

Author's Note

This book is a work of historical fiction.

It is based substantially on the story of the *Sydney Cove* shipwreck, which occurred near Preservation Island in Bass Strait in 1797. The version of that story that passes as 'history' is carried largely by the lost diary of a shipwrecked mariner, reproduced or perhaps paraphrased much later by a newspaper named the *Asiatic Mirror*. The diary extracts that appear in this novel are quoted verbatim from that source. There is precious little else in the archive to corroborate what William Clark wrote, let alone explain why he wrote it.

There are no signposts herein to tell the reader where they have lit upon 'history', and where the ramblings of my imagination. The difference between the two is a matter only of degree: some parts of this story are 'truer' than others. Where I have guessed, I have done so within the bounds of what I think the evidence makes possible. The errors, the biases and the affronts are entirely of my making.

History itself is fraught and frequently unreliable. The Djirringanji would have a different tale to tell about the day these bedraggled strangers wandered through their country. So would the Gunaikurnai, and the Wandandean, and many others, if only 'history' had turned its gaze to them.

Perhaps all of this is history, and none of it.

1



The governor's quill stopped in its flow, as if it had struck some unseen obstacle.

'Tell me again, lieutenant. Carefully.' The nib hovered above the page, the hand suspended there, steady and waiting.

'A small fishing boat, excellency. It had been gone three days, working offshore from a bay to the south of here, about twenty miles distant. *Wattamulla*, sir. Native word.'

The quill waited. Governor Hunter's powdered hair caught the sun through the window behind him. The serene beauty of Sydney in autumn, laying its soft light on the bookshelves and the chairs.

'It was one of the deckhands that saw them. A Master Drummond. Early morning, on his watch. Three men, he thought they were natives at first as there wasn't much left of their clothing, and one's, ah...one's dark. They were making their way up the beach from south to north. The inlet there

forms a pronounced indentation in the coast, but the beach is very short, I'm told. They were terribly distressed...'

The quill moved again, trailing blue words.

'...Crawling.'

'Yes,' came the governor. 'You said that before. Such a striking detail. Is there no doubt about that?'

'He was quite firm sir. Could see the tracks they'd made up the beach.'

'Go on.'

'Their condition was pitiable. They were hoarse, although not delirious in any way. They were taken on board and identified as a Mister William Clark, supercargo of a vessel named the *Sydney Cove*, three-masted country trader of three hundred tons displacement; his lascar manservant, name not disclosed, and a Mr Figge: a tea merchant travelling aboard the same vessel. She was bound for here as a speculative trading venture, having departed Calcutta last November and was app—'

'They named her after us? Let me guess. Rum?'

'It appears so, sir.'

'It makes me so...Did you know I've just had another still dismantled? Out near the Brickfields this time. They'll take the grain from their children's table if they have to. Part of me thinks these shipments are the lesser evil. I'm sorry, continue.'

'The vessel was beached, they say, after sustaining irreparable damage in a series of storms below Van Diemen's Land. The position of the wreck is a matter of considerable interest, excellency: north of Van Diemen's Land, yet south and west of any known position on the southern coast of New South Wales. If the estimate is correct, it supports those who maintain the existence of this strait that separates Van Diemen's Land.'

'You've notified Mr Bass?'

‘Not yet, sir.’

The lieutenant watched as the governor made a note of this, then continued.

‘They formed a party of seventeen, left thirty-two of their fellows on the island and departed in a longboat, having entertained hopes of sailing it to here and seeking rescue for the others and salvage of the cargo. Mr Clark holds a letter to this effect from the captain. A Scotsman, sir, Mr Hamilton. Addressed to you.’

He stepped forward and passed the envelope over the desk. The governor extended a hand to take it but the goose quill stayed where it was.

‘Has this been seen by others?’

‘No sir. It is unopened.’

‘Very good. What else?’

‘The longboat itself was wrecked on an exposed shore at about thirty-eight degrees latitude.’

‘A second wreck?’

‘Indeed. All of those aboard survived the incident and made the beach. Now, if these three are to be believed, excellency, they have travelled on foot from there. Around five hundred and fifty miles, through unknown territories, until they were rescued. And they would appear to have done this in a little over two months.’

‘Your scepticism is noted, lieutenant.’

‘Nine miles a day, sir. Forests, river crossings. Nine miles of it, *every* day and probably barefoot. And in spite of the natives.’

‘Are you saying the natives represent help or hindrance?’

