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The Several 'Discoveries' of Sydney's Georges River: Precursors to the *Tom Thumb* Expedition ¹

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For many years Bass and Flinders' 1795 voyage up the Georges River in the *Tom Thumb* was held up as the exemplar of young men in explorer and adventure mode. It was often taught as such as one of the first history lessons in NSW primary schools. Even within a few years of the voyage its memory had become sanctified: a relic of the *Tom Thumb* was offered to the French explorer Baudin in 1802. Bass and Flinders had already become legendary, approaching Cook's stature by a similar mixture of service, scientific achievement and final tragedy. Surprisingly, however, a closer reading of the First Fleet diarists and maps indicate that much of the Georges River had been explored, and at least some of its fifty kilometres of tidewater channels fairly accurately charted, long before the *Tom Thumb* voyage.¹ Some of this detailed work had been done by Hunter, the very Governor who sent Bass and Flinders on their expedition.

What seemed to mark the 1795 *Tom Thumb* voyage in people's minds was that the river had been named. Prior to its naming, the Georges River existed in the European mind only as part of an extended Botany Bay, usually referred to as 'the South West Arm', 'the west river', or 'the head of the Bay', distinguishing it from the 'north east arm' (the Cooks River; see Map 1). The land in between these two inlets was simply referred to as 'the Peninsula', at least in Tench's account.² This vagueness in designation has concealed, even to most modern historians, just how far early interlopers had penetrated up what we now call the Georges River, and its environs.

¹ The author is grateful for funding from the Australian Institute of Nuclear Science and Engineering Inc. for radioactive isotope dating of sediments which have allowed a reconstruction of estuarine conditions in the Georges River around 1788.

² L. F. Fitzhardinge (ed.), *Sydney's First Four Years: Being a Reprint of A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson, 1788-1791 by Captain Watkin Tench*, North Sydney, 1979, p. 209.

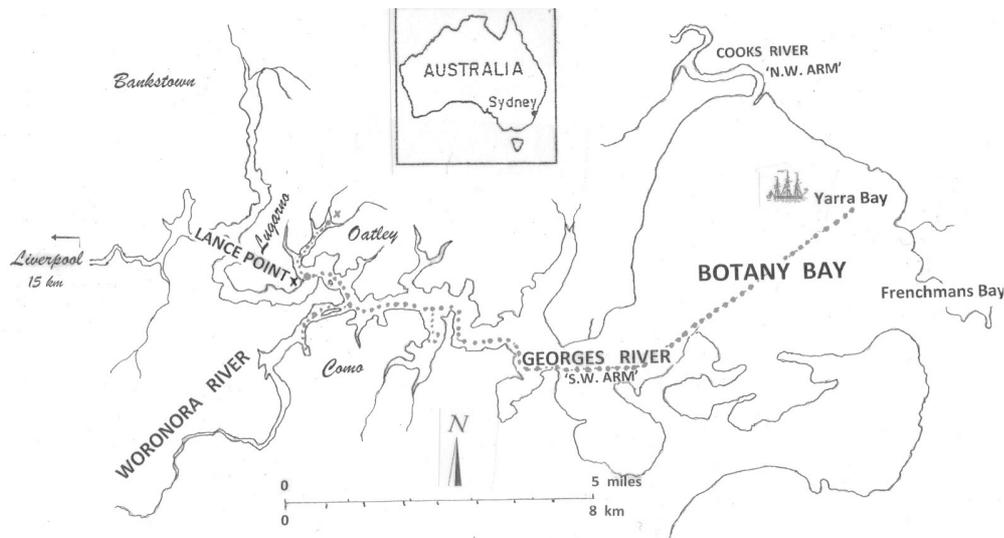
The Journal of Philip Gidley King, second Lieutenant of the *HMS Supply*, the first ship of the fleet to reach its destination, is the only account that gives firsthand details in the form of diary entries of the first few days in Botany Bay, before the fleet hoisted sail for the more promising waters of Port Jackson.³ In most histories these count as lost days, an abortive hunt for the rich and fertile lands of Cook's and Banks' supposed erroneous fancy. Writers tend to hurry over these events in order to record the real beginning of Anglo-Australia, the settlement at Sydney Cove. As well as this foundational bias, the actual route of the first journey by the British up the Georges River has been obscured by a lack of names for the appendages of Botany Bay. The account of the first major social exchange between the British and the Eora is itself well known for its picaresque and somewhat salacious details. It is carefully described by Philip Gidley King in his diary, and referred to briefly by others. However, in most general histories it is usually located as occurring somewhere on the shores of Botany Bay proper.

It was not until King's diaries were edited in 1981 that the scene of the famous incident was set closer to its actual location— at least as far up the Georges River as present day Oatley (Map 1), six miles from the river's terminus into the Bay at Towra Point. What occurred there was no ordinary passing incident, such as the direction to potable water given by the natives to the sailors on the northern shore of Botany Bay on the first day of the *Supply's* arrival. Rather, this meeting occurring deep in the hinterland and, significantly for later events, in the heart of the clan territory of Pemulwuy, was the first attempt at transaction between the two sides, an attempt at social exchange going beyond the blanket 'Wurrah!'—('Begone! ') of the Eora and the 'beads and baubles' approach of the British.⁴ But the

³ P. G. Fidlon and R. J. Ryan (eds), *The Journal of Philip Gidley King: Lieutenant, R.N. 1787–1790*, Sydney, 1980.

⁴ Tench, in his account of the first punitive expedition against Pemulwuy, intended that the search should start 'three miles above [the] mouth of the south-west arm [Georges River] ... and thence passing along the head of the peninsula, to proceed to the north arm [Cooks River]'. That route would have involved marching on, or parallel to, Salt Pan Creek, or possibly along the old Aboriginal ridge top track that was the forerunner of the Old Forest Road from Lugarno to Bexley. Fitzhardinge (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 210.

incident cannot be fully understood, especially what was missed by both sides, until the exact whereabouts of the incident is established. Fortunately, there are ample clues in King's account, and subsidiary details from others.⁵ The incident attains far greater meaning when combined with its whereabouts – the geography of the land and water traversed between the afternoon of January 18 when the *Supply* and its personnel pulled into Botany Bay alone, and January 24 when in company with the full fleet they left the Bay to the newly arrived French ships of the La Perouse expedition.



Map 1: King's likely route up the Georges River to 'Lance Point' and his tryst in the nearest inlet to it. Anywhere west (or upstream) of Como fits the description of being at least twelve miles from the *HMS Supply*, moored at Yarra Bay. The French ships moored nearby at Frenchman's Cove, so they would have a similar starting point. The twenty-six miles that La Perouse's men covered travelling up the river would bring them to the tidal limit at present day Liverpool.

⁵ An anonymous officer gives what seems like an eyewitness account of a progression up the 'South West Arm', probably in Phillip's boat, on the same day as King's journey. He was not impressed by the scattering of 'miserable huts', and describes leaving 'hats, and trifles and some morsels' for the hut dwellers. He implies that they were met with a noisy display by the people (and 'wolf-type' dogs) onshore as they rowed up-river. Anon, *An Authentic and Interesting Narrative of the late Expedition to Botany Bay, as performed by Commodore Phillips and the Fleet of Seven Transport Ships under his Command*, Aberdeen, 1789, p. 15.



