

The Pioneer



1913 coloured print of the Bowman Flag, main panel [APC collection].
Photo by David Miller.

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The Pioneer

This issue publishes the text of two excellent lunchtime addresses given to the Club in the second half of the year. Both looked at threats to the nascent New South Wales colony, but from separate agencies: starvation and invasion. At the Dunbar Lunch in August Louise Anemaat took us back to an early maritime disaster for the struggling settlement, the loss of the provisioning ship *Guardian* in December 1789 following an encounter with an iceberg. Then in October, Lieutenant Commander Desmond Woods, RAN, put in context the significance of Nelson's triumph off Cape Trafalgar in 1805 which snuffed out Napoleon's predatory ambitions for settlements in the South Seas. As an encore, Donna Balson, accompanied by Robert Greene on the piano (both from Opera Australia) reinforced the message with a rousing rendition of *Rule, Britannia!* Sadly, Rule Corona constrained those present from enthusiastically participating in the chorus.

Also on show at the Trafalgar Lunch was a replica of a contemporaneous colonial tribute to Trafalgar: the Bowman Flag, as it has come to be known ... but not known enough as an artefact in Australian history and heraldry.

John Bowman (1763-1825), a Scottish-born carpenter with experience in construction of corn mills, was recommended by Sir Joseph Banks for a passage to NSW, "found ... to be victualled by Government during the voyage; on arrival to have the grant of one hundred acres of land; ... to be victualled and clothed [sic] from the public stores for the term of twelve months ... and to be allowed the labour of two convicts for the same term."¹ He arrived with his wife Honor (1759-1826) and son George (aged three) on 18 May 1798 aboard the vessel *Barwell*. On 8 April 1799 Governor Hunter granted him 100 acres on the Richmond Lowlands south of the Hawkesbury River, about four kilometres below the Richmond

Bridge near what is now Freeman's Reach, but what was then the granary of the settlement.² He named his holding *Archerfield*. Bowman identified himself with the cause of free settlers on the Hawkesbury who opposed the monopolistic practices of the New South Wales Corps. They persisted in their support of the deposed Governor Bligh after the so-called Rum Rebellion of 1808 and 14 of them, including Bowman, sent a memorandum in 1809 to Viscount Castlereagh, the Colonial Secretary in England, putting their case against the military faction and eschewing any involvement in the coup.

But back two years to the aftermath of Trafalgar. On 11 April 1806 the convict transport *William Pitt* arrived in Sydney, bringing reliable intelligence of Nelson's triumph which it had picked up in transit via the Cape of Good Hope. The news was quickly conveyed to the colonial authorities and the 13 April 1806 issue of the *Sydney Gazette* printed a public announcement [left] wherein Governor King declared Sunday 20 April 1806 to be a Day of General Thanksgiving for "the Mercy and Goodness shown to our most Gracious Sovereign and his Dominions."

ALMIGHTY God having blessed one of His Majesty's Fleets, (under the Command of the much lamented and renowned LORD NELSON of the Nile, who with several distinguished Officers & brave Men were slain in the arms of Victory), the signal and decisive Defeat of a French and Spanish combined Fleet greatly superior in number and force, His Excellency the GOVERNOR directs that Sunday next, the 20th instant, be observed as a Day of General Thanksgiving, for the Mercy and Goodness shewn to our most Gracious SOVEREIGN and his Dominions.

The Rev. Mr. Marsden will perform Divine Service at Sydney, in the front of Government House, at ten o'clock ;

The Rev. Mr. Fulton at the Church at Parramatta ;

Mr. Crook, Missionary, at Castle hill,

And Mr. Harris, Missionary, at the Green-hills, Hawkesbury.

At which places all persons not prevented by sickness or the necessary care of their dwellings are expected to attend.

By Command of His Excellency,

G. Blaxland, Sec.

Government House, Sydney,

April 13, 1806.

The Reverend Samuel Marsden would celebrate Divine Service at Government House, with services also to be conducted at Parramatta, Castle Hill and Green Hills (the Hawkesbury), whereat "all persons not prevented by sickness or the necessary care of their dwellings are expected to attend." The back page of the *Gazette* reprinted a report from the *Cape Extraordinary Gazette* of 26 January 1806, including "Nelson's Tellegraph [sic] signal issued previous to the action ... ENGLAND EXPECTS EVERY MAN WILL DO HIS DUTY."

At *Archerfield* the Bowmans, having attended the Thanksgiving Service at Green Hills, hoisted a 220cm by 91cm silk flag with swallow-tail fly ... by family tradition, cut from Honor Bowman's wedding dress. On it were

hand-painted in oils (whether by Honor Bowman or a professional sign writer is uncertain) a shield surmounted by the word UNITY and incorporating a rose, a thistle and a shamrock, emblems of England, Scotland and Ireland, the Union of which had been consummated just five years earlier (thereby completing the present form of the Union Flag ... or Jack ... with the incorporation of the red saltire of St Patrick). Beneath the shield was a ribbon reproducing Nelson's signal and supporting it were an emu and a kangaroo ... the earliest rendition of native fauna as part of an Australian coat of arms, which were finally granted by King Edward VII in 1908 but reversing the positions of the kangaroo and emu.



