

Beyond the Sea

Journey into Hell

Selected extracts from Chapter 11 - it covers the voyage of the convict transport Atlas 1801-1802. References to Murtagh and Michael Ahern, log details and illustrations have been deleted as have the trials of Atlas captain Richard Brooks and Hercules captain Luckyn Betts.

In the cold, mist laden early hours of Sunday, November 29, 1801 the convict transport ship *Atlas* raised its anchor from the muddy waters of Cork Harbour and slowly made its way out to sea to meet up with her sister ship *Hercules* and sail together to Port Jackson. The emotional farewells could still be heard from the quay as the pilot boat took its leave with a series of long waves and a shout of 'god's speed'.

The convicts, now chained together below felt the desperate pull of home, knowing they would never return or ever again hold their loved ones. They were sailing into the unknown. No ship in the history of transportation from Ireland had so many associated deaths before sailing than the *Atlas*. Upwards of fifteen convicts had perished, some so sick and weak they could not be disembarked from their transport; others died on the quay waiting to go aboard. As the *Atlas* left the harbour the crew was employed making the ship ready to brace itself against the storms that were gathering on the horizon.

Within 24 hours of departure the first on-board death is recorded. A suicide. At quarter past twelve in the afternoon a pistol shot was heard coming from the lower cabin. The ship's steward raised an alarm, that Isaac Telf the cabin steward had shot himself. He was found lying dead in his own blood. He had shot himself in the left side and a point of a nail was discovered sticking out in the other side.

The next day strong gales, pelting rain and heavy seas saw the ship taking huge quantities of water over the deck, causing a great deal of damage and the drowning of sheep and poultry. During this terrible weather the *Atlas* lose sight of its sister ship *Hercules*. Both ships and their charges were now at the mercy of a violent and unpredictable sea.

The convicts, many of whom had never been to sea, suffered the anxiety of an unknown fate. Sea sickness was the least of their troubles. Their irons pulled against their flesh each time the ship lurched and there was no escape from the loose cargo and human excrement that was being thrown about inside the prison. The noise from thunder and lightning, breaking rigging and shouting sailors added to the fear that all would be lost and they would end up in a watery grave. These atrocious conditions and the moans of the sick continued without end. Being housed below deck, the

convicts had no air, all the hatches had been tightly closed.

One convict, sentenced to life for the abduction of a Quaker heiress, did not have to endure the squalor of these conditions. On October 31, Sir Henry Browne Hayes, still wealthy, had bribed *Atlas* Captain Richard Brooks prior to sailing with £200 for a cabin and other privileges, including freedom of the deck and being able to mess with him and other officers. Not for him the restriction of leg irons, chains and the life threatening close association with those suffering from contagious diseases. On October 31 he had been taken from his prison cell to the Cobh of Cork, and rowed out to the *Atlas* with his personal luggage, there to be greeted by Brooks. Sir Henry, being the only convict allowed on deck on departure was unable to control his emotions, he burst into tears, ran down below to, as it was later reported, 'to ease his pangs of adversity'.

The weather continued to deteriorate as hail, rain and lightning saw sails sheet and split. It sprung the mizzen mast and carried away the bowsprit bitts. The courageous crew rallied in spite of the conditions to change sails and rigging as the ship rolled and laboured in a totally confused sea.

Sleeping was impossible, made worse by the confined accommodation, one of the male convicts died in these appalling conditions, and left to lay amongst his fellow sufferers until the storm settled. He was buried, followed by another unfortunate inmate two days later. Their names were not entered in the log, just noted as: 'buried a convict'.

The cramped conditions were a result of the *Atlas* being heavily laden with the personal goods of the Captain, Richard Brooks. He demonstrated a total disregard for the health and safety of the convicts by cramming goods to trade, including 2,166 gallons of rum, into the holds to protect them from the harsh elements. The air scuttles were closed and the deadlights shut in. Not a spare inch of space was available and the suffering convicts lived amongst the stacked goods. Worse, because of this overloading, half the hospital had been turned into a sail room and the main hatchway fully stowed with casks and boarded to close, cutting off the air from those in the prison. Even the candles could no longer provide a flame, leaving the sickly prisoners to endure in an atmosphere of eerie darkness, the moans of the sick and the foul smells.

How the ship gained its 'permission to sail' inspection was either through straight bribery or sheer negligence by the inspectors. With little or no air available and the prisoners sitting and lying in their own excrement and vomit the health of already diseased prisoners was now in a critical state, as was the real fear of suffocation.

Convicts suffered throughout this ordeal being closely confined and always in irons. They had to carry two very heavy leg irons and another around their necks secured with a large, heavy padlock which weighed a pound and a half. Only when the extreme weather changed on Friday December 11, were prisoners able to go on deck and take in fresh air and dry their soaked bedding. The squally conditions continued. Next day six prisoners were ordered to be double ironed on account of beer buns found empty,

the contents delivered down the throats of those responsible. Brooks, totally deprived of humanity, now began to cheat the prisoners of their food rations and water allowance by using false weights and measures.

Surgeon Elphinstone Walker complained to Brooks that the rations were totally inadequate for the prisoners to survive. Water had been reduced to a miserable three pints per day, not enough to suppress the insatiable thirst of those burning up with fever. The number of sick in the small overflowing hospital and those in a dying state dramatically increased. If a prisoner complained or made threatening remarks they were unmercifully flogged, regardless of their state of health.

Down below the nights seemed to go on forever. Being linked together by a single chain running through an iron ring, those wanting to relieve themselves, or pass the proceeds of poor food or sea sickness had to crawl along the chains and over their sickly, half awake neighbours to get to the buckets, hopefully in time. The human waste could not be bailed out through the open hatches once strong seas were running as the hatches were shut fast, not only to prevent water coming in on the convicts and flooding the prison, but also to preserve the personal goods of Brooks and his first mate, Mr. Byron. Prisoners were only allowed on deck in succession, with their irons being overhauled on reaching the deck. Another male convict died on December 18. Brooks' log states from time to time 'the whole of prisoners on deck'. There was little space on the upper deck. The spars on either side of the waist had been raised some four feet and the ship's long boat was stored in the centre of the deck, so even more merchandise could be stored on board. Suitable areas for exercise just did not exist, so they just lolled about, lent on rails and cargo or sat down on the deck before being sent back and chained below.

In these incredibly cluttered conditions both above and below the prisoners fell to disease in large numbers. The death toll continued to rise as did the number on the sick list. Prisoners had died since leaving Cork, due to the state of their living conditions or typhus and dysentery. The supply of anti-scorbutics was extremely low and so rapidly increased the list of those affected by the much dreaded disease, scurvy.

The intolerable hot, humid weather added to the discomfort of the prisoners, as rats, lice and cockroaches tormented the sick without relief.

On Tuesday December 22, six of the prisoners were drummed on deck and severely flogged on account of the beer they drained in the main hatchway. Christmas passed without the usual celebrations, but the convicts still managed to sing their songs and wished each other better times. Their thoughts naturally drifted off to Ireland. On December 29 saw a terrible flogging of a female prisoner for thieving and shortly after another male convict passed away and was buried in the cruel sea. The burials only added to the depressed state of the convicts. When it came their turn they knew there would be no ceremony or lasting notice. It would be as if they had simply vanished off

the face of the earth, their name never recorded.