Map 1a: The inlets and peninsulas around Lance Point, and King's route by water and land. From Como, his route is clearly described by still-existing features, such as: 'I rounded a point off which lies a long shoal ... in many places quite dry at low water' can only be what is now called Mangrove Island off Como Point and just inside the Woronora River mouth. This is the only large dry shoal on the entire river system. Lugarno Headland at 98 metres is the highest hill going up the river, being over twice the height of any headland downstream, and 'Lance Point' is an obvious protuberance from this, with shoal water around it, and visible to any craft going upstream from a distance. The likely trysting site between the Aborigines and the crew '12 miles from the fleet' would be at the head of Lime Kiln Bay, the inlet that begins just north of Lance Point, as King said that they entered the inlet immediately on leaving the Point. The shallow waters of upper Lime Kiln Bay had such an abundance of shell middens that they supported a later industry, indicating that it had long been a popular Aboriginal eating and probably recreational spot.

An understanding of the physical geography of the area helps decipher King's text and that of most others describing 'Botany Bay'. It is also useful to recall just how far and how vigorously people could walk in the pre-car ages. The records of both Cook's expedition and those of the First Fleet should be read with an understanding of the walking capacities of eighteenth-century people, in this case mostly young, male, and recently released from shipboard confinement. Also, it needs a reconstruction of, or at least an allowance for, the vegetation and terrain they walked over, now mostly obliterated by urban development. Above all, the clear delineation in local geology determined vegetation and soil type: the sandstone cliffs and slopes in a belt along the estuarine valleys were rocky with dense shrubs and poor sandy soils and difficult to walk over; the plateaux above had the best soil ('black loam') of the Wianamatta Shale, with the open understorey common to the endemic Turpentine forest that made for easy walking in cool shade.⁶ King had the mind of a marine officer, one given to recording geographical details and seeing new areas in terms of their place on a yet-to-be-drawn map. What is doubtful is what may have been left out. Exactly how far inland did he and others penetrate, for instance, in their forays from boat to shore and beyond, often only to gain a high point to get perspective of the country they had left behind? A close reading of King's diary, written mostly to remind himself, may remind us of what they were after and what they may have found but not explicitly mentioned.

The arrival of the rest of the Fleet in Botany Bay on the Sunday morning of 20 January, with over 1,400 people needing to be quickly settled and housed, must surely have concentrated Governor Phillip's mind on the absolute necessity of finding a suitable site quickly. The necessary requirements for a marine-supplied settlement of so many people were a sufficient water source and a sheltered anchorage deep enough to get ships close inshore, and preferably reasonably flat (but not swampy) land for building. According to King's diary, all the immediate shoreline of Botany Bay as well as the Cooks River ('north east arm') had been surveyed the

⁶ See R. J. Haworth, 'The shaping of Sydney by its urban geology', *Quaternary International*, Vol. 103, 2003, pp. 41-55.

day before (19 January) and found wanting.⁷ Therefore, Phillip determined to examine thoroughly the last possibility, what came to be called the Georges River, referred to by him simply as the 'south west arm' of Botany Bay.

Despite the excitement and necessary work caused by the anchoring of the remaining ships of the First Fleet in Botany Bay early on 20 January, two parties of officers and men from the *Supply* set out at 10am to explore the yet unexamined Georges River. One boat contained Governor Phillip, Lieutenant Governor Ross, Captain Hunter and three marines, the other Lieutenants King and Dawes, with three more crew members. Although no mention is made of the craft used, the numbers suggest six-oared rowboats, as Hunter describes being used for later surveying of Sydney waterways. King's specific instructions for the day were to 'explore all the south side of the Bay, & trace the two inlets on the south side as high as possible'. As the lower side branches of the Georges River are shoal and therefore useless for the purposes of settlement, 'two inlets' could only refer to the major Woronora/Georges branch six miles upstream. This strongly suggests that Phillip's party had foreknowledge of the major estuarine anatomy of the lower Georges system (its branching into two major arms, but six miles upstream and out of sight of any observer in Botany Bay), and the only likely source of this kind of geographical knowledge is from an unpublished or oral report from Cook's 1770 expedition.⁸ That it may have been oral is suggested by the presence on the First Fleet of at least one officer, and a diarist, who had been with Cook in 1770.⁹

⁷ Fidlon and Ryan (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁸ Cook's journal does mention a long afternoon walk into the hinterland on the south side of the bay, far enough ('up country to some distance') to come across 'rich loamy soil' (Anon, *op. cit.*, p. 42). This suggests that they penetrated sufficiently far inland to reach the good soil of the Wianamatta shale in the uplands of what is now the Sutherland Shire, and by definition the upland shale country would be high enough to glimpse the two major fluvial branches of the 'south west inlet', the Georges and the Woronora, especially the deep incision the Woronora Valley makes in the sandstone plateau, with the waters of its long reaches glinting in the sunshine and thus visible from a long way off.

⁹ Anon, *op. cit.*, p. 15. This Scottish officer had a good eye and ear for detail, as in his description of the noise from shore greeting Phillip's journey up-river.

King continues: 'I ran along the Southern shore till I rounded a point off which lies a long shoal which is in many places quite dry at low water'.¹⁰ The only shoal that answers this description in the Georges River is what is now called Mangrove Island, lying in the mouth of the Woronora River, just around Como Point on its western side (Map 1a). King also confirms that he is at one of the major inlets, that is, the Woronora River, by then saying: 'We ran up the first inlet about a mile when we came to the head of it'.¹¹ This presumably refers to the head at Bonnet Bay, the last major indentation in the Woronora estuary before the waterway narrows considerably and adopts a more fluvial form, rather than the deep estuarine anchorage they were seeking. Also, Bonnet Bay is clearly marked on the earliest maps of the Georges River (compare Bonnet Bay in Map 1a to Maps 3 and 4, where it appears as a clear indentation on the southern inlet), unlike many other branches of the Woronora/Georges system.

It is possible to make some estimate of the state of the tide on this leg of the journey. While no First Fleet accounts covering these first few days report the time of the tide for Botany Bay, it was well reported in some of the *Endeavour* logs from eighteen years before. By using a simple algorithm, the tidal times can be forwarded from 4 May 1770 to 20 January 1788. Low tide on 20 January 1788 would have been at approximately 3am and 3pm, and high tide at 9am and 9pm. King and party set out from the *Supply* at 10am and returned at midnight, departing when the tide was just past flood. As it ebbed, it would have been increasingly difficult to row upstream. By contrast, they began their return when the tide was close to the stillstand of flood, and progress would have been increasingly easy as the ebb carried them downstream and back to base. On their journey out in the morning, by the time they had rowed inland the 10 or 11 miles to Como and Bonnet Bay, assuming a rowing speed of two to three miles an hour, the tide would be approaching its lowest, and the mud flats exposed, as indicated by the remark about the long shoal. The Woronora River remains tidal until the Needles, three miles further upstream, but by the time King's party got to Bonnet Bay we

¹⁰ Fidlon and Ryan (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

might assume that it was at least 1pm in the afternoon (allowing at least three hours hard rowing against the tide from Yarra Bay), and the tide would still have been ebbing strongly through the narrows above Bonnet Bay. It was a full moon, so the king tides would have been exceptionally high at flood and low at ebb, making further progress up the Woronora very difficult at low tide in a large six-oared survey boat.¹²

King continues: 'I returned down again and crossed over to a point which from what happened there I gave it the name of Lance Point perceiving that it was the highest point here about'.¹³ We have several good pieces of geographical information in this statement to guide us to the exact location of Lance Point, especially when combined with a statement at the end of the day's diary entry that when they turned for home they were 'twelve miles from the fleet'. Whether these are nautical or English statute miles is not clear, but with the fleet moored in the northeast corner of Botany Bay at Yarra Bay, and five statute miles from the fleet across the bay to the mouth of the Georges River, the balance of seven miles, whether statute or nautical, would bring the party at least to the mouth of the Woronora ('the first inlet') with a couple of miles to spare. As it happens, the highest point from Botany Bay upstream would be facing the party in clear view upriver, as soon as they cleared the 'long shoal' and were back in the main estuary – the ninety-eight metre high headland of Lugarno, a bit over one mile away across the large estuarine pool made up of Jew Fish and Hurstville Bays and Oven Reach (see Map 1a).¹⁴ Hence they 'returned down [the Woronora River] again' to the main stream and then 'crossed over'

¹² P. Turbet, *The First Frontier: The Occupation of the Sydney Region, 1788-1816*, Kenthurst (NSW), 2011, p. 19.

