

## Sir John Northcott

(1 August 1946 – 31 July 1957)

*Chris Cunneen*

The 30th representative of the Crown in New South Wales, John Northcott, was the first Australian to be State or colonial Governor.<sup>1</sup> It was only after extraordinary pressure from the Premier William McKell that King George VI, advised by the British Government, agreed to the selection.

### **Birth and military career**

John Northcott was born on 24 March 1890 at Creswick, Victoria, eldest son of English-born parents: his father, also named John, owned a general store in the nearby town of Dean, his mother was Elizabeth, née Reynolds. Young John was the eldest of four sons and one daughter. Educated at Dean State School and Grenville College, Ballarat, he was a keen member of the school cadets. He was also an enthusiastic horse rider, so in 1908 he enlisted in the Ninth Light Horse Regiment, a militia unit. Deciding on a full time career in the Army he passed the entry examinations and in 1912 joined the Permanent Military Forces as a Lieutenant on the Administrative and Instructional Staff. He was posted to Tasmania. On the outbreak of World War I he transferred to the Australian Imperial Force and in August 1914 was appointed Adjutant of the 12th Battalion, based at Anglesea Barracks, Hobart.<sup>2</sup>

Northcott's service record at this time described the 24 year old as five feet eight and a half inches tall, with a fair complexion and blue eyes. His Battalion left for Egypt in October 1914. On Sunday, 25 April 1915, Northcott was one of the first to land at Anzac Cove, Gallipoli. He was wounded within hours of reaching the beach. His diary records his experience that day:

4.30 a.m. Transferred to Tow boats in breaking dawn (too late) under heavy fire. Col Howley shot in the spine. Lt Sackfille RH shot in head. Towed ashore by Navy pinnace got a bullet thro cap. Cutting away badge.

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Survived by his two daughters, Sir John died on 4 August 1966 in his home at Wahroonga. After a State funeral with military honours, and a service at St Stephen's Presbyterian Church, conducted by his friend and former pastor Gordon Powell, Northcott was cremated. Sir John's portrait, in uniform, painted by HA Hanke, is held at Government House, Sydney.

In 1968 the electorate of Northcott was named after the late Governor. It ceased to exist in 1998. In January 1975 his daughter, Mrs Nash, launched one of the "Lady" class of Sydney ferries, named after prominent NSW women, including Governors' and Lieutenant-Governors' wives. Over 30 years later, the *Lady Northcott*, built in the State Dockyard, Newcastle, remained in service on Sydney Harbour.<sup>64</sup>

In 1995 the NSW Society for Crippled Children, which had been established by the Rotary Club of Sydney in 1929, and of which Sir John had been patron during his term as Governor, was renamed the Northcott Society in his honour.<sup>65</sup> In 2009, as Northcott Disability Services, it continued to support people with a wide range of physical disabilities and to help commemorate Sir John's notable contribution to the public life of Australia and to his adopted State, New South Wales.

## Notes

- 1 He was not the first Australian to represent the Crown in Australia. Sir Isaac Isaacs had been Governor-General from 1930 to 1936: see Cunneen, C, *Kings' Men*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983, pp 173-88. Nor was Northcott the first Australian-born State Governor; Lord Huntingfield, Governor of Victoria from 1934 to 1939, had been born in Queensland, but left at the age of 15: de Serville, PH, "Huntingfield, fifth Baron", *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (ADB), vol 9, MUP, Melbourne, 1983, pp 410-11.
- 2 For biographical details, see Coates, HJ, "Northcott, Sir John", ADB, vol 15, 2000, pp 493-4; and biographical article by Graham Perkin in *The Age*, 4.11.1959, p 13. I am also grateful to Mr Russell Nash and Mrs Nash for their gracious assistance.
- 3 Northcott papers, Box 3, Mitchell Library, Sydney, ML MSS 1431, Mitchell Library, Sydney (hereafter ML).
- 4 Supplement to the *Economic Record*, August 1930, pp 95-121.
- 5 See Heath, AE, and others, *Report of Committee appointed to investigate transport in Great Britain ... 1936*; and Northcott, J, *Report ... on transport investigation in the United States of America and Canada, June 1937*, both published by the Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra, 1937.
- 6 *Smith's Weekly*, 15.8.1942, p 15.
- 7 *Australian Army Journal*, vol 215, April 1967, pp 9-10. For Blamey, see Horner, DM, "Blamey, Sir Thomas Albert", ADB, vol 13, 1993, pp 196-201.
- 8 Reported in *The Age*, 4.11.1959, p 13.
- 9 See Chapter 29, p 520, Note 23.
- 10 For Captain Armstrong (1900-88), see Sears, JS, "Armstrong, John Malet (Jock)", ADB, vol 17, pp 31-2. For negotiations leading to Northcott's appointment, see Cunneen, C, *William John McKell*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2000, pp 171, 175-7.