Much to surgeon Walker's concern, more convicts were being reported as desperately sick, so all the convicts were allowed on deck. The crew landed a large shark. It added fresh food to the monotonous menu. A problem of a different nature now surfaced. The Sergeant and some of his privates were found to be frequently drunk, quarrelsome and not in a fit condition to be on duty. Brooks placed the soldiers on half the allowance of liquor as punishment for, as he put it, 'too frequently and quarrelsome and incapable of being on guard'. The following day another male convict died and was committed to the deep.

Brooks did not record the name of the deceased or just as importantly the reason for the death. This neglect would continue throughout the entire voyage and result in inadequate records on disembarkation.

The distribution, poor cooking and quantity of food continued to be a subject for complaint. Fed up, the convicts made a formal complaint regarding the disgusting food and the quantity received in the vain hope of getting their entitled Government allowance. Another male convict died and was buried the next day. The prisoners were now allowed on deck all day, but their prison remained a filthy hell hole, as it could not be cleaned or fumigated without the removal of Brook's private goods. This allowed the vermin to continue their long holiday amongst the prisoners' bedding.

The weather was mostly fine as they made their way towards Rio de Janeiro, but the near perfect conditions outside would not help the suffering once they were back down below. The death toll continued to climb with a male convict dying on January 16 and another on Friday January 22. The prisoners continued to be on deck during the day. The poor quality food was still a cause for complaint. This time it was the dried fish, which was eventually declared totally unfit for human consumption.

Depth soundings taken on Sunday January 31 indicated they were approaching close to the port, white sand is sounded in 50 fathoms. All sails were ordered to be set to take advantage of a fresh steady breeze that would hopefully stay with them all the way to the harbour at Rio de Janeiro.

On the first of February a great deal of excitement spread throughout the ship when it became known that female convict, Collins, was expected to give birth. At two o'clock in the morning she became the proud mother of twins, a girl and a boy. Tragically they did not survive, the heartless Brooks noting 'Died & buried the same'. The poor woman delivered back to the prison to agonise over what could have been. The twins were not alone for long. A male convict died later in the day and joined them in their voyage to the deep.

Log Monday February 1, 1802 ... Died & Buried 1 Male Convict

At 2AM Collins, one of the Convicts bro't to Bed of Twins – Boy & Girl

– Died & Buried the same

On February 2, 1802 the *Atlas* sailed slowly into the picturesque harbour of Rio de Janeiro in calm and hot sultry weather. The death toll had reached fifteen and upwards of seventy convicts were listed as severely sick. On the same day the sister ship, *Hercules* arrived, with a chilling story to tell, a mutiny on board, resulting in the death of fourteen prisoners. The *Hercules* Captain, Luckyn Betts, met up with Richard Brooks not long after they anchored. It was their first meeting since leaving Cork, having been separated shortly after they set sail due to the gales encountered the day after leaving port. Brook's log notes covers the meeting only briefly with little comment of the conversation or noting the details. This could only be to cover himself in the event of being called as a witness in any future legal action. Clearly, Brooks would have spoken to officers from the *Hercules* on the matter.

Another male convict died and was buried on February 3 and two days later, on February 5, the sympathetic Portuguese Government agreed to give Brooks permission to land 129 convicts onto a small island.

The accumulating filth in the prison and the hospital exceeded description. The *Atlas*, now at rest, offered a favourable opportunity to clean and fumigate these areas of infection. It was never done, the timber and private goods of Brooks preventing Surgeon Walker from carrying out any form of hygiene, let alone wash floors. Sick convicts were still forced to sleep in the prison because part of the hospital was still used as a sail room. The various forms of bedding including hammocks and blankets were rarely aired on deck. The confined humidity added to the air below becoming more noxious by the day.

Water was issued daily, but confined to only a beer quart. The enterprising Brooks quoted it as three pints, not sufficient for those with ravenous appetites and thirsts. Being defrauded of their Government allocated rations, the sick were only allowed a vegetable diet of Barley, Rice, Pease and oatmeal. Meat and pork were withdrawn. However, the full food ration was charged to the government thanks to manipulation of the false weights and measures. Passengers fared poorly and were also affected by the excessive amount of cargo in and around their cabins, having to creep under hammocks and over chests to gain access to their lodgings. Sir Henry fared much better. He enjoyed part of the round-house and a cabin allocated for passengers was stowed with his baggage. Thomas Jamison told of his cabin and sleeping quarters:

‘My bed-place where I slept was rather on a contracted scale, and underneath was stowed four casks of sugar, which were usually required on deck twice a week. My cases were constantly cast loose, and in danger of being broke to pieces. In the opposite side of the cabin was a shuttle, and

under it Mr Brooks had stowed a number of his packages, which underwent frequent examination, so that my peace and rest were eternally disturbed'

Brooks meanwhile had more important things in mind. He went shopping while ten butts of water and three live bullocks are taken aboard his ship.

The *Hercules* was separated from the *Atlas* during the gales and high seas encountered after taking up together from Cork. It had no alternative but to make the best of the situation and make her own way to Rio.

On December 29, 1801 the ship was nearing Cape Verdes. Having been alerted of a plot to take over the ship Betts, after interviewing the informers, came to the conclusion that because the convicts showed no unruly activity and on the whole were well-behaved it was probably a series of concocted stories presented for personal benefits. This approach was expected by most transport captains at the time. They were briefed before sailing they should be aware of signs to take their ship and ensure security was always in place. They should also be suspicious of informers who sell their comrades for personal gain. If punishment was administered without evidence they would have to answer on their return and, if found in breach of charter, forfeit their pay and bonus.

Lucky Betts was known to be a lenient master as far as the prisoners were concerned. At the time only one man was in double irons and twenty or thirty were out of irons, the remainder in single irons. Appreciating the way they were treated a mutiny was far from Bett's mind. This soft approach would have been frowned upon by most masters with responsibility for dangerous convicts.

At about half past two that afternoon Betts was just finishing his lunch with commander of the guard, Chief Mate Aiken, Surgeon Kunst, Captain Ralph Wilson of the New South Wales Corps, Purser John Carr and two guests, wives of the officers. The crew and soldiers without arms were all below deck. The helmsman and two sentinels were allocated to watch duties on the quarter deck. They were ordered to cover a small group of convicts who were at this time unchained and exercising.

Suddenly, everyone at the lunch jumped from their seats on hearing violent screams coming from the female prisoners in the round house. They had just witnessed convicts overpower the two sentinels. Added to the screams was the sound of people shouting and running on the deck, some close to the Captain's cabin. With weapons in hand, they threw open the cabin door only to find their worst fears realised, a group of prisoners were in charge of the quarter deck and holding the two guards held captive.

Before they had time to gather their thoughts and engage the attackers, a convict rushed forward and pointed a blunderbuss directly at Wilson and Betts, shouting that their lives were at an end. Fortunately for them the weapon did not discharge. Captain Wilson instinctively reacted and shot him dead on the spot. The soldiers and crew were

now alerted and came rushing on deck firing down on the convicts blocking their way. Convict Pat Whelan had already smashed windows and the door to the Captain's cabin and burnt his coat with a hot logger-head. He was disposed of by a 6lb. shot. Cutting with cutlasses and using the butts of rifles the crew and soldiers battled for some time before forcing the convicts back down below and putting sentries in place.

The savage hand-to-hand fighting lasted for nearly an hour before control of the ship returned to the ship's company. When all the convicts were below and secured the bloody scene was inspected. Some twelve convicts were dead or dying, some lying on the main and quarter decks and some in the prison.

