

HEERE BE MONSTERS

JOHN BIRMINGHAM

Bestselling author JOHN BIRMINGHAM is extremely versatile, as adept at writing speculative fiction, fantasy, and bestselling thrillers as he is at writing mainstream history, sport, crime, gonzo journalism, and humour. His first book — *He Died with a Felafel in His Hand*, which he calls ‘the Chernobyl of share house literature’ — became a comedy bestseller and a youth cult classic, and was later turned into a play (the longest running stage play in Australian history), a film, and a graphic novel. He won the National Award for Nonfiction in 2002 for *Leviathan*, his biography of Sydney. His other books include *The Tasmanian Babes Fiasco* (the bestseller sequel to *He Died with a Felafel in His Hand*), *A Felafel Guide to Sex* and *The Felafel Guide to Getting Wasted*, *How to be a Man*, *Dopeland: Taking the High Road Through Australia’s Marijuana Culture*, and *Off One’s Tits: Ill-considered Rants and Raves from a Graceless Oaf Named John Birmingham*. He is also the author of the crime novel *The Search for Savage Henry* and the Axis of Time trilogy, which includes the novels *Weapons of Choice*, *Designated Targets*, and *Final Impact*.

Birmingham writes that he was distracted by the first incarnation of *Dreaming Down-Under*, inhaling it in one big gulp when he should have been earning his keep elsewhere. That distraction was a left-handed gift, though, encouraging him to switch genres to alternative history/technothriller with *Weapons of Choice*.

He says that his story in this collection, ‘Heere Be Monsters’, pays off that karmic debt.

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(Extracted from the address of Lieutenant-General Sir Watkin Tench to members of the Royal Society, in London, on 25 January 1808, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the discovery of the Scourge.)

You will forgive me, gentlemen, if I do not dwell on the preliminaries of the matter which has these recent years inflamed the fearful wondering of every soul extant upon God’s earth, be they monarch, basest commoner, republican or Bantu savage. My colleagues Surgeon White and Admiral

Hunter have both enjoyed considerable success with their journals of the voyage from the Mother Bank to the forbidden seas. The publication of our late Governor's notes as an addendum to their work provides an immoderate weight of material preceding the events at Port Jackson for those inclined to so immerse themselves.

If I might begin with the ordinary, as a solid footing for the extraordinary which quickly follows it, we had famously anchored for a number of days at Botany Bay and found it unacceptable as home for the new colony. The waters were very open and greatly exposed to the fury of the southeast winds, which when they blew, caused a heavy and dangerous swell. At a distance of a league from the mouth of the bay was a bar, on which at low water not more than fifteen feet were to be found. Within this bar, and proceeding for many miles along the southwest arm of the bay, was a haven in which any number of ships of the line might permanently shelter, were it not for lack of fresh water, a thirst unrelieved by any source within the bay as we first found it.

I emphasise that point. As we *first* found it.

The Governor, having despatched a small party north to examine the inlet noted by Mr Cook, and having had reports of a commodious and well-watered anchorage, resolved to remove the camp from its original situation to one more calculated to inspire confidence in our survival. A grim irony, that, you'll warrant now.

Our passage took up a mere few hours, but in that time we did not simply move from the rather exposed and unsuitable anchorage at Botany Bay into the deeper harbour of Port Jackson. We rather travelled from a position of pleasant anticipation and general relief at the termination of our long voyage, into a hell of unimaginable contour and unfathomable depth.

As best all who lived can tell, it was the white squall which marked the crossing of the line from an ordered world, where God's design is apparent to all who look, into the darker Inexplicable where we now dwell. The Fleet was proceeding in fair order, as we had done for nigh on two hundred and fifty days. HMS *Supply* had the vanguard, and in her sailed Governor Phillip. The fastest of the convict transports — *Scarborough*, *Friendship* and *Alexander* — were not embarrassed in their efforts to keep station, a claim my own tub, the *Charlotte*, could not dare make without gross outrage to truth and modesty. We wallowed some distance behind the leaders, penned in on all sides by the remaining hulks and store ships, shepherded on our way by brave little *Sirius*.

There was no warning of the tempest. You will have heard seafarers make claim of wild storms blown up without caution, when what they truly mean is that whatever warnings they did enjoy were rather short and the transition from tranquillity to the devil's own maelstrom was effected without delay, a matter of some minutes, perhaps.

As an officer of His Majesty's Royal Marines, I too have had my fill of storms at sea and would not confute any mariner a small measure of exaggeration in such things. They have earned the right. In doing so, however, such tales rob my own of the immediacy and hazard I must now impress upon you.

