

4

William Bligh

(13 August 1806 – 26 January 1808)¹

Anne-Maree Whitaker

William Bligh is undoubtedly the most famous Governor of New South Wales. He is the subject of over 2500 major books and articles, and has been portrayed in three Hollywood feature films as well as several Australian ones. The cause of this fame is not his time in New South Wales, nor even the fact that he was the only Governor in Australian history to be overthrown in a military coup (on 26 January 1808), but the mutiny aboard his ship *Bounty* on 28 April 1789 near Tofua in the South Pacific and his subsequent voyage in an open boat to Timor.

Early life

William Bligh was born on 9 September 1754 at Tinten Manor, St Tudy in Cornwall. His father Francis Bligh was a boatman and land waiter in the customs service at Plymouth, Devon. Francis was descended from a family settled in St Tudy since 1680, five of whose members were mayors of nearby Bodmin in the 16th century. William's mother Jane Pearce (née Balsam) was a widow when she married Francis Bligh.²

A daughter of her first marriage had married John Bond, who was a surgeon in the Navy. In 1762 Bond was serving on HMS *Monmouth* when his seven year old brother-in-law William Bligh was entered on the ship's books as a captain's servant, and paid off the following February. This kind of arrangement was not unusual but does not necessarily mean that the boy went to sea. William Bligh actually joined the Navy aged 15 on 27 July 1770 as an Able Seaman on HMS *Hunter*, rising to Midshipman in February 1771.³

This began his six years of training as a Midshipman, which continued on the 36 gun frigate HMS *Crescent* in the West Indies from September 1771 to August 1774, and then on HMS *Ranger*. His new ship was

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Colonel David Collins, Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land, stated: "I know him now, and shall ever think he merited what befell him, and much more than even suspension, unless that was from the end of a strong halter". Describing Bligh's daughter Mary Putland, Judge Advocate Ellis Bent wrote: "Her temper is as violent as that of her father, and that is more violent than I could have conceived".⁷⁵ Bligh's successor Lachlan Macquarie stated:

Governor Bligh certainly is a most disagreeable person to have any dealings, or public business to transact with, having no regard whatever to his promises or engagements however sacred, and his natural temper is uncommonly harsh, and tyrannical in the extreme.⁷⁶

Bligh's daughter Mary married Lieutenant-Colonel Maurice O'Connell in Sydney in 1810.⁷⁷ The O'Connells served in various colonial outposts over the years and returned to Sydney in 1845 with Sir Maurice as the military commander and Lieutenant-Governor. Lady O'Connell set about tracing her father's long-forgotten land grants received from Governor King in 1806. As well as the modern suburb of Camperdown they included 1000 acres at Rouse Hill and 105 acres in Parramatta. The Parramatta land (in modern terms bounded by Church Street, Victoria Road, O'Connell Street and the Parramatta River) had been extensively developed and included the Female Factory, gaol, King's School and St Patrick's Church.

Despite the fact that Bligh had failed to build on the land, thereby technically nullifying the grants, Governor Gipps wished to avoid protracted court action. A settlement was negotiated whereby the O'Connells dropped the claim to Parramatta but were allowed to keep the Camperdown and Rouse Hill land. Sir Maurice died in 1848 and was the first burial in St Stephen's cemetery, Camperdown, Sydney. His widow died in Paris in 1864.

Bligh had no sons, but another of his six daughters married an eponymous cousin and thereby ensured that some of his descendants retained the surname. Anna Bligh, who became Premier of Queensland in 2007, is descended from this line. Malcolm Bligh Turnbull, who became Federal Opposition Leader in 2008, is descended from a family of Hawkesbury settlers who supported the Governor and bestowed his name on their children over the next 200 years.

Notes

- 1 This chapter also includes the interregnum period under George Johnston (26 January 1808 – 29 July 1808), Joseph Foveaux (30 July 1808 – 9 January 1809) and William Paterson (9 January 1809 – 31 December 1809).
- 2 Kennedy, G, *Captain Bligh: the man and his mutinies*, Duckworth, London, 1989, p 1. Bligh was baptised the month after his birth at Plymouth, but described himself as born in Cornwall.
- 3 Kennedy, pp 1-2.