Eight convicts were brought up from below by Sergeant Thomas Trotter and held on the quarter deck. Trotter, a member of the New South Wales Corps, was in the guard room when the mutiny started. He immediately came up and on his way was accosted by a prisoner with a bayonet. He threw him down the hatchway and, hearing shots, collected arms and went on deck to force the prisoners below. One convict, Jeremiah Prendergass, who appeared more active than most was pulled out from the group and put before Captain Betts and his officers. He had been identified by James Tracy as being the sole ringleader of the mutiny and had demanded the lives of the ship's officers. Tracy told Prendergass he supposed himself dying because of him. Tracy, a notorious criminal, was in truth another ringleader and the first to surprise and assault the officers. After being wounded in the arm he feared for his life and, if he survived, knew he would be found guilty because of his participation. Informing on Prendergass would, he perceived, save him from that fate.

On hearing the accusation the trembling Prendergass, now single ironed, knelt down on the deck directly in front of Betts and Captain Ralph Wilson. He protested his innocence and any involvement or lead in the uprising. Wilson heatedly urged Betts to: 'shoot, shoot the rascal'. Betts, caught up in the emotion of revenge and in sight of the bodies recovered from below, would not have anything to do with Prendergass or his claims of innocence. He told him to pray, for he was a dead man if he did not confess his role in the events. The convict continued to plead his innocence. Betts raised his pistol, said he should die with a lie in his mouth, then put the pistol to Prendergass's head and shot him dead in cold blood in front of the officers and crew. Wilson after the execution expressed his complete satisfaction. He said Prendergass was the greatest villain in the ship and would have shot him himself if he had a pistol.

It was later found that Henry Taylor, the ship's boatswain's mate, had been attacked by Prendergass with a carpenter's adze.

Apart from Jeremiah Prendergass thirteen others were killed or later died during the mutinous attempt on the *Hercules*: John Blair, William McKnight, William Long, Hugh Murray, Richard Nixon, Peter Mulvahill, Patrick Whelan, Michael Lee, John McCottell, William Knox, John Fitzpatrick, Barney Kaanaan and Thomas Walker. A

day after the mutiny another convict, Thomas Mather, died of his wounds, leaving the total of remaining wounded at nine. None of the officers, soldiers or crew were killed or badly wounded.

Betts attempted to find the people behind the insurrection, and claimed a Mrs. French alias Howe had played a significant role. He immediately put her in irons. Two members of the crew had participated and five others were charged with complicity. A convict named Pat Jones came forward to name names at the enquiry. Those named were double ironed and chained below.

From that point on convicts were securely confined in the prison until disembarking at Port Jackson. Only limited time was allowed on deck and always under guard. Betts would not return to his days of leniency. The only reason he called in to Rio de Janeiro was a humane one, the deteriorating health of the prisoners, due mainly to their close confinement and not having regular access to the deck.

Betts is careful not to give details of the mutiny in the log or his role in the killing of Prendergass, knowing he would have to explain the circumstances and the deaths of the convicts to an enquiry once they arrive at Port Jackson.

It was the worst and the bloodiest mutiny on a convict transport and only confirmed the belief of most convict ship captains that the Irish rebels had to be strictly supervised as they were always a threat to a ship's safety.

Brooks, after hearing of this frightening affair, would have feared for his own situation, after all there were at sailing 91 convicts sentenced to life aboard his ship. Some had committed vicious murders; they had little to lose. The loyalty of the crew was also questionable.

These events would have played on his mind and may have had a strong influence on his later behaviour. Undoubtedly, the convicts on the *Atlas* would have heard of these events through people visiting the ship with stores and carrying out repairs. They would be ready to escape if the opportunity arose.

The convicts were told previously they would be transferred from the ship onto a nearby island in order to restore them to better health. They would be under the guard of small party of marines. Most of the officers and the Captain would be relaxing on shore. Having knowledge of this, a group of convicts and some crew members saw the opportunity to carry out their long-awaited desire to escape from the *Atlas* and to new-found freedom.

The first were the ship's caulkers, Richard Cushill and Jacob Robinson. During the night of Friday, February 11 they quietly slid over the side of the ship and under the cover of darkness swam over to an American schooner anchored in the harbour. Hauled aboard they pleaded their case for making America their new home. Unfortunately for them they were informed on. When the Americans were made aware of who they were and the consequences of being part of an escape plot from a British

ship they handed them over to Brooks the next day. He immediately put them in irons and deposited them on the island with the convicts. On the same day the ship's carpenter, David Brown, was whipped as he worked with the caulkers and was implicated in their attempted escape.

The death toll continued to rise despite the improvement in prisoner living conditions. Two males died, one on February 14, the other on the 16th along with a female convict. All three as usual were unnamed.

Log Friday February 12, 1802 ... found the Caulker & William Robinson on Board an American Schooner Put them in irons and sent them to the Convicts Island ship'd David Brown – Carp'r.

Sunday February 14, 1802: Died and Buried one the Male Convicts

Monday February 15, 1802: Died and Buried one the Male Convicts

Tuesday February 16, 1802: Died and Buried one of the female convicts

At 3am on the morning of Thursday February 18, a second daring escape. This time by three convicts. They had somehow been able to remove their irons and slip off the holding chains. In the early hours of the morning they reached the deck undetected. Climbing over the side, they carefully scaled down the side of the *Atlas* and slipped into a pinnacle (an eight-oared row boat slightly smaller than a barge) which was tethered to the side of the *Atlas* and, with a minimum of noise, slowly rowed towards shore and to freedom. It was not long before their daring escape into the unknown was discovered and the alarm raised as was the temperature of Brooks and his officers. A crew of five were immediately put into the cutter and told not to return without the escapees. All day the cutter searched the shoreline with no result, the order not to come back without them still ringing in their ears. They continued into the night and until the following morning without success. The following day a sighting of the pinnacle was reported from the shore and that she was lying on a bank. The cutter was launched and the pinnacle found high and dry, but no sign of its former occupants. It was recovered and returned to the *Atlas*. The three unnamed prisoners made good their escape, never to be seen or heard of again. The questionable activities of Brooks did not escape the notice of one important and influential passenger on the *Atlas*, Thomas Jamison, who was on his way to Sydney to take up his commission as Surgeon General of New South Wales. He had first-hand experience of convict transport having been the Surgeon's Mate on the *Sirius*, one of the ships of the First Fleet in 1788. When the *Sirius* was wrecked off Norfolk Island, he was appointed Assistant Surgeon to the colony by Governor Arthur Phillip. Quarrels broke out between Jamison and Brooks based on issues such as the herding of prisoners, the hideous conditions and the gross overcrowding of the ship with Brook's private trade goods. Jamison's criticism was to

no avail as he had no authority on the ship and, being an Irishman, he was seen to have sympathy for the Irish convicts. This was not the only time the two men had words. Fierce arguments arose about Brooks' preferential treatment of Sir Henry Browne Hayes, especially as he was allowed to have meals in the Captain's cabin whilst the other convicts were being short-changed of their rations. It also annoyed him that Hayes fraternised with the female prisoners and had, freedom of the ship. Hayes had also abused him on many occasions. The simmering disgust for Brooks and Hayes came to a head on Monday the 22nd of February. At seven o'clock in the evening Jamison came on board from a trip on shore, and attempting to go down to his cabin, was again faced with the familiar obstacles blocking his passage, the goods of Brooks and his officers. Rather than work his way around them he kicked a few down the steps, causing some damage to the side of a case. It would be fair to assume he would have had some liquor by the time he returned to the ship, but he was fed up with his situation and the persons he saw as the reason for his frustration.

