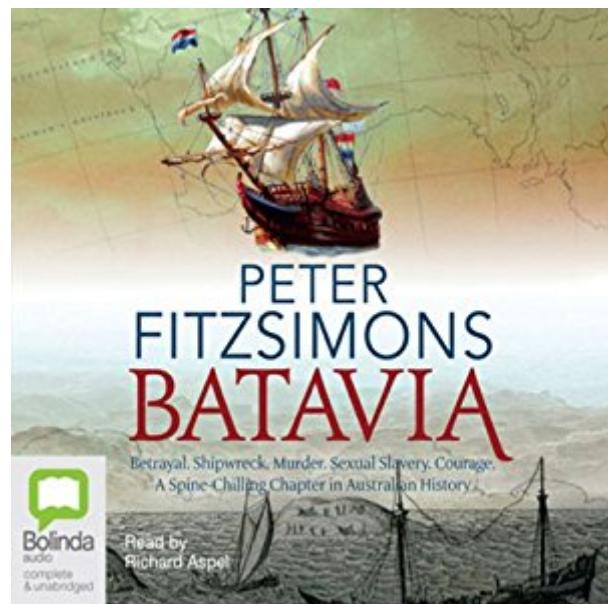


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# Batavia



## Synopsis

The story begins in 1629, when the pride of the Dutch East India Company, the Batavia, is on its maiden voyage en route from Amsterdam to the Dutch East Indies, laden down with the greatest treasure to leave Holland. The magnificent ship is already boiling over with a mutinous plot that is just about to break into the open when, just off the coast of Western Australia, it strikes an unseen reef in the middle of the night. While Commandeur Francisco Pelsaert decides to take the longboat across 2,000 miles of open sea for help, his second-in-command Jeronimus Cornelisz takes over, quickly deciding that 250 people on a small island is unwieldy for the small number of supplies they have. Quietly, he puts forward a plan to 40 odd mutineers how they could save themselves, kill most of the rest, and spare only a half-dozen or so women, including his personal fancy, Lucretia Jansz - one of the noted beauties of Holland - to service their sexual needs. A reign of terror begins, countered only by a previously anonymous soldier, Wiebbe Hayes, who begins to gather to him those are prepared to do what it takes to survive....

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I read the hardback edition. The saga of the Batavia is an incredible story which really deserves to be better known. Although it is the story of the first European settlement in Australia, predating the celebrated settlement of Sydney by a century and a half, it is barely even known in that country. Although the few months of settlement was accidental and ephemeral, it is significant in human history, in that it is a consummate case study of how rapidly civilized order can fall apart, even in a

supposedly sophisticated Christian society. I will let other reviewers give a synopsis of the story. Very few accounts of the story have been told. Sadly, this is NOT the version which will satisfy serious enquiring minds. Inevitably, primary source documentation is scarce, so that any author is required to fill in the gaps, as best he/she is able, relying upon historical research of the period and their own best judgement. I make no criticism of Fitzsimons in this regard. As far as I can tell, his research is thorough and his infill is plausible. Where his work disappoints me is in his style of story-telling. He chooses to be a narrator concurrent with the events, a fly on the wall who speaks only in the present tense, not unlike a commentator at a football match. To me, his book read like a draft film script, rather than a serious piece of history, which the material cries out for. Thus we have forced upon us infantile attempts at reconstructing verbal exchanges in direct speech, complete with old-salt gibberish. Also, he creates difficulties for himself by not being able to use modern geographical names, so that, for example, Australia is always referred to as "het Zuidland" and Cape Town as "Tafelbaii", always italicised. I am sure that some readers will go right through the text thinking that het Zuidland is some mythical land which research has not been able to identify. Others readers might not become quite as irritated by the style as I was, and some might actually enjoy it. Clearly, Fitzsimons has adopted it to try to bring immediacy and drama to the tale, but the story is so incredible in its own right that it does not need this artifice to bring it to life. In fact, I became so irritated about half way through, that I temporarily put the book aside and read the few relevant entries in Wikipedia, plus the links to a few references. I found this more satisfying than all the melodrama in Fitzsimons' book. I did, however, complete the book. One thing which the author does well is to simplify the Dutch naming system of the time into something manageable. Also, the photos in the book as well as their captions are excellent. On the other hand, the maps are quite inadequate. They are too small and lack grid references. Also, each map should be repeated on the facing page with modern place names. There is also a crying need for a regional map, covering the area from say Perth in the south to Exmouth in the north, showing the full extent of the Houtman Abrolhos Islands and their relationship to the adjacent mainland. This map could have been used to detail the departure route of Pelsaert towards Java, the erratic path by the recovery vessel Sardam, and the landing point of the two exiles on the West Australian coast. Compared to the bulk of the text, I found the Introduction and the Epilogue very good. Two technical areas I would have liked to be addressed were: 1. Some discussion on the likelihood of finding ground-water on the islands, given their topography and geology; and 2. Some modern psychological insights into the human behaviour displayed by Jeronimus, his henchman and their victims. The book could also profit from a tabular appendix listing all of the 330+ people involved, giving their name, age, where, when and by