‘I don’t know. But the state these men are in speaks eloquently of their suffering. I am not suggesting they’ve confected their account. Only that...I don’t understand it.’

‘What is their condition now?’

‘Unwell. Quite indisposed. Sores, insect bites. Some scurvy; underfed, of course. Sunburn. They have had at least one major skirmish with the natives: Clark has wounds through both palms—’ He pointed to each palm in turn.

The governor smiled painfully: not a day passed without the bush testing his credulity.

‘Stigmata?’

‘Coincidence, I’m sure.’

‘It’s an odd way to be wounded. Do you say there is any... ritual aspect to that?’

‘No. The other two were wounded also. But less seriously. Cuts and scrapes. Mr...Figge the tea merchant has a rather badly broken nose.’ The lieutenant waited a moment as again the governor took up his quill and wrote. ‘And there is this, sir. A journal, kept by Mr Clark.’

He handed the leather-bound notebook across the desk. The brown tanning was blotched with darker stains.

‘You’ve read it?’

‘Yes. It’s very short, and as it wasn’t addressed to anyone in particular I thought—’

‘Of course.’

Governor Hunter opened the book and placed his fingertips where the cursive swirled over the first page. The headstrong sweeps of a hand marking posterity.

In the Year of Our Lord Seventeen Hundred and Ninety-Seven.

He began to leaf through the damaged pages, scanning here and there. They had been wet and then dry: they crackled in his fingers. He stopped, whistled softly, pulling the creases of his face.

‘Did you see this?’ Clark made an inventory of the cargo.

China, tea...textiles, shoes...seven *thousand* gallons of rum.' He looked up, his pale eyes creased and hooded by long observation. 'Someone's going to be out of pocket. Where are these men now?'

'I have taken the precaution of separating them, sir. All three are accommodated in the guest quarters behind the main house. The doctor has been to see them and they are resting for now. But there is quite a clamour to have them tell their story publicly.'

'I can imagine. So; three remaining of, what did you say? Seventeen? What became of the others?'

'You will find when you read the journal, sir, that it's rather unclear. If you take it literally, two more of their number were left alive in the bush, only a day's walk south of where these three were found. I had the opportunity to ask Mr Clark about it: I thought he would insist that they be rescued quickly if they were left in peril.'

'Peril?'

'There had been conflict with the natives, he said.'

The older man's eyes narrowed. '*He said*. What did he not say?'

The lieutenant hesitated. 'There is discord among these men. Over what, I don't know. The fishermen said that when they found them on the beach they were divided: Clark was first into the boat with the other one, Figge, coming after him. *Scuttling*, sir, was the word they used. And the lascar after them. But with Mr Clark, it's difficult sir.' He grimaced.

'Speak your mind.'

'Listening to those fishermen, they thought it wasn't that Clark was leading Figge northward: it was more that he was trying to get away from him. The two things could look similar, I suppose.'

The governor stood and leaned over the sideboard nearest

the desk, pouring himself a glass of water from a decanter. He gestured vaguely with a second glass. The lieutenant declined with a smaller movement. 'Has anything specific been said about it?'

'No. The lascar keeps close to Clark, and he has no English. Clark and Figge have so far been kept apart. As you say sir, they have suffered a terrible ordeal.'

The governor returned to his seat. It creaked under him. He sighed and regarded his hands. 'Very well. Send the fishing boat back out with a detachment to see if the missing men can be located—we have names?'

'One's the chief mate, goes by Thompson, and the other one's the carpenter. I don't recall the name just now.'

'Good. And I think it just as well that you separated Clark and Figge. I will read these'—he gestured at the letter and the journal—'overnight and return them to you in the morning. As soon as these men are well enough to talk I want you to question them. I will deal with Bass and with Flinders and whoever else comes knocking in the meantime. If it all appears credible we'll need to arrange a rescue, of course.'

They watched each other in easy silence before the governor continued.

'Keep me informed, please. The salvage is going to be a debacle when the Corps get involved.'

'Thank you, sir.' The young man turned to take his leave. 'Joshua?'

The lieutenant turned back. His face was attentive, open and loyal, but his eyes were heavy with fatigue.

'How is she?'

'No change, sir. Thank you.'

2



Lieutenant Joshua Grayling came down the hill from Government House with the sun behind him and the convict maid at his side, slowing his pace to allow for her careful levelling of the tray. It had been four years since he first walked this path, and day by day a view had opened across the cove from up here on the hill; silver light scattered on blue. He loved the sight of it as any seafarer loved to behold the refuge of a harbour, and it eased his longing for home. Leith could produce no such light as this.