Returning to his cabin Jamison, after changing into his dressing gown, went back on deck to take in some fresh air. Almost at once he was confronted by the *Atlas* first mate Robert Byron, a close relative of the *Atlas* owners and like Brooks owned some of the cargo. He accused him of purposely breaking his personal goods and, shouting insults, he threatened to assault Jamison. Brooks, awakened by the shouting, called out from his bedroom located in the cabin below as to what was the noise on deck? Byron replied that strong words had taken place between him and Jamison. Brooks shouted back: 'Mr Byron, put that mutinous scoundrel in irons' Jamison became irate telling Brooks that he lied and that he was neither 'mutinous or a scoundrel'. Brooks then appeared on deck and after an exchange punched Jamison repeatedly whilst Byron and John Wellen the second mate and others held him. Jamison was forced to the ground where Brooks continued to assault him until his temper was exhausted. Brooks then returned to his cabin leaving a bloody and bruised Jamison lying on the deck much the worse for wear. Jamison, unable to protect himself and having no redress, was even further alarmed when he was advised by Captain Wilson of the New South Wales Corps that he should leave the *Atlas* without delay as his life was in imminent danger.

Unable to have his complaints acted upon and being in constant quarrel with Brooks and Hayes the frustrated Jamison, now in a state of alarm, sought out Luckyn Betts to arrange a transfer and a passage on the *Hercules*.

On Wednesday, February 24 he transferred the majority of his belongings and his family onto the *Hercules*. Before leaving he put Brooks on notice that when he reached Sydney he would report to the Governor of New South Wales all the incidents, including the fraud of government goods. He would also take immediate legal action in the courts of the colony against the convict Sir Henry Browne Hayes.

However, Jamison would not forget Hayes or Brooks. Brooks did not report the assault on Jamison, nor the involvement of his first mate, Mr. Byron. He fully expected some form of revenge from Jamison, not only for the assault, but the need for him to take measures to meet up with the *Atlas* at Cork after Brooks deliberately withheld the sailing date from him.

The remaining luggage and personal goods belonging to Jamison and his family were pilfered once he vacated his cabin and left the *Atlas*.

On February 25, the *Atlas* sailed from Rio de Janeiro harbour setting a course towards New South Wales with the *Hercules*. Two males and a female had died during the stop over. Not long into the voyage the wife of Sergeant Champion died and was buried the following day. The *Atlas* remained within sight of the *Hercules*, but Brooks had no intention of steering a course to New South Wales. He had another port in mind, one that offered opportunity for personal gain.

On the first day of March another male convict died. Brooks allowed half the convicts on deck for the first time since leaving Rio, but they remained chained, curtailing any chance of exercising. He entered daily in the log the position of the *Hercules* in order to cover any future questions about a change of course. Thomas Jamison was privy to a letter written to Brooks by Betts when in Rio and suggests it was collusion to cover a pretext for Brooks to proceed to the Cape of Good Hope.

It was not long before the fear of insurrection reared its ugly head. At one o'clock in the morning of March 3 disturbances and loud noises were heard coming from the convicts below deck. An alarm was sounded bringing the ship's soldiers in arms and the crew running towards the open hatchway in anticipation of convicts coming up the hatchway and rushing on to the deck. There was no need for the alarm. All the commotion and noise was caused by prisoners arguing and fighting over someone stealing their bread rations. One of the suspects of the theft was singled out, taken up on deck and flogged. It was only a minor incident, but everyone in charge of the convicts remained nervous and apprehensive.

Still mindful of the *Hercules* episode Brooks suspected a mutiny would be attempted on his ship. He ordered searches of the prison and prisoners a daily task for the guards. On March 6 the *Atlas* lost sight of the *Hercules*.

On the same day a nervous Brooks ordered the convict prison to be searched for weapons. The *Hercules* was not seen again until April 8. However, rumour still abounded that the prisoners were continuing to act suspiciously and were planning to mutiny and take the ship:

With time on their hands, there was always talk amongst the convicts of hate, unfairness and cruelty of the system and of Brooks. Some would brag about their previous exploits, true or imagined, and of course have a plan and a way to wreak revenge. Captains were always alert and some readily inclined to believe rumours of

an uprising. If it suited their position they would take swift action against alleged perpetrators and those they personally disliked.

The next day Brooks, now almost hoping for an incident to prove his predictions, ordered all the prisoners to be brought on deck and chained together. A search was undertaken between decks and throughout the prison. Fearing the rumours to be true the ship's crew and soldiers were ordered to be on guard, the soldiers ordered to keep their muskets loaded at all times. There was little credence to the rumours apart from loose talk and the continuing grumbling about food, water and their deplorable living conditions. This situation came to a head on Saturday March 13 when a convict named Patrick Coleman came forward to inform the Captain of a proposed mutiny. Brooks, a ready listener, now believed his thinking was vindicated.

It was simply an alarmist story. There was no evidence of threats against the ship. At no time did Brooks record in his log book that any convicts were troublesome or note any suggestion of a rising. It all boiled down to the 'stories' being told by informers with much to gain through special favours.

Aware that Brooks would believe anyone who supported his beliefs and of the advantages, more convicts came forward with names of those they disliked. Firstly, John Foley (Fowley), then Patrick McDermott, (Brooks swore him to secrecy), followed by Patrick Darcey. Not long after, and fearing they too would be implicated, the informers now started informing on each other, Foley and McDermott on Patrick Darcey, then Darcey on Foley. The original informer Coleman was in turn informed on by Foley. Despite making a number of threats, a confused Brooks found it impossible to get to the truth of the matter.

Not able to gain any evidence or confessions and still believing they were going to rise and take the ship he ordered that each of the prisoners informed on should be flogged in order to gain confessions. The order resulted in the flogging of nineteen convicts supposedly involved in the rumoured mutiny. The deck ran red for days with the blood of sickly convicts who never had a chance to defend themselves. The whistle of the cat's tail may have been music to Brooks' ears, as might the cries of his victims, but it produced an intense hatred in the hearts of those falsely accused. There was not one piece of evidence against any of those flogged. Nine of the suspects flogged would not survive the journey to New South Wales. The floggings had taken a toll.

Patrick McDermott, a serial informer, came from Meath and had already a reputation as a standover merchant and lying to suit his own ends. Brooks it appears took his word without question, evidenced by him being the only informer not flogged and sworn to secrecy. He repaid the privilege of having the ear of the Captain on Monday March 15, when he told him a group of convicts had smuggled poison on board with the sole purpose of poisoning the soldiers. He added that others were planning and plotting to take the ship and murder the soldiers and members of the

ship's company. The accused were Ordinary Seaman Jas. Smith, convicts William Holligan, Michael Byrne and Patrick Gannon. Brooks flogged each of them, but did not gain any evidence to support the claims made by McDermott. Of those flogged only Holligan and Gannon lived to reach Port Jackson. How poison came into the possession of the convicts was questionable as they had no contact outside the ship

The log did not record the names McDermott and others gave to Brooks for 'plotting to take the ship'. There can be little doubt that McDermott was involved in naming one of these plotters as 'Ahern', he being the only remaining informer recognised in the log. Murtagh, Michael and John Ahern were not named, nor was William Ahern who was not related to the three brothers. However, the very next day a single prisoner named Ahern is listed by Brooks to be flogged. Brooks did not enter the Christian name of the Ahern in his log. He is nominated as the man who, if the mutiny was successful, would have navigated the *Atlas* to America. This manufactured 'skill' could only have come from McDermott. Brooks had little or no knowledge of the prisoners, backgrounds, descriptions, crimes and in many cases their ages. Informers like McDermott and others just fabricated stories to gain even more privileges from the ever-eager listener, Captain Brooks. During conversations he would have discovered all the Aherns lived near waterways. The three brothers lived directly alongside the Morning Star River and not far from Limerick Harbour. William Ahern came from Waterford also a port.