¹³ Fidlon and Ryan (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 33-4.

¹⁴ Every other headland they passed in their journey upriver peaks at exactly 45 metres above sea level. Lugarno Peninsula represents a sharp rise in the altitude of the Woronora plateau to around 100 metres. From Lugarno westwards the river carves its way through this high plateau till it breaks through to the Cumberland Plain 6 miles further on at East Hills – the Cumberland Plain being the promised land of good soil that King's party never reached. Technically, Jew Fish Bay and appendages is a broad estuarine mud basin, the limit of dominantly marine-influenced features, above which the various branches that flow to this basin from the hinterland show more fluvial features.

the one mile or so from the present Como Bridge to the pronounced feature of Gertrude Point (the probable 'Lance Point') at the mouth of Lime Kiln Bay on Oven Reach (see Map 1a). Immediately behind Gertrude Point the land rises to over 60 metres, and immediately behind that again, 600 metres further west but in clear view from a boat on the river, is Lugarno Peak, itself at 98 metres in altitude, all looking like one eminence when approached from the east.

It is possible that Lance Point could have been located further up the main river, where Lugarno Peak is clearly in view. However, all the land here to the south of the river, which cannot be seen from Gertrude Point, is an extensive plateau as high or higher than Lugarno Peak.¹⁵ As King thought he was looking at 'the highest point here about' it means he could not have gone further up the river where he would have seen high land on all sides, but in fact was looking at the first protuberance of this suite of higher land.

King's party landed at their Lance Point, now given the more homely designation of Gertrude Point on modern maps (Map 1 and 1a). King 'ascended the hill and found the soil an exceeding fine black mold, with some excellent timber trees & very rich grass'.¹⁶ The steep slopes running up from the river would be infertile Sydney sandstone, but the plateau at the top of the escarpment is made up of the heavy clay soils of the Wianamatta Shale merging into one of the few volcanic outcrops along the Georges River. The trees and soil would indeed have been fine. The original vegetation was a mixture of the closed-canopy forest of a Turpentine/Ironbark assemblage that once covered all the heights of the Hurstville Municipality, the valuable borer-proof timber used for a century and a half to provide the timber pylons for Sydney's wharves. The edge of this great forest, which King and his party were traversing, merged into a rare patch of warm temperate rainforest on the north side of the plateau, in what is now Evatt Park but was for a century intensively cultivated for its rich soil by Chinese market gardeners. King had

¹⁵ Hence Phillip's disappointed summation of the land after his own journey upstream on the same day as being 'very mountainous ... in all directions'. *An Authentic and Interesting Narrative*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Fidlon and Ryan (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 34.

stumbled across one of the necessary requirements for the settlement – good soil. Although he never found it, the other essential, a permanent and considerable stream of potable water, was running out of the rainforest remnant on its northwest side. The irony was that King had chosen to explore this 'highest hill here about' based on the very sound judgement that it might have good water. But what happened next forestalled their discovery and exploration of a site that had at least two, and possibly three, of the necessary conditions for settlement.¹⁷ At the top of the hill they sighted a 'red fox dog, & soon after discovered a number of the natives who halloo'd & made signs for us to return to our boats'.¹⁸

King obviously felt obliged to follow the protocol of his mentor, Phillip, in the rather delicate situation he found himself in, with his party of five outnumbered by the twelve 'vociferous' and threatening natives. His unarmed approach bearing gifts not working, and met with a warning shot of a lance thrown wide but determinedly towards them, he retreated to the brow of the hill (which means that in order to retreat they must have advanced some distance across the top of the plateau before they met the Aborigines). After his approaches were again rejected at the brow of the hill, they moved quickly down to the river, which at Gertrude Point is only a distance of fifty to eighty metres down the steep slope.

At this point something critical happened. Seeing them retreat to their boat, the Aborigines 'became ten times more vociferous' and 'very soon a lance was thrown *among us*' (my italics), that is, as opposed to the warning throw of the first spear deliberately 'thrown wide'. This was an act of war intended to inflict injury. King responded by ordering one of the marines to return fire 'with

¹⁷ See Tench's comments, possibly repeating French opinions, of the usefulness of the Georges River as a haven able to contain 'any number of ships', so long as the shoals were avoided. Fitzhardinge (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁸ This suggests that the Aborigines were not aware of King's group until the dog alerted them. Although G. Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney*, Crows Nest, 2009, pp. 47-9, asserts that Aborigines had good means of transferring information about the movements of the intruders, the whole impression of this sentence is that they surprised the locals, and what followed was a hastily organised reaction to that surprise.

powder only', after which the Aborigines 'ran off'. But a shot fired at Gertrude Point would have reverberated around the stony cliffs and slopes of Jew Fish Bay, and been heard far down the river. King and party embarked 'with great precipitation' and were met in the middle of the bay (sufficiently wide to be well beyond spear throw) by Governor Phillip. This is the first we have heard in King's journal of the Governor and his party also examining the river this far up. Phillip's route until then is described by King in faintly ambiguous language, as 'Philip joined me from the south side of the Bay',¹⁹ and, in what sounds like a mild rebuke to King and his not so successful landing on Lance Point, Phillip reported that he 'had found the Natives very sociable and friendly'.²⁰

Whatever diplomatic magic Phillip was using, doubtless honed by his long years as an espionage agent having to quickly assess many and varied cultures and people,²¹ it must have further rubbed salt in King's wounded pride when Phillip very quickly won the good offices of the Lance Point people by disembarking alone and offering gifts. Of course, the numbers were now more even, eleven British to twelve Eora warriors, and King had already demonstrated the nature of the musket, which weapons no doubt the marines were displaying more or less discreetly as a backup to this meeting. Nonetheless, what followed was extraordinary, and rather belies Karskens' proposition that the aggression in the initial incident was a result of King's party straying into some kind of men's sacred site

¹⁹ 'The Bay' can only mean Jew Fish Bay and its extensions in the mid-Georges River (Maps 1 and 1a), but in the past has been misread to signify Botany Bay proper or a proximal inlet. See for example, T. Keneally, *Commonwealth of Thieves*, 2005, Milsons Point (NSW), pp. 95-6; J. King and J. King, *Phillip Gidley King: A Biography of the Third Governor of New South Wales*, North Ryde (NSW), 1981, pp. 28-30.

²⁰ But see Phillip's report to Lord Sydney: 'while the ships remained in Botany Bay no dispute happened between *our* people and the natives'. Either Phillip had forgotten the Lance Point incident, or he did not think it amounted to 'a dispute', or he was deliberately ignoring it for home consumption. Phillip to Sydney, 15 May 1788, *Historical Records of New South Wales (HRNSW)*, Vol. 1, Pt. 2, 1892, p. 129.