Main panel of the flag photographed at Richmond Public School in 1908 –
[from original glass plate negative, courtesy NSW State Archives]

Believed to be the earliest flag designed in Australia,³ it remained with the Bowman family until the centenary of the Battle of Trafalgar in October 1905. In November that year, after the death of Leslie Bowman (last great-grandson of John Bowman),

it was given to the Richmond Superior Public School, where Edward Campbell, a solicitor related to the Bowman family by marriage, would later find it nailed to the back of a cupboard door. After cleaning, restoring and framing, it was hung in the Assembly Hall of the school and officially unveiled by the Honourable Joseph Cook, MHR, at a ceremony marking Empire Day in May 1908.⁴ There it remained until 1916, when it was transferred to the care of the Mitchell Library and placed on public view in the Picture Gallery. In the 1970s it underwent extensive cleaning and conservation and is now only periodically on display.



The flag being mounted for display to mark the 2005 bi-centenary of Trafalgar

By the centenary of John Bowman's arrival in the colony his descendants had justified Sir Joseph Banks's recommendation of him as a suitable settler to have a free passage to the new colony. Two of his sons, George (1795-1878) and William (1799-1874), served as members of the first Legislative Council and later of the Legislative Assembly. One grandson, Alexander (1838-1892), was also member for Hawkesbury of the Legislative Assembly⁵ and two others, William and Edward, were mayors of Muswellbrook for many terms.⁶ George Bowman was a benefactor of John Dunmore Lang's Australian College and, as the "Father of Richmond," built at his own cost the town's Presbyterian Church with its handsome clock

tower.⁷ In the 1840s William Bowman built *Toxana*, a two storey regency town house, now-heritage listed, in Richmond's main street, which served as the original student premises of Hawkesbury Agricultural College from 1891-96.

Succeeding generations of Bowmans established pastoral stations at (a new) Archerfield, Arrowfield, Skellator, Balmoral, Gyarran and Grampian Hills in the Hunter Valley, Maidenhead in New England and Terry-Hie-Hie in the north-west. In their *History of the Australasian Pioneers' Club 1910-1988* Lark and Mackenzie list 19 of John Bowman's descendants who have been members, including four from the Club's founding year. The Club holds a portrait of George Bowman among the Herbert Beecroft collection and a framed colour print of the Bowman Flag, presented in 1913 by Arthur Bowman, one of the 86 original members.

The Bowman Flag has been described as "a remarkable artefact on many levels. As an expression of local patriotic fervour merging colonial and international content, its conceptualisation and execution in a remote farming community ... is hard to conceive. Given its fragile fabric, flaking paint and ephemeral nature, the flag's two hundred year survival is even harder to believe. Yet its naïve imagery has the symbolic power to resonate with us to this day."⁸

John Lanser

- 1 Bowman, E S: *John and Honor Bowman of Richmond, New South Wales, and their Family*, Archer Press, Singleton NSW, 1999, page 6.
- 2 Jack, Ian: *Exploring the Hawkesbury*, Kangaroo Press 1990, page 142.
- 3 Cayley, Frank: *Flag of Stars*, 1966.
- 4 Riley, Margot: *The Bowman family's Trafalgar flag: symbol of patriotism or Australian Nelsoniana?* in *Australiana*, August 2005; *An Interesting Flag*, Sydney Morning Herald, 22 May 1908, page 6.
- 5 *Windsor & Richmond Gazette*, 16 July 1892, page 5.
- 6 Australian Dictionary of Biography, volume 3, (MUP), 1969.
- 7 Bowman, Alexander (1838–1892), Obituaries Australia, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/bowman-alexander-3325/text26563>; also *Windsor & Richmond Gazette*, 7 January 1899, page 9.
- 8 Riley, Margot, *op.cit.*

The wrecking of HMS *Guardian*

This is the text of the address to the annual Dunbar Lunch by Louise Anemaat, Executive Director, Library and Information Services and Dixon Librarian, State Library of NSW and author of *Natural Curiosity: Unseen Art of the First Fleet* (2014).

In early 1790, Watkin Tench, officer of the Marines with the First Fleet, lamented that after two years in the colony and nearly three years since leaving England they had heard nothing from home and ‘felt entirely cut off from the rest of the world’. Feeling the effects of famine and isolation, ‘gloom and dejection overspread every countenance’.

The eleven ships of what has come to be known as the First Fleet had left England in May 1787 and on their arrival at Sydney Cove in January 1788 were already facing shortages. The livestock had suffered during the voyage and in NSW the cattle escaped into the bush where their progeny remained undiscovered until 1795, grazing in the Camden area of western Sydney still known as Cowpastures. Seed bought at the Cape of Good Hope germinated en route and was useless on arrival, the soil seemed infertile, and the crops they sowed failed in the summer heat or were washed away in Sydney’s violent storms.

The colony was divided from the outset between those optimistic about its future and those who thought the whole undertaking was madness. The feeling of abandonment took hold as the months passed with no sign of ships from home. For chaplain Reverend Richard Johnson it was excruciating. It was as if they had been ‘buried alive’, as if they had disappeared off the edge of the world. The experience of those first years, regardless of rank or station, was a unique form of isolation.¹

When news reached Sydney in June 1790 with the Second Fleet’s *Lady Juliana* that a special supply ship destined for the colony, HMS *Guardian*, had been lost at sea, it was bitter sweet. The very existence of the *Guardian* proved the colony had not been forgotten as they had feared, but the knowledge that the ship, its cargo and crew, and the opportunity to connect with the outside world were lost to them, was a devastatingly cruel blow.

