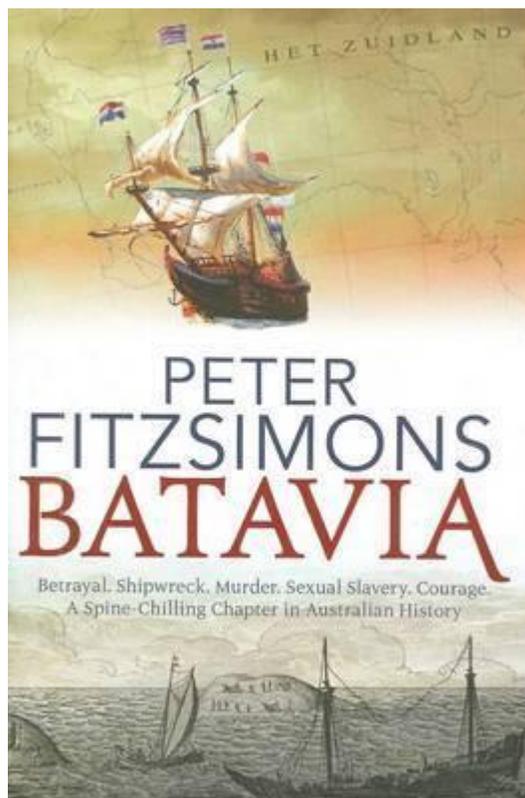


Batavia



By Peter Fitzsimons

Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Batavia: Betrayal. Shipwreck. Murder. Sexual Slavery. Courage. A Spine-Chilling Chapter in Australian History.

By Peter Fitzsimons. Sydney; William Heinemann, 2011. 490 pages. Illustrated with maps, diagrams and colour photographs. All illustrations in this review are taken from the public domain.

No the subtitle is not my doing. This is the actual subtitle of the book and no, the writer and publisher are not connected to the world of tabloid journalism, for once hyped up lurid language reflects historical reality.

From the sixteenth century onwards the Dutch trading ships of the East India Company travelled from Holland around the Cape of Good Hope and caught the

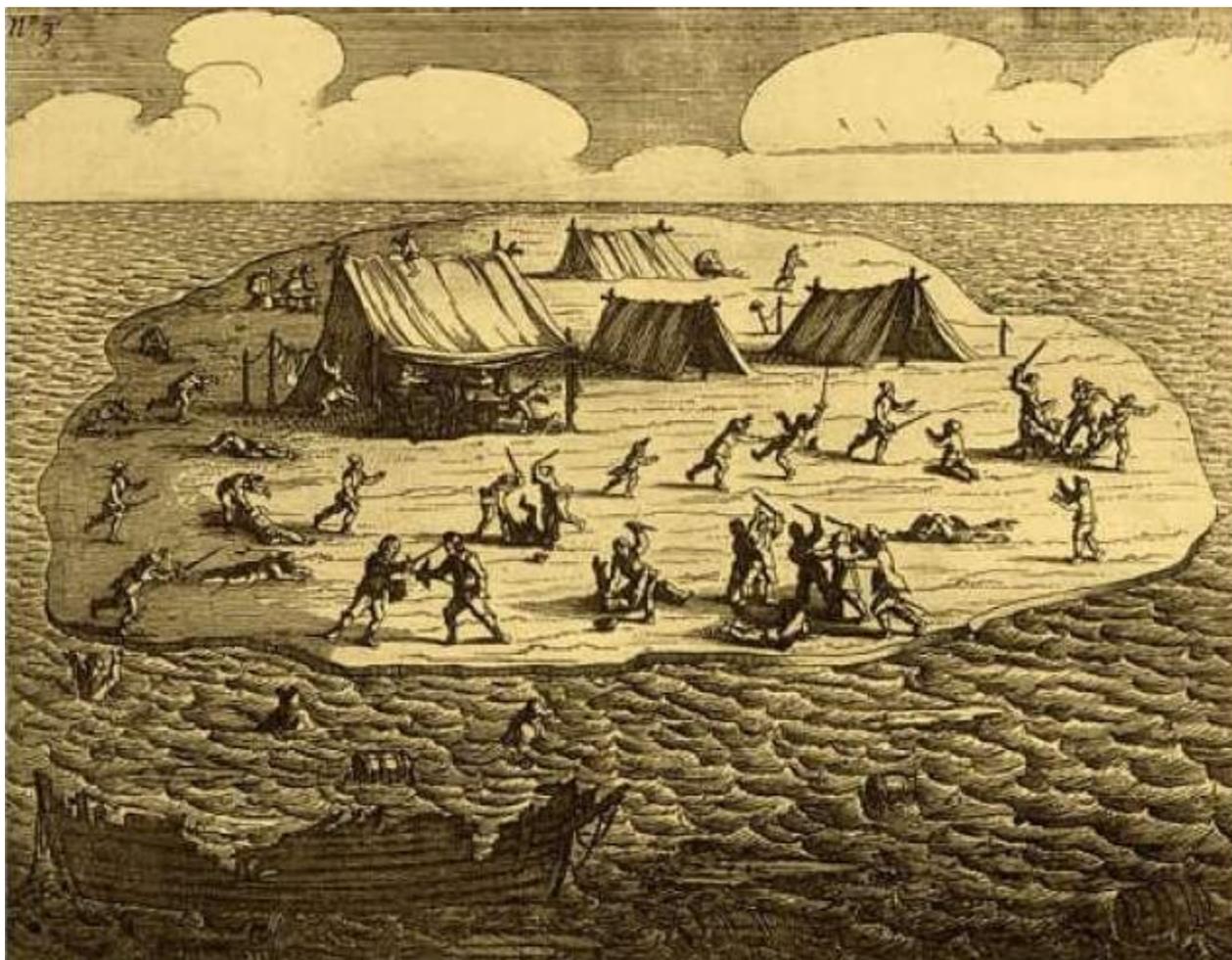
trade winds known as the roaring forties eastwards to India, Sri Lanka, Malaya, the Maldives, the Andaman Islands, Timor, China, Japan and Thailand. None of these trading partners however were not the jewel in the crown of their empire. That title went to the land now known as Indonesia, which was clumsily entitled the Dutch East Indies until the end of the 1940s. Similarly Jakarta was also known as Batavia until their empire disintegrated. Trade was lucrative as spices were expensive for small amounts and essential for food preservation in the days before refrigeration. Large vessels could take spices in large quantities as cargo.

