

Book Review: James Dunk explores the madness of early New South Wales

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Bedlam at Botany Bay, by James Dunk, Sydney, NewSouth, 2019, 306 pp. incl. notes and index, \$34.99AUD, ISBN 9781742236179, Publisher's website:

<https://www.newsouthbooks.com.au/books/bedlam-botany-bay/>

'Madness', as James Dunk points out, 'is a beguiling and bewildering idea' and 'acute madness, the kind we now medicate, is never less than a private suffering—something interior, perhaps incommunicable, which nevertheless clashes with the world around. As it does, it opens a new vein of history.' (5). In his remarkable *Bedlam at Botany Bay*, Dunk has mined this rich vein to produce a series of excellent—and in several cases, I would suggest masterful—examples of imaginative, richly detailed, and sensitive historical writing, which is both scholarly and immediately accessible. Dunk readily acknowledges the limitations of the archival record, with madness frequently coming under the ambit of the convict department and the powerful colonial executive, and regulated by the courts. Women are underrepresented in the records, and Indigenous Australians are almost entirely absent. Dunk does not seek retrospectively to diagnose the historical actors in *Bedlam at Botany Bay*, but rather to ask more pertinent and important questions. What does the madness of those suffering in early New South Wales mean to us today? How did these individuals endure their suffering? What did they think and feel about those experiences? What was the effect of their madness upon them, their family and friends, and society more generally?

There are, to my eyes, three stand-out case studies in *Bedlam at Botany Bay*, each dealing with the impact of an individual's, personal experience upon the wider political climate of New South Wales—and vice versa. The first is the exploration of the life of John Grant, sentenced to death at the Old Bailey in May 1803 for breaching the peace, but whose sentence was commuted to transportation for life. (Grant had shot in the backside the lawyer, Spencer Townsend, who Grant blamed for preventing him from seeing Anna Maria Ward, with whom Grant was obsessed and who had recently married another man). In making use of Grant's remarkable journal and letters, Dunk explores Grant's inner life and turmoil and their intersection with matters such as the legality of transportation and the extent of gubernatorial power, as well as the treatment of 'gentleman' convicts, the recalcitrant, and those who publicly dissented against authority. For challenging Governor Philip King, Grant himself was packed off for a stint at Norfolk Island, a period which including a spirit-breaking four months of isolation on nearby Phillip Island.

The second is the discussion of a spate of suicides during the administration of Governor Ralph Darling (1825–1831), exposing ruptures in colonial politics when, in the post-Bigge reorganisation of the convict system, emphasis was placed upon instilling 'terror' in the form of greater punishments, remote penal settlements, and the like. In the eyes of Darling's critics, the governor's authoritarianism created a climate of fear among civilians as well as the convict population. Darling's purge of government officials, for example, appeared to have prompted George Galway Mills, registrar of the Supreme Court, to have shot himself in May 1828 out of fear of being removed from his post and left unable to pay his debts; 'These sort of dismissals', wrote Edward Smith Hall, editor of the *Monitor* and one of Darling's chief critics, 'make gentlemen blow out their brains' (169). It is difficult to disagree with Dunk's conclusion that in

implementing the system of terror required in the penal colony, Darling's autocratic tendencies only 'increas[ed] colonial anxiety' (179).

Finally, the third stand-out chapter is 'After the Rebellion', where Dunk turns to the aftermath of the overthrow of Governor William Bligh in January 1808, and how such a 'public crisis' might 'bleed into the private' (180). The chapter is an examination of the 'intensity of the rebellion' upon the 'minds of the rebels' and those of their families (189) in which we read, for instance, of the crushed hopes of Major George Johnston, the commander of the troops and leader-in-name of the rebellion, who was cashiered out of the army as a result, abandoned by his former friends and co-conspirators, and left to eke out his days through drinking and mourning that his associates had 'risen upon my ruin' (193). The crowning achievement of the chapter, though—and perhaps the crowning achievement of the book—is the wonderfully sensitive pen-portrait of the private troubles of John Macarthur, the prime mover behind the rebellion, the impact on those close to him, and what those troubles meant in the wider imperial and colonial contexts. A man from the margins who spent his career battling to keep himself on the right side of that marginality, Dunk finds Macarthur a man whose 'pride cloaked deep anxiety' (195), and who endured depression and physical illness. When he arrived in England during March 1810 to support Johnston at his court-martial, Macarthur found himself separated from his wife Elizabeth, unable to return to New South Wales for fear of prosecution, and was ground down by legal, financial, and political troubles in the colony while at thousands of miles remove. When Macarthur was allowed to return to Sydney in September 1817 it was on condition that he did not interfere in colonial politics and, though he made himself financially comfortable, in the words of Governor Darling, Macarthur remained 'a man of strong passions [who] observes no medium in anything ... equally ardent in his exertions to serve as he is to injure ... he considers the accomplishment of his plans as secondary to the subjugation of his opponents' (202). Dunk concludes that Macarthur's letters and other sources 'offer the rare chance to view his inner drama against the colonial drama he helped to orchestrate', and the 'glimpses of the unravelling' Macarthur and his co-conspirators 'reveal the longer and deeper confrontation between private property, theories of liberty, and the strong power of government in a penal colony' (208–9). In drawing all these threads together into a moving narrative, this case study is a quietly spectacular piece of work.

There is a fundamental humanity in *Bedlam at Botany Bay*, and an empathetic handling of moving and, on occasion, distressing subject matter. Dunk recognises that there is more work to be done, such as in seeking 'to properly situate the settler drama of madness in the broader history of colonisation' (13), such as the violence of the dispossession of the Indigenous peoples of New South Wales. I look forward with some eagerness to read the fruits of such research in due course.