

## EARLY GOVERNORS AND EXPLORERS OF COLONIAL NSW

### and their impact on the settlement of the South Coast

#### Part IV: William Bligh (Governor of NSW, 1806-1808)

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#### Introduction

Most people know of William Bligh as the captain of the *Bounty*, against whom Fletcher Christian organised a famous mutiny before absconding with the ship to settle eventually on Norfolk Island. Five movies of this event have mostly managed to portray Bligh as a cruel taskmaster, and Fletcher Christian as the rescuing hero. History says otherwise.

Having joined the Royal Navy at age 7, William Bligh was chosen to be sailing master by Captain James Cook on his third expedition to the Pacific, aboard *HMS Resolution*, in 1776. When Cook was clubbed to death in the Sandwich Isles (Hawaii), it was the 22 year-old Bligh who took command and managed to escape with minimal loss of life. Commended for his handling of this venture by the Admiralty, Bligh was made commanding lieutenant of *HMS (aka HMAV) Bounty*, in 1787, tasked (by Banks, who was now President of the Royal Society) with sailing to Tahiti to collect breadfruit plants to start a food crop for plantation slaves in the Caribbean, and making a statement to France of Britain's intentions in the Pacific. En route, having to detour around Africa after Cape Horn proved too difficult, Bligh called into Tasmania in the *Bounty* and planted the first apple trees there (Adventure Bay, 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1788), just 7 months after the First Fleet arrived in Port Jackson. He then continued to Tahiti, arriving on 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1788.

#### The mutiny

Having to wait in Tahiti for 5 months, for the breadfruit plants to mature for transportation, the crew got used to the idyllic Polynesian lifestyle and became disgruntled when it was time to leave. Christian, a master's mate who was in charge of the watch as Bligh slept, organised a mutiny on 28<sup>th</sup> April 1789. He set Bligh and 18 crew loyal to him adrift in a small launch, with a week's worth of food and water, a broken quadrant and a compass (but no charts or marine chronometer). *[There were 4 others loyal to Bligh, but the 6-7m boat could not hold them all, and Christian needed them to sail the Bounty; they were left in Tahiti when the Bounty returned there.]* Bligh and the other survivors were attacked by natives in Tofua, where the quartermaster was killed, so (without any guns for defence) they also avoided landing in Fiji. Bligh kept a written log of their almost impossible 47-day, 6 700 km voyage, island-hopping along the Great Barrier Reef to Timor, without further loss of life, thanks to the superb navigational skills he had learned under Cook. Once in Batavia (Jakarta) several of his men died (probably of malaria) as they waited for a ship back to England. In October 1790, Bligh was honourably acquitted for the loss of the *Bounty*. In 1791, he was again sent by Banks to

get breadfruit from Tahiti to the West Indies, this time successfully, in *HMS Providence*, with a young Matthew Flinders on board.

The mutineers, meanwhile, had sailed the *Bounty* to Tubai and tried to settle there, but after 3 months of battling the natives, returned to Tahiti where 12 of the mutineers and the 4 loyal to Bligh stayed. Christian and the 8 other mutineers, together with 6 kidnapped Tahitian men and 11 women and a baby, set out to escape the Royal Navy, passing through the Cook Islands and Fiji to Pitcairn Island, which had been misplaced on navy maps. [*Pitcairn Island had been discovered and charted by Portuguese explorer De Quiros, for Spain, in 1606, and rediscovered and mapped by the British Captain Philip Carteret in 1767, but later voyages found it was not located where mapped*]. After arriving here on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1790, they removed everything they could from the *Bounty*, and, a week later, burned it. Meanwhile, *HMS Pandora* (sent by the Admiralty to find the mutineers and return them for court martial) captured 14 mutineers in Tahiti; but *Pandora* was wrecked on the Barrier Reef on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1791, with the loss of 35 lives, including four of the mutineers. Matthew Flinders, who was at that time in Sydney, was sent north to rescue the survivors.