Australia knows little of HMS *Guardian* or its young commander, Lieutenant Edward Riou. As a 16-year-old Midshipman, Riou had sailed on James Cook's third Pacific voyage in 1776, along with William Bligh, and died a hero in the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801. In between, in command of the *Guardian*, en route to the starving colony at Sydney Cove in 1789, he survived a dramatic shipwreck at sea.

Four primary sources recreate the story, written at the time or shortly after, all held in the Mitchell Library: the original logbook Riou was required to keep on board the *Guardian*; his manuscript narrative of the voyage; a memoir written by Riou's niece, Charlotte Benson; and an anonymous pamphlet published in 1791, *The Melancholy Disaster of His Majesty's Ship Guardian*.

In September 1789 the *Guardian* sailed from England but never reached its destination.

Loaded with cargo specifically and urgently requested by Governor Arthur Phillip in his dispatches to the Admiralty, the *Guardian* carried food, seeds, livestock, farming tools and equipment, medical supplies and other staples and a large garden of trees, medicinal plants, herbs and seedlings mostly from the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew, and was fitted with a special plant cabin designed by Sir Joseph Banks to protect the more fragile plants. They also carried personal items for the officers and marines who had sailed with the First Fleet, along with 25 convicts and seven superintendents, all specially chosen for their agricultural and horticultural skills and expertise, precisely those things Phillip had requested from the Admiralty.

Riou was the only commissioned officer on board, along with three warrant officers - a boatswain, master and purser - and a crew of 96 sailors. A chaplain, Reverend Crowther, was to assist Reverend Johnson, and a little girl, Elizabeth, about 10 years old, travelled with her German father, Philip Schaeffer, a farmer who was to be a superintendent of convicts.



Portrait of Midshipman Edward Riou
at 16, 1776 / by Daniel Gardner ML 1263

The equipping of the *Guardian* cost an extraordinary £70,000. The cost of outfitting the entire First Fleet has been estimated at £84,000.

The *Guardian* sailed on 8 September 1789 via Teneriffe and moored at the Cape of Good Hope on 23 November after an uneventful voyage. Here Riou took on further provisions including two stallions, five mares, two bulls, 16 cows, sheep, pigs, rabbits and poultry. He was presented with two deer, a buck and doe, by the Commander in Chief of Dutch Forces. In addition to the plants brought from England, more were purchased at Cape Town including over 150 trees, plants and shrubs.

Almost three weeks later they departed for Sydney intending to sail via Van Diemen's Land 'with the pleasing idea of the Consequence we should be to Governor Phillip and his Infant Colony'. The voyage continued unremarkably during the next couple of weeks.

On 21 December and again three days later Riou noted seeing an iceberg, further north than icebergs are usually expected. According to his logbook, judging conditions to be favourable enough to sail closer to the icebergs, he made the decision to collect floating slabs of ice to supplement the ship's supply of fresh water. The livestock and plants onboard needed huge amounts of fresh water and Riou reasoned that if he could replenish his supplies of water now, he might not need to stop at Van Diemen's Land but could proceed directly to Sydney Cove.

It was fairly standard practice at sea to gather ice for fresh water. The Library's collection holds drawings from Cook's second voyage of his men doing exactly that, clambering over icebergs in Antarctic waters, chipping off pieces of ice to be loaded onto the ships. But it was certainly not without risk.

Half an hour after the ship's cutter and jolly boat had been lowered, conditions suddenly changed. A heavy fog shrouded the *Guardian* alongside an iceberg twice as high as the masthead. As the fog closed in the boats were ordered back to the ship. As if in slow motion, Riou then describes the ship being pushed alongside the iceberg and 'into a vast Cavern which appeared to be high & large enough to devour [the ship] entirely'. Heaved in high seas against the mountain of ice, the *Guardian* struck the iceberg once, then twice. The whole ship shook.²

Riou recorded the moment in his logbook:

Judging from the distance to the Ice that I should every instance see [and] feel the first Effects of our dissolution. In this situation we were for about



Part of the Crew of his His Majesty's Ship *Guardian* endeavouring to escape in the Boats, 1790 / Robert Dodd

a Minute when the Expected Shock came which though it made the whole frame of the Ship tremble was so unexpectedly favourable (as I had little hopes of her surviving after the first instant She Struck) ...³

The men were terrified, Riou remained calm. The impact seemed not so severe as expected but worse was to come. A large piece of ice, protruding unseen off the iceberg below water level, had smashed the tiller and torn the rudder off. The crashing of the ship, pushed along the submerged ice, continued for some time until she was finally pushed off the iceberg and gradually moved away.

The ship, while not smashed to pieces as expected, was badly holed. The iceberg had left a vast gash in its side. Water poured into the heavily laden ship, already sitting very low in the water. The water increased steadily despite four pumps being manned and so began an appalling night, with high seas and a gale blowing up.

Sometime after midnight the anchors were cut and livestock, guns and cargo were thrown overboard to lighten the load. The crew now worked desperately through the night pumping water out of the hold. By daylight the sails had been torn to

shreds by high winds. Despite the constant pumping, 6-7 feet of water filled the hold. More cargo was thrown overboard and in moving a cask of flour, Riou jammed and badly injured his left hand.

On Christmas morning Clements, the Master, and a sailmaker prepared a sail, impregnated with hemp and oakum, to fother the ship by attempting to plug the hole by running the sail under the hull of the ship, a technique that had saved the *Endeavour* when it had struck the Great Barrier Reef in 1770. Their attempt was unsuccessful and with all efforts to save the ship failing, some members of the crew agitated to abandon ship in the *Guardian*'s boats.

