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THE FIRST FIVE GOVERNORS OF NEW SOUTH WALES



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The First Fleet transported Britain's unwanted criminals to their new destination, Botany Bay, New South Wales. Captain Arthur Phillip was tasked with establishing a penal colony in what was incorrectly believed to be uninhabited land. Under his guidance, the convicts would serve out the term of their imprisonment in a remote land far from home.

As the founding Governor, Arthur Phillip's role was to establish a workable settlement that supported every member of the colony, including the convicts. This meant he was responsible for farming, health, employment, and housing. Phillip was guided by Lord Sydney's blueprint, designed to support the colony on principles surrounding the rule of law. The *First Charter of Justice* authorised the establishment of courts to provide justice and ensure the laws were applied equally and fairly. Over time, the colony quickly became a place of opportunity granting freedoms and opportunities to convicts, privileges which were denied to felons back home. The responsibility of establishing and governing the colony was challenging and after serving four years, Phillip returned to England in poor health.

During the three year period between the founding governor's departure and arrival of the second governor, the colony was run by the New South Wales Corps. This was a special force that had been formed to relieve the Marine garrison that had travelled with the First Fleet. The Corps quickly took control and its members prospered, gifting each other generous land grants re-assigning convict labour to benefit Corps members. The Corps controlled all transport of trade and stock arriving in and out of the colony, and rum became a profitable and valuable currency. One officer from the Corps, Lieutenant John Macarthur, became the wealthiest landowner living in the grandest house and estate in the colony. The New South Wales Corps controlled all matters to their own benefit creating a dangerous and unpredictable environment.

The next three governors were unable to break the power of the Corps, which thwarted the progress of each governor attempting to pass or enforce a law. Governors Hunter, King, and Bligh fought to remove the officers and soldiers, who by then held positions of authority in the colony. Officers, such as John Macarthur, had influence in England to relay complaints and misinformation back to the British Government, declaring successive governors unfit for office. The tyranny of distance made it near impossible for each governor to effectively communicate the reality of the circumstances, as they were unable to leave the colony to return to England and present their case.

By 1810, maintaining rule of law that ensured all inhabitants were treated equally and fairly, was near impossible. The Corps had tightened its grip and had power over the colony.

Who would be able to control the Corps and return law and order to the colony?