*[What happened eventually to the mutineers? Fletcher Christian was shot dead on 20th September 1793 (4 years after the mutiny), along with other mutineers, after he denied the Tahitians land on Pitcairn. On 8th June 1856, 67 years after the mutiny, the descendants of the mutineers and Tahitians on Pitcairn were moved to Norfolk Island as Pitcairn was too small for their growing population. The remains of the Bounty were found on Pitcairn Island in 1957.]*

### **Bligh's subsequent naval career**

William Bligh, meanwhile, went on to serve as master and commander of more than ten different ships, serving under Admiral Horatio Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen, in 1801, and earning personal praise from Nelson for the victory there. [*This was the famous incident where Nelson held the telescope to his blind eye, pretending not to notice Admiral Parker's signal to stop the battle. Bligh was commander of HMS Glatton, fighting directly behind Nelson's ship, HMS Elephant. He was the only captain in position to see both Parker's signal flag and Nelson's signal to continue, and he chose to fly Nelson's signal, ensuring all the ships behind him kept attacking, resulting in a British victory*]. He had already performed heroically in defending the English Channel against Napoleon, in 1797, something which also has an Australian connection. Bligh was captain of *HMS Director* in the English Channel, just off the Netherlands which had been taken over by the French who were planning an invasion of England via Ireland. In the Nore Mutiny, the crews of several British ships deserted at this crucial time, so Dutch Vice Admiral Jan De Winter decided to attack England by engaging the British channel fleet under Admiral Adam Duncan, on 11<sup>th</sup> October, 1797. It became a huge naval battle, during which Bligh brought his ship, *Director*, alongside the Dutch flagship, De Winter's *Vrijheid*, boarded and took the vessel, captured De Winter and took his surrender, ending the battle. It was known as the Battle of Camperdown, an anglicised version of the nearby Dutch town of Camperduin. [*It was Bligh's greatest naval triumph, so when he was granted land of 97ha near Sydney in 1806, he named it Camperdown. It later became the site of Camperdown Racecourse and the Prince Alfred Hospital.*]

### **Appointment as Governor of NSW**

It was, of course, Sir Joseph Banks who was the main sponsor of the breadfruit expedition to Tahiti. Banks had been sending botanists, other naturalists, and specially reconstructed ships to NSW for over a decade, to continue the world-esteemed collections he held privately and at Kew Gardens. With his connections to the King, Parliament and the Admiralty, he knew only too well the problems faced by Governors Phillip, Hunter and King in NSW, and of their issues with John Macarthur. Despite being seriously ill, King had to wait two years in NSW to be replaced as governor because Britain could not find anyone prepared to take up the challenge of governing this difficult colony that had just managed to become self-sufficient. Banks recommended William Bligh, with a promised salary of £2 000, double the salary of King. His biggest task would be to curtail the power of the wealthy landowners and businessmen and the officers of the NSW Corps, all of whom were defying government regulations by operating private trading ventures for their own profit. Governor King had weakened their power, but now a head-on collision was needed to finish it. Banks recognised that Bligh had proven his ability as a firm disciplinarian and a capable leader, and so had him appointed, on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1805, as the fourth naval governor of NSW.

William Bligh arrived in Sydney on 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1806, and immediately made it clear to Macarthur that he did not approve of the privileges granted to Macarthur by the Colonial Office (especially the granting to him of government land at Cowpastures, the best pastoral land in the colony) and that the matter of his court-martial was still outstanding. Bligh also checked the documentation concerning Macarthur's refusal to obey an order by Judge-Advocate Richard Atkins, during Hunter's governorship, and the refusal by the NSW Corps to arrest Macarthur for it. Barely a month into his governorship, Bligh seized two stills imported by Macarthur in March 1807, because of government orders against distilling spirits in the colony. Macarthur claimed unlawful seizure of property and accused Bligh of being against free enterprise and liberty. In addition, Macarthur demanded from Atkins repayment of a bill of exchange for £26/6/- drawn up by him a month earlier. He virtually threatened both Atkins and Bligh with public rebellion if a judge should not uphold the law. Bligh countered that, in July 1807, Macarthur was trying to get promissory notes paid in goods (usually spirits) instead of currency as per government orders, so he was not in a position to quote the law.