- 4 Kennedy, pp 2-3, 9.
- 5 Kennedy, pp 4-5.
- 6 O'Brian, P, *Joseph Banks: a life*, Harvill Press, London, 1989, pp 234-8.
- 7 Kennedy, pp 10-11.
- 8 Kennedy, pp 9-13.
- 9 Christian, G, *Fragile Paradise*, Doubleday, Sydney, 1999, pp 65-9.
- 10 Christian, pp 139-40.
- 11 Shaw, AGL, "Bligh, William (1754-1817)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)*, vol 1, MUP, Melbourne, 1966, pp 118-19.
- 12 This aspect is explored in Dening, G, *Mr Bligh's Bad Language: passion, power and theatre on the Bounty*, CUP, Cambridge, 1992.
- 13 "William Bligh", *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15th ed, 1992, vol 2, p 282.
- 14 Christian, p 259.
- 15 Shaw, p 119.
- 16 Shaw, p 119.
- 17 Shaw, pp 119-20.
- 18 Short to Pole, 13 .1.1808, Captain's Letters, ADM 1/2519, National Archives Kew, p 96.
- 19 Cooke to Short, 8.7.1805, Colonial Secretary's Letters, 4/1721, State Records NSW, p 62.
- 20 Short court martials on HMS *Gladiator* at Portsmouth, 10-14.12.1807, ADM 1/5384, National Archives Kew.
- 21 Short to Budge, 22.8.1806, CO 201/45, National Archives Kew, pp 37-40a; Whitaker, A, *Joseph Foveaux: power and patronage in early NSW*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2000, p 220.
- 22 Atkinson, A, *The Europeans in Australia: a history*, vol 1, OUP, Melbourne, 1997, p 281; Mrs King's Journal on the *Buffalo* 1807, King Papers, MLMSS 1973X, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, pp 44-50.
- 23 Fletcher, BH, *Landed Enterprise and Penal Society: a history of farming and grazing in NSW before 1821*, SUP, Sydney, 1976, pp 49-50.
- 24 Fletcher, pp 110-11.
- 25 Ritchie, JD (ed), *A Charge of Mutiny: the Court Martial of Lieutenant-Colonel George Johnston for Deposing Governor William Bligh in the Rebellion of 26 January 1808*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1988, pp 178-9.
- 26 Banks papers, A85, Mitchell Library, pp 3-4, 33-4.
- 27 Atkinson, A, "Taking possession: Sydney's first householders" in Aplin, GJ (ed), *A Difficult Infant: Sydney before Macquarie*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1988, pp 81-2; Atkinson, *Europeans in Australia*, p 278.
- 28 Atkinson, A, "Taking possession", pp 84-7.
- 29 Sarah Wills, 1.5.1808, in Atkinson, *Europeans in Australia*, p 273.
- 30 Bridges, P, *Foundations of Identity: building early Sydney 1788-1822*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1995, pp 48-9.
- 31 Fletcher, pp 112-14.
- 32 For executions from August 1806 to August 1807, see *Sydney Gazette*, 7.9.1806, 21.10.1806, 2.11.1806 and 21.12.1806, and 25.1.1807, 22.2.1807, 5.4.1807 and 5.7.1807.
- 33 Court of Criminal Jurisdiction, 5/1152, State Records NSW, pp 107-8.
- 34 Bench of Magistrates, SZ 769, State Records NSW, pp 145-8, 158-9; and Ritchie, pp 238, 261.
- 35 Court of Criminal Jurisdiction, 5/1149, State Records NSW, pp 386-432.