The view had emerged because the trees were coming down, fed into the fireplaces and sawmills of the colony. Neat houses appeared in rows and what had grown wild was rendered captive by tending hands. Not all the smoke was the natives' these days. Not all the shouting and the laughter were theirs, either.

Each season brought turned soil now, and the sounds of livestock. The ring of metal, unknown here through the ages,

echoed in answer to the birds. Fishing boats stood by the warehouses at the water's edge, where Grayling remembered seeing only rock and saltbush in the past. The strange stepping shorebirds and the natives eyed each other down there in shared perplexity.

He stopped at the doorway of the guest quarters. With his boots on the mat, he studied the thread of steam rising from the teapot in the humid early morning air. The maid stood to his left with the tea service on a tray under her bosom, her face set in cold formality. Grayling had seen her papers. A year from her freedom and unable to make sense of what freedom might be: her and the unspeaking bush.

His right hand hung momentarily in the act of knocking. He had been so eager to begin, so consumed with curiosity, that he'd mapped no path for his questioning. Nor had he decided the most basic issue: whether he was assisting this man to tell his story or seeking to expose its flaws.

The voice from within, quiet but firm. 'Come in.'

It took his eyes a moment to find sense in the gloom. The light from the window caught the dust in a square beam that cut the middle space. It fell on the foot of the bed, the rough brown blanket crumpled there against the iron. The man was covered only by a sheet, though the room was cool. He lay still. He might, just briefly, have been dead.

He was tall: his feet rested on the footboard. The light shroud draped from the points of his body. He was emaciated, Christ-like to Grayling's eye; an impression heightened by his beard, full and uniformly brown. His hair fell away from his face in tangled locks of the same deep brown. Grayling thought perhaps the man was not so old as he'd imagined overnight, when his sleep was held at bay by thoughts of today's interview:

of speaking to a man who had passed so far beyond ordinary experience and returned.

Grayling motioned to the maid to place the tray on the bedside table. She did so and retreated silently, closing the door. The room was stark: a rug under the high bed, the small table with the tea on it set to the far side of the bed. An armchair by the small table. The sheet rose and fell with the man's chest, and that was all.

'Mr Figge? Lieutenant Grayling, sir. Personal aide to His Excellency Governor Hunter.' He stood with his hand extended, feet stiffly together. The man in the bed reorganised the shapes under the sheet, producing a hand. Grayling, surveying a face so swollen by sunburn that the eyes had been pinched almost shut, was surprised by the life in the grip.

'I trust you have been cared for?'

'Mm,' the man replied sleepily. 'I have. Thank you.'

The voice. More power in it than the punished body should have been able to produce. Honeyed as though it swelled from a blond timber instrument, but laced with an uncomfortable intimacy.

A silence tightened around them as Grayling studied the face on the pillow. The hair might have suggested the broad range of the man's age, but his features were inscrutable. His forehead and cheekbones bore the marks of suffering: the scratches and infected bites, the raw planes of purulent flesh. Grayling had seen similar effects on men stranded at sea, faces so racked by extremity that a boy of twenty might appear sixty. And more so here, for his nose was badly broken, an anvil of bone and whitened skin poking under his left eye, not quite breaking the skin. Tiny dark flakes of dried blood adhered to his face beneath the uppermost bristles of his moustache.

‘I brought you tea. I heard you were in the trade.’

A minor smile pulled the cracked lips taut. ‘I’m afraid my mouth is filled with...’ He swallowed thickly. ‘Ulcers. Might as well be hot water.’

‘To be honest sir, around here you’d be lucky if there’s any tea leaves in it anyway.’

The tiny smile again. Figge had turned his head to stare into the straight-edged beam of light. He spoke without looking back at Grayling, slurring a little.

‘You have the others, then?’

‘Oh, of course. Yes, yes. We have accommodated them elsewhere in town.’

‘They are well?’

‘I believe so. I am yet to meet them.’

Figge lifted himself up on the pillows with some considerable effort. He tried to reach across himself to lift the teapot; Grayling intervened, poured a cup and placed it in his hands. As the cup passed between them Grayling saw ripples in the tea from his own shaking hand. The liquid stilled when Figge took the cup.

Grayling sat in the armchair, his eye line now slightly lower than that of the man in the bed.

‘Not too hot?’ He heard his own forced joviality.

