

DARK PARADISE

- *NORFOLK ISLAND* -
ISOLATION, SAVAGERY, MYSTERY
AND MURDER

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CHAPTER ONE

All nations lie about their past.

The Japanese, for example, are notorious for the official euphemisms that cloak their atrocities in the Second World War. The Turks threaten their own people with death if they tell the truth about the Armenian genocide. The Israelis justify the savage oppression of their fellow Palestinian Semites with the claim that their God granted them a particular piece of real estate. The Americans attribute demigod status to their Founding Fathers, not least the slave-owning sexual predator Thomas Jefferson, and habitually invoke the blessing of *their* God for the most arrogant of their military adventures. Australians are no better – for 200 years they have denied the very existence of the frontier wars that ripped to pieces the oldest continuous living culture the world has known. But in this they have learned well from their progenitors, the true masters of historical mendacity: the British imperium.

No nation has been so successful in disguising and distorting the reality of its colonial brutality as the British. The fiction that they are to be praised for having brought ‘civilisation’ to the ignorant and backward masses within the empire is not just an article of faith in Britain today, it has received a general – if impressionistic – acceptance in the Western world and even among its erstwhile victims. The plunder and pillage of vast areas of Africa, for example, is set against the depravity of the Portuguese in Angola or the Belgians in Congo and found to be relatively benign. The crime against humanity that was Britain’s attempt to turn an entire nation of Chinese into opium addicts – and to enforce the outrage with Indian militia – has been forgiven, if not forgotten, by a magnanimous China. The Indians themselves have consigned the splitting of their country into two warring states to historical wonderland and prosecuted two wars (with more to come) between the divided states with irrepressible enthusiasm. And even the Americans, who were forced to conduct two separate wars of independence in 1776 and 1812 to escape the British oppressor, now rejoice in a famously ‘special’ relationship.

The British propaganda campaign has been unremitting and astonishingly successful. The image makers have surpassed all possible expectations. They have created the world’s perception of Britain as the mother of democracy despite the fact that it remains a bastion of aristocratic privilege. And in a bewildering paradox the campaigners have even engaged the comic opera of its hereditary monarchy as an earnest example of its commitment to the democratic system.

It has played the underdog brilliantly in two world wars despite its leading role in prosecuting the first and by its vindictiveness

at the peace talks in Versailles creating the conditions that gave rise to the second. It has made a soaring international hero of Winston Churchill, whose madcap schemes caused the needless death of 8,000 Australians and many more of his fellow countrymen at Gallipoli and similar disasters in Norway and Dieppe in the second great conflict. Churchill is celebrated as the saviour of democracy, whereas the reality is that the war was won by the overwhelming power and resources of the United States and the Soviet Union.

It helped the image makers' cause that Churchill himself wrote history (which valued sentiment above scholarship) and that his principal antagonist was a homicidal maniac beside whom Churchill's faults seem inconsequential. And of course he was on the side of right.

It was the Second World War that marked the effective end of the British Empire, and victory allowed it to sanitise its centuries of cruel colonial oppression within the sanctimonious narrative that the world has come to accept. It has also helped that humanity's attention span is short and becoming shorter by the decade.

All of which goes some way to explain why one striking element of the narrative has never before been fully explored and understood as the *sine qua non* of the savagery that underpinned the British Empire. And it is to be found in the most unlikely setting: a tropical paradise, an emerald isle in a vast ocean of the deepest blue, surrounded and protected by natural rock walls, a haven for birds on their great migratory journeys, a nesting place free of predators, a perfect climate rarely touched by the great cyclonic swirls that thunder and carve their way across the Pacific to the north and east; a tiny place, less than 9,000

acres (3,600 hectares) of heart-shaped land, forested in parts, park-like in others with clear freshwater streams tumbling from its heights to cascade down a final slope and into the sea.

We know it now as Norfolk Island. And indeed it was the folk from the north – the British in the person of another of their flawed colonial heroes, the Yorkshireman James Cook – who in 1774 discovered and named it for a woman who, unbeknown to him, was already decomposing within an aristocratic tomb. Over the next 200 years it would host all the horrors that man's ingenuity could visit upon his fellows. So terrible have they been that even today a resident would confide to me in an unguarded moment, 'I have to tell you – Satan lives here.'

However, while the actors in the drama to follow are almost invariably British, and engaged in horrific and outrageous excesses against their fellow man, there is no intention to gratuitously traduce British colonial rule. There are wider issues at stake. While my account will, I trust, explode the myth of British benevolence, it is designed only to reveal that there is no justification for the posturing of superiority by any nation. We are all vulnerable to the urgings of the darker angels. We are all capable of the most appalling behaviour. We can never relax our vigilance as governments use ever more effective technology to manipulate sentiment and pervert our inherent sense of natural justice.

What follows is a story like no other, since it incorporates three distinct yet inseparable tales – the convict settlements that plumbed the depths of human malevolence; the mutiny on the *Bounty* and its lurid and little known aftermath; and finally the High Anglican Melanesian Mission in all its arrogance, violence, sexual predation and ultimate futility. Together they boast a

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cast of characters ranging from the most high-minded to the vilest ever to have walked the earth, all playing their parts in a setting that today is steeped in controversy and at the brink of total collapse. However, there is hope. It is just possible that this cursed isle will at last find redemption.