

Billy Blue, the Old Commodore
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Billy Blue was the first ferryman at Sydney Cove. It is from him that the landmark Blue's Point takes its name. Universally known as "the old commodore", Blue was celebrated as a kind of mascot for the fledgling colony of New South Wales. His portrait, executed in 1834 by J.B. East, hangs in State Library of New South Wales. East was a painter of some renown who had exhibited at the Royal Academy and his painting captured a tall, graceful man with intelligent eyes and a beatific smile, dressed in rag-tag clothing with a cloth bag slung over his shoulder and carrying a carved stick. He has positioned his subject beside Mrs Macquarie's Chair in the Domain, an obvious acknowledgement to Blue's patron, Governor Lachlan Macquarie, with distant harbour views to remind the viewer of Blue's position as the commodore. It is an arresting picture in many ways, but the most remarkable thing is that the old commodore is unmistakably a man of the African diaspora.

Blue arrived in New South Wales as a convicted felon in 1802. He was a very black man and some believed he came from the West Indies.⁷⁰ On his death, Blue was thought to be aged somewhere between ninety-seven and ninety-nine. Many years after his death, his children revealed that he had told them his native place was New York.⁷¹ Much of Blue's early life story was provided autobiographically. In 1823, he addressed several petitions to Governor Thomas Brisbane, where he recounted that prior to transportation to New South Wales he had spent his adult life in the service of the King, as part of the British military forces gaining and losing an empire from the Seven Years' War to the Revolutionary conflagration. In a second version of the petition he amplified the claim by adding that he was twice wounded. Nine years later, he explained in his own words to the Magistrate's Court that he had served in America with both General Wolfe and General Howe.⁷² Dubious as his claims appear to be, Blue was unlikely to be telling outright lies. The colony of New South Wales was packed with veterans of the British army, both as convicts and soldiers, many of who had served in the campaigns in America and Europe mentioned by Blue. Governor Lachlan Macquarie, who showered Blue with favour, was a veteran of the War of Independence. This unlettered black man was, almost certainly, involved in some of the most significant military engagements of the eighteenth century. At the end of the American Revolution in 1782, Blue would have been among the 9000 black Americans who left with the British forces, probably working as a seaman for the Royal Navy during the Loyalist evacuation of 1782 and 1783. He fetched up in Deptford, an impoverished maritime district of London geared towards servicing the needs of the Royal Navy, and in close proximity to Greenwich. Many merchant ships moored off Deptford, even though the cargo had to be unloaded up-river on the north side of the river where the customs houses were. Even before the American Revolution, Deptford had a noticeable black presence and in the period immediately after the American Revolution, the two Deptford parishes registered a tenfold increase in the number of black adult baptisms.⁷³

It was a desperate predicament to be in England in 1784 when the labour force was swamped with demobilised soldiers and sailors. The black refugees from America who flooded into the city had no support networks on which they could draw, and their situation was worsened because they did not fit easily into the existing framework of the Poor Laws.⁷⁴ Blue joined an indigent black community eking out a precarious existence without access to poor relief. The bitter winter of 1784-85 was especially cruel for those struggling to survive on whatever could be begged, borrowed or stolen. Poor Law restrictions were relaxed in some parishes to allow

starving black people access to food and shelter, but it was too little, too late. In December 1784, three young black men died in a workhouse in Wapping.⁷⁵

The plight of indigent black people in London became a matter of public concern on January 5, 1786, when the *Public Advertiser* reported that a gentleman had authorized a baker in the city to dole out quarter loaves of bread to “every black in distress.” That same gentleman was taking subscriptions to assist him in this purpose. Five days later he and several other prominent and worthy individuals, including the chairman and a director of the Bank of England, met to form the Committee for the Relief of the Black, which then sought help from the government to replace the food relief with a direct payment of sixpence a day, paid weekly out of Treasury coffers. Blue was one of the first to sign on for the bounty of three shillings and sixpence, travelling across the river to Mile End to collect it. He was listed as number 50 of the 659 people to whom payments were made throughout August 1786.

A decade later, Blue was working seasonally as a lumper on board the ships that carried merchandise from the West Indies. Lumpers unloaded the cargo of the merchant ships that moored side-by-side in the Thames in tiers of seven or eight. They were among the lowest paid workers in London; ship-owners did not even provide them with food or drink, requiring them to go ashore unpaid for their food breaks. All cargo was offloaded onto lighters and taken to the riverside warehouses. This involved the lifting and swinging of heavy loads, manipulating the packages with winches and cranes, hauling on ropes. It was a tough job for any man, let alone one in his fifties, but Blue was still strong and vigorous. Indeed, ten years later he was described as “a very Hercules in proportion.”⁷⁶ Compensation for the poor lot of the lumper was the toleration of small-scale plundering, referred to in the business as drainage, spillage or leakage; hence the other connotation of the word “lumper”—a pilferer of cargo. A couple of regular trips ashore during the day for sustenance gave lumpers the opportunity to relieve the cargo of small quantities of merchandise, which was customarily regarded by all parties as an element of the wage.⁷⁷ Generally, merchants allowed up to two per cent of the shipped weight to disappear as spillage. It was a fine balance. Small quantities regularly taken were acceptable, but larger amounts *were* regarded as plunder, which was how William Blue came to grief.

In his deposition, Blue explained that as well as being a lumper, he traded in Deptford as a chocolate-maker. Prior to mechanization, chocolate was produced by grinding cocoa beans into a paste. The paste was then mixed with sugar and spices to form a bar. The bar was not eaten; it was melted into hot water and

served as a drink. More expensive than coffee, it was also a more potent stimulant, especially if the sugar level was high. For the labouring poor, there was strong demand for a quick, hot drink that boosted energy while suppressing hunger. Furthermore, chocolate making was a simple, if laborious cottage industry, so long as the ingredients were readily available. It is quite possible that Blue lumped on the West Indian ships that imported cocoa beans from plantations in Jamaica. For 80 lb. of sugar, another 100 lb. of cocoa ground from a large quantity of beans was required. This would have produced as much as 180 lb. of chocolate—nothing less than a serious commercial enterprise. Blue was the type of lumper of whom West India merchants deeply disapproved: someone engaged in vertical integration, able to create a commercial opportunity from lowly, life-threatening labour on their ships. Evidence to the parliamentary committee heard tales of a lumper who kept a mistress and a horse, even though common knowledge had it that lumpers were unable to survive without dipping their hands into the cargo. Blue alluded to the customary rights of spillage when he protested on arrest that while he had taken the sugar “all the lumpers had some sugar”, too.⁷⁸ He was singled out because he took too much, too often. Four times on September 26, as he was leaving the ship to go ashore the mate had taken from him a 20 lb. bag concealed under the voluminous smock worn by Blue. Two days later, Blue was arrested at a pub on the docks. When the case came before the Kent Assizes, the judge and jury were reasonably well disposed to the defendant, although they did not believe that Blue was guiltless. He was not acquitted, being found guilty of one charge of stealing sugar and sentenced to seven years transportation to New South Wales.

Blue’s vertical integration as lumper and chocolate-maker cast doubt upon the claim he made in his 1823 petitions that he had spent his whole lifetime in His Majesty’s Service prior to sentence. He appeared not to be in His