At one heartbeat I stood on deck, adjacent to the barricado, our final defence against any uprising from below. The waters were gentle, and slipped by our flanks with a slight hiss and the occasional plop of wavelet against wood. The moon's reflection was a silver sword upon the deep and I was chatting pleasantly with my friend Surgeon White, enjoying the hard brilliance of the increasingly familiar southern stars in the night sky, as we recalled our damnable luck in the affairs and intrigues of *amour* with the ladies of St Sebastian. We had both arrived in that port aflame with the reports of Dr Solander, who had written of Portuguese beauties throwing nosegays at strangers for the purpose of bringing on an assignation. White and myself, not an entirely unhandsome pair I'm sure you'll agree, were so deplorably unfortunate as to walk every evening before their windows and balconies without once being honoured by a single bouquet, even though nymphs and flowers were in equal and great abundance.

These memories did we rake over like spent coals, enjoying the warm, still night, when at the next heartbeat we were all about beset by a storm of such insensate violence I would not be aghast to discover it had blown straight from the mouth of hell. It is possible the good surgeon cried out. I am certain I did, but so enormous was the shrieking of wind and hammering of rain, that I could hear nothing beyond their savage caterwauling din. Smashed to the deck as if by a great invisible fist I was attempting in extreme distress to settle accounts with my maker, for annihilation must surely be the only outcome of such a development.

And then another heartbeat, gentlemen, just like the thudding within your own breast pockets at this precise moment, and we were clear of it, or rather it of us, for of the storm there was no sign, beyond a strange contrary fog which had settled like a cloak upon the fleet. Besides the mist there was not a puff of breeze, nor drop of rain beyond that remnant moisture which now dripped from our sails and rigging. The silence was enormous in

its own way. As deafening as the roar that had proceeded it.

I heard the raw curses of the *Charlotte's* crew, and the beginnings of a panic below decks amongst our human freight, when there came a great crash and the awful splintering of timber which bespoke a collision between two ships. It was impossible to tell, what with darkness and fog — and one must admit of it, *fear* and confusion — but a naval lieutenant soon hurried past with news of a mishap involving the *Borrowdale* and *Golden Grove*.

I am sure you will agree that it is to the credit of the British race, and our maritime tradition, that no lives or ships were lost in the next hours (although, perhaps for some it were best t'was otherwise). Great cliffs stood to our portside and we had been driven a good way towards them, but the masters of the Fleet and their fine men quickly shook off all consideration but that of returning order and a settled command to our affairs. When Governor Phillip was satisfied that no great damage had been done to his host, that *Borrowdale* and the *Grove* were still seaworthy, and that we might proceed, he signalled from *Supply* to heave to, and, as innocent and unknowing as babes, we did just that.

Would that our intelligence of the great changes afoot was not smothered by the fog that had remained after that unholy tempest? Might we have stood off and sent much smaller armed parties to investigate? Might we have withdrawn and quarantined the Scourge for all time? I see some of you nodding vigorously, but of course, to have done so would have betrayed the nature of dauntless inquiry and adventure by which Empires such as ours are built. And without the Scourge, of course, there could be no knowledge of the wonders which attended it. We might be gathered here by candlelight, rather than electronical glass. These notes before me would consist of stained scrawls, inked by quill, rather than neatly composed by mechanical typewriter. And the cornucopia of marvels recovered from that benighted place would have been prey to Spanish brigand or French privateer, rather than devoted to the betterment of man's finer instincts and designs, as manifest in the achievements of the British Empire.

Could the American colonies have been won back without the repeating gun? Could all those children now alive and growing to strengthen the sinews of the Empire have done so without the miracle patents and potions and pure knowledge of the Hippocratic arts we snatched from the jaws of hell and brought safe home? Would the blockade of the forbidden seas by the Royal Navy have any real chance of sustained accomplishment without the steam engine, ironcladding and the radiola? As much as horror

has come into the world, so has a countervailing magic with which to combat it. I hope you will indulge me these digressions, for, as I age, they are much upon my conscience.

At that point however, some twenty years ago tonight, my deliberations were centred squarely on immediate concerns. I had greater than one hundred convicts in my charge, twenty of them women, and forty-one marines with which to guard them — although I must confess some of my men took to their husbandry duties with questionable vigour, and I cannot today recall a single female transportee who had not found herself a connection amongst the men of the regiment by the time we reached Port Jackson. I have at times pondered the virtue of such vice, asking myself if we might not have survived in the numbers we did aboard the *Charlotte* were it not for the bonds of family which had been struck below decks on the voyage out.

I had ordered the chains struck off my prisoners almost as soon as we had departed home waters, an indulgence which I am proud and happy to relate was not abused by the wretches, or not so much as greatly matters. Disinclined to return them to their fetters I was nonetheless concerned lest riot should ensue upon our making landfall. It had been much discussed amongst the officers, and Chaplain Johnson, always greatly exercised by questions of morality, had predicted a bacchanalian outbreak of sin as soon as the prisoners were free to have at each other. I must admit I was more concerned for the safety of our precious stores than for the ethical temper of my pick-pockets and whores.