what means they met their deaths. So the story is worth five stars and the telling of it one or two.

Let's say an average of three.

I have the hard copy and this review has nothing to do about the price in an electronic format or any other. As for Peter Fitzsimons effort he probably stretches the limits in joining the threads of the factual recorded accounts but I guess he has that artistic licence. Though I have often found the author painful when in group interviews as he generally likes to dominate every conversation I do think he can write a reasonable and readable story as he did with Kokoda and now this. His enthusiasm for the project has rewarded the reader with a great story and one that all Australians should know about. So having said that I think it's an amazing story that should end up on film and as Fitzsimons says it's a bigger story than Titanic with every possible element. Shipwreck, Mutiny, Murder, Rape, Greed and Survival among them. The Dutch have the replica of the Batavia that must be fairly accurate in size as its mast would only fit under the Sydney Harbour Bridge on a low tide when it arrived during the 2000 Olympics. That ship alone would help make a wonderful movie. The Dutch could also celebrate this story being bought to the screen not so much for the brutality of it and the indifference of the first world wide corporation but for the courage and heroism of those early sea captains in those magnificent tall ships when they were such a powerful nation.

This book is well researched to the extent possible for such a poorly understood event. Many readers may be dismayed by the brutality documented throughout. I was going to recommend it to my wife but decided the brutality (even if accurate) was too excessive to make the book enjoyable. As they would say in a movie or TV show "reader discretion is advised".

There would scarcely be an educated person in a western country today who has not heard of the mutiny on HMS Bounty. That is, the overthrow of William Bligh by a group of mutineers led by Fletcher Christian. I suspect that the number who have heard of Bligh's subsequent overthrowing in the Rum Rebellion of New South Wales would be a much lesser number. I further suspect that the number of persons who are familiar with the voyage of the Batavia and its wreck on the Abrolhos Islands would be comparatively tiny. This is a shame. The sheer horror inflicted on innocent people by the Batavia mutineers probably has few equals in maritime history. In order to at least partly overcome this relative historical neglect, Peter FitzSimons has crafted a wonderful book. He has brought the events of 1629 to life. He is to be thoroughly commended. His technique has been to write a history book that uses a considerable degree of licence. It is not possible to have been privy

to the minute details and conversations of events. However, he has remained true to the larger sweep of events. He skillfully covers the sheer horror and arrogance of the mutiny itself. He also details the subsequent events and how justice was meted out. Personally, I was pleased to see some retribution. The mutineers, in particular their leader, Jeronimus, were a hideous group. In some respects, the Batavia wreck and mutiny seem like an adult version of Lord of the Flies. However, it was far worse. It truly knew no bounds. I strongly recommend this book to the general history reader.

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