



# PETER FITZSIMONS BATAVIA

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



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# Preface

In a chance lunch conversation with my two then publishers, Shona Martyn and Alison Urquhart, late in 1999, they mentioned the seventeenth-century story of the shipwreck of the *Batavia* and how it might possibly lend itself to a great book. That afternoon, I went back to the library of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and dug up some stuff on it. I was instantly and totally absorbed. Among other things, I was stunned to read of the grandeur of the ship herself and that when her replica had sailed into Sydney Harbour a couple of months previously, to get to her berth at the Maritime Museum in Darling Harbour, she had needed to do so during an exceptionally low tide so the top of her mighty mast would fit under the Sydney Harbour Bridge. And this was a ship that was originally built nearly 400 years earlier. Staggering!

The true wonder of the story, though, had little to do with the physical dimensions of the ship and everything to do with the personal dynamics of the *Batavia's* company once she got into strife. Sure, a lot of the details might have been well known to many Australians, particularly in Western Australia, but they were totally unknown to me – and I remember thinking at the time that the whole astonishing saga made the story of the sinking of the *Titanic* look like a Sunday School picnic. I frankly couldn't believe that such a fantastic story wasn't as well known in this country as Ned Kelly or the Eureka Stockade and decided then and there to write a book on it.

In short order, I had a contract to do exactly that, and I began my research. A lot of water has passed beneath the bridge since

then – I have been involved in many other projects, including many other books, and have changed publishing houses – yet I have returned again and again for further bursts of work on the *Batavia* story before dedicating myself to its completion. What you hold in your hands is the result.

Over the last 400 years or so, many other authors have also been bitten by the bug of the *Batavia*, with the first accounts of the 1629 shipwreck appearing in the 1647 Dutch work *Ongeluckige Voyagie, Van't Schip Batavia* (*Unlucky Voyage of the Ship Batavia*), published by Jan Jansz. A bestseller of its time, this book was predominantly a third-person treatment of the original journal of Francisco Pelsaert, *Commandeur* of the fleet in which the flagship *Batavia* made her maiden voyage, which explains why it was frequently (and incorrectly) known as ‘Pelsaert’s Journal’.

Pelsaert’s actual journal describing this sorry saga from beginning to end is now kept in the Netherlands’ National Archives in The Hague, and it was a special thrill in the researching of this book to have held it in my hands. I am indebted to Lennart Bes of the National Archives for facilitating my access to it.

The first of the more modern Australian books on it, *The Wicked and the Fair*, was a fictionalised account written by Western Australia’s Henrietta Drake-Brockman and published in 1957. Her seminal non-fiction book *Voyage to Disaster* (1963) came out of her research for *The Wicked and the Fair* and took ten years to write. Her tireless research helped lead to the actual discovery of the *Batavia* by Max Cramer and his little band, working with Hugh Edwards and local fishermen, in the same year. Edwards’s *Islands of Angry Ghosts* came out in 1966 and, among other things, describes the wonderful tale of how the two men finally came to pinpoint the site of the wreck. All of us who

follow owe Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Cramer and Edwards a great debt, and I am grateful for the extent to which the two men were able to assist me in my research.

Hugh squired me around the Abrolhos Islands, where it all took place, showed me things that only a man of his deep background in the subject would know and, thereafter, was constantly steering me towards different pieces of information. As to Max Cramer, who organised the trip for Hugh and me, his eyes were the first to see the *Batavia* in 334 years, and he became an acknowledged world authority. Max, too, was wonderfully generous in sharing his knowledge, and he and his wife, Ines, were also warm hosts when I visited Geraldton, the nearest mainland town to the Abrolhos Islands. I was in constant touch with Max throughout the course of this book and was deeply saddened when he died in mid-August 2010. *Vale*, Max.

And then there is the craggy cray fisherman who wishes to be known only as ‘Spags’ and actually lives on those islands, loving and caring for them with an abiding passion. I met him on my visit with Hugh Edwards, and he, too, couldn’t have been more generous in sharing his deep local knowledge.

In recent years, interest in the *Batavia* has slowly grown, and a slew of books on the subject appeared just after the millennium, as did a well-received *Batavia*-related opera. Yet, generally, the passion of the writers for the wonder of the story has not been remotely matched by the awareness and enthusiasm of the reading public. As I speak at various events around Australia, I frequently ask for a show of hands as to how many people know of it, and, on the east coast particularly, it is usually between five and ten per cent of the audience. The story of the *Titanic* is a thousand times better known.