- 11 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1.4.1946, p 1.
- 12 Despatch to Crewe, 13.8.1908, CO 418/63/35269, AJCP PRO reel 2192. See, too, *The Age*, 23.9.1908, leading article, p 6; and Twomey, A, *The Chameleon Crown*, Federation Press, 2006, pp 29-43.
- 13 *Correspondence relating to the Appointment of Governors of the Australian States*, His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1926 (Cmd 2683) 4-7 and 11-19.
- 14 Cunneen, *Kings' Men*, pp 173-82.
- 15 See Twomey, pp 40-2, 45 for discussion of the Mitchell case; also Bolton, G, "Mitchell, Sir James", *ADB*, vol 10, 1986, pp 530-2. For Sir Charles Gairdner (1898-1983), see Boyce, P, "Gairdner, Sir Charles Henry", *ADB*, vol 17, pp 419-20.
- 16 For Morshead (1889-1959), see Hill, AJ, "Morshead, Sir Leslie James", *ADB*, vol 15, 2000, pp 423-5; and for Lavarack (1885-1957), see Horner, DM, "Lavarack, Sir John Dudley", *ADB*, vol 15, 2000, pp 61-3.
- 17 For Sir James Harrison (1912-71), see Howell, PA, "Harrison, Sir James William", *ADB*, vol 14, 1996, pp 400-1.
- 18 For Sir Stanley Charles Burbury (1909-95) and Gordon Stanley Reid (1923-89) see obituaries in *Australian*, 2.5.1995, p 18, and *Canberra Times*, 28.10.1989, p 6. Though Sir Wallace Kyle (1910-88), who was Governor of Western Australia from 1975 to 1980, was Australian-born, he was a British resident and his career had been in the Royal Air Force. For an excellent summary of the these appointments, and the history of the change from British to Australian citizens as Governors, see Twomey, ch 3, pp 25-55.
- 19 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1.4.1946, p 2.
- 20 Letter from Jordan and reply from Northcott, 11.7.1946, are in Northcott Papers, vol 17, folder of Correspondence 1946 (April-July), on microfilm CY 4175, ff 225-233 and 236, ML MSS 1431, SLNSW.
- 21 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8.4.1936, p 16; *Sun-Herald*, 8.11.1964, p 13.
- 22 Rose, the author of *The Framework of Government in New South Wales*, New South Wales Government Printer, Sydney, 1972, retired in 1975. His successors had briefer but still substantial terms. Richard Neville Alexander Wills served from 1975 to 1986. Alan Edward McKenzie, Official Secretary from 1986 to 1996, was the last to live in the cottage in the grounds of Government House. Brian L Davies served from 1996 to 2009.
- 23 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3.8.1946, p 6.
- 24 For Rhodes scholarship meeting, see *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5.9.1946, p 2.
- 25 *Daily Telegraph*, 1.8.1946, p 10.
- 26 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1.4.1946, p 7.
- 27 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8.6.1950, p 11.
- 28 *Sun-Herald*, 9.6.1957, p 4.
- 29 For 1949 levee, see *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14.6.1949, p 5. Sir Eric Woodward's cessation of such events was reported to me by Sir John's former ADC, Mr Russell Nash.
- 30 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14.6.1949, p 5; 28.10.1949, p 7.
- 31 Information from Mr Russell Nash.
- 32 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28.6.1949, p 3; 18.3.1955, p 2.
- 33 Hogan, M, and Clune, D (eds), *The People's Choice – Electoral Politics in 20th Century New South Wales*, Parliament of NSW and University of Sydney, 2001, vol 2, 1930-65.
- 34 For renovations to Government House in connection with the royal tour, beginning as early as 1948, see Historic Houses Trust of NSW, Government House Sydney Conservation and Management Plan, vol 1, June 1997, pp 207-16.
- 35 Ralph, RC, and others, *Hillview – country home of the governors of New South Wales*, Berrima District Historical Society, 1986, p 26.