Some hours earlier, Riou had privately declared to his officers that he believed the loss of the ship was inevitable, and he regretted the loss of so many brave men. Acknowledging that 'little chance was left of safety', Riou gave his crew, and Clements, permission to abandon ship believing that only a boat with Clements on board had any chance of survival.⁴

And so began the painful process of deciding whether to stay or abandon ship. On deck the boats were hoisted: the launch, small cutter, large cutter and the jolly boat. The men dressed as warmly as possible – Riou even saw his own clothes flying around on deck. Roughly half of the *Guardian*'s company, around 50 men, chose to leave.

'The agitation of the mind, on this melancholy occasion, may be better imagined than described', stated the account of one who opted to flee: 'never did the human mind struggle under greater difficulties than we experienced in being obliged to leave so many behind, in all probability to perish.'⁵

An argument ensued between two men lowering one of the boats, causing it to fall and become swamped by sea. One of the officers, drunk, drowned the surgeon. Another man was lost overboard, at least 20 had jumped overboard trying to get to the boats and were picked out of the water as the *Guardian* moved off.

Some boats carried only a few men, others were completely overloaded. Some carried no provisions, nothing to eat or drink. Riou, choosing not to abandon ship, held out little hope for their survival and fully expected he too would perish with those who had remained. He had entrusted to Clements a letter to the Admiralty: 'There seems to be no possibility of my remaining many hours in this world', he wrote, asking the Admiralty to consider his sister and widowed mother and

recommending his officers whose conduct, he wrote, ‘was admirable and entirely wonderful in every thing that relates to their duty.’⁶

Through all this Riou continued to keep his daily logbook though at times the entries were barely legible. The constant pumping seemed to the men to be doing no good, the water continued to rise in the hold. Those remaining on board, some because there had not been enough room on the boats, were convinced by Riou to keep pumping. They included the Midshipmen Thomas Pitt, later Lord Camelford, and John Gore, the Master’s mate who had also sailed on Cook’s third voyage along with the young Riou, and the 21 convicts and their three superintendents including Philipp Shaeffer and his 10 year old daughter, Elizabeth.

Riou’s log continued during the next 53 days though he would have had little time to spare to write it – Riou was also pumping and bailing. He recorded another unsuccessful attempt to fother the ship and stem the leak, the rise and fall of the water level, drunkenness and simmering mutiny, the fights that broke out between men and attempts to keep them away from alcohol in their despair. A rudimentary rudder gave Riou some control of the ship’s course during calmer weather. The growing unrest led some men to attempt to make a raft and even to threaten Riou’s life. There was the hope that they might see ships of the Second Fleet.

Late in January 1790, more than five weeks after the wrecking, one of the crew ignored Riou’s orders to trim the topsail. Riou threatened, the man became violent. Riou attempted to strike the man but broke his own hand when it struck the arm of a second crew member who interceded to protect the first. Riou could no longer man the pumps and now wrote his log with his left hand. His mental and physical deterioration and despair are evident in the rough scrawling of single words: ‘Lying’, ‘Losing’, ‘see land’. His entries, barely legible, continued to record events as accurately as possible, fully aware he would be court martialled for the loss of his ship if he did survive.

Then, miraculously, after two months of continuous pumping, in late February they came within sight of Cape Town where they spent the first night outside the harbour, hoisting their pendant and continuing to pump. The next day, after difficulties getting into harbour in the crippled ship, Riou ran the *Guardian* aground onto the beach at Table Bay. The local harbour master came on board asking what ship it was and where she came from. Riou in his memoir recorded: ‘I merely answered the *Guardian*. He lifted his eyes and immediately went on shore without saying a word more.’

Even now, pumping continued until the Governor sent men to take over sending Riou's men ashore. Then, on 23 February, John Fryer, the Master of the ill-fated *Bounty*, came on board. Fryer and others from the *Bounty* had reached the Cape of Good Hope from Batavia after surviving the spectacular open boat voyage with William Bligh following the mutiny on 28 April 1789. Bligh had returned to England from Batavia.

Like Bligh following the mutiny, Riou's disastrous 1789 expedition ended with a remarkable feat of seamanship, leadership and courage along with some luck. Just as Bligh, left for dead with eighteen others, maintained his authority and sailed an open boat nearly 6,000 kilometres to safety, Riou kept the *Guardian*'s remaining crew in line and the stricken vessel afloat for two months until they limped back to the Cape of Good Hope where Riou was determined to refit and restock the *Guardian* and continue on to NSW, knowing how important it was for the colony. Then, on 12 April 1790, the *Guardian* was finally broken to pieces, destroyed by a violent gale.

Riou waited at the Cape of Good Hope for further orders from the Admiralty, sending whatever supplies and stores he could to Sydney Cove via ships of the Second Fleet. In April 1791 he finally arrived back in England, a hero.

Of the four boats that had left the ship shortly after the disaster, only one was ever seen again. As anticipated by Riou, only the boat carrying Clements survived. Rescued by a returning French merchantman, en route to France from Mauritius via the Cape of Good Hope, the crew of the *Viscontess Britannie* gave Clements and his men every assistance and took them back to the Cape of Good Hope in late January, ahead of Riou.

Clements returned to England carrying Riou's letter and taking news of the apparent loss of the *Guardian* with all hands. Months later, news of their survival reached England and took the country by storm. Riou's letter, delivered to the Admiralty by Clements, which included the recommendation of his officers, was even thought to have been a forgery.