Lest high spirits should lead to a general debauch, in which months of provisions might be utterly destroyed, I loudly ordered all of my men to stand to with muskets, sabre, bayonet, spare ball and powder. I am convinced I stand here before you today in possession of my life and immortal soul because of that precaution. I might add that thirty seamen sailed on the *Charlotte*, and although the majority of them were given to the busy task of navigating an uncharted, fog-bound harbour at ebb tide, their master Mr Gilbert, ensured that his men too were alive to the possibility of mayhem.

We proceeded up the passage, the cries of the pilots and fathom sounders flat and alien, smothered by the mist no doubt. Of the shores there was little to be seen at this juncture. It was still dark and the fog shrouded all. Those few times we strayed close enough to make out anything, the slopes seemed steep, and luxuriantly wooded. Points of light burned here and there, a sight we had grown used to as we hauled up the coast. Natives, we presumed, gathered around their campfires, some of

them considerable infernos as best we could judge.

The first intimation of disaster was not long in coming. Positioned as we were towards the rear of the Fleet we discerned the cries and alarms from ahead, without understanding what encouraged them. As I was later to discover, the *Supply* had struck a buoy.

A floating buoy in a harbour never transited by civilised man.

In short order, more shouts and sirens reached us in the rearguard as those in the van encountered evidence of the cursed miracle into which we had blundered, or been cast. As the sun rose and quickly burned away the fog we found ourselves, not resident of some empty cove at world's end, but inexplicably surrounded by a city, not of the new world, but of another world entirely. A sharply strengthening breeze from the south cleared out the remaining fog within minutes, presenting to us the spectacle of a metropolis to call London dwarf, of blues and whites and light, bathed in sun to blind the eyes. I stood there a pilgrim to this New Jerusalem. It was only as we drew closer I found no hammering of industry, no cacophony of voices, or the clip clop of horse traffic. There was a low, constant and most unsettling *moan* which drifted over us, but I ascribed this to the passage of the sirocco through our rigging.

Many, if not all of you will have seen the photographic imagery of the dead city known as Sydney. A city of monoliths, of magnificent colour and textures and angles and omnipotent scale as to overwhelm the senses. I need not recall to you the familiar sights of metal and glass towers, some of them awash in flames and spewing clouds of roiling black smoke into the sky. As dawn brightened, the harbour itself was revealed as an inky pool choked with debris and dominated by the broken hull of a gargantuan iron vessel, unlike any ship of His Majesty's Navy, at least in those days. I could see now a veritable flotilla of smaller craft, their lines sleek and almost painful to the eye. Abandoned all of them, or so we thought.

As the temperature rose, the southerly wind carried over us the first of many terrible revelations. The foul, cloying air emerging from the broken teeth of those soaring towers was as rank as a charnel house on a summer's day. The miasma of putrescence and burning flesh threatened to overwhelm me, and I, you will recall, had ample experience of life below decks and not far removed from the bilge water of the good ship *Charlotte*.

Surgeon White appeared at my side, a looking glass in hand.

'It is an impossible vision,' he croaked. 'A thing that might be dreamed

of by a Wren in the grip of opium.'

My uncomprehending eyes followed his shaking hand and I perceived it too, a vast claw, raking the sky. It seemed the cunning work of giants, fled from the lands of men and returned here at the ends of the earth. It was terror and it was madness and it was glory, and it made one feel like an ant beneath the boots of God himself.

'What holds it up?' I whispered.

'The Will of God, sir,' said Surgeon White. 'It can be nothing else.'

Behind the impossible erection, which we know these days to be a haunted opera house, a massive stone and metal arch spanned the waters of the inlet. It glittered in the morning sun. A dream of iron and wire and stone, its arch almost a mile in length and suspended at over five chains above the harbour. On both banks I presently espied great stately homes. Some of them afire. But of people we saw little. A shambling figure here and there. One or two others darting hither and yon across rooftops in the distance. Some waving, possibly crying out to us. Of their fate I know nothing, but suspect the worst.

We advanced towards the magnificent bridge, a creeping sense of wickedness and malignity growing stronger as we delved. I have seen much battle at the closest of quarters in service to His Majesty, but I lie not now when I tell you that never has fear threatened to unman me as completely as it did on that bright morn'. Surgeon White must have perceived my unease, for he gripped me on the arm and pressed a tot of rum upon me.

'Some medicinal advice, if you will have it, Captain Tench?' he muttered.

'Yes,' I choked back in reply.

'One tot immediately for every fighting man, and any man who will fight to save himself and his fellows.'

'Why ...' I began, meaning to inquire further, but the gentlemen's grip only tightened. 'Do you not feel it, Watkin? Inside of you? We are in the presence of evil and I fear it means to strike. The men will look to you for strong leadership. You must provide it, or we will die here. I feel it in my meat.'

