

The British Settle Australia

British explorer James Cook claimed Australia and New Zealand for Great Britain in 1769–1770. At first, Britain did not know what to do with territory so far away. However, the loss of the American colonies in 1783 caused Britain to rethink these “empty” lands.

For years, Britain had eased prison overcrowding by sending some criminals to the American colonies. After losing America, Britain decided to use Australia for this purpose. So in 1787, 11 convict ships—the First Fleet—sailed from Britain for Australia. Crammed on board were 736 prisoners—mostly convicted thieves—ranging in age from 87 to 15.

The conditions on the voyage were horrendous. Starved, kept inactive, and often covered in boils, the convicts suffered greatly. The boats stopped at three places along the way for supplies and repairs. They took a less direct route to Australia to take advantage of trade and westerly winds. After 252 days, the First Fleet landed at Botany Bay.

(Thereafter, a convict being sentenced to “transportation” meant being sent to Australia. There, he or she would serve out a sentence and then remain to settle the continent.)

Unfortunately, the randomly selected convicts had few usable trades. The prison colony had to raise its own crops. Yet only one convict was a professional gardener. The colony also lacked experience in fishing, brickmaking, and carpentry. It was not until the 1830s, when free immigrants arrived in large numbers, that living conditions in Australia improved.

Between 1789 and 1868, when the practice ended, 162,000 convicts were transported to Australia. Over time, they displaced the native Aborigines living on the coast. Eventually, some convicts escaped from Australia. They became some of the first Europeans—along with missionaries and traders—to settle in New Zealand. After 1840, the British population of New Zealand increased dramatically.