²¹ 'On my [Phillip] showing them that I wanted a front tooth it occasioned a general clamour, and I thought gave me some little merit in their opinion'. Phillip quickly realised, probably already on this first trip inland, the advantage given him in negotiations with the Eora thanks to his missing tooth. Phillip to Sydney, May 15, 1788, *HRNSW*, Vol. 1, Pt. 2, p. 131.

and provoking the murderous spear.²² To quote the outcome of Phillip's diplomacy and parleying:

... they found us so friendly they ran up to the man who had thrown the lance & made very significant signs of their displeasure at his conduct by pointing all their lances at him and looking at us intimating that they only waited our orders to kill him, however we made signs for them to desist.²³

There was likely an element of exaggerated theatrics and play-acting on both sides in this behaviour, but there was obviously a clear division between the considered aggression of the lance-thrower, and the desire on the part of the rest of the clan to cooperate with these strange beings. Indeed, the whole affair came close to turning into a love-in, once the old men Phillip and Ross had taken their leave in the second boat.

It is an interesting question to speculate just who the isolated aggressor was. This was in the heart of Pemulwuy's Bediagal (Bidjigal) territory, just around the corner from his later base in Salt Pan Creek. Could it have been Pemulwuy, and was this the very first meeting between the main protagonists of the conflict of the next twelve years, Phillip, King, and Pemulwuy? Tempting as this conclusion is for its inherent dramatic unity, it is probable that the British officers would have remembered their antagonist of this day, and would have later recognised that they had met their long-term opponent on their first substantial meeting with the locals. Certainly it was someone closely related to Pemulwuy by both kin and attitude. And it does demonstrate that at least in the beginning the belligerent party was in the minority as opposed to the majority who apparently sought cooperation of some kind with the newcomers. Before the smallpox epidemic of the following year though, there were probably many young warriors of the lance-thrower's disposition, quick to anger and hostile to strangers even before the

²² Karskens, *op. cit.*, p. 49. Her explanation may be correct, but it is much more likely the locals were simply reacting as anyone would if they were surprised by a bunch of outlandish strangers in their backyard.

²³ Fidlon and Ryan (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 34.

strangers had done anything to merit this anger, a point seemingly appreciated by the majority of the Lance Point clan. Although Pemulwuy is currently being presented as a national leader of resistance to the settlers, there are two versions of his demise, the one least favoured by the modern storytellers depicting him as being betrayed by his own people. The desire for reconciliation and friendship shown initially at Lime Kiln Bay by the majority suggests support for the betrayal version of Pemulwuy's end. Even after all the ill-treatment suffered by the Eora over that twelve years, the majority still valued their association with the settlements and the settlers, as indicated by their dismay at their later temporary expulsion from the settlements by Governor King in his crackdown on Pemulwuy and his followers in the early 1800s.²⁴

To continue the story of this first foray up the Georges River: 'Governor Phillip then went up another branch, and I [King] followed the one we were in'.²⁵ If they were at Gertrude Point, they were at the mouth of Lime Kiln Bay (Map 1a). 'The other branch' followed by Phillip is most likely to have been the main stream running south-west at this point, and narrowing at Lugarno so it is difficult to distinguish from the many other branches. That he took this direction where the river cuts through high country to the west is supported by Phillip's disappointed remark that 'the country is mountainous in all directions'.²⁶

King and his party proceeded up Lime Kiln Bay 'and soon came to the head of this inlet', followed by the Aborigines, increasing in number.²⁷ The famous scene followed where they were asked to

²⁴ King to Hobart, 30 October 1802, *HRNSW*, Vol. 4, pp. 867-8.

²⁵ Fidlon and Ryan (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 34.

²⁶ *An Authentic and Interesting Narrative*, p. 15.

²⁷ It was just over two kilometres to the head of the Lime Kiln Bay as it then was. At the head of the inlet King kept his party only ten yards from the shore, that is, easily within range of an aggressively-thrown 'lance'. The shores of the upper bay would have been mostly open salt marsh in 1788, where it is now choked with dense and concealing mangroves. By the time of the beach encounter, the tide must have been approaching or just passed its 3pm low. However, work done by the author in measuring and dating sedimentation over 200 years at LKB has shown that unsilted channels at the heads of the inlets would have been several metres deeper in 1788, and even at low tide there may have been sufficient water to give King's

reveal their sex and then offered sex with the women, which King rather priggishly declined, though there is no record of what his men thought. The 'women and girls with infant children on their shoulders' had joined the party before this as the British rowed up the inlet, surely a sign of a steadily relaxing attitude towards the interlopers. King was still apprehensive of their 'lances and short bludgeons'; the day was drawing to a close, 'we were twelve miles from the fleet' and the tide by this time turning from low to flood. It was wise to start rowing to catch the peak flood and turning ebb tide that would carry them easily down the river. As it was it took until midnight before they got back to the *Supply*. This indicates a four-hour row which would have been perhaps one hour against the tide and three hours either at the flood or with the ebbing current, averaging about three miles an hour for the 12 mile journey. Three miles an hour seems a bit slow under those tidal conditions for able-bodied marines, suggesting that they had left their new Aboriginal friends at the last possible moment before complete darkness. So it looks as if they spent from mid-afternoon to dusk (four or five hours at least) with the local people – more than just a quick hello, and suggesting that this was likely to have been an extended session of mutual enjoyment and teasing for both groups.²⁸

The next day, 21 January, all attention concentrated on Phillip's reconnaissance trip to Port Jackson, and King was ordered to explore 'coves at the head of the bay', a reference probably to Kogarah Bay and other coves on the near north side of the Georges River, all of which appear in recognisable shape in the earliest maps (see Maps 2 and 3). King relates how he, Dawes and a petty officer 'went in two boats to explore the upper part of the Bay in which we found some

boat party some security and a quick escape route. R. E. James, 'Environmental Boundaries in the central Sydney basin During the mid-to-late Holocene', PhD thesis, University of New England, 2006, pp. 84-86. See also p. 251 for the core diagram showing sedimentation since c.1800.

²⁸ One wonders how serious the offer of sex was, and whether it was not just a high-spirited dare common to boisterous young people of all ages and places. See I. Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, Melbourne, 2003, and her numerous examples of inter-cultural and inter-racial frolicking.

