book provides a biography of each surgeon.

The author, Air Vice-Marshal B. H. (Bruce) Short AM RFD (Ret'd) is a former surgeon-general of the Australian Defence Force, who in a parallel civilian medical career was in private practice as a physician. Following his retirement, he has become an independent researcher in 18th century British history, with an emphasis on medical history and the history of urban and tropical diseases. He gained an MA (2011) and an M Phil (2014) from the University of Sydney for his thesis entitled: "Dr Robert Robertson: Fever Specialist, 18th Century Medical Experimenter, Naval Health Reformer and a Senior Physician in the Royal Navy Medical Department". He is the author of two earlier books – *Disease in history: commentaries in medical history* (Bellingen, NSW: North Bank, 2021); and *Fever: the mysterious scourge of the 18th century* (Bellingen, NSW: North Bank, 2023). He was appointed a Member in the Military Division of the Order of Australia in 2005.

The author describes this book as "an eclectic collection of commentaries, some separately published, derived from various researches within eighteenth [century] British medical history". While the biographies of the four naval surgeons form the main portion of the book, they are set in a broader context of the events in Sydney and Britain at that time. Woven into the narrative, too, is the story of Edward Laing, one of White's surgical staff who, although not a naval surgeon, in 1792 was appointed by Governor Phillip to be an assistant surgeon replacing Thomas Arndell who was permitted to retire from the Parramatta Hospital to become a local farmer. Further, the book is not constrained to the years 1788 – 1794 mentioned in the title. It ranges more widely in recording events over the lives of its subjects both well before 1788 and well into the 19th century.

The book commences by setting the scene for the eventual establishment of a British penal colony in New

South Wales with a chapter on Captain James Cook's expedition to the Pacific from 1768 to 1771. The next chapter describes conditions in the Sydney Cove settlement in its early days, focusing on the succession of food crises and relations with the indigenes. It then presents the biographies, each a standalone essay constituting a chapter. These chapters are presented in alphabetical order by surgeon's surname, beginning with Arndell.

The biography of Thomas Arundell focuses not only on his role as White's second assistant surgeon, but more so on his other activities as a successful farmer and landowner, as a virtuous and equitable magistrate, and as a devout Christian. The next biography is of William Balmain, White's third assistant surgeon, who in time would become surgeon-general and an administrator within the settlement as well as a landowner and 'mercantile magnate' between 1788 and 1802. In the biography of Dr Dennis Conisden, White's first assistant surgeon, he is described as a dedicated Royal Navy surgeon and a keen naturalist at Sydney Cove before later becoming an accomplished London physician. There follows a further contextual chapter focused on sickness at Sydney Cove from 1792 to 1794, which features William Laing, assistant surgeon following Arndell's retirement. The narrative culminates with a long final chapter on Dr John White focusing on his role as Australia's first surgeon-general and medical administrator.

The book is very well researched with a detailed list of notes and references at the end of each chapter. Rather than a smoothly flowing narrative, however, the book is 'a collection of commentaries' as the author phrases it. Some commentaries are better linked to those preceding and following them than others are; and some readers may find the occasional editorial lapse a little off-putting.

Much, if not most, of the ground covered in this book is dealt with in other published works. Perhaps the book's major value is in collating the biographies of White, Conisden, Arndell, Balmain and Laing in a single volume. The book should appeal to students of 18th century British history, particularly medical history linked to the Royal Navy; and to those interested in the First Fleet and the early history of the British colony established at Sydney Cove in 1788. Readers seeking a brief biography of John White by the same author may wish to refer to Bruce Short's earlier paper "Surgeon John White: Australia's first surgeon-general" published in *United Service* **64** (4), 24 – 27 (December 2013).

David Leece

¹The book is available from the author at bruceandjoanshort@gmail.com at \$28.00 plus GST, post and packaging.