The gooseflesh crawling up my arms and the ice water in my bowels knew the truth of it. I took the rum in a swallow and ordered Mr Baker, my sergeant at arms, to break out two days grog ration and distribute it with all haste amongst the private soldiers. Then to see to a further distribution amongst Master Gilbert's men, and every convict who was willing to bear arms.

Yes, I see some of you shake your heads at that. I understand your perplexity, that we had gone in such a brief interval from guarding these miserable vagabonds at bayonet point, to placing in their gnarled hands the very weapons with which they might undo us. You must take it as testimony to the malevolent nature of our surroundings that such a drastic course seemed entirely appropriate. Sergeant Baker, a thirty-year man, did not so much as bat an eyelid. With sallow face and haunted eyes he merely nodded and hurried off to do my bidding, his fingers stroking the ammunition pouch at his waist as he went.

We all felt it, the oppressive presence of evil and grave madness.

It was at that moment that I perceived a vision so reassuring in its familiarity that it seemed placed within this fantastic tableau as a mockery to the rational mind, a jape to reinforce the loss of balance we all felt when reeling back from the apparition of the damned city. It was a stone fortress, a Martello Tower as they are called of late, which would not have caused surprise had it been spied in any port where the King's law is writ. A mere glimpse, I had, before the *Borrowdale* and *Sirius* passed in front of her, but in that interlude, I knew I had seen men at the ramparts. Armed men. It was a revelation to add to a book of revelations, but before I could order my thoughts around this new development it ceded precedence to another.

The first appearance of the Scourge.

Satan's handiwork did not present as such of course. T'was Surgeon White, with benefit of a long looking glass to his eye, who saw them on the promenade of the opera house. A woman and boy came first, running as though the hounds of hell snapped at their heels. They emerged from the far side of that soaring bleached structure of giant seashells, and behind them came a shambling mob of hundreds. The low moaning of the wind, I belatedly recognised as issuing from human throats. Hundreds of them.

'Look,' he said, a redundant instruction, as I had been alerted to the excitement on shore by the sudden tacking of *Supply* towards water's edge. Our sister ships manoeuvred about in the semicircular quay, with *Sinus* pulling up next to the stonework fort, where a furious communication

ensued between the occupants and the commander of the Marine detachment aboard. Too distant to hear any of it, I noted the precautions of the *Sirius*, the guns trained upon the stronghold, and could not help but admire the courage of the master and crew. In any duel of cannon the wooden ship must surely have fallen to a redoubt of solid rock. Would that we had known what armaments lay within of course! Captain Hunter might not have been so quick to follow Nelson's dictum that no captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of the enemy.

The greater drama, to my eye, lay on shore, where the mob had surrounded woman and child in a tightening half-circle. She, a red-headed lady, was most remarkable for being dressed in her underthings, a rather thin blouse of some kind and what appeared to be unconscionably brief white pantaloons. She looked frantic for escape, but saw as I did, that there was nowhere to go but into the deep. Her son, who seemed to be about seven or eight years of age and dressed in mud-coloured shorts and a blue sleeveless jerkin, was pulling at her hand, obviously urging her in the direction of the water.

'Sergeant Baker!' I yelled. 'Your best marksmen into the rigging now! Covering fire for the woman and child on my order.'

'Yes sir,' he replied and set to snarling and snapping in his reassuring way, sending half a dozen musket men aloft with loaders and a spare gun each. He knew his work, did Baker. Master Gilbert too needed no telling his duty, and we began to move towards the scene as he brought the helm about.

I had the looking glass from Surgeon White and, training it upon the fugitives, both leapt into view with faces strained by a mortal terror such as I had never seen etched upon human features, no matter the extremity of peril. The boy at that point stared at me, I am certain of it. He yanked at his mother's arm again and pointed in our direction. She turned from the closing mob, and saw the reassuring bulk of the *Charlotte* and *Supply* closing in. The brave woman wasted no time, but grabbed the lad by his right hand and dragged him into the water.

'Ready the gig!' roared Captain Gilbert from just behind my ear, causing me to leap near out of breeches and boots. 'A fighting party, if you please, Mr Hood. That boy and his mother will drown otherwise ...'

But, for a wonder, both could swim! And they struck out directly for us. At this very moment the loudest voice I have ever heard bellowed forth from the ramparts of Fort Denison. Had it issued from the same proximity

as Gilberts roar, behind my ear, I am certain it would have blown out my brains, such as they are, from their resting place within my skull.

All turned as one, by which I mean no exaggeration. Every single soul upon the deck and in the rigging of the Fleet's vessels twisted towards the source of that shout.

'Get out of the -----way! Move aside and give us a clear field of fire,' boomed the voice. I saw a man with a red trumpet to his mouth and assumed the amplified roar could only have issued from that instrument, although it still seemed too loud to me.