- 36 *The Messenger* (Victoria), 5.4.1946, p 475; 19.4.1946, p 495.
- 37 On the first Sunday after he took office Northcott attended divine service at St Andrew's Cathedral, where he was received by Archbishop Mowll: *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5.8.1946, p 2. He continued to attend there occasionally, for example, see *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21.3.1955, p 2.
- 38 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18.9.1957, p 4.
- 39 *Catholic Weekly*, 26.9.1957, p 2.
- 40 *Sun-Herald*, 9.6.1957, p 3.
- 41 Hogan and Clune, p 362.
- 42 Confidential Memorandum CON 40/124/1, Commonwealth Relations Office, dated May 1953, Public Records Office file FCO 68/64 "Government policy on appointment of Australian Governors, 1968-9". Cited by Twomey, A, *The Constitution of New South Wales*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2004, p 621 fn 194. I am grateful to Ken Turner for drawing this important reference to my attention and to Anne Twomey for generously making available a copy of the document.
- 43 Boyce, P, *The Queen's Other Realms*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2008, p 149 and fn 12.
- 44 Details about Northcott's Masonic career are from a paper delivered by J Armfield to the Masonic Historical Society of New South Wales on 26 May 1997, copy held in the Royal Australian Historical Society, Sydney.
- 45 See Chapter 27, pp 501-02.
- 46 *The N.S.W. Freemason*, vol L, no 8, 1.8.1955, p 309.
- 47 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31.7.1957, p 1.
- 48 *Smith's Weekly*, 15.8.1942, p 15.
- 49 "The First Australian Governor", in Historic Houses Trust of NSW, Government House Sydney Conservation and Management Plan, vol 1, June 1997, p 206, citing *Daily Telegraph* and *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1.8.1946.
- 50 *The Age*, 4.11.1959, p 13.
- 51 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6.7.1957, p 4.
- 52 Author's conversation with the late RR Downing.
- 53 Horner, D, *Blamey: the Commander in Chief*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1998, pp 559, 562, 579.
- 54 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2.8.1957, p 1.
- 55 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30.8.1957, p 5; 22.1.1958, pp 1 and 4.
- 56 Unidentified cutting, 19.3.1964, in cutting file, Northcott papers, MSS 1431, vol 47, ML.
- 57 *Sun-Herald*, 27.11.1955, p 13.
- 58 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8.6.1960, p 6.
- 59 *The Age*, 4.11.1959, p 13.
- 60 *Sun-Herald*, 19.6.1960, p 34.
- 61 Unidentified cutting, in cutting file, Northcott papers, MSS 1431, vol 47, f 41, ML.
- 62 *Central Western Daily*, 31.8.1963, and *Richmond River Express*, 2.9.1964, in cutting file, Northcott papers, MSS 1431, vol 47, ML.
- 63 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16.12.1966, p 4.
- 64 The first "Lady" ferry to be launched was the *Lady Cutler* in 1968. She was followed by the *Lady Woodward* and the *Lady McKell*, then two bigger sisters the *Lady Wakehurst* and the *Lady Northcott*, and two similar vessels, the *Lady Street* and the *Lady Herron*. The last of the class was introduced in 1979 (information from ferries of Sydney website).
- 65 Fletcher, BN, *Breaking the Barriers: the Story of the Northcott Society*, Parramatta, 1998.