After the story of the *Guardian* became known, several artists re-created the unfolding disaster. Robert Dighton shows the *Guardian*, surrounded by islands of ice, and the departure of the jolly boat though at this point they were no longer in proximity of icebergs. Riou is shown on board with two of his officers, comforting one, while the other pleads with him, probably to abandon ship and join the boat.

The men already in the boat seem also to beg him to join them. A live sheep and a hog, and boxes of stores are scattered on deck. The rigging is hung with ice.

Robert Dodd, known for his images of ships, dockyards, naval battles and marine scenes and highly regarded for his accuracy in painting details of ships such as sails and rigging, was one of many printmakers who capitalised on Britain's appetite for rollicking, rousing tales of the ocean, exploration and voyaging, sea battles and maritime terror and glory. Dodd was known for his dramatic depictions of maritime incidents including the moment William Bligh was cast adrift in the Pacific by the mutinous *Bounty* crew.

His desperate image of the *Guardian* as the ship foundered is laden with doom and foreboding, emphasised by excerpts from Riou's letter to the Admiralty in which he anticipated there would be 'no Possibility of my remaining many hours in this world'⁷ and seems equally designed to invoke feelings of pride and patriotism in Britain's heroic seamen such as Riou and Bligh.

Court martialled, honourably acquitted and publicly thanked, Riou was promoted to Commander and Post Captain. He wrote to the Admiralty asking for recognition of the *Guardian*'s men, exonerating Clements from any blame or criticism for leaving the ship and recommending Fryer of the *Bounty*. He asked for clemency for the convicts who had remained on board the *Guardian*. Together with their superintendents, the convicts continued to Sydney Cove on board ships of the Second Fleet, carrying the news of the loss of the *Guardian*.

In Sydney Cove the convicts received conditional pardons. German born superintendent, Philip Shaeffer, established himself as a farmer on a land grant at Parramatta named the Vineyard, with his young daughter who also survived the ordeal at sea. Schaeffer farmed various crops including vines for viticulture. He later married, continued farming, received a further grant at Narrabeen, but in old age died in poverty at the Benevolent Asylum. It is not known what became of Elizabeth, his daughter.

The impact that the arrival of the *Guardian* would have had on the seemingly forgotten colony at Sydney Cove can only be guessed at. Once news reached the colony Governor Arthur Phillip's sense of loss was acute: 'The loss of the *Guardian* ... is almost fatal to the Colony ... & I assure you that we are far from being at this time, where we should have been at the end of the second year if the *Guardian* had arrived.'⁸



The monument to Edward Riou in St Paul's Cathedral

Riou survived the dramatic wrecking of the *Guardian* in 1789 but died in 1801 during the Battle of Copenhagen, made famous by Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson's ignoring Sir Hyde Parker's command to cease fire and withdraw by raising his telescope to his blind eye. Riou, who obeyed the order, was cut in two by a cannon ball. A monument to his bravery stands in London's St Paul's Cathedral.

Nelson, who had not met Riou before the Battle of Copenhagen, quickly came to value him, and wrote of him as 'the gallant and good Riou' and '*In poor Riou the country has sustained an irreparable loss*'. And from the Admiralty: 'Except it had been Nelson himself, the British Navy could not have suffered a severer loss'.⁹

Now almost forgotten, Riou's heroism on the *Guardian* is part of the foundation story of Australia. The loss of the *Guardian* was the most traumatic event to befall the colony in its early years. The significance of the *Guardian*, an expedition that failed to reach its destination, cannot be overstated. Such a deliberately and expensively fitted out expedition gives credence to the idea that the convict colony was not just a dumping ground for Britain's convicts but that for Britain, the colony at Sydney Cove also held strategic possibilities.

- 1 Johnson, R. to Fricker, 9 April 1790. ML Safe 1/121
- 2 Riou, E., Logbook of HMS *Guardian*, p. 16
- 3 *ibid*, p. 17
- 4 *ibid*, p. 30
- 5 Anonymous, in *Chronicles of the sea: or, Faithful narratives of shipwrecks, fires, famines*, 10 Feb. 1838, no. 7 p. 51
- 6 Riou to Admiralty, 25 Dec. 1789
- 7 *ibid*
- 8 Phillip, A. to Banks, J., 24 March 1791. Banks Papers, Series 37.14
- 9 Quoted in Becke, L, *The gallant, good Riou*, (London, 1901)

TRAFALGAR – The Most Significant Battle in Australia's Nineteenth Century History

**Address by Lieutenant Commander Desmond Woods, RAN ,
to the Trafalgar Day Lunch, 20 October 2020.**

Why does Nelson's victory at Trafalgar in 1805 matter and why is it a part of Australia's history?

It is widely recognised that Nelson's victory at sea defeated any attempt by Bonaparte to invade southern England in 1805, which he had hoped to achieve in order to remove his most irreconcilable enemy. Whether he would have succeeded in any attempt to do so is open to serious doubt.

A decade later in 1815, when final victory on land was achieved at Waterloo, after millions had died in battle and from famine and disease caused by Napoleon Bonaparte's war, it was widely recognised that it was British maritime power which had prevented Bonaparte from achieving victory in Europe and an expanded French global Empire.

It was that major victory at sea which then made possible and fuelled the expansion of British trade and migration for the next century. Sea power was the means by which the settler empire in Australasia was established, consolidated and expanded without risk from a competing European power.