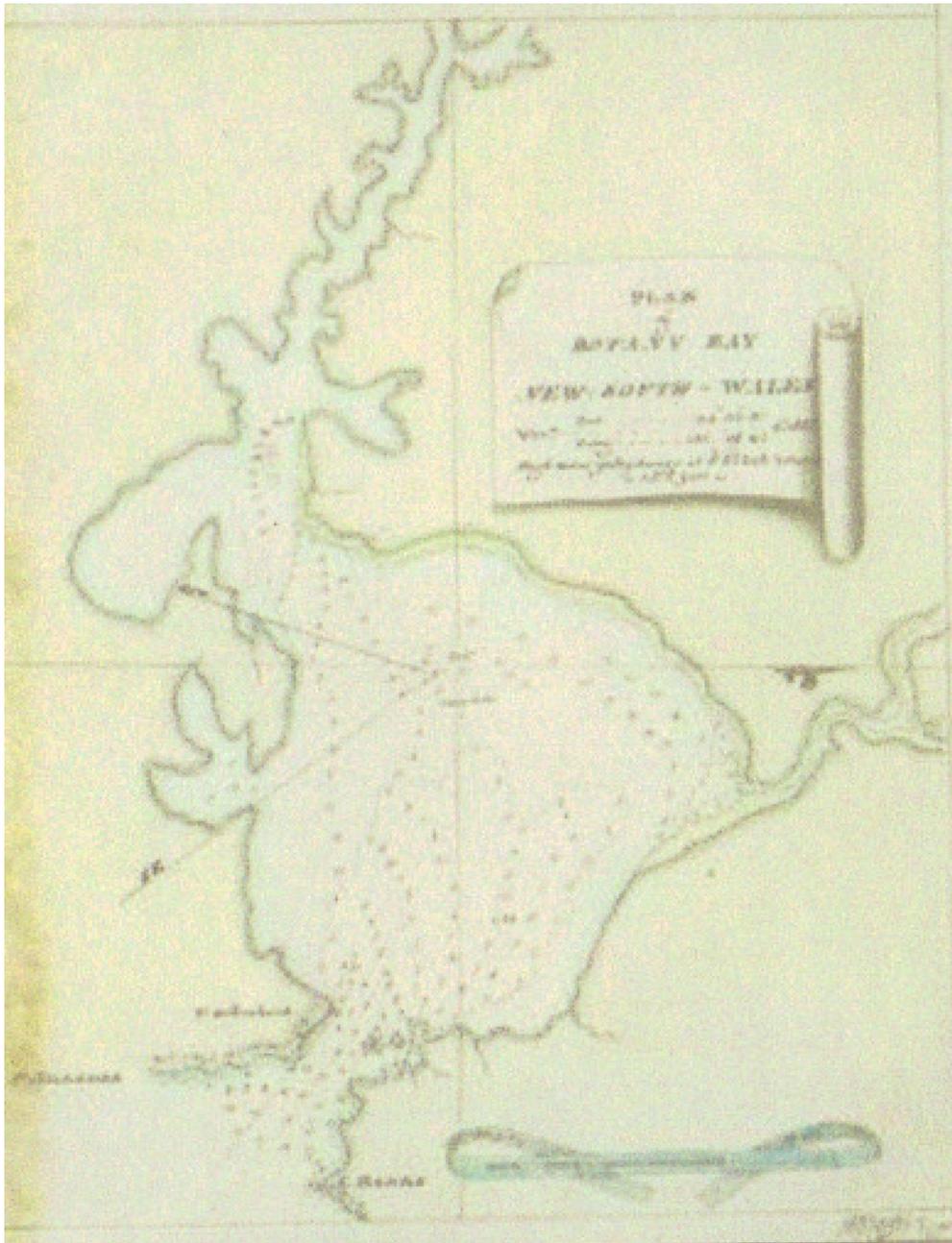
very large and deep coves and some extensive lagoons but no fresh water', returning at eight in the evening.²⁹

Even modern bathymetric maps show a long finger of water of two to five metres depth extending far up Kogarah Bay.³⁰ There is even deeper water (ten to twenty metres) in the main stream adjacent to Shipwright and Kyle Bays, the next two coves up river. It is likely that before 220 years of siltation deepwater extended into these coves, especially as the name of the former suggests ship building activity. It is unclear what is meant by 'extensive lagoons'. As King encountered no fresh water, they were presumably salt and may refer to the tidal broadwaters on the south side of the entrance to the Georges, Woolooware and Gwarley Bays. Surveying all these coves and lagoons would have been a fair day's work for the three officers and their crews, and is another indication of how thoroughly parts of the Georges River system were explored in the earliest days.

Within a few days King and all the British and their ships had transferred to Port Jackson, and left Botany Bay to the two French ships of the La Perouse expedition which, to the First Fleeters' initial alarm and astonishment, had sailed in on the morning of 24 January. The alarm subsided over the next few weeks as the British realised that the exhausted French, rattled by a massacre of their men in the Islands, were no threat to them. However, Phillip was quick to realise that the French may have become a threat to his so far successful programme of friendship and amity with the Eora. Several diarists recorded a clash between the French and the local people. It has always been assumed that this clash occurred around the heavily fortified French camp on the north shores of Botany Bay. This seems unlikely: why would the otherwise cautious Botany Bay clans attack in a location where they knew they would be outgunned and probably outnumbered? The incident at Lance Point indicates how quickly aggression could turn to friendship once the odds had been evened by the arrival of Phillip's party.

²⁹ Fidlon and Ryan (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 35.

³⁰ See NSW Maritime Authority, *Map 9E, Boating Map for Botany Bay, Georges, Woronora and Cooks River*, 2006. There has been some dredging over 200 years, but largely to maintain existing channels.



Map 2: A map of Botany Bay (west is at the top) and its western extension (the Georges River estuary), reproduced in Collin's Journal from late 1788, and showing the extent of knowledge of the district up to this date. Lance Point is probably the last small protuberance on the north bank at the western limit of the estuary, and thus the limit of King's expedition. The Woronora/Georges bifurcation is also clearly shown at the western limit of the map. Note the fairly accurate depiction of inlets on the south side up to the Woronora-Georges junction ('the two main inlets'), and lack of detail of inlets on the north side compared with the complexity shown on part of the north shore on Map 1a. This hiatus corresponds with King's account that he 'ran up the south shore' on his upstream voyage. He was thus unable to see the extensive inlet of Oatley Bay two kilometres away on the north shore. He returned downstream after dark and even though there was a full moon, the northern inlet entrance would have likely remained hidden in the deep shadow cast by its high shoreline cliffs.

But what if the clash had occurred elsewhere, perhaps somewhere along the 'southwest arm', where Phillip had just so meticulously and successfully ingratiated himself to the locals?³¹ For Tench makes an extraordinary remark early in his *Journal* in a description of Botany Bay: 'It is of prodigious extent, the principal arm, which takes a south west direction, being not less, including its windings, than twenty four miles from the capes to the entrance, according to a report of the French officers, who took uncommon pains to survey it'.³² The import of this report is enormous, and it is strange no one has seen the implications before. One can sense Tench's faint sarcasm in the term 'uncommon pains'. Despite the almost exaggerated bonhomie, both sides knew that this was a French spying expedition, reacting to sealed orders delivered all the way from Paris to Kamchatka which had occasioned an extraordinary and

³¹ Maria Nugent sensibly insists that all the separate parties should be contextualised in terms of each other. 'If nothing more, the violence between the French and the Botany Bay people raises an interpretive issue about whether Phillip's own encounters with Aborigines during the early days and years of settlement—encounters that continue to receive considerable attention—can be treated in complete isolation. I have already suggested ... that Phillip's encounters in the opening weeks of 1788 ought to be interpreted with reference to Captain Cook's earlier encounter there in 1770; I am proposing here that they ought also be interpreted through reference to the French, who momentarily shared the zone of cross-cultural encounter with the British and who perhaps were responsible for throwing the first punch'. M. Nugent, *Botany Bay: Where Histories Meet*, Crows Nest, 2005, p. 54.

³² Fitzhardinge, *op. cit.*, p. 34. Emphasis added.

near-disastrous dash across the full length of the Pacific. But to take 'uncommon pains' surveying twenty-four circuitous miles of river channel must have involved one, or several reasons.

The first reason was defensive. Despite the derisive rejection of Botany Bay and all its waterways in favour of Port Jackson, the fact is, as Hunter and Tench both later conceded, the ten-metre deep pools of the lower Georges could 'hold the entire Royal Navy'. The French, apparently, also gave a favourable assessment of the lower Georges River's naval capability, thinking it 'a haven, equal in every respect to any hitherto known, and in which any number of ships might anchor, secured from all winds'.³³ It could certainly hold the two French ships in a secure defensive position, with the shallow bar at the entrance, to be crossed comfortably by a big ship only at high tide, a defensive advantage.³⁴ After all, Port Jackson, with its deep entrance, was easily breached by enemy submarines in 1942, the downside of a too-welcoming sea port. It is no accident that most of the great ports of northern Europe have tortuous approaches that have proved useful defences in the long centuries of naval warfare.