The experience needed to navigate a ship the size of the *Atlas* would have required years of training and experience at sea. None of the Aherns had that level of experience. If they did the authorities would have pressed them into the naval service. The British were desperate for men with this background.

Regardless of any truths, 'an Ahern' was singled out for special treatment. Once again it would be punishment without evidence or a statement by the prisoner. On Tuesday, March 16 all the prisoners and the ship's company were drummed and assembled on deck to witness another flogging, one that was to become a virtual execution.

The drill for flogging followed a familiar pattern which included a formal ceremony. The crew and convicts were piped on deck and the military escort assembled in line with their officers in full uniform. The prisoner was brought up from below and escorted onto the deck between two guards and marched up to the hatch-cover which had been raised to accommodate his body. All eyes were now focused on Captain Brooks who ordered 'hats off' and addressed the accused and announced the punishment, followed by the order that the sentence should be now carried out. Surgeon Walker stood by Ahern taking up his responsibility to ensure the punishment did not result in the prisoner's death. The prisoner Ahern's shirt was pulled over his head and his arms raised so the guards could tie his wrists to the open grating section of the hatch. His

legs then spread apart and each ankle tied in the same manner. Carefully watching the proceedings the Bosun's Mate came forward with a bag containing the 'cat'. It consisted of a one inch diameter wooden handle which was two feet long and attached to the end was nine two-foot-long plaited quarter inch diameter ropes, a Turk's head knot securing ropes to the handle. The cat was removed from the bag and the Bosun's Mate now stepped into position and commenced the punishment, delivering strong strokes to the back of the skinny emaciated frame, each about a half-minute apart. This meant nearly an hour of constant agony. When he tired of the effort the prisoner was left in the sun, hot enough to overcome an injured man just by merely standing for that length of time in the blazing sun. The cat was then passed to one of the guards to resume the flogging with the same vigor.

It was custom to ask during the punishment if the Captain wished to call a halt. There was no signal so the flogging continued with Ahern's back bone and ribs now exposed, the remainder of his back raw and completely bloody. Sections of flesh were hanging from his tormented body and pieces scattered about the deck, blood running freely across the boards. The scourgers were bespattered with his blood like the butchers they were.

The emotions of the Aherns ran high as they stood by and witnessed the terrible damage being inflicted for a crime that had not been committed let alone proven. Listening to his cries of intense agony only strengthened their hatred of Brooks and their will to survive regardless of his brutality.

There is no record of the number of lashes administered, but the crime of mutiny on other ships saw punishments in excess of 250 lashes. Ahern fainted after the punishment ceased and was eventually cut down and dragged below suffering horrendous life threatening injuries.

Made & short'd Sail accord'g to Weather. Car'd away the
Spanker Boom. Do Wr to the End
Flogg'd Ahern the Prisoner –
If the Prisoners had succeeded in tak'g
the ship, this Ahern would have navigated her to America
noth'g more of the Conspiracy found out
The Serjeant sick a great suspicion of His being poisoned

Brooks, frustrated by not being able to find evidence to prove his theory was now even more brutal in his treatment of the sickly prisoners, more floggings, including another on informer, now ringleader, Patrick Darcy. This was the second punishment Darcy had suffered under the lash. Not getting the answers he wanted he delivered Edward Walsh to the hatch. He was flogged to force a confession or, as Brooks put it,

‘get a clearer understanding of the conspiracy’. All he got were screams of a bloody, innocent man claiming he knew nothing. Water and food continued to be issued in smaller quantities as Brooks still allowed the use of false weights. Accommodation became even worse than ever before as a result of the additional space taken up by the private goods purchased by Brooks at the Rio stop over. Fumigation was impossible.

The suspected poison conspiracy surfaced on March 19. It was believed the prisoners had somehow arranged to poison the officers. This was thought to be the cause of the death of Sergeant Butler on that day. No record was made that the surgeon had given this as his opinion for the death of Butler.

The *Atlas* was continuing to live up to its reputation as a ‘floating hell’. The prisoners, crew and even the soldiers were in fear of the ‘cat’. Even the smallest misdemeanour was severely punished. Soldiers did not escape discipline. Two were flogged on April 3 for being found asleep on their watch. The searches continued below decks and those flogged had little chance of survival. Their terrible wounds would never heal in the foul environment.

Four more prisoners were flogged on April 5, Patrick Darcey, Darby Laehy, Francis Stafford and Mary Courtney. The male prisoners were assumed to be part of a conspiracy, the female Courtney for showing prisoners where arms were housed. This was the third flogging of Pat Darcey; he would by now have wished he had never spoken out or turned informer.

Another disturbance a day later was caused by a call of ‘murder’ between decks. Soldiers and crew rushed forward to investigate, but it was discovered a convict had only fainted, not an uncommon event amongst the sickly crowded prisoners. Some saw it as prisoners taking their revenge on the informers. One convict was heard to use foul language and was flogged for his outburst.

The reprisals continued without gaining information. Brooks, despite his investigations was unable to gain any evidence of a mutiny, having totally relied on the word of informers. Twenty-five convicts had been unmercifully flogged so far for their involvement in the so called conspiracy. The prisoners were now regularly chained through their irons. On April 8, the floggings and conspiracy campaign claimed its first victim. The terrible damage inflicted on Ahern’s body on March 16 was so severe that despite treatment, he succumbed to his flogging and died. He was brought onto the deck and thrown over the side. Another convict joined him in the sea on the same day. Brooks simply recorded the death as ‘Died and buried one of the male convicts. The man that was to have carried the ship into port.’

As in many log entries, Brooks took care not to name those who died, so the christian name of the ‘Ahern’ was never recorded or the cause of death. It is believed the Ahern who died was John Ahern, who was sentenced to life. William Ahern’s term was seven years. He had already completed nearly two years of his sentence since being gaoled

in September 1799, so had little or no incentive to be involved in situations that would endanger his early release.

The rumour still persisted that the convicts planned to murder the guards and soldiers by administering them poison. The day before Ahern's death four soldiers had been found in a bad state of health, supposedly the result of being poisoned. These suspicions saw a convict who was suspected of involvement stapled between decks

Brooks now made a decision, its consequence adding to the loss of life. He changed course and sailed towards Table Bay at the Cape of Good Hope. This change of direction was purely Brook's decision. It was not on the agreed route laid down by the Navy Board at the time of sailing from Cork. The master of a vessel had licence to make such a decision if circumstances warranted, but no event brought this decision about except personal gain. Government orders to all transport masters stressed they were to land their human cargo in the shortest possible time and by the most direct route. This was done to ensure more prisoners survived their long journey into captivity.