At any rate, whatever intercourse had been pursued between Hunter and the defenders of the fort, the *Sirius* promptly made way and then came the specific instant that I, as a military man, knew the world had forever changed. Three score men *and* women did I spy mount the ramparts of Fort Denison, all of them armed with miniature muskets. They took aim and opened fire.

The immediate concatenation was deafening in a fashion that any one of us might recognise, but there came no respite for reloading. No second or third line stepped up to provide volley fire. The same thirty or more shootists simply squeezed their triggers again and again and again, until the uproar of gunfire was so constant and so huge that it overwhelmed all else and pained the ear as greatly as any long naval engagement with artillery.

Beside me Surgeon White swore, as small geysers erupted in the water around the woman and child, and for all the world I would have wagered that these savages had demanded we move aside so they be allowed to shoot down their own kind. The command to return fire was in my throat but *Supply* ran up signal flags ordering us to stand fast. I could scarcely credit it, and my head swirled with the outrage of the thing, but presently I saw the reason of it.

The fugitives were being pursued in the water by fiends which appeared to rise from the harbour floor, and their comrades were providing covering fire of an accuracy I would not credit had I not witnessed the affair myself. Examining the scene anew, I discerned a division of responsibility among the firing party, with a portion given to protecting their mates, while others engaged the mob.

White muttered curses and shook his head as he passed the glass back to me.

‘What make ye of yon slaughter?’ he asked.

The vast mob had piled up at a stone barrier, waist high, which impeded all forward motion. Not a one of them attempted to mount it, as modest an obstruction as it was. Instead they stood rocking back and forth in a rhythmic motion, moaning as one while they were methodically felled by scarifying gunfire. The thing of it was this. Every single shot seemed aimed at their faces. Only once or twice did I witness a round strike home below the neckline, and then with the most salutary effect — which is to say *none at all*. From a short observation it became apparent that these monsters were immune to all but the most serious of wounds, a lead ball sent directly into their brains.

And monsters they were. Less than one hundred yards now separated us from the nearest of them and such propinquity allowed of an uncomfortably intimate inspection.

‘They should be dead,’ avowed the good Surgeon White. ‘Look at them, Tench. Just look at them.’

He did not need to reiterate the suggestion. I could not look away. I stood transfixed by that phantasmagorical sight. The recently imbibed grog lay unsteady in my vitals, threatening to rise as the stench of them assaulted us. One does not like to speak ill of the dead, gentlemen, but here I must. No member of that horrific rabble was whole of body. Their exposed flesh was a rich palate of advanced decay and gangrenous mortification, shining in sickly hues of mottled greens and grays. All manner of atrocity and flagellation had been visited upon their flesh. I witnessed those with limbs hanging by the merest thread of skin, with guts opened and viscera spilling, throats torn and faces flapping, jaw and skull bones shining whitely in the dawning morn’.

And the stench! The smell of the Scourge, the high, putrid, stomach-churning reek that accompanies them, is not easily conceived unless experienced by prior ill fortune. The lowest bilge or the ripest midden is as nothing to the miasma that emanated from that dreadful horde. There is something about the infection that seems to magnify the natural aromas of decay and effluvium the human body produces post mortem, such that even from our removed vantage, I was struck quite physically by the rankness that reached out to us. I heard several of the crew retching beside me, and felt my own gorge rise, yet with an effort I regained control and turned back to Surgeon White.

‘What hell is this, sir?’ I asked in shaking timbre. ‘Some malady of the

soul *and* the flesh? A disorder of the mind? Some voodoo curse? I have seen Zombees of the Carib, Doctor, but naught of them do I see here. Here I see but monsters.'

'Aye,' said White, his voice a whisper, a drift of ash. 'Monsters. Captain Tench,' he continued, reaching a moment of decision. His speech accelerated like a fast steam ship with boilers roaring. 'I cannot vouch for my speculations but on the evidence I must avow to a suspicion that some malady *is* at work here. Some sort of rabid infection, perhaps transferred in the saliva, or in the blood itself. I must advise you, sir, to order your men that under no circumstances are they to *come to grips* with these fiends, even if it means surrendering honour to expedience and retreating in the face of them. Destroy the head, sir. They must *destroy the head* by whatever means available, but not by hand to hand combat. A club, a sword, a bayonet thrust directly into the brain pan. Anything to stay beyond arm's length. Ball and powder, of course, would be best.'

He grew wistful at that, squinting at the distant rifle company of Fort Denison. I knew that he, just like I, was wishing to Our Lord for weapons such as those as yet unknown allies did enjoy.

I called up Sergeant Baker and bade him in the strongest terms to pass on the physician's warning. The first of the convicts appeared from below, blinking in the light, and dealing with a thousand confusions, not the least of which were occasioned by the armaments pressed on them. Baker and his men pushed them forward to the gunwale, with furious and lurid imprecations to do their duty as Christians and Englishmen, no matter how poorly they had once measured up as subjects of the crown.