Second, what was the main project of the French while they spent six precious weeks moored in Botany Bay? They were desperately assembling two whaleboats to replace those lost in the island attack. For this they needed timber, in a land where good shipbuilding timber was not common. Is it possible that, twenty miles upstream near the junction of Cabramatta and Prospect Creeks with the main river they would not have noticed what the English later called 'brush' – the nearest thickets of riverine rain forest, containing that most sought-after ship fitting timber, Red Cedar, *Toona ciliata*. Red Cedar has a habit of growing on forest margins along river banks, including salt and brackish upper estuaries as in the lower Hunter River and North Coast rivers of New South Wales. Any party rowing along the narrow channel in the upper river could hardly miss the valuable rainforest softwoods, buoyant wood

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³⁴ The modern bathymetric map (*NSW Maritime Authority, Map 9E, 2006*) shows a shallower depth on the bar, but the deep holes behind the bar have generally maintained their depth, so the main channel of the river (as opposed to the side branches) does not seem to have suffered too much siltation in 220 years.

extremely suitable for ship building and repair work especially by comparison to the near-ubiquitous but unworkable eucalyptus trees.

Third, twenty-four miles would take the French to the location of the later settlement of Liverpool, the limit of the tide, where the estuary meets a substantial and permanent freshwater stream running out of the southern hills. The French must have become aware of this, just as they must have become aware of the vision splendid of a substantial ten miles of good soil and good grass as the river cut through the Cumberland Plain from East Hills to Liverpool. They also knew perfectly well that this was what the English colonists were desperately seeking, although they seemingly managed to convey no hint of all this to their 'good friends' the English, even those table companions fluent in French such as King.

And fourth, it is almost inconceivable that the French could painstakingly survey the river from its mouth to its tidal limit without making contact with the Eora, perhaps the very ones who may have been lulled into a false sense of security by Phillip's studied charm. But these were French sailors completely rattled by their South Sea misadventures with the Melanesians, paranoid and trigger-happy. It is awful to think of what may possibly have happened when these two forces met. The French may have been ashamed to broadcast anything of the battle in any detail. The accounts they gave the English were very general, and suitably and deceptively vague, especially about *where* it happened.

While much of the above is inevitably speculative, it is very likely. Even stranger is that Tench, or any otherwise irrepressibly curious and French-speaking officer, did not press the French for details of their up-river trip. This supports the notion that the French were deliberately dissembling, and must have led the conversation away from any such discussion. Yet to be fair to the French, Tench reported a description apparently based in their survey that: 'The country around (the lower Georges, though this is not entirely clear) far exceeds in richness of soil that about Cape Banks and Point Solander, though unfortunately they resemble each other in one

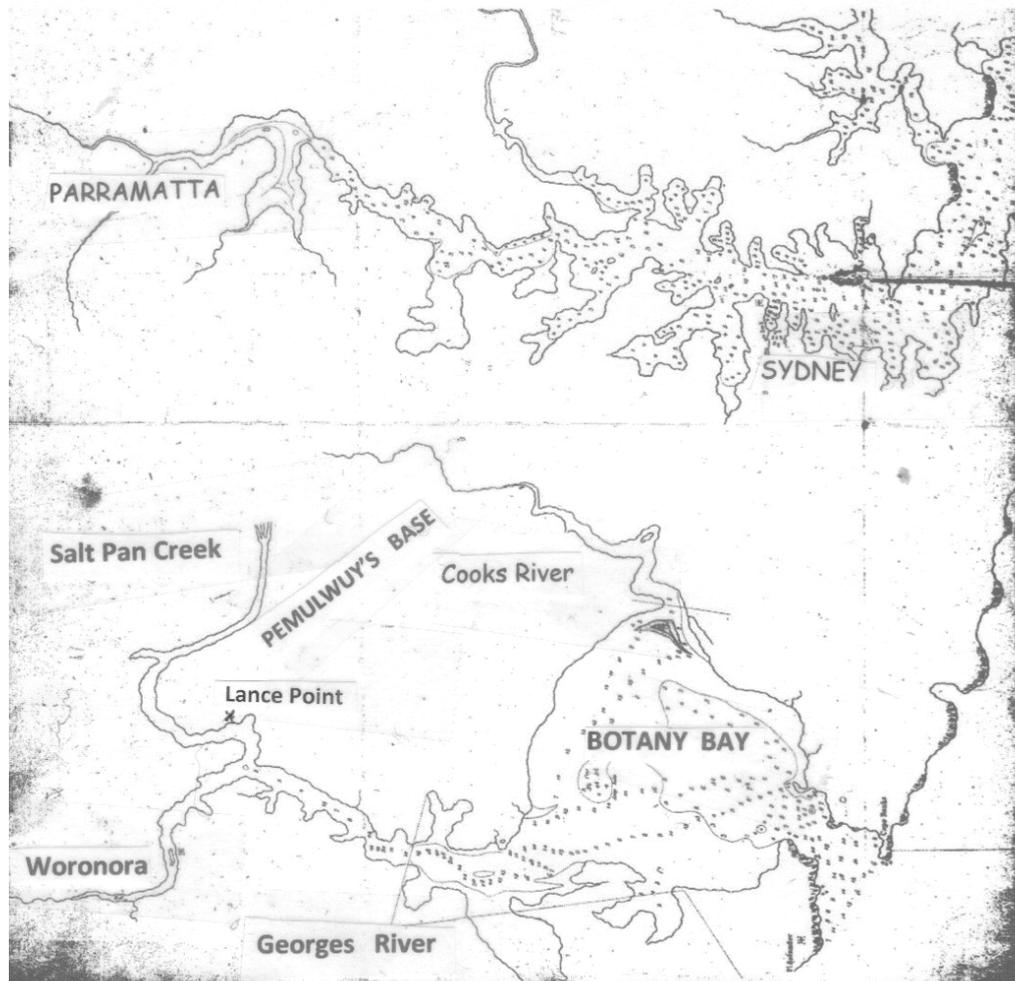
respect, a scarcity of fresh water'.³⁵ But the English may have been the more easily deceived because many of them, especially Tench, had developed a 'tall poppy' hostility to everything Cook and Banks had reported about Botany Bay and its environs. It is quite possible that Cook and his men had wandered further than their reports (or the interpretation of their reports) indicated, and the 'fine mold and good grass' they had seen was on the Wianamatta Shale country that covers the surrounding uplands, such as also described in Tench's report gained from the French. This country is only a few short kilometres further up the Georges River on the low plateaux on either side, the beautiful and often well-watered country of Turpentine forests, an extension of the 'Kangaroo Grounds' further north around what is now Rookwood cemetery, which even the ever-complaining English allowed were rich and fertile.³⁶

Whatever the case, many of the officers had developed an hostility for everything to do with 'Botany Bay'. This was even more the case when Tench allowed himself to be led a wild goose chase by his 'guides' in the famous reprisal expedition. He was marched up and down the very worst country around Botany Bay, the marshy strip of sandy lands on the immediate west side of the bay (present day Sandringham, where much of the swamp is still preserved as a wetland reserve). The guides deliberately led him away from where he had intended to go in pursuit of Pemulwuy, further up the Georges River, where he would have seen the good forest and soils of what is now the Hurstville Municipality. Following what was no doubt a witty debunking on Tench's part of all things to do with Botany Bay after the mess he had got himself into there, Phillip and his colleagues could more enthusiastically follow the leads to Pittwater and the Hawkesbury, where distance no doubt lent enchantment to the view. And so, anomalously, the far more distant