The voyage was the trick: while the roaring forties were a blessing they were also tricky; it was easy to be blown off course and then it difficult to miss the coast of West Australia unless the wind stopped. Often it did not stop. How many ships were wrecked on the Australian coast that way will never be known. It is possible other shipwreck discoveries might still be made. In 1927 a shepherd looking for his dog went down a coastal crevice and found a seventeenth century Dutch treasure from an unknown shipwreck.

If that sounds like a purely fictional Hollywood yarn, wait till we read what happened with the wreck of the *Batavia* in 1629. As in Hollywood pirate movies the ship was opulent and massive in size and carried treasure. Also as in Hollywood scripts an astoundingly beautiful aristocrat was on board Lucretia Jans and yes she will be menaced by the lustful villain and rescued. The ship was wrecked, not quite on the coast, but on the Abrohlhos Islands. With a makeshift crew the *Batavia's* captain used a long boat to try to sail north to Java and bring back a rescue vessel. Things he hoped, will work out until they return, they have supplies, a clement climate and there are no ferocious natives on these islands to kill people. He has Jeronimus Cornelisz, his second in command, a man who thinks much on God, to be in command until he returns. But will he return? The captain has to sail around two thousand miles through unknown waters in a small boat to reach help.

Cornelisz does indeed think on God a good deal, but so did Charles Manson, and the Reverend Jim Jones of Jonestown notoriety. Charismatic alpha male leadership woven into a messianic religious belief was not the only point he had in common with those two, for Cornelisz also has similar plans for establishing a utopia, but there are two problems. The first is that as always when the latest messiah wishes to establish a utopia, cynics and individualists oppose it. The second is more practical: 220 people are on the rather barren island and there are not enough food supplies for very long...

As usual utopia's rules must be enforced the bad selfish cynics and individualists must conform or die and the best of everything including the women, must be for the Messiah and his true believers As with ISIS today they became objects to sexually service God's holy folk. Clearly God rewards his followers through the efforts and wisdom of his prophet on earth.



The island was bigger than this illustration shows, and there were more people, but it does capture some of the ferocity and drama of the events there.

The world is full of Jeronimus Cornelisz types. Their causes vary depending in what type of organisation they are in and where they are located. Europe's fascist movements, Latin American dictators, Moslem fundamentalists, assorted communist parties, right wing nationalists, conglomerates, religious cults ... They are usually unable to kill or intimidate those that oppose them because and there

are laws to stop them. They usually do not have political power or weapons, but in 1629 on the remote Abrolhos Islands Cornelisz was the law and his armed followers were his source of power. Fortunately a Hollywood style hero emerges. Australia's first attempt to set up a settlement was a nightmare and a dismal failure. Few Australian historians wish to credit Cornelisz's attempt as the first European settlement. Better to focus on the 1788 Sydney Cove success story.



The Batavia

For his major primary sources Fitzsimmons uses trial records, records of archaeology, a personal visit to the site and two written documents from 1629, a journal of the voyage and Cornelisz's justification. Secondary sources include novelist Henrietta Drake-Brockman's 1963 history *Voyage to Disaster*. After publishing her 1957 novel on the topic she published this work: ten years of research and writing went into those books. It proved worthwhile as her information helped archaeologists and researchers find the wreck, the graves and the settlement's artefacts a few years later. Fitzsimmons credits Mike Dash's *Batavia's Graveyard* (2002) as being the best of the several histories on this topic. Fitzsimmons has the modesty to put his own work behind that of others. The story

has attracted histories, novels, a television documentary and even an opera. Even so, compare this with the amount written about the *Titanic* - which has been estimated to be one of the four most written events in history. Look at how that nautical disaster has inspired at least five big budget Hollywood films. *Titanic* is a household name: Batavia remains almost unknown, even in Australia.

Hollywood we have a problem...

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