Now musket shot began to pour upon the mob from the decks of our own vessels, our meagre volleys adding drips and drops to the flood of fire still raging from the fort. Only a broadside from the *Sirius*, unexpected and terrifying, drowned out the staccato uproar, and then but briefly. The withering cannonade of grapeshot from half of one dozen six pounders and three of her eighteen pound pieces swept over the foul assemblage onshore like an evil wind, disarticulating rotten arms and legs, bifurcating trunks like hollow tree stumps, turning whole bodies to a rancid mist and yet ... and yet ... still some lived! If living it could be called. With a hand now preternaturally steady I raised glass to eye again and surveyed the carnage only to reel inwardly at the vision of some demonic wretches, inadequately fragmented by the broadside, dragging what remained of their leavings back towards the water's edge. An intact cranium attached to a half or more of torso appeared to be vessel enough to contain whatever motive force

drove them on. Only a discrete blow to the brain itself provided an assured *coup de grace*.

As orders to this effect rang out across the fleet, including from myself to all the fighting men aboard good *Charlotte*, I watched as her gig, almost forgotten in the wider horror, reached the woman and child. Both flung themselves into the reaching arms and hands of our gallant tars as though attempting to jump from a boiling pot. One of the poor, brave men, however, not swift enough to escape a reaching, rotted claw, suddenly screamed and toppled over into the water, which began to boil around his thrashing form. The foam turned red and he soon disappeared below. No order to heave to was needed. The small boat crew leaned into their oars with vigour inflamed by mortal terror as they raced back towards their mother ship.

As escapees and rescuers scrambled up the nets of the *Charlotte*, dripping nightmares followed them and I was thankfully spared leisured contemplation of the morning's wickedness by the demands of our defence. The nets I had cut away with all despatch, and those few devils who made it to the top before the severance were held off with gaffing hooks while a single shot to the head was organised and administered by Sergeant Baker.

The poor woman was delirious with fear and her boy shaking as though possessed by a fit of St Vitus. 'Sweet mother of Christ,' White called out over his shoulder as he hurried to their aid. 'Look upon fresh hell, Captain Tench.'

I followed where he pointed and felt my gorge rise as I too comprehended the new and awful exigencies of this battle. Four of our transports packed with convicts, stores and livestock had withdrawn to a safe distance from the fray, or so it had seemed. But these most exemplary precautions had taken them beneath the span of that great steel bridge and whilst all had been distracted by the terrible spectre of the walking dead to our port, on starboard an horrendous *mise-en-scène* unfolded. Hundreds of ghouls dropped through the air like fat, blackened fruits. Descent and the prospect of destruction upon impact seemed not to bother them at all and quickly I was given to comprehend the reason of it.

Even as their bodies struck spars and mast, parting in an obscene spray of chunk and offal, the ruined vestiges smashed into wooden decks and, presuming no damage to the cranium ensued, they recommenced their assault. Many simply speared into the deep, and many were indeed

destroyed by the crushing or severing of skulls. But enough made it down there, gentlemen. Enough.

I shudder now to think of it, even though my own sight of the holocaust was oft impeded by distance and the intervening bulk of our other ships. Through the glass I saw all that I needed. A score or more of the plague carriers made the *Borrowdale* while I looked on, all but helpless. Some of the fiends survived by mere dint of crashing down atop some unfortunate crewman or marine and, horror upon horror, commenced without delay to feast upon them. The screams which reached across the water and over the uproar of gunfire will follow me to the very gates of heaven, where I can only hope I might finally receive blessed surcease. Just one incident of this satanic cannibalism did I allow myself to witness, and that because I could not avert my eyes in time. I confess myself paralysed by the horror. Half a devil fell upon one of the few free woman travelling with the Fleet, the wife of a comrade indeed, and well known to me from the advantage of fond memories. I recognised her at a distance from her gay bonnet and parasol, which I well remember from pleasant walks with that poor family about the common of their village back in Dorset.

The thing which struck her — for although science tells me it had once been a man or woman, I could not now privilege it with any appellation beyond that of a foul and soulless *object* — the thing, trailing gizzards and great ropey lengths of corruption, crashed into her shoulder and drove her to the deck. Would that the force of the blow had killed poor ----- . Alas she was but momentarily stunned, and quickly revived by the painful stimulus of first one, then two, then three of these creatures making a meal of her. Brave woman that she was she cried out her defiance and had at them with the only weapon to hand, her broken parasol. I saw it rise and fall repeatedly, but to no effect, and the resistance soon ended as all life ran from her wounds. As horrific as this was, worse followed as my colleague's only love soon rose from the heap of her tormentors, and now suffering the most appalling disfigurements, joined in the assault on her former friends and shipmates. I saw her bite the neck of a corporal of marines whose only fault was to attempt to spirit her to safety and as he fell with great jets of his lifeblood painting the ambulatory corpse of-----, I turned away.