- 36 Ritchie, pp 238-9, 386; Harris to King, 25.10.1807, *Historical Records of NSW (HRNSW)*, vol 6, p 338.
- 37 Ritchie, p 6; Bligh to Windham, 7.2.1807, *Historical Records of Australia (HRA)*, series i, vol 6, pp 124-5; Macarthur v Campbell junior, 24.10.1807, *HRNSW*, vol 6, p 335.
- 38 Conway, J, "Blaxland, Gregory (1778-1853)", *ADB*, vol 1, pp 115-17; Irving, TH, "Blaxland, John (1769-1845)", *ADB*, vol 1, pp 117-18; *HRA*, series i, vol 1, p 160.
- 39 Hainsworth, DR, "Kable, Henry (1763-1846)", *ADB*, vol 2, 1967, pp 31-2.
- 40 *Morning Chronicle*, 11.11.1807, p 2c.
- 41 Joseph Foveaux's brother Michael married Harriet Ann Short in 1792. She was the great-niece of Captain Short's father, also Joseph Short (1724-76). Whitaker, A, "A Short Story: how new electronic resources solved the mystery of Governor Bligh and Captain Short", *Descent*, vol 39, pt 3, September 2009, pp 104-8.
- 42 E Bligh to Banks, 25.1.1808, Brabourne Papers, A78-5, Mitchell Library, p 37.
- 43 Captain William Kent statement of career, Kent Papers, A3966, Mitchell Library, p 17.
- 44 Coffin to Pole, 13.12.1807, *HRNSW*, vol 6, p 388.
- 45 E Bligh to W Bligh, 15.2.1808, Bligh Papers, Safe 1/45, Mitchell Library, pp 587-8.
- 46 *Morning Chronicle*, 14.11.1807, p 3a.
- 47 Duffy, M, *Man of Honour: John Macarthur: duellist, rebel, founding father*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 2003, pp 279-80; Macarthur to Atkins, 12.9.1796, CO 201/14, National Archives Kew, p 225.
- 48 Duffy, pp 281-4; Ritchie, p 469.
- 49 Duffy, p 284.
- 50 Duffy, pp 284-6; Atkinson, *Europeans in Australia*, p 288.
- 51 Duffy, p 287.
- 52 Duffy, 287-8, 290.
- 53 Duffy, pp 289-91.
- 54 Duffy, pp 291-4.
- 55 Duffy, pp 305-6.
- 56 Roberts, A, *Marine Officer, Convict Wife: the Johnstons of Annandale*, Annandale Urban Research Association, Sydney, 2008, p 91; NSW Commissary's Accounts 1808-1815, AO 1/557, National Archives Kew; Petition of G Johnston to Earl of Liverpool, 10.3.1812, CO 201/62, National Archives Kew, pp 67-70.
- 57 Not to be confused with the office of Colonial Secretary created in 1820.
- 58 Roberts, p 98; Fletcher, pp 50-1.
- 59 Whitaker, *Joseph Foveaux*, pp 103-8.
- 60 Whitaker, *Joseph Foveaux*, pp 110-15.
- 61 Whitaker, *Joseph Foveaux*, pp 114-15.
- 62 Whitaker, A (ed), *Distracted Settlement: NSW after Bligh from the journal of Lieutenant James Finucane, 1808-1810*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 1998, p 84.
- 63 Whitaker, A, "'Primitive construction' or 'Sound and stable?': Joseph Foveaux's public buildings", in *History*, no 75, March 2003, pp 4-6.
- 64 Whitaker, *Joseph Foveaux*, pp 118-20; Foveaux memorandum (c 1811), accession number A 4110, State Records NSW; Fletcher, p 51.
- 65 Whitaker, *Joseph Foveaux*, pp 121-7.
- 66 Whitaker, *Distracted Settlement*, pp 76-9; Currey, J, *David Collins: a colonial life*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2000, pp 272-93.
- 67 Ritchie, pp 5-11, 156-7.

- 68 Ritchie, pp 158-76.
- 69 Johnston to Castlereagh, 11.4.1808, *HRA*, series i, vol 6, p 212.
- 70 *Times*, 5.7.1811, p 2e.
- 71 Ritchie, *Charge of Mutiny*, is a facsimile reprint of the 1811 publication.
- 72 Kennedy, p 304.
- 73 Parsons, G, "The commercialism of honour: early Australian capitalism 1788-1809" in Aplin, *Difficult Infant*, p 103.
- 74 Duffy, pp 7-8; Evatt, HV, *Rum Rebellion: A Study of the Overthrow of Governor Bligh by John Macarthur and the NSW Corps*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1938.
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- 76 Macquarie, L, to Macquarie, C, 10.3.1810, transcript in *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol 16, pt 1, 1930, p 27.
- 77 Her first husband, John Putland, had died of tuberculosis on 4 January 1808.