But we really need to commence in 1788, the year before the French revolution, to understand the relevance of Trafalgar to the story of Australia. We need to remember that the decision to send a First Fleet to Botany Bay, as proposed by

Joseph Banks, was the boldest strategic experiment in trans-oceanic migration in the history of European seafaring. It was also a deliberate strategic move into the contested area of the South West Pacific. Louis XVI, King of France, was very interested in the possibilities of a French future in the Pacific and he sent a scientific expedition under the Comte de La Pérouse to explore it.

In 1787 La Pérouse was charting the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Northern Pacific when a message was sent to him from the French Admiralty, via Moscow and overland across Siberia. The new orders told La Pérouse to sail south to Botany Bay in New Holland and observe the arrival of the British convict fleet which had sailed six months earlier from Portsmouth.

The two French ships' arrival, where we now call La Perouse, while Phillip was landing at Sydney Cove, was no coincidence, as so many Australians assert to this day. He was there on his King's orders not his own initiative and, like his King, he would be dead within a year. Louis would die on the guillotine as a victim of the French Revolution. La Pérouse sailed north from Botany Bay and disappeared. Only a generation later, in 1827, was evidence found that both his ships were wrecked at Vanikoro in what is now Vanuatu.

Unfortunately young Napoleon Bonaparte was not on the fatal expedition. He had volunteered for it but was not accepted by La Pérouse. He was keen on the Navy because of his ability in mathematics and artillery. Had he died young at Vanikoro the world would have been spared a 15 year long war of aggression and bloodshed costing millions of lives that he waged in Europe and Russia.

Revolutionary France did not accept that the settlement of Sydney meant that all of New Holland and Van Dieman's Land was now British territory. There were continuing French efforts to explore the coastline of the vast continent with a view to furthering French interests and possible settlement.

Bonaparte's military expedition to Egypt in 1798 was designed to give him a political platform for returning to France as a military hero. Instead, though he easily won the Battle of the Pyramids against the overmatched Mamelukes, his battle fleet was annihilated by Nelson at the Battle of the Nile. During the battle the 118-gun battleship *L'Orient*, crammed with the stolen booty from the pharaoh's tombs which Bonaparte stole, blew up. This irreplaceable treasury of ancient objects was lost forever.

Unfortunately Nelson missed the opportunity to capture Bonaparte when he abandoned his army in Egypt and returned to France. Nelson just didn't have enough frigates to interdict every French troop transport. One got past the Royal Navy blockade at night. It was a tragedy for Europe that Bonaparte wasn't captured and taken as a prisoner to England. Nelson lamented: "Were I to die this moment, 'Want of Frigates' would be found stamped on my heart". Every Fleet Commander since his era would agree with him!

During the brief Peace of Amiens of 1802–1803 between Britain and Revolutionary France Matthew Flinders was tasked by the Admiralty to circumnavigate and chart the whole coastline of New Holland, starting with the as yet unknown Great Australian Bight. He started from Sydney and took local indigenous sailor Bungaree with him so that first circumnavigation included an Aboriginal man.

Simultaneously, a French scientific expedition, launched by the French Government and supported by Bonaparte, was sent to chart the still unknown southern coast of New Holland. The two expeditions met at Encounter Bay. Flinders and Baudin had cordial meetings and parted to their separate destinies. Unfortunately, Baudin died at sea and his reputation was destroyed by his jealous senior scientist Péron. Baudin's exploration was derided by Bonaparte because of his failure to claim South Australia for France before Matthew Flinders did for Britain. It was Flinders who proposed that the name of the continent be changed from New Holland to Australia.

Recent research reveals that Péron wrote a secret memorandum urging a French takeover of Port Jackson. His plan was for French Marines to arm the rebellious Irish convicts so that they could stage a rebellion, disarm the small number of Royal Marines acting as prison guards, and imprison the Governor. But the logistical difficulties of getting a French Marine Battalion so far would have been formidable even before Trafalgar.

The British victory at Trafalgar in October 1805 did not end the War at Sea against France, but it critically limited French imperial ambition beyond Europe. If there had been any plan for the seizure of Sydney germinating in Bonaparte's mind the Franco-Spanish defeat at Trafalgar ended it. The French would have been totally unable to supply or reinforce a small French garrison in Sydney with the Royal Navy commanding the seas in between. Most of the available French battle fleet was burnt, captured, sunk or wrecked at Trafalgar. What remained of the battle fleet was blockaded in French ports.

Whatever dreams of conquest Bonaparte may have had for New Holland before Trafalgar, afterwards he can have had no illusions about seizing a distant British colony in NSW after the French Fleet had been so comprehensively defeated at sea. Furthermore, there was no chance of safely transferring French colonists to such a vulnerable location with Britain triumphant at sea. It would have been an ocean too far even for Bonaparte's ambitions!

The US naval strategist Captain Alfred Mahan, USN, wrote of the period after Trafalgar, describing the influence of the British blockade on the eventual outcome of the war. He called the British battle fleet 'That line of distant storm beaten ships, on which the Grand Army of France never looked - but which stood between it and the dominion of the world.' That world which was excluded to France included New Holland.