The Cape of Good Hope was used as a port of call by British ships which needed to refresh their stores of meat, vegetables and water whilst sailing to the East Indies colonies. It was also a substantial trading port. A Dutch colony since 1651, the British had captured it in 1795, returning it to the Dutch government in 1801, only to recapture the port again in 1806.

The Cape's Table Bay, constantly exposed to the violence of the South Atlantic sea and its never-ending gale force winds, did not provide a safe anchorage at most times of the year. Only in the months of summer was it possible to anchor in relative safety. In winter ships anchored in False Bay. This left the anchored ship some thirty miles from Cape Town.

In sailing to the Cape at this time of year Brooks exposed the *Atlas* and its human cargo once again to the mercy of heavy, violent seas and strong winds. However, he was now in a position to sell or trade some of his goods under the guise of repairs, purchase of provisions and the need for medical assistance for the sick troops. The *Atlas* arrived there on April 12, 1802.

Brooks needed to off load some of his goods as he had been advised whilst in Rio that goods similar to his and those from Europe had been flooding the Sydney market. His expectation of large profits therefore would not be realised. The Cape was the only alternative market before the *Atlas* reached Port Jackson. Brooks could not have had much success as he only stayed a week before setting sail on April 19 for his final destination, Port Jackson. The weather continued to be a factor in the survival of the prisoners. *Atlas* once again experienced huge seas and gale force winds. This meant the policy of close confinement was re introduced. Already six men had died between Rio and the Cape and another man at the Cape. The verminous, filthy quarters of the convicts and the lack of air made breathing almost impossible. It continued to effect

both body and mind. A member of the ship's company died on April 22, adding to the ever-increasing death toll.

In these inhuman conditions disease became rampant. Scurvy raised its ugly head once more, taking a heavy toll amongst the already desperately sick. Scurvy weakens capillaries causing haemorrhages into the tissues, bleeding of the gums, loosening of the teeth, anaemia and general debility and in the appalling conditions on the *Atlas*, a slow and extremely painful death. The anti-scorbutics and other helpful medicines were almost gone so there was little more that could be done except pray.

Brooks continued to neglect the cleaning and fumigation of the prison and airing of bedding. The convicts were nearly always ironed and chained so had very little relief from their cramped confinement and the foul stench of the urine buckets and the never-ending moans of the sick. The *Atlas* continued on towards Port Jackson with an ever-increasing sick list. Another twenty seven lives would be lost before reaching port.

Brooks also had to contend with strong gales, rain and mountainous waves constantly striking the ship, throwing it around like a cork in a tub. There was unrest amongst both the crew and the soldiers. On May 3 Brooks disciplined Sergeant Champion, as he put it, 'in irons for disobedience of orders and making mutinous language on the main deck'. Two days later an unnamed female convict died and was buried. This may have been Collins.

The weather now became increasingly worse, with the crew struggling to keep the ship afloat. The log of May 7 and 8 states: 'Strong gales-struck the bow carried away the rail and filled deck with great quantities of water.' 'Same weather – many things destroyed – damaged – male convict died.'

On May 14 the *Hercules* was sighted once more and Betts informed Brooks that they had lost some of their people overboard in the violent weather. Another male convict died on the 16th. On May 18, under pressure from Brooks, Sergeant Champion gave 'acknowledgements of his faults, and was released from his irons'[and]. A male convict died and buried the same day.

Brooks' log notes that 'A great number sick because of late severe cold weather want of clothing and beddings', and, adds, a great number sick with scurvy. There is no acknowledgement of the filthy conditions and confinement the convicts continued to live in as contributing to the human disaster. Aware the death toll would only increase he relented his tight confinements and single ironed the sick but kept all other prisoners double ironed.

The *Atlas* now became a death ship in every sense of the word. Convicts died at an increasing rate, two on May 29, one on June 1, two more on June 6 and one day later three more male convicts died and were buried. The very next day a further two convicts were found dead. Brooks, now desperate, removed the irons from the worst of the sick. How he could leave dying men chained and in irons defied humanity. But

worse was to come, eleven more convicts died between the 10th and the 29th of June.

Having already cost convict lives by sailing to the Cape, Brooks, in complete disregard for human life, anchored the *Atlas* near the Sisters Island on June 30, instead of proceeding directly to Port Jackson and known medical assistance. While convicts were lying on death's door, he spends time hunting seals and boasted of killing nine and surveying the island. Then adds to his cruelty by deciding to remain a second day at the island, killing 24 more seals.

The log for July 1, 1802 records that a 'number of prisoners not able to walk being bad with scurvy'. Two convicts who could have survived, if not for the unscheduled stop over, die over the following two days.

On July 5, at 7am the shout of 'land' sent all those on board running towards the direction of the masthead and outstretched arm of the lookout. The land sighted was the entrance of Botany Bay and the coast of New South Wales. Soundings are commenced, with no bottom recorded at fifty fathoms. That night the convicts could not sleep, the ship had been busy all day with the sounds of rumour and apprehension as the word had passed throughout that the *Atlas* was nearing its destination and would be landing at Port Jackson early the following day.

The *Atlas*, its sails taking strong breezes and squalls of rain, at 6am moved towards the NW and at 10am was close to the white sands of Botany Bay. They sighted a ship as the squally rain continued, typical of a Sydney winter.

At 11am the *Atlas* sailed directly towards the entrance to Sydney Harbour and sighted the signal house on South Head. The order 'fire' rang out from the deck and across to the sandstone cliffs, an echo returning to the *Atlas* and the ears of all those aboard. Two of the *Atlas* guns were fired, a signal for a harbour pilot to come across and lead them into port. *Atlas* sailed slowly past the huge towering cream and grey sandstone cliffs commanding the entrance to Sydney Harbour. The ship's company were still busy cleaning ship when the world's greatest harbour opened up before them and presented its unique, magnificent landscape. All those permitted on the swaying deck stood in awe, unable to comprehend the sights before them. This was a world beyond the imagination.

Their collective hearts began to beat faster and for a time their long-suffering emotions stood still, no longer thinking of the unknown future soon to engulf them and their fellow sufferers. The trees and plants were of a type never seen before, giant rocks lined the shores of sandy bays, the clear blue waters of the huge harbour were dotted with black men silently observing them from the shore and bark canoes as they continued the journey through the calm waters to await the pilot Henry Beamer. At noon they were well within the heads and standing in Middle Harbour making ready to take on board the harbour pilot. Brooks slowly worked the *Atlas* up the harbour and at 2 o'clock in the afternoon lowered the anchor into the quite, clear waters of Sydney

Cove. The *Atlas* had arrived.

Log Tuesday July 6, 1802: Ship Atlas lying in Port Jackson New S Wales
Strong Breezes with squalls of Rain at Intervals In F. T. Gt Sail & handed
Double Rf'd Fore & Miz & Single Rf'd Main topsail At 8 Squally with
Rain – AM Do Wr haul'd the Foresail up and handed it and stowed the Jib
At 1/2 Pt 3 hove too to the E'ward haul'd the Miz out and Back'd the Main
yard At 6 Wore Ship to the NW & made all sail
Do Wr Out Rf's At 10 Close in with the Land.
Standing in towards Botany Bay hove in sight a ship 1/2 Pt 10 Bore up to
windward of Port Jackson At 11 saw the Heads Signal House upon the
South Head Made the signal for a Pilot fir'd 2 Guns.
At 12 within the heads. Standing into Middle Harbour tacking
Occasionally got on Board a Pilot Work'd the ship up the Harbour
At 2 PM Came to Anchor in Sidney Cove in 7 fm furl'd Sails
and Clear'd decks & doing other necessary jobs
This Log Contains 36 hours

It was the 6th day of July, 1802. All aboard thanked God they had survived. The journey had taken 220 days and resulted in a terrible toll in human lives and the minds of all those aboard. Many would never recover from their sickness and disease. Unable to work again they simply did not have a future. It would be a voyage talked about for generations to come.