Matters came to a head in December: ships' captains were required to post a bond to prevent convicts from stowing away and escaping; Macarthur had held the bond of a ship, the *Parramatta*, jointly owned by Macarthur and Garnham Blaxcell, on which a stowaway convict was found. Macarthur said he would forfeit the ship rather than pay the £800 bond and refused to hand it over to the governor. Bligh told Macarthur that he was therefore in contempt of court and had him arrested. At the trial, held on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1808, Macarthur was accused of being "a malicious and seditious man, and of a depraved mind and wicked disposition" and of "deceitfully, wickedly, and maliciously contriving and abetting against William Bligh, Esq., His Majesty's Governor-in-Chief of this territory". It was a charge of sedition. Before the charges could be read in full, Macarthur leapt to his feet and objected to the very presence of Atkins on the bench, citing six objections, including his outstanding debt to Macarthur! Atkins shouted him down, but the other six "judges" were officers of the NSW Corps, in business and league with Macarthur, and they refused to commit Macarthur. Atkins flew from the courtroom, declaring that without him the hearing could not continue. The NSW Corps officers demanded that Governor Bligh appoint a replacement for Atkins. Bligh refused. The Corps officers then claimed Macarthur was being held by them in protective

custody as he feared for his life. Bligh summoned the Lieutenant-Governor and Corps commandant, Major George Johnston, who refused to come, claiming ill-health. Bligh issued an escape warrant against Macarthur. Next day, January 26<sup>th</sup>, Provost-Marshal William Gore was ordered by Bligh to arrest Macarthur, but at 3 pm Corps officers assembled to charge Gore with illegal arrest. Bligh countered with a claim against the officers of illegal usurpation of judicial powers calculated to incite rebellion. Major Johnston, now miraculously recovered from his illness, signed an order for Macarthur's release went to the barracks (now Wynyard Park) where he was joined by Macarthur ready to march on Government House (on the site of the current Australian Museum). These events set in train what became known as the Rum Rebellion.

### **The Rum Rebellion**

This so-called Rum Rebellion was now the second mutiny Bligh had had to face. On 26th January (20 years to the day of the founding of the colony), Johnston marched on Government House with Macarthur, 400 soldiers, and hundreds of spectators following. He then arrested the governor and took command. *[Johnston claimed to have a petition from 151 signatories demanding the removal of Bligh, but it was written on the day of the arrest and more than half the signatures were gathered in the following days. Soon after, Australia's first political cartoon was drawn – a watercolour showing a soldier dragging Bligh out from under a bed in Government House. It is meant to show Bligh as a coward by lampooning him, but, as Bligh explained later, he was not even under a bed but was hiding papers he didn't want them to get hold of. The original cartoon, by an unknown person, was drawn on a thin sheet of paper designed to be placed against window glass and illuminated from behind].* Johnston had Bligh placed under house arrest, took over his powers as governor, declared martial law and sacked Bligh's key public servants, including Judge-Advocate Atkins. Johnston and Macarthur allowed rum to once more become the key staple of the colony. In February, under Johnston's administration, Macarthur was made both a magistrate and Colonial Secretary. But, within 3 months, they were bickering among themselves in power struggles, and Macarthur could not control Johnston and the NSW Corps. On 20<sup>th</sup> October 1808, Viscount Castlereagh, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, announced that the NSW Corps needed to be replaced as soon as possible, due to its part in the rebellious act against the appointed governor of the colony.