As any professional military man will attest, however, there is much succour to be had in attachment to duty and necessity. Of that I had an elegant sufficiency, as we now found ourselves ordered by the Flagship to sail into the diseased heart of that horrendous encounter beneath the bridge, there to take on any survivors who might yet escape.

Pride is a deadly sin, gentlemen, but I am proud that not a man

amongst us on that day resiled from certain death, and what was more, from equally certain damnation. Even the prisoners, now armed with the means to revolt if they so wished, proved themselves not entirely beyond redemption as each gripped whatever weapon they now held and, spitting either prayers or curses at their fate, made ready at the end to die as free men. For none of us saw any way in which we might possibly achieve the stated aim of our orders. We were surely headed to our doom.

Our passage there was not without incident, as you might imagine. We were increasingly besieged by those water-logged corpses drawn to us by the flight of the woman and child. A veritable raft of them did form o'er the next minutes, a floating carpet of moaning reaching phantoms that surrounded every ship on all sides, necessitating much cooperation between the firing parties of each vessel, and our new chums in the fort.

My own makeshift force however, I ordered to hold fire, knowing that we would presently require every advantage accruing to us through the possession of a well stocked armoury. Master Gilbert brought the helm around for a rendezvous with the *Lady Penhryn*, the nearest vessel, upon which a furious but sadly hopeless struggle was enjoined. It was vexing. Of all of the ships of the Fleet, the *Lady*, with the majority of women transportees, had but two lieutenants and three privates of His Majesty's Marine Forces. A small, valiant party still held out on the quarterdeck, where these three marines and the same number of tars blocked all attempts by the shambling hordes to have at a dozen or more screaming women and children clustered at the stern.

Below them lay many corpses of the dead, in pieces. They stabbed, slashed and hacked at a solid writhing mass of reanimated flesh as it all but *poured* up the steps towards them. The deadly winnowing education of combat had taught these few defenders the efficacy of striking only at the heads or their attackers, among whom, I am sorry to say, were numbered many former comrades and shipmates, including the afore mentioned regimental officers, both friends of mine while the light of God had flickered within their breasts.

Sergeant Baker had a firing line of our marines drawn up in short order and I instructed them with all despatch.

'Aim for their heads, lads,' I called out. 'The heads and ... fire!'

Ten flints struck as one, followed by a single roar. The gun smoke lifted to reveal a small clearing, felled in the midst of that evil mass.

The second line stood forward and unleashed their volley in the same fashion to even greater effect and the rousing cheers of the *Charlotte's* complement. Sadly I saw one of *Lady's* marines slip and slide into the flailing mob, screaming proud defiance to the end. His partner smashing his skull as he fell, before returning to the dreadful repetitive work of cracking monster heads with a pair of iron bars.

I saw, a dozen chains away, a similar battle raging on the decks of the *Sirius* which had drawn up beside the Golden Grove and I could but wish them Godspeed.

Our own trial began at this point as we had drifted within the shadow of the giant bridge and exposed ourselves to invasion from above.

'Look to the skies,' I called out as Sergeant Baker began to roar at his reserve of armed prisoners, goading them from their fearful reverie as the very first crash of a demon slamming into the boards of our own deck resounded. A terrible, dull, crunching thud it was, an impact which speared the beast headfirst into solid oak, thus ending the immediate threat, but only for a moment.

They soon came upon us as a biblical rain of toads. Dark, heavy and pounding down like the fists of Satan himself. What a job of work it was, maintaining an orderly supporting fire upon the vile horde of inhumanity that had infested the for'ard decks of the *Lady Penrhyn*, whilst all the time being mindful that something worse than death was probably plummeting towards one from the heavens.

But Baker, a soldier's soldier, had done my job for me, as the very best of non-commissioned men will always do. A corporal and five privates all armed with Ferguson pistols and axes were duly detailed to the single task of spotting imminent and unwanted arrivals on board the *Charlotte* and warning any who stood in danger of being thus felled to move themselves with extreme haste. Such of those vile creatures which did make it down *relatively* intact and hungry for fresh meat, were consigned to oblivion by this party, all save for one.

A scrape and the metallic clink of chains upon the deck sounded behind me. I turned and was confronted by a woman. One of ours gone over to the darkness. Her white, dead eyes and a slack jaw identified her as being contaminated. Shocked, I saw the child at her breast still suckling but it too had been cursed. She looked at me and uttered one, guttural word ... 'B r a i n s' ... as she reached out to me with a clawed hand. I had become

immotile, this woman had given life to her child on our perilous voyage and I had promised to bear witness to her wedding with William Bryant and now ...