How can this be? The most obvious answer is that it is very difficult for the modern writer to breathe life into a 400-year-old

story that relies on just two primary documents for its base, being firstly Pelsaert's Journal and, secondly, a sketchy retrospective account of the terrible drama by the *Batavia's* preacher, which he addressed to his relatives. Known as the 'Predikant's Letter', it was written on 11 December 1629, just a short time after the saga's conclusion.

This very problem of how to successfully resuscitate the tragedy was identified by the Dutch-born Australian Willem Siebenhaar. In an article for Perth's *The Western Mail* on 24 December 1897 – an article that for the first time in Australia provided a broad translation for the 1647 work *Ongeluckige Voyagie* – he wrote:

The story has been used by Mr. W. J. Gordon as the basis of a novel entitled *The Captain-General*, but still awaits the coming of someone who will put permanent life into its dry bones. If there is any ambitious Australian poet who desires to emulate, say Browning's 'Ring and the Book', he may find in these records something that will afford more scope than the old parchment-bound tale of Roman murder and the trial of Count Guido, on which that great poem was reared.

Ahem. (The author is heard to rather nervously clear his throat.)

I am not an Australian poet, but I certainly am in possession of a small poetic licence, which I have long felt was always going to be the key to making the *Batavia* story resonate for the wider audience. In his meticulously researched book of 2002, *Batavia's Graveyard*, Cambridge-trained English historian Mike Dash makes the legitimate claim that there is not one line of dialogue in his work not corroborated by primary documents. While Dash's *Batavia's Graveyard* is, and will remain, far and away the most authoritative work on the subject, I make no such claim for

this book. It seemed to me from the beginning of writing this book that, while not embarking on flights of fancy that take the reader well away from the documented storyline, limiting the protagonists' dialogue to the few broken shards of conversation that have survived would make it very difficult to convey the emotional depth of this tragedy and do justice to a story of such shocking spiritual and physical magnitude.

I have previously likened the writing of other 'creative non-fiction' books that I have done, such as *Kokoda*, *Tobruk*, *The Ballad of Les Darcy* and *Charles Kingsford Smith and Those Magnificent Men*, to having 50,000 pieces of a jigsaw puzzle at one's disposal . . . with space for only 1000 pieces. In these cases, the challenge was to find the *right* 1000 pieces, so that the picture I finally drew was illustrative of the whole.

In this case, however, the challenge was different and, for me, intellectually absorbing. For, nearly 400 years on, only a few scattered pieces of that original picture have survived – about 500 by my count. Thus, the challenge is to be able to have a strong-enough grasp of what *is* known and do enough research on both the time and the people involved to give one the necessary confidence to fashion another 500 pieces that fit, without distorting the true picture.

In trying to make those pieces as authentic as possible, I have been greatly helped by Dutch experts in their field: Diederick Wildeman, curator of navigation and library collections of Amsterdam's Scheepvaart Museum; Vibeke Roeper, of the Cultureel Erfgoed Noord-Holland; Jan Piet Puype, formerly of the Leger Museum, the chief expert on guns in the Dutch Republic during this period of history; Jaap van der Veen of Amsterdam's Rembrandt House; Lennart Bes of the National Archives in The Hague; Aryan Klein, project manager of the *Batavia Werf*, shipyard, in Lelystad; and, most particularly,

Ab Hoving of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, who was a notably wonderful source of fine detail on seventeenth-century Dutch maritime history.

In Australia, author Paquita Boston gave me greatly valued advice on ancient Aboriginal culture, and I was constantly calling on Helen Wilder's skills in the Dutch language. I drew on the expertise of Stephen Jackson and Alex Whitworth when it came to the conditions of the various oceans, and on all matters of medical history my dear friend Dr Michael Cooper was a fount of information. Now, if all of these experts agreed on every detail of what is historically correct, my life would have been a lot easier. As it was, when they disagreed – and they frequently did – on just which way the nautical world worked 400 years ago, I had to make a decision.

My aim has been to be able to confidently say that, 'While many of the original pieces from this puzzle have not survived, based on the shape of all the surviving pieces, it almost certainly looked just like this.' By way of example, though there is no record in the primary documents of the *Batavia's* surgeons employing the medical methods I describe in this book, expert research informs me this is the way it was done at that time. And, though there is little record of the precise words that Pelsaert spoke to Jeronimus when they reached the Abrolhos, the dialogue I have constructed is entirely consistent with both their established characters and the other bits of their dialogue that have survived. On several occasions, such as when they left Texel and arrived at Table Bay, I have adapted detailed dialogue from roughly contemporaneous accounts to illustrate the likely scenarios aboard the *Batavia*.