### **Foveaux and Paterson step in**

It was clear that, in the interim, Johnston could not properly administer the colony, so London ordered Lieutenant-Colonel Joseph Foveaux (who had had previous experience as lieutenant-governor of NSW and Norfolk Island) to assume control of NSW from Johnston; but he lasted in the role for only 6 months before sailing for England with his account of the Rum Rebellion, in which he was critical of both Johnston and Bligh. William Paterson, now also a lieutenant-colonel, once more stepped in as lieutenant-governor of NSW. *[He had been in charge of a new settlement (on the present site of Launceston) in Van Diemen's Land, under King's governorship, since 1806].* Paterson refused to meet with Bligh but decided to let him sail back to England, on condition that he proceed there directly. Bligh accepted the offer and was given command of *HMS Porpoise*, on 7<sup>th</sup> March

1809. However, once aboard, he announced that he was not obliged to keep a promise made to a rebel government and, instead, sailed for Hobart. Here, he hoped to get the support of Lieutenant-Governor, Colonel Collins, but Collins refused to let him ashore. So, Bligh sailed to a bay at the mouth of the Derwent where he intercepted food from English ships. Collins wasn't sure who was actually in charge of NSW [*Tasmania was still part of the colony of NSW at this time*], so it was something of a stand-off, but Collins finally allowed Bligh to reside in a government-owned house.

Nine months later, in December 1809, Bligh received news that Lachlan Macquarie was being sent to Sydney to become the new governor, along with his own regiment to replace the NSW Corps, so on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1810, Bligh sailed for Sydney to make his case to Macquarie. Here, two years after the rebellion, Bligh received a letter advising him that the British Foreign Office had declared the rebellion to be a mutiny and, therefore, illegal. Macquarie freed Bligh's supporters from gaol and restored them to their official positions. He then sent both Macarthur and Johnston back to England to face court-martial, and Bligh back on a separate ship, to give his account of the rebellion. The court-martial exonerated Bligh and found that Macarthur's and Johnston's evidence was incorrect and corrupted by self-interest. So, in 1812, Macarthur was banned from returning to Australia for eight years; Johnston, likewise, was discharged from the army, and the NSW Corps was ordered back to London. The loser of the rebellion (Bligh) had won, and the victors (Macarthur and Johnston) were vanquished.

### **Bligh's legacy**

It is easy, amongst the turmoil of all this, to lose sight of Bligh's achievements in his brief time (17 months) as governor. Although he never relied on popularity, he had many supporters, especially among the less wealthy settlers. In 1807, over 800 people, including some of the most prominent citizens of the colony, signed a document praising him for his outstanding achievements. Hundreds of Hawkesbury River farmers moved formal votes of gratitude for his expert advice on agriculture and his assistance to them after floods. He was generous in his assistance to the newly arrived and less wealthy settlers in the colony, offering not only his assistance as governor, but also his expertise in plants, to get them started. It is a tribute to the respect in which he was held by these settlers that so many of them named their sons after him. One, born 8<sup>th</sup> June 1809 at Windsor, was William Bligh Turnbull, an ancestor of Malcolm Bligh Turnbull, our current prime minister.

William Bligh was a strict disciplinarian, but not the sadistic monster he has often been made out to be. As a captain, he used the lash frequently, but less than Cook did; his strict insistence on good hygiene was detested by his crew but helped considerably in the survival of the *Bounty* loyalists; and on Tahiti, before the mutiny, Bligh had allowed the crew great liberty in their relations with the natives. Had he not accepted the post of Governor of NSW, Captain Bligh would probably have been with Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805; instead, he is remembered by most as the victim of two "mutinies" in the Pacific. Back in England, he continued his naval career, being made rear admiral in 1811, and vice admiral in 1814. He died at the age of 63 in 1817. His gravestone contains a sculpture of a breadfruit plant, and no mention of the mutinies. Perhaps that is as it should be.

In 1987, a statue of Bligh was erected in Bligh Reserve, George St, Sydney. A long inscription on the back details his life and career, and ends with these words: "Over the years writers have built

misleading legends about Bligh. He was a severe disciplinarian, but never cruel. He was brave and honest, but unfortunate in his subordinates. This monument seeks to restore the proper image of a much maligned and gallant man". #

## References

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