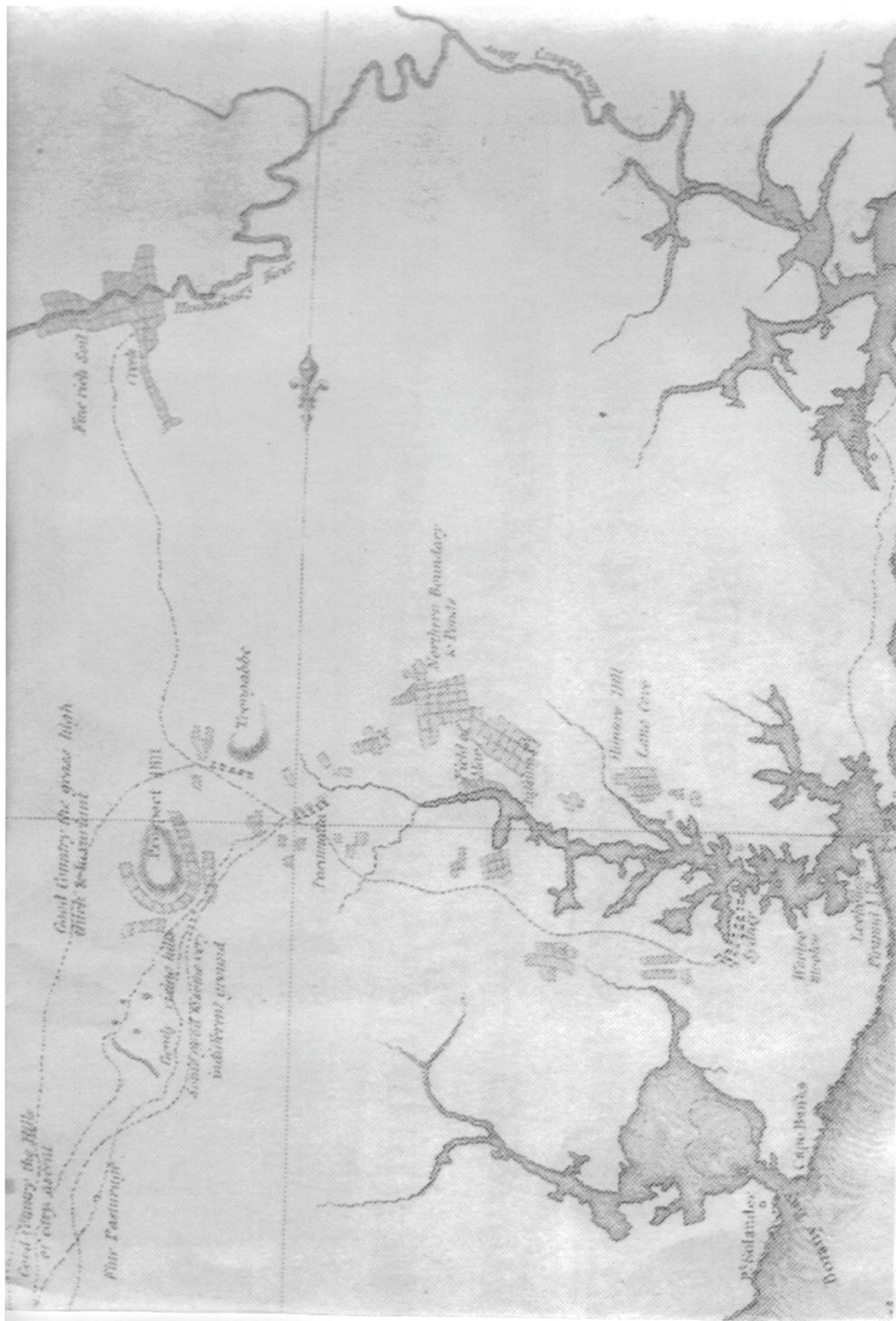
³⁵ Fitzhardinge (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 35.

³⁶ Real estate advertisements in the nineteenth century for a Mortdale five-acre subdivision stress, correctly, not only the good soil and timber but also the abundance of water in the ponds and hanging swamps on the claypans just above the barren sandstone country that mostly borders the lower Georges. The sandstone barrens and cliffs of the riverine strip, although picturesque, were shunned by suburban settlement almost until the middle of the twentieth century.

Hawkesbury floodplain was opened up before the far closer, smaller, but equally productive resources of the Georges River district.



Map 3: Hunter's 1793 map, based probably on his own surveys, showing just how thoroughly he had charted the navigable channels of the Georges and Woronora estuaries, at least two years before Bass and Flinders' Tom Thumb expedition in October 1795. Strangely, the hiatus on the north shore of the Georges River remains – marked as a straight line where there are in fact many deep indented coves (see map 1a). As this was the known base of Pemulwuy and associated white bushrangers was this a result of caution on the part of the surveying parties, wary about sailing up shoal-ridden inlets in small, vulnerable boats?



Map 4: The three estuaries, (from the north) the Hawkesbury/Nepean, Port Jackson, and Botany Bay/Georges River, from a 1796 map in Hunter's journal. Even though this is the year following the Tom Thumb expedition, little new information has been included from the sketch Bass and Flinders are reported to have given the Governor. Hunter's map demonstrates how much effort has been put into mapping the coves and bays of the Hawkesbury and Port Jackson, and how comparatively little had been achieved in understanding the Georges River. The main channel of the river has been adequately surveyed, with correct orientation of the main branches, for 15 miles up to Salt Pan Creek, but the loop through rich alluvium and rain forest to the west of Bankstown has been omitted, as has the substantial freshwater stream entering from the south west at the future town of Liverpool, even though its tributaries must have been within easy reach of the marked tracks in the south west corner of the map. Any streams in this far western area were apparently thought to continue their north orientation to flow to the Hawkesbury/Nepean River, an indication of the geomorphic confusion of the early explorers.

After the establishment of settlement at Sydney Cove, there were intermittent but continuous expeditions in the following year to further survey Botany Bay and its extensions. Phillip sums up the results in his report to Lord Sydney as 'charts of Botany Bay ... [of] such parts ... which have not been surveyed are from eye-draughts made in different excursions and ... give a pretty just idea of their different branches'.³⁷ The results may be seen in the maps reproduced in various published accounts *before* 1795 and Bass and Flinders' *Tom Thumb* journey (Maps 2 and 3). For instance, Phillip reports that he spent five days surveying Botany Bay in November, 1788, in which time he must surely have explored 'the arms', but most of the rest of his report is a promotional account of the value of the newly discovered Hawkesbury and its floodplains.

With all eyes turned to the new frontier on the Hawkesbury, there seemed to be almost a resentment at allowing any value to the Georges River and its hinterland. Yet it was extraordinary that the officers, even those with a penchant for exploration, kept on missing the value of even the most fertile reaches of the Georges River. The fertile floodplains that have formed between present day Liverpool and Bankstown at the denouement of the freshwater arm of the Georges River are only a few hours walk south of Parramatta, and word had got to Tench, either from convicts or Aborigines, of 'a

³⁷ Phillip to Sydney, 13 February 1790, *HRNSW*, Vol. 1, Pt. 2, p. 304.

large river, which was said to exist a few miles southward of Rose Hill [Parramatta].³⁸ However, when Tench and Dawes made the journey south in the bitter winter cold of July, 1791, they sarcastically rejected the river they found as 'this second Nile ... [which is] nothing but a salt water creek, communicating with Botany Bay, on whose banks we passed a miserable night, from want of a drop of water to quench our thirst'.³⁹ Yet this was at the mouth of Prospect Creek, near Georges Hall, which for over a century served as the vineyard and market garden for much of western Sydney. But what is more extraordinary, the section of river dismissed as useless by Tench and Dawes was precisely that section extolled by Bass and Flinders four or five years later, and on the basis of their report Governor Hunter, after a further survey, established the important settlements of Bankstown and Liverpool.

