

## Sir James Anthony Rowland

(20 January 1981 – 19 January 1989)

*Evan Williams*

Like each of the Governors appointed in the half century before him, Sir James Rowland was a man with a distinguished military record – upright, respected, uncontroversial. Premier Neville Wran, who chose him for the job, wanted a military man. He was determined to have nothing do with lawyers or faded British aristocrats when making his first, and only, Viceregal appointment. Six years after the dismissal of the Whitlam Government, Wran was maintaining the rage. He liked to say that there was a good reason for having military men in the Governor’s office: they knew how to take orders.

Nothing in Sir James Rowland’s eight year tenure as Governor suggests that he entertained any ambitions for power or delusions of personal grandeur. Unlike Sir John Kerr, he was not one to ruminate on the powers of the office or chafe at its limitations. Wran chose him on the strength of his character – or more accurately, perhaps, his personality. For Wran he was the “happy Governor” – a “man’s man” in the days before the phrase became unfashionable. He admired his warmth, his friendliness, his dignity, his humour. After a brilliant war-time career he had risen through the ranks of the RAAF to be appointed Chief of the Air Staff by Whitlam’s Defence Minister, Lance Barnard, in 1975. And the public liked him. There was a whiff of excitement, of adventure, about him. “He had piloted just about every plane ever built”, Wran recalled later. “One day he took a group of us up in a Neptune, whizzing us up and down through the valleys and gullies around the Hawkesbury. It was a day to remember”.<sup>1</sup>

But even the safest choice of Governor can set off alarm bells. One of Rowland’s first acts was to replace the Union Jack flying at Government House with the flag of New South Wales. It still bore a Crown and a Union Jack in the corner, but its sudden appearance over the Botanic Gardens ruffled some loyalist feathers. Then, in February 1981, within

This is a preview. Not all pages are shown.

perhaps, Rex Jackson) had a word to say against him. When he died on 27 May 1999, the tributes were many and generous. Wran had chosen well. He wanted a sound and popular Governor, and he got one. James Rowland proved a “safe pair of hands”. That may be the highest compliment a Governor can be paid.

## Notes

- 1 Neville Wran’s recollections of Sir James Rowland are drawn from an interview with the author on 9 February 2009.
- 2 This quotation, and the words attributed to Sir James Rowland in this paragraph, are from an article by Gordon Macgregor in the Sydney *Daily Mirror*, 20.2.1981.
- 3 *Daily Telegraph*, 22.1.1981.
- 4 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20.1.1981.
- 5 *Daily Mirror*, 20.2.1981.
- 6 The author is grateful to Rodney Cavalier for these and other recollections and impressions of Sir James Rowland, conveyed in a conversation on 26 June 2009. See also Rodney Cavalier’s chapter, “The Wran Cabinet”, in Bramston, T (ed), *The Wran Era*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, pp 77-8, for an account of the Rex Jackson incident. The author also records his appreciation of the generous assistance of David Clune of the Parliamentary Library of New South Wales.
- 7 *Daily Mirror*, 20.2.1981.
- 8 *Daily Mirror*, 19.2.1981.
- 9 New South Wales *Parliamentary Debates (NSWPD)*, 1.6.1999.
- 10 *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 4.2.1981, p 10.
- 11 *Daily Telegraph*, 23.11.1988.
- 12 University Legislation (Amendment) Bill 1994. See *NSWPD*, 20.4.1994, pp 1545-6.
- 13 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18.12.1984.
- 14 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27.1.1988.
- 15 Barrie Unsworth provided invaluable assistance in the preparation of this chapter in a conversation with the author, 16 June 2009.
- 16 Cavalier, “The Wran Cabinet”, p 78.