In 1808 six heavily armed and skilfully commanded French frigates based in Ile de France, now Mauritius, raided British sea routes from India to Cape Town. Seven East Indiamen were captured in a month. This represented a huge economic loss to the City of London. Critically, some ships were carrying supplies of saltpetre from which the gunpowder was made for Wellington's artillery. British gunners needed that saltpetre to beat Bonaparte's generals in Spain where war was raging. This threat had to be solved by British sea power. In 1810 Isle de France was attacked and taken, from the sea, by the Royal Marines, and the threat to British commerce in the Indian Ocean was eliminated in a swift amphibious operation. Mauritius became a British Base for the rest of the century. The Indian Ocean was no longer a base for French raiders.

The remaining French battleships and frigates of the French Atlantic Fleet were blockaded, then attacked and largely destroyed or captured by Nelson's daring successor Admiral Lord Alexander Cochrane in 1809.

In 1815, after he was defeated at Waterloo, Bonaparte was captured and taken to St Helena in HMS *Bellerophon*. He walked her main deck and, as an artillery officer, admired her armament. He was heard to reflect ruefully on his final defeat. He said, '*wherever the British could float a ship they were always there opposing my plans.*' He finally understood that in European affairs it is sea power which is usually a slow but certain counter to ambitious plans by dictators bent on conquest on land.

With peace in Europe restored from 1815, the Royal Navy established the 'preventative squadron', which for 60 years operated against the Atlantic and

Indian Ocean slave trade and piracy in the Caribbean. Britain had been a major slaving nation but led the world in first banning the trade and eventually abolishing it across the British Empire. The Royal Navy saved millions of Africans who would have died on the fatal ‘Middle Passage.’ They were saved from enslavement, brutality and early death either at sea or in the New World. Hundreds of British sailors died from sickness off the Guinea Coast, manning the ships which suppressed this hideous trade.

The year of Trafalgar, 1805, a future Royal Navy captain was born who epitomised the naval achievements of the post war Pax Britannica. Robert Fitzroy not only took HMS *Beagle* around the world carrying the young naturalist Charles Darwin, he went on to found the British Meteorological Service which saved countless thousands of lives at sea by predicting storms. The Royal Navy’s hydrographic service probably saved even more lives by providing accurate, reliable and easily available Admiralty charts to the mariners of the world. The British were also the first to mark the world’s most dangerous headlands and shoals with lighthouses and lightships. These were the signposts of the sea which for generations kept navigators from ‘standing into danger.’

In 1840 another Royal Navy officer, Captain William Hobson, secured a mutually agreed treaty at Waitangi in the Bay of Islands with the chiefs of the Tribes of New Zealand. Aotearoa became the Crown Colony of New Zealand by consent. The Maori recognised that lawlessness and exploitation by whalers and sealers had turned the Bay of Islands into the ‘hell hole of the Pacific.’

Two years earlier in August 1838 a French whaling ship captain, Langlois, negotiated with Maori chiefs the purchase of several thousand acres of land on Banks Peninsula on the East Coast of the South Island. Upon returning to France in 1839, he founded a company with the help of several financial backers, the aim of which was to claim the entirety of the South Island for France. French Government support came via



Captain William Hobson RN

King Louis Phillippe and 80 settlers were selected to found Port Louis-Philippe at Akaroa. A warship, the corvette *Aube*, would travel to New Zealand, followed a month later by the colonists aboard *Comte de Paris*.

By the time *Aube* arrived at the Bay of Islands in June 1840, the acquisition by treaty of both islands by Hobson in the name of the Crown was effectively complete. To reinforce the point, Hobson sent a fast frigate, HMS *Britomart*, to Akaroa with two British colonial magistrates. When the *Comte de Paris* arrived the magistrates allowed French settlers to take up their land, but they lived henceforth under British law and the French speaking settlement flew the Union Jack.

Faced with no prospect of anything more than a small colonial settlement in a British colony the French Government lost interest in further settlement of New Zealand and no further migrants were sent. It was Pax Britannica which had once again checked French ambition in Australasia.

British migrants started to come as free settlers to Australia after 1815 and after 1840 to New Zealand. They faced many dangers but none from an enemy Navy. British naval mastery of the sea lanes they used guaranteed that they were safe from attack at sea. Emigration from British and Irish towns was seen as the remedy to urban poverty and disadvantage. Emigration companies could offer cheap or free sea travel to a better life in the Empire for millions of poor, but ambitious, families. Very few migrants could afford to return so, whether they wished to or not, they had to remain in the colonies and become pioneers. The advent of ocean going steam ships dramatically reduced length of time at sea for migrants. Steamships and the opening of the Suez Canal made migration safer and simpler for migrants than it had been in the age of sail.

By the second quarter of the nineteenth century wheat, gold and wool, the exports that built the Australian colonies' financial success, were carried routinely by sea to the world in safety. This was the era of 'Australia Felix' and it was underpinned by the fact that 80 per cent of world shipping flew the British Red Ensign.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, whenever Britain and Russia went to war or appeared to be about to do so, Australians and New Zealanders were alarmed about a Russian Pacific Fleet attack on Sydney, Melbourne or Auckland. Australian colonial governments, fed by speculation in the London Times reprinted in the Australian newspapers, had lively visions of 'hit and run' naval raids in the Pacific by Russian cruisers and swoops on major Australian cities and seaports.

British-made coastal defence long range artillery guns defended Australasian ports. None ever fired a shot in anger. No Russian Fleet attack from the sea was ever attempted or contemplated.

Significantly, if there had been any such plans it is the potential for retaliation which would have deterred any thought of attack on Australasian colonial cities. According to the eminent British naval historian Andrew Lambert, if the Russian Navy had ever dared to shell Sydney or Melbourne or Auckland the Royal Navy would have entered the Baltic and levelled St Petersburg from the sea with a massive bombardment – and the Czar knew it! Extended deterrence existed long before the nuclear age.

In addition to this distant deterrence, long after Britain had withdrawn regiments of the British Army from Australia and New Zealand the Royal Navy remained on station in Sydney. British warships remained on watch to ensure that the South Pacific and the Tasman Sea were not left unguarded. This Australasian Squadron at Garden Island in Sydney was a far flung link in the Navy's chain of ships and naval bases which secured the sea lanes of communication back to the parent nation and markets in Britain.



Sir George King-Hall and Sir George Patey handing over command

In October 1913 the Australian Fleet Unit, led by the new battle cruiser *HMAS Australia*, steamed into Sydney Harbour to take over responsibility for commerce protection in the Pacific. A million Sydneysiders lined the harbour to greet her.

The day of handover came when Vice Admiral Sir George King-Hall, RN, handed the responsibility for Australia's maritime defence to Rear Admiral Sir George Patey, RN. He was the first Fleet Commander of the newly arrived ships of the Royal Australian Navy.

The Commander of the Kaiser's East Asia Squadron based in China, Vice Admiral Count Maximillian von Spee,

observed this increase in naval power in Sydney and wrote: *“The Anglo Australian Squadron has as its flagship the new battle cruiser Australia, which by itself is an adversary so much stronger than our ships that in the event of war we would be bound to avoid it.”*

He was right. *Australia* carried eight powerful 12 inch guns. The pervasive fear that in wartime Australia could have its ports blockaded or bombarded and its trade routes raided by the German East Asia Squadron was greatly lessened by the Fleet Unit’s arrival.

Just nine months after the arrival of the RAN fleet, on the day war was declared in August 1914, HMAS *Australia*, with her cruisers, destroyers and two submarines, steamed out of Sydney. The big battlecruiser would not return until 1919. Admiral Patey and the young RAN were in all respects ready for offensive or defensive operations. This First Fleet Unit has been called the fastest and most cost effective return on a defence investment in Australian history. The torch had been passed to a new island nation, one steeped in knowledge of Trafalgar and the importance of sea power as a national asset in peace and in war. What has been called a ‘Tradition of Victory’ had been established in 1805 and was passed on to the daughter navies of the Royal Navy.

The British Maritime Empire had been built and it could now contribute to its own defence and that of the Empire, fighting freedom’s battles in world wars of the twentieth century.

One naval officer more than any other must be given the credit for that ‘Tradition of Victory’ in which Australia and New Zealand grew from infancy to young adulthood. Although Horatio Lord Nelson never sailed in any part of the Pacific Ocean we can acknowledge, 215 years after his final victory, fought when Sydney was still a village, that Trafalgar can be fairly considered to have been the most important battle in Australia’s nineteenth century history.



Arrival of the RAN First Fleet Unit in Sydney led by HMAS Australia

A Defence of *Rule, Britannia!*

This singalong anthem was a target of the Culture Warriors in the middle of the year: the BBC planned to render it without words at the Covid19-impacted Proms and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra peremptorily dumped its popular cover version Last Night of the Proms, for good. Added as an encore to the Trafalgar Lunch, it was introduced by immediate past president, Chris White, with some words of explanation relevant to the politically correct polemics:

To round out the luncheon on a high note, no pun intended, we are going to listen to a rousing rendition of *Rule, Britannia!* sung as a tribute to the Royal Navy.

The origins of this song are interesting and, it seems, not well known.

During the 17th century, the Barbary Corsairs, aka, the Barbary Pirates, sailed the seas around Britain including the English Channel, capturing British ships and attacking towns and villages along the English coast. The captured ship crews and the men, women and children taken from the towns were sent to North Africa to be sold off in the slave markets of Morocco, Tunis and Tripoli.

It wasn't until after Oliver Cromwell had built up and strengthened the British Navy that in 1675 the British were able to attack Tunis and sink much of the Barbary fleet, and that Britons could say with confidence "Britons never, never, never shall be slaves."

The song was written in 1740 by James Thomson and set to music by Thomas Arne and is not only a paean to the Navy but also a big "thank you" that at long last Britain was safe from the depredations of pirates, in large measure due to the Royal Navy.

The song was first performed at the *Proms* in 1905 to celebrate the centenary of the Battle of Trafalgar.

We are very fortunate that we have been able to entice two very talented and accomplished musicians to come along and perform the tribute.

Donna Balson is a singer and voice coach who has entertained and delighted audiences around the world and has helped many aspiring and established singers perform at their best.

Robert Andrew Greene is a conductor and pianist who is well known to Australian and overseas audiences not only for his keyboard virtuosity, but also his abilities as a maestro.

I invite you to see their biographies on the insert to the menu for more background on Donna and Robert Andrew.

The original idea for this tribute, which was suggested by John Lanser and picked up by Antony Carr, was to have a big sing-a-long where we could all belt out the tune and display our singing skills. Unfortunately, and perhaps mercifully, the Covid-safe rules have put a cramp on our style. I know you are all bitterly disappointed, but don't despair, Donna has a cunning plan and will say more on that a bit later. Maybe, just maybe, this will become a regular event at our Trafalgar Day Lunches.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join with me in welcoming Donna Balson and Robert Andrew Greene.



Australian Navy Enlistment
Poster 1913



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