‘No, it’s wonderful. I’ll be calling for the chamber pot after this, of course.’ Figge made a face that mocked exasperation, but Grayling was taken by something else. The choice of words, the delicacy about it.

‘Mr Figge, the governor is very interested in your story. As you know there has been so little exploration of the coast—indeed of anything beyond this settlement.’ The eyes in the bed shifted his way, evaluating. Under the swelling they burned bright.

‘What did you see out there?’

‘I believe Clark wrote it all down,’ he said eventually. ‘Did he not?’

Grayling shifted in his chair and took a folder from the table where the tea service rested. ‘I have his account and also the letter from Captain Hamilton that he carried. Both are extremely helpful but they are...brief. I would value some more detail from you.’

Grayling watched Figge take a deep sip from the teacup. ‘I’m tired just now. My grasp of events may not be acute.’

‘Yes, yes. Perhaps we could begin tomorrow. I could...I might read passages for you to comment upon. Would that be helpful?’

The man shifted under the sheet, craned his neck. ‘You’d read it to me? The diary?’

‘And the letter, if that helps you.’

‘Never mind the letter, that won’t detain us long. But the diary...’ His sudden vigour opened a split in his lip; a bright red droplet appeared over the scarlet track of the old scab. He took up the teacup and drained the last of the tea, leaving a smear of blood on the china.

‘Come back tomorrow morning,’ he said, clearer now. His voice carried something softer than command. Persuasion. ‘I may speak to you then.’

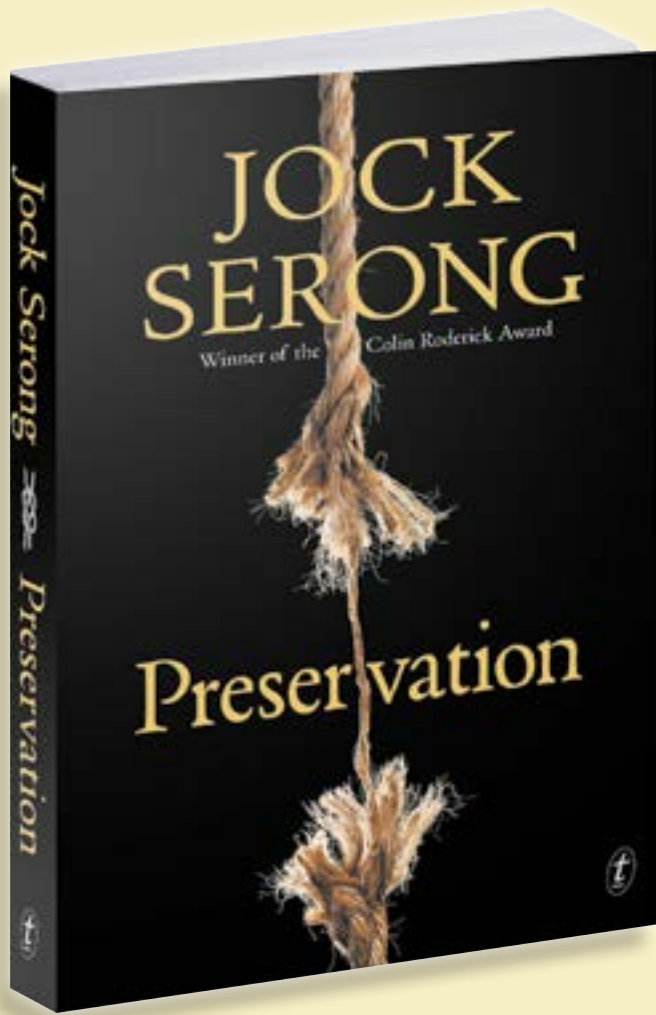
Grayling rose from the armchair.

‘Oh, lieutenant?’ The man was up on one elbow, smiling faintly. ‘It was bohea.’

Grayling took a moment to understand. ‘Ah! Yes, very good, Mr Figge. I believe it was.’ He took up the tray and tucked the folder of documents under his arm. The room was still and silent again, but the unsettling presence of the man in the bed had lodged itself deep within him.

As he closed the door behind him, he imagined the man becoming inert without the human company that lit him. The eyes would go cold and dark and the voice would recede somewhere, into some silent depth beyond the reach of the virtuous. Or the sane.

In the space of ten minutes, the man in the bed had unnerved Joshua Grayling completely.



Loved this extract?

Learn more at [Text Publishing](#)

Taken from *Preservation* © Jock Serong, 2018.
First published in Australia by the Text Publishing Company.