Before them were a number of ships and small boats, all actively working to unload ships and making trips to and from the shore. Sydney Town was still an isolated settlement. It was only fourteen years before their arrival that Governor Arthur Phillip declared New South Wales a British possession. The population a month after the *Atlas* arrival was only 6,463, there were 293 horses, 1,856 cattle, 8,661 sheep, 1,146 goats and 5,233 hogs. Agriculture was in its infancy with acres sown of 4,954 wheat, 3,135 maize, and 255½ of barley. There was no pasture, except for rank native grasses. Progress of the infant settlement had been slow and difficult. This was reflected in the words of George Suttor who had arrived on the *Porpoise* on November 6, 1800:

... which was a camp rather than a town – the streets full of stumps and dead trees – the houses, all covered with thatch, were built of wattle and daub – a few had glazed windows. In Pitt Street and High (George Street) a few weatherboard houses were to be seen.⁴



Murtagh and Michael Ahern on the deck of the *Atlas* on July 6, 1802.
The Governor of New South Wales Philip Gidley King inspects the dead and dying convicts

On board the *Atlas* the situation remained the same. The desperately sick still remained close to death's door lying on the deck waiting in hope to be taken to the colony's only primitive hospital. Those able to walk without assistance were still chained with nowhere to go. The people on shore and in the boats viewed the new arrivals with curiosity, but to them they were just another problem to contend with and more mouths to feed. The feeling of despair was everywhere. The small town sitting in front of them was to be the convict's home forever. They would never return to Ireland or see their families again. A long boat was lowered, ready to take the hated Captain to meet the colony's Governor, Philip Gidley King, and file his report. One wonders what thoughts ran through the mind of Richard Brooks as he stepped ashore and prepared to deliver his report. There can be little doubt he would have been apprehensive as he was about

to explain the deaths of sixty-five poor souls on his watch. The blame game was about to commence. The report of Captain Brooks was written on the day of his arrival along with an enclosure covering the numbers of arrivals. Surgeon Walker submitted his surgeon's journal and report two days later:

Captain Richard Brooks to Governor King.

Atlas, 6th. July, 1802

I HAVE to inform your Excellency of my arrival here this day with Convicts from Cork after a passage of Seven Months and Nine Days – On our passage out we were obliged to put into Rio Janeiro on the 5th February 1802, owing to our Mizzen Mast being sprung, and our Bowsprit Bitts being carried away also to get a supply of water, – On the 25th February we sailed and arrived at the Cape of Good Hope on the 12th April to get a supply of Bread and Water owing to the quantity of Bread being damaged from the badness of the Weather we experienced on our first sailing we sailed from the Cape on the 19th April. It is with concern I inform your Excellency of the Number of Deaths we have had on board owing to the disorders called Dysentery and Scurvy and have still Twenty Men remaining very sick.

(Sub-enclosure.)

I have, etc.,
RD. Brooks.

RETURN relating to convicts on the transport Atlas.

Received on board at Cork

151 Male Convicts

28 Female Do

Died on the passage

Soldiers 2 and 1 Serjts Wife

Male Convicts 63 Female Do 2

Male convicts escaped Three

85 Male Convicts 26 Female Do remaining on board.

Based on this report, a death rate of one for every 2.7 convicts embarked. The

official embarkation list total differs from Brook's report. It shows 148 males and 29 female convicts, a total of 177 not 179. The log book shows between the first embarking on October 20 to the final on November 7, 1801: 151 males and 26 females, a total of 177. On October 18, 1801: 1 Sergeant, 2 corporals and 20 privates embarked. There were six separate embarkations, all at Cork. The death count taken from the log book from July 16, 1801 to July 8, 1802 is: Male convicts 50. Female convicts 2. Soldiers 1. Ship's company 2. Soldiers wife 1. The deaths of twin babies were not disclosed in the report.

As Brooks did not name many of those who died and the log of the surgeon Elphinstone Walker cannot be found, the death totals remain to be proven. The surgeon's activities or quotes are not mentioned once in the log. The final disembarkation record does not note those who died. It is simply a duplicate of the original embarkation record without any comment, although an 'x' is entered against some names, again without an explanation.

Surgeon Elphinstone Walker to the Commissioners for Transport:

Gentlemen,

Port Jackson, 8th July, 1802

I have the honour to inform you of the arrival of the ship Atlas, Captain Rich'd Brooks, in this port on the 7th July, 1801, and from the great mortality which has been on board I think it my duty to inform you of the cause. The first prisoners we embarked were from the three brigs that came from Dublin, one of which, named the Henrietta, were very sickly, and I was informed of the dysentery accompanied with a typhus fever.

The other two brigs were also in a bad state of health. Most of the prisoners from the Henrietta were embarked on board this ship; we also embarked prisoners from the other two brigs.

The weather being then very cold, the washing of them and shaving their heads must, in my opinion, be very much against people in their sickly state. Some of them were embarked actually in the disease, and a great many convalescents. The rest of our prisoners embarked from Cork, many of whom were also convalescents. One old man, in particular, who was sent to be embarked was labouring under a very heavy sickness. Seeing that he could not survive long I thought it best to send him back, and he died before the boat reached Cork. One of the prisoners from the Henrietta died five days after he came on board; another also died before we left the harbour, which was on 28th November, 1801. After sailing from the Cove of Cork we experienced very bad weather, and the convalescents began gradually to

relapse into their former sickness. When we arrived at Rio de Janeiro, 30th January, 1802, I had upwards of seventy sick, and was then myself recovering from a very heavy sickness. The prisoners were put on shore on one of the small islands for the recovery of health, and the number of sick began now to diminish from the benefit of fresh provisions and other comforts. We lost by sickness fifteen male prisoners and a soldier from the time of their embarking till our arrival, and during our stay two male prisoners and one female died. We sailed from Rio de Janeiro 26th February, 1802. A short time after leaving that port a general sickness prevailed amongst the soldiers, which I attributed to poison, and I at the same time had a return of my sickness. A mutiny was at this time going on amongst the prisoners, which on being discovered caused them to be more closely confined, and which consequently was much against the sick.

