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TIM FLANNERY

The Sandstone City

On 6 February 1788, Sydney was ten days old. The men of the First Fleet, both soldiers and prisoners, had already been ashore at Port Jackson for much of that time, preparing the ground and setting up camp. Now the women convicts were set ashore. There were more than 700 convicts but fewer than 200 of them were female, and the sexes had been kept apart in hulks, prisons or transports for at least a year.

The women had enjoyed solid ground beneath their feet for only an hour when the sweltering summer evening was lit up by a prodigious thunderstorm. Lightning knocked a sentry to the ground and temporarily blinded him; a pig and at least five of the colony's precious sheep were electrocuted. The storm was a manifestation of austral nature at its grandest, and it terrified many of the newly arrived Europeans, who cringed in their cabins or prayed by their bunks.

With authority blinded or cowering under cover, the lower