A sick-making crunch cut off her rasping call for my grey matter and she toppled like a rotten tree given out at the roots. An iron axe head protruded from her cleaved open skull and behind her stood the near naked woman we had rescued from the fore court of the Opera House.

'I am most grateful, madam ...' I began, but lost my words as she stepped forward and despatched the zombie child with a shot from what I took to be a pistol, although its design was in kin with the sharp angles and prepossessing bulk of so much machinery in this benighted hellhole.

'Sweet as,' she said tightly and somewhat incongruously before striding to the gunwale, taking a spot in the firing line as though a woman might do such a thing without a second thought, and unloading a second helping of death, this time permanent, upon the hellish multitude there swarming. Like her fellows on the stone fort, she handled a firearm with preternatural ability, placing her ball seemingly wherever she chose.

Good *Charlotte* crunched into the flanks of her dying sister ship, and lines to the embattled party were made fast as every muzzle available to us was trained upon the remaining ghouls. Now sitting directly under the bridge, we were spared the airborne hazard for the moment and could concentrate our best efforts upon effecting the escape of our comrades.

Many, if not all of you, will have read Surgeon White's account of the rescue, which I must tell you fails miserably in one respect, by neglecting to credit the surgeon with his own most fearless role. A wide plank did he have laid between our vessels and with two pistols in hand he proceeded over, heedless of the fatal seas alive with the undead just beneath his feet. One unfortunate pitch or toss and he would have joined them down there.

More tars and marines followed him, setting up an impenetrable barrier past which none without a soul might pass. In this way, with safety lines secured to the few surviving passengers of the *Lady Penrhyn*, did we evacuate that poor accursed wrack.

Others, I am afraid, were not as fortunate. Whether by ill luck or lack of fair preparation, the *Sirius* did not return from her mission. She was overrun, and with her the other store ships and transports. Our commanders signalled us to withdraw from any further contretemps beneath the bridge, and, barring a short interlude where once again we

received the enemy from above, we repaired from the battle without much further incident.

I deduce by the strained faces before me tonight that I have done enough to present to you some intimation of our vile circumstances, but, gentlemen, believe me when I say that whatever repulsion you may feel, was felt one thousand fold in our gullets on that day. Indeed, it would not be much of an exaggeration to admit to you that a shadow of repugnance has followed me through my days ever since.

And yet, I stand here, before my friends and colleagues, ready to bear witness and to avow my preparedness to do whatever necessary to preserve this realm from the terror of the Scourge, which every day threatens to spread beyond the Forbidden Seas to infect virgin lands and souls.

It cannot pass, gentlemen. And it shall not. Not while the British Empire stands vigilant and immeasurably strengthened by the scientific wonders salvaged from that dead city inexplicably cast down amongst us from the god-forsaken wastes of the twenty-second century.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

I was deep into researching my big fat history of Sydney when I saw version one of *Dreaming Down-Under*. I shouldn't have picked it up. I should have kept on at my research into the sand dunes of Surry Hills, but I am a bad, naughty, easily distracted author, and such a hefty tome, promising hours of enjoyable time-suckage, was too much for me. I think I read it in about two days, during which time nothing else got done.

It set me to thinking about writing my own bit of spec fie, which I soon started, as an alternative to playing computer games to wind down at the end of the day. Long story short, that brief, unintended experimentation eventually saw publication world wide as the *Axis of Time* series. Since that day, I've always felt I owed a debt to *Dreaming* and the authors who worked so hard to drag me away from my paying gig as a serious, nonfiction guy.

And so here I am, paying that off. The setting for the story, you'll see when you read it, was directly influenced by my research for *Leviathan*.

The other thing that was a bit spesh about this story for me was that I wrote it in close collaboration with some of my readers, specifically with the 'Burgers', the regular inhabitants of the toxic swamp that is my personal blog, Cheeseburger Gothic (birmo.journalspace.com). I've always been comfortable having a lot of contact with my readers and the Burger operates as a sort of friendly tavern where anyone can pop in for a brew and a chat.

Over the years I've gained a lot from having those scurvy dogs at my back. I've run a lot of ideas for my books and even my journalism past them and have been blown away by how generous and useful have been their suggestions and offerings and tip-offs about raids by the Feds.

I'd wanted some way of paying them back as well, and *Heere Be Monsters* is it. I cannot claim sole authorship of the story, which is a ripping little zombie yarn by the way, because at every turn the Burgers were there with their own helpful thoughts and contributions. They can all claim to be coauthors, and as such we've decided to donate *our* story fee to research into sexually transmitted disease amongst koalas. They're randy little buggers and they just can't help themselves. So are the koalas.

Some time after this book is published I'll post up the various drafts of *Monsters*, and anyone who cares to check them out can do so. You might even find the evolution as fascinating as I did.

— John Birmingham