

GOVERNOR WILLIAM BLIGH

1806 - 1808

4

Captain William Bligh was appointed the fourth Governor of New South Wales, 13 August 1806 – 26 January 1808.

Bligh was a strong leader and it was hoped he would regain control in the colony. He immediately set about fixing many buildings that had been left in disrepair. The New South Wales Corps controlled all the trade and paid the farmers in rum for their produce. The farmers were then charged high prices for basic supplies, such as sugar, tea, shoes, and clothing. Members of the Corps became very wealthy by exploiting the farmers. Bligh had a challenge on his hands.

Bligh re-assigned convict labour away from the Corps's private arrangements and back on to public works. This caused conflict with the Corps as this work force normally came under its responsibility. Bligh demolished unauthorised houses that had been built on government land, including one belonging to John Macarthur who was a powerful officer of the Corps. Macarthur was a major opponent of the new governorship and considered Bligh a tyrant.

Bligh set up government trading stores and encouraged farmers to use British currency. Anyone caught paying someone in rum was charged with an offence and a reward was promised to those who reported offences to the authorities. Many farmers were emancipists who came from a poor background with limited knowledge or experience of agriculture. Bligh used his own land to create demonstration farms to teach the farmers how to live from the land. This strengthened Bligh's control and influence as the farmers and settlers became his loyal supporters.

Bligh stopped all free land grants and wrote to the British Government asking for support to entice new migrants to buy land and settle in Australia. This promoted strong economic growth and Australia soon became a land of opportunity, not just a place for unwanted criminals.

These improvements released the Corps's grip on the colony, but it came at a price. Members of the Corps stormed Government House and placed Governor Bligh under arrest after he refused to back down on their demands to reinstate the trade in rum. This was called the Rum Rebellion. Bligh was summoned back to England to face charges of misconduct. Eventually, the truth came out and he was exonerated and members of the Corps were punished.

Opinion was divided about the legacy of Bligh. The Corps considered him a cruel and ineffectual leader, with many accusations coming from the likes of John Macarthur. However, the emancipist farmers understood the enormity of his challenge, but were unable to support his authority for fear of becoming targets of the Corps themselves. Bligh served as Governor for only 18 months of a four-year term. He achieved valuable milestones that helped reset the colony back on its feet. Most importantly, the message was clear, that even in New South Wales the law must be obeyed.

William Bligh died at Lambeth England 7 December 1817.

William Bligh was a Royal Navy Officer of the British Fleet, reaching the rank of Vice-Admiral in 1814

Sir Joseph Banks advised King George III that only a man like Captain William Bligh would be able to regain control of the colony

Bligh prohibited the trade in rum for goods and services, replacing it with British currency

Bligh was extraordinarily stubborn and refused to back down during times of conflict. He quickly lost his temper and used offensive language, threatening those who did not comply with his orders

Captain William Bligh is probably best remembered for an infamous mutiny aboard his ship, The Bounty in 1789

The 29th Prime Minister of Australia is named Malcolm Bligh Turnbull. Claims he is a distant relative of William Bligh is an urban myth

The use of Bligh became a family tradition after one of Turnbulls' ancestors, colonist John Turnbull, named his youngest son William Bligh Turnbull in honour of the deposed governor