Flinders' account, accepted by posterity, gives no recognition to the numerous people, starting with King and the French, who had between them explored almost all the river. It had been largely explored within the first month or two of settlement, and it is certain that there were innumerable unofficial incursions from runaway convicts, and even official fishing parties who we know from other records ranged as far as Wattamolla in the south in the first years of settlement.⁴⁰ As a convict fishing party under officer control was actually established in a semi-permanent camp in Botany Bay in late 1788, it is hardly likely that they did not try their luck up-river.

Hunter and Tench also conducted a formal survey of the lower Georges River in September 1789. They both submitted reports which probably accounted for the dismissal of the Georges River as a settlement site for the next six years. Hunter, revealing a fair working knowledge of the river's bathymetry, correctly points out that despite the deep holes, the lower Georges is full of shoals.⁴¹

³⁸ Fitzhardinge (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 237.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ The survivors of the 1797 *Sydney Cove* disaster were picked up by fishermen at this distant site. M. Jeffreys, *Wreck of the Sydney Cove*, Frenchs Forest (NSW), 1997, p. 249.

⁴¹ 'This river in some parts has good depth, and that near and within the entrance, but higher up it is all shoal water, and full of knowls of sand; in short, it is only to be

True, but this did not prevent the whole length of the river becoming a major shipping lane – admittedly for shallow draught boats – for the first fifty years of the nineteenth century, by the simple expedient of marking the navigable channel with posts. The thriving towns of Liverpool and Bankstown depended on the river routes for supplies and export of their produce. But Tench's report is the most damning, and the most ignorant. Beginning his report with yet another criticism of the judgement of Cook and Banks, he concludes with a definitive condemnation of the prospects for good soil on the land either side of the estuary; 'on the sides of the harbour, a line of sea coast more than 30 miles long we did not find 200 acres of land which could be cultivated'.⁴² This is interesting, as it indicates they surveyed fifteen miles up the river, which would extend their exploration to the entrance of Salt Pan Creek (Map 3), just short of where the river breaks into the more fertile Cumberland Plain – a fertile plain that Tench had already been to, seen, and dismissed. Of course he did not see any good land in the skeletal soils of the sandstone belt that parallels the lower river, but if he had ventured a thousand yards inland, in the footsteps of King, he would have found 'soil of an exceeding fine mold, with some excellent timber trees & very rich grass' on the volcanic ridge of Lugarno Headland.⁴³ Or he could have got out of his boat and followed Cook's route a few kilometres inland south of the river, onto the Wianamatta Shale country, where he would have found that 'the soil was much richer, for instead of sand, I [Cook] found a deep black mould, for which I thought fit for the production of grain of any kind'.⁴⁴ Cook and King were not imagining this. The good soil is there, still buried beneath suburban development, but for a century and a half on the semi-rural fringe the shale soils supported orchards, dairy farms and even grain fields. For opposite Lugarno and a little upstream is Mill Creek, so named after the grain mill that

navigated by boats: it has two branches, in which there are several coves, or bays, containing shoal water'. J. Hunter, *An Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norflok Island*, Piccadily, 1793, p. 160.

⁴² Fitzhardinge (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 155-6.

⁴³ Fidlon and Ryan (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁴⁴ J. Cook, *The Voyages of Captain James Cook Round the World*, Vol. 1, London, 1842, p. 209. This land is in the present Sutherland Shire and was to become a prosperous sheep farm of the nineteenth-century entrepreneur Thomas Holt.

stood on the banks of this freshwater tributary of the Georges in the early-nineteenth century and which milled wheat grown on the shale uplands of present day Menai.⁴⁵

No one doubts Tench's eloquence as a writer, and probably as a talker, but unfortunately his very eloquence appeared to have helped close his colleagues' minds to the obvious. It took the coming of another eloquent propagandist, skilled in romantic presentation and an ability to name things, whether shoaly estuaries on the outskirts of settlement or the continent of Australia itself, before people's attention could be drawn back to the potential they were overlooking. So Flinders re-opens the consideration of this nearest but rejected estuary, by presenting its re-discovery as an adventure story:

Projects of this nature, when originating in the minds of young men, are usually termed romantic; ... Thus it was in the present case; so that a little boat of eight feet long, called *Tom Thumb*, with a crew composed of ourselves and a boy, was the best equipment to be procured for the first outset. In the month following the arrival of the ships, we proceeded round in this boat, to Botany Bay; and ascending George's River, one of two which falls into the bay, explored its winding course about twenty miles beyond where Governor Hunter's survey had been carried.

The sketch made of this river and presented to the governor, with the favourable report of the land on its borders, induced His Excellency to examine them himself shortly afterward; and was followed by establishing there a new branch of the colony, under the name of *Bank's Town*.⁴⁶

Thus the real novelty of Bass and Flinders' *Tom Thumb* expedition was that they had named the river, and by naming granted a certain comprehension and power to the namers. But they were the last,

⁴⁵ H. Goodall and A. Cadzow, *Rivers and Resilience: Aboriginal People on Sydney's Georges River*, Sydney, 2009, p. 92.

⁴⁶ M. Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, London, 1814, p. xcvi.

rather than the first, to venture into the river in the first seven years of the colony. Their expedition could better be understood as a second look at a river system that had already been substantially kenned but disregarded.

Part of the problem was understanding just what kind of waterway the Georges River was. Was it simply an arm of Botany Bay or a major fluvio-estuarine system in its own right? Unlike Port Jackson, which is all estuary, with no major freshwater river input, the lower Georges is fed by a major freshwater stream draining hundreds of square kilometres of plateau country to the south. However, the feeder catchment's overall pattern is bizarre: its main tributary (O'Hares Creek) starts from the top of the coastal escarpment near Wollongong a few miles from the sea and flows inland, north-westwards, until it switches east in a sharp boathook bend where it meets the main estuary. Thus, with the model of Sydney Harbour before them, the settlers were not expecting such a contorted stream form. It was not until they had solved a similar problem of a riverine system with a similar morphology, with the realisation that the north-west flowing Nepean and the east flowing Hawkesbury were the same stream, that they could begin to comprehend the Georges system (Map 4). For Bass and Flinders to give the entire system the one name was an exercise in comprehension, just as Flinders' comparable naming of the continent of Australia was the end result of two-hundred years of piecemeal discovery of what seemed an amorphous collection of islands, peninsulas and desert coasts.

Consequently, it was only after the exploration and settlement of the much more distant and difficult Hawkesbury floodplains that Bass and Flinders' 'rediscovery' of the Georges River allowed a comprehension of its advantages, and subsequent rapid settlement of its good soils on Hunter's orders after 1795. Hence, the folk memory that attributes the waterway's European discovery to Bass, Flinders, and Boy Martin contains an important grain of truth: however many may have traversed Australia's coasts and inlets in centuries past, their travels seem to have little importance for posterity unless they lead to sequential development. However, something of real consequence may have happened on those first days in the new land

in January 1788. The hours spent splashing together in the shallows and sand bars up-river in Lime Kiln Bay, on a summer's afternoon long ago, when two peoples met and, after a bit of a squabble set about befriending each other, showed that despite massive differences in clothing and customs they were not so far apart in the simple enjoyments that make us human.