We arrived at the Cape of Good Hope 12th April, 1802, having lost by sickness six male prisoners, one soldier, and sergeant's wife on our passage between Rio de Janeiro and the Cape. The number of the sick was now considerable diminished. We had here a supply of fresh provisions for the prisoners. I also obtained a supply of some medicines and fumigating apparatus. During our stay here we lost one male prisoner. We sailed from the Cape on the 19th April, some time after leaving which port the scurvy made its appearance, which soon became general, and amongst those who were formerly sick it made great havoc. Having few or no antiscorbutics, I was forced to palliate with medicines. The weather was in general very bad from the time of our leaving the Cape till on arrival at Port Jackson, and we lost by the scurvy and dysentery forty-three male prisoners and one female, several of whom were after our arrival, at which time I kept about twenty of the worst of my patients on board, they being incapable of being removed, and had a supply of necessaries for them from the hospital. They soon began to recover from the benefit of the vegetable diet. By this, gentlemen, I have endeavoured to state, from as exact a point of view as I possibly could, the causes of the great mortality which has prevailed on board this ship,

And remain, &c.,

ELPHINSTONE WALKER

Walker's report to Governor King, like the report to the commissioners, would have been written after consultation with Brooks. It, like Brook's report, laid the main reason for the deaths squarely on the sickness (dysentery and typhus) of the prisoners prior to leaving port. No mention is made of the terrible crowded, unsanitary conditions the prisoners had to endure or the excessive floggings and their contribution to the high

death toll. Interestingly, it covers briefly the suspected poisoning episodes which Brooks did not refer to in his report. Walker's report did not have an enclosure, giving the names of the dead. His journal has never been found, either in Australian, Irish or British archives. Walker later served on the *Euphrates* between 1802 and 1803.

Unfortunately, this was not to be the end for the long-suffering convicts. After surviving the horrendous voyage and when a better life was just before them, twenty-four were so ill they had to remain on the ship, many unable to walk. They crawled around the decks on their hands and knees. July, being the middle of the Australian winter, they suffered from the cold and the lack of adequate clothing and bed cover. Four of them dying not long after reaching port. As was the case with all visiting ships an inspection was made by the Colony's surgeon, the port officials and if required, by the Governor. A ship was quarantined until it was officially declared cleared of any disease and its passengers and cargo documented.

All the convicts hoped Brooks would be brought to account for his maltreatment. Many of the convicts gave the officers who documented the background to the voyage, graphic accounts of Brooks' cruelty, cheating them of their food rations and the harsh punishments .

News of the high death tolls on the transports *Atlas* and the *Hercules* quickly spread throughout the port, Matthew Flinders noted in his log book whilst anchored in the Harbour on the H.M.S. *Investigator*:

5th July 1802 ... The Comm and P'Lieut. sitting as members of a court of Vice Admiralty to try Mr. Lukyn Betts master of the *Hercules* transport for putting to death several convicts said to be in a mutinous attempt to take the ship from the commander & officers

7th July 1802 ... Arrived the ship *Atlas* – Brookes from Cork with convicts, since November – very sickly and having lost 60. A.M Fresh breezes and hazy weather. Sawyers on board the Supply hulk cutting plank

Matthew Flinders noted in his log that the *Atlas* arrived on the 7th of July, as did Elphinstone Walker, when it actually arrived on the afternoon of the 6th. This could be a simple error, the date may have been based on using different times, the *Atlas* having dropped anchor at 2pm. The dates and times noted by Captains in logs at sea and on land differ. This is because there are three recognised times:

Civil Time: It runs from midnight to midnight. The day and the date changing after each midnight.

Ship Time: The ship's day runs from noon to noon, the day and date changing after

each noon and commencing twelve hours before the civil day and date. Therefore the first twelve hours of a ship's day are all pm times which are recorded as one day's date ahead of the civil day and date. All am times correspond to the civil day and date.

Astronomical Time: The day runs from noon to noon, but starts 12 hours after the civil day and 24 hours after the ship's day. The hours are not expressed in am or pm, but numbered 1 to 24.

Anticipating the promised challenge from Thomas Jamison, Brooks, whilst at the Cape of Good Hope covered his back by sending a letter on April 14, 1802 to the Commissioners of Transport:

I am sorry to Report the ill conduct of Mr. Jamison. Having a few days before I left Rio been obliged to Order Two Men out of the Ship who were then in the Lower Cabin on the point of purchasing Goods from him of all Kinds, which were taken on board as his Cloathing, he seemed to be much hurt at the time. The day after he came on board late in the evening intoxicated, and abused my Officers, and the same time made use of that horrid kind of language which I was not accustomed to, and forced me from my bed when laying ill on the quarter Deck, which caused a fight. He has also behaved very ill to the Two Women passengers. Every indulgence that was possible was done for him. We had some Altercation before we sailed from Cork, because I would not take more goods on Board. I told him my Orders from Capt. Raines was not to exceed more than Two Tons, and by some means or other he has got on board near Five Tons, which I will send you the measurement of in my next Letter.

Brooks was right in denying Jamison the additional cargo weighing over the two tons allocated by the Commissioners. However, he did not report his involvement in the fight at Rio or the reasons for the altercation. Added to this, he did not advise Jamison of the sailing schedule, causing him to chase the *Atlas* all the way to Cork. He correctly assumed Jamison would be true to his word.

Governor King on August 9, 1802 wrote to the Transport Commissioners:

By the surgeon's list, and the masters of the Hercules and Atlas's letters to me, of which I send you a copy, you will observe the dreadful mortality that raged on board those ships, exclusive of the numbers killed. Altho' there was no mutiny on board the Atlas, yet in every other respect the master of that vessels conduct appears as much if not more reprehensible than the other. The miserable state the survivors were

in both those ships on arrival in this port, being filthy beyond description, some of the convicts lying dead with heavy irons on, many of them died as they were coming from the ship to the hospital.

These circumstances, together with the complaints made against the masters by the officers, rendered it necessary to investigate the necessity of their having to put into Rio de Janeiro and the Cape, and how far the masters had infringed the charter-parties.

The master of the *Atlas* having such a quantity of private trade and spirits on board, appears to have produced most of the bad consequences complained of in that ship. What that private trade consisted of, and the bulk occupied on board, will be obvious from the enclosed report of that ship's entry.

I have, &c.,
PHILIP GIDLEY KING

One cannot imagine how this cargo which was much larger at embarkation, along with sails, materials, boats and how over 220 human beings could possibly fit on a ship measuring only 110 feet long and 30 feet wide and sail half-way around the world in some of the most treacherous seas on earth.

Governor Gidley King refused to allow Brooks to land his 2,166 gallons of rum and 120 gallons of wine, but did allow him later to sell 800 gallons of the spirits to a visiting French ship for its exploring expedition. He was advised of the charges that were to be brought against him including a breach of his charter.

It has been claimed that the majority of those who lost their lives on the voyage were United Irishmen, but this has never been proven. Betts was ordered to remain in Sydney pending his trial by the Vice-Admiralty Court. Brooks was now under investigation on a number of charges, including those brought by Thomas Jamison. Sir Henry Browne Hayes was due to appear in a Civil Court on charges also brought by Thomas Jamison.

Life on the *Atlas* now became more bearable. There was the welcome news relating to the charges being laid against Richard Brooks. They were at last eating fresh food and receiving regular medical attention and their health was improving to the point it was now possible for some of them to leave the ship.

Brooks now concentrated on disembarking the remaining convicts and on July 8, the bulk of the male convicts were disembarked. The following day the female prisoners were allowed to disembark. These ragged and sickly survivors said 'good riddance' to the *Atlas* as they were lowered into the longboats, some heading towards the hulk *Supply*, others to the hospital. The *Supply* was a prison ship and also a stop over point where

newly-arrived prisoners from transports would be washed and clothed prior to their being assessed and assigned to their new masters in Sydney. The convicts would need time to recover from their terrible ordeal, but knew that nothing in the future could be worse than their existence aboard the 'ship from hell'.

Beyond the Sea (2 volumes and Log of the Atlas).

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