INCISIVE ACCOUNT

NON-FICTION
FIRST FLEET
SURGEON;
THE VOYAGE OF
ARTHUR BOWES
SMYTH
By David Hill
NLA Publishing
$45

A meticulous record from the First Fleet makes interesting reading, writes JOHN CAPLES.

ARTHUR Bowes Smyth was surgeon on board the Lady Penrhyn, responsible for the well-being of more than 100 convict women and their children.

An observant and concise writer, he began his diary on March 22 1787, the day he arrived in Portsmouth to join the 11-vessel First Fleet for its historic eight-month voyage to Port Jackson.

He had no illusions about the challenge ahead.

Weeks before the fleet sailed he was allocated a newly painted cabin which came available only because the previous occupier had died of a "putrid fever".

He meticulously recorded daily events on the long and eventful journey via South America and South Africa in the tiny, leaky vessel.

There were violent storms, disease, miscarriages and seasickness, but also calm days when he could observe whales and porpoises.

Bowes Smyth also maintained his diary during the first three months of the fledgling, struggling colony and made his last entry on the day he arrived back in England in August 1789.

The original 238-page leather-bound diary was bought by the National Library of Australia in 1974 from the descendants of Sir William Denison, a former Tasmanian governor.

David Hill's edition is beautifully illustrated with sketches, paintings and maps.

It's the sort of high quality tactile product that can never really be matched electronically.

The author, who in a remarkable career has been managing director of the ABC and chairman of the Australian Football Association, was drawn to Bowes Smyth because he too made the voyage from the UK although under rather different conditions as part of the Fairbridge child migrant scheme.

A highly readable history.

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RECORDED: Arthur Bowes Smyth told of the Lady Penrhyn sailing close to giant whales.