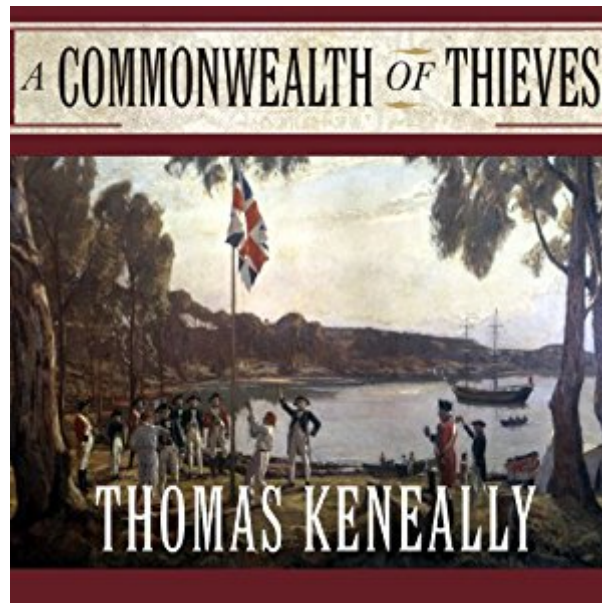




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A Commonwealth Of Thieves: The Improbable Birth Of Australia



Synopsis

In this spirited history of the remarkable first four years of the convict settlement of Australia, Thomas Keneally offers us a human view of a fascinating piece of history. Combining the authority of a renowned historian with a brilliant narrative flair, Keneally gives us an inside view of this unprecedented experiment from the perspective of the new colony's governor, Arthur Phillips. Using personal journals and documents, Keneally re-creates the hellish overseas voyage and the challenges Phillips faced upon arrival: unruly convicts, disgruntled officers, bewildered and hostile natives, food shortages, and disease. He also offers captivating portrayals of Aborigines and of convict settlers who were determined to begin their lives anew. A Commonwealth of Thieves immerses us in the fledgling penal colony and conjures up the thrills and hardships of those first four improbable years. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have found that as a baby boomer expat, I have become more interested in the history of my country over the years. Australian history was not taught at Melbourne schools back in my day - it was all English history. A great shame and hopefully rectified in these more enlightened times. For many years there was a sense of shame about our history and origins as a penal colony but those days are fortunately passed. Robert Hughes masterpiece "The Fatal Shore" is my favorite book on the subject but I really enjoyed Thomas Keneally's account. His gritty description of the early days of the colony is

compelling. He paints a vivid portrait of the troubles Capt. Phillip encountered - first at Botany Bay which was not suitable for a settlement and then at Port Jackson, a wonderful harbor that was home to population of convicts and their military minders - although they were not far removed in many respects. He does a thorough job of describing the woeful logistical management of the second fleet as well as the importance of the relationship between Capt. Phillip and Bennelong, the key conduit to the native aboriginal population. In fact, Capt. Phillip is the under appreciated hero of the book (and arguably of Australia's history) - his governance of the colony set it on a path to becoming the vibrant country it is today.

Excellent history full of anecdotes bringing to life the experiences of the first settlers. The book humanizes all players, showing the positive role that a large number of transportees played, without omitting the deviousness and untrustworthiness of an equally large number of settlers, military and convict alike. *The Fatal Shore* is an excellent book, but it presents an almost unmitigated picture of the grimness of everything. *Commonwealth of Thieves* adds the balance necessary to understand why Australia has become the extraordinarily vibrant country that it is today.

It's maddening to read Kenneally's text because you get the sense he's trying so hard for style points that it gets in the way of simple, clear sentences that convey meaningful things. That pretentiousness makes the book hard to enjoy, at least for me. *Commonwealth of Thieves* is, at least on the surface, an attempt at a social history, but it never really gets very far beneath the surface of the handful of diaries and court records that he uses as primary sources. Large sections of the book read like an endless procession of anecdotes, and it doesn't seem as if there's any attempt to bind these together in the attempt to make any sort of historical point. The individuals, too, are rarely portrayed as being anything but two-dimensional post-colonial caricatures. The British officials are faceless bureaucrats. The prisoners and sailors are peons under the boot of the system, flawed but naturally good. The preacher has delicate sensibilities, which we're supposed to find humorous. The natives are wise in their ancient simplicity. You know the drill: villains and victims. If you want a history that sticks close to the vest of post-colonial stereotypes, then Kenneally won't be too objectionable for you. If you want a book that explores tough questions or that evaluates the meaning of its content, then this book will leave you disappointed.

As a UIL Social Studies coach, I have been required to read several assigned texts, and this year's text "*A Commonwealth of Thieves*" is chock full of information and is (perhaps more importantly)

interesting. There have been a few texts before that read like encyclopedias and were a chore to use, this book has a good index and reads a little like a novel. The author has written fiction before and that shows. He also is renowned as the author of "Schindler's List". His skill as an author shows as the main characters are fleshed out as best as the historical record allows, and the narrative has a decent flow to it. I didn't know much about that era or that part of the world other than the basic skeleton of it all and am glad to have read it. I think the kids will enjoy it. The book primarily focuses on the First Fleet of sailors, marines, and British convicts that set up the first European colony on Australia, near what would become present day Sydney. The book concludes with the first governor, Governor Phillip returning to England (along with an epilogue sewing up all the primary characters' lives). I would recommend it, and although there is some frank discussion of what occurred between the male and female convicts (and soldiers) as well as between the Aborigines and the English, high school age students would be okay in reading it.

This is hard for me to rate because I found much of the book too tedious. I enjoyed reading the beginning chapters and the epilogue, but got bogged down reading all the details in the middle chapters. I may try again after visiting Australia. I am sure it is well-documented with valuable information.

A detailed history of Australia. Book lags with all the info presented.

Everyone knows about the "convicts" that formed the nucleus of Australia's earliest settlers. Keneally gives us an introduction to the people themselves, what their lives had been like in England, the dangers and challenges they faced to start new lives on what must have seemed a different planet to then. This is an exceptional tale of Humans living on the edge and learning to make the best of it.

I read several non-fiction books a month, for years. This is one of best reads. Very well written and organized. Especially appreciated the Prologue.

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