And yet, if I have taken some latitude, it is under strict conditions. From 1617 on, when Dutch ships were rounding the Cape of Good Hope on their way to the East Indies, they were



instructed to keep between the latitudes of 36 and 42 degrees south as they headed east – the chosen *karrespoor*, cart-track, across the ocean. Similarly, I have framed this book so as to keep between the tight latitudes of the historical record, while still affording myself a little room to manoeuvre within those parameters.

This approach will likely attract criticism. So be it. The important thing for me is that all the key events described in this book are documented in the primary sources, all the machinations and dynamics between the protagonists laid down in black and white. Wherever possible, time and time again I have returned to and referenced Pelsaert's Journal, bearing in mind that it is a one-eyed account of events by a man under enormous pressure.

A good 113 years on, I have accepted Willem Siebenhaar's challenge to put permanent life into the story's dry bones. I have been aided by the fact that far more has now become known of the saga than in his time, and even in the time since Henrietta Drake-Brockman's fictional account *The Wicked and the Fair* was published in 1957.

In his review, Mike Dash criticised Drake-Brockman's non-fiction take on the subject, *Voyage to Disaster*, on the grounds that her 'book has no real narrative and fails, really, to convey the unprecedented drama of the *Batavia*'s wreck and the appalling events that followed it . . . It is not a narrative history, nor an easy book to read.'

I make no such criticism of his great book but do note that my intention is to try to go one step further. That is, I want to accurately 'convey the unprecedented drama of the *Batavia*'s wreck' by making it read like a novel, while not limiting myself to only the few precise details of the story that have survived the four centuries – most particularly when even those primary documents are sometimes contradictory as to what happened.

I have included notes at the end of the book indicating where I have departed significantly from the documentary evidence along with my justification in so doing.

While struggling to work out how best to tell the *Batavia* story, I was fascinated to note that I was not alone, and that similar struggles have been going on for 350 years. In a closing note to the first edition of the *Ongeluckige Voyagie* in 1647, Dutch publisher Jan Jansz wrote:

*The want of a continuous record has prevented my polishing this story in such good order as I had wished. I would, therefore, request anyone who should be in possession of further information or notes to place them in the hands of the printer, so that they may be added to a second edition. For the same reason, I trust that the deficiencies of my work will be excused. With this I bid the reader farewell, recommending him to read all with judgment and discrimination.*

Exactly.

In the course of writing *Batavia*, I have travelled to India to see the real spice markets that are still in operation, to the Abrolhos Islands off the coast of Western Australia, to the remains of the citadel of Batavia, which can still be seen in the old city of Jakarta, and, of course, to Amsterdam, from where the ship *Batavia* set out, and The Hague, where the records of her voyage are kept.

In the Shipwreck Galleries at the Western Australian Museum in Fremantle, I devoured the wonderful *Batavia* exhibit, including the skeleton and facade of the shipwreck, just as I loved the museum in Geraldton with its own *Batavia* exhibit. Those displays are masterpieces of recovery, conservation and reconstruction, due in no small part to the hard work put in by the museums' staff, led by Dr Jeremy Green, who in 2007 won the Rhys Jones Medal in

acknowledgement of his pioneering work in the development of maritime archaeology in Australia. The Western Australian Museum could not have been more helpful to me, particularly staff members Dr Michael McCarthy and Patrick Baker, the latter supplying some excellent images for the book.

For her help in all things to do with the form and texture of the book, I offer my deep appreciation to my treasured colleague at the *Sydney Morning Herald* Harriet Veitch, just as I do to my long-time researcher Sonja Goernitz, who was a great help across the board. Let me particularly acknowledge the work of my dear friend, and principal research editor on this book, Henry Barrkman. I have never worked as closely with anyone in the writing of a book, and, by its end, he was more familiar with the primary documents than I was. He was a constant sounding board as to how I might extrapolate from them, how the principal characters interacted, what the most likely chronology was for various events, and, when information conflicted, which account was the most likely. My debt to him is enormous.

I thank all at Random House, particularly Margie Seale, Nikki Christer and Alison Urquhart, for backing the project from the first, and my editor, Kevin O'Brien, for his meticulous approach and keen dedication.

*Peter FitzSimons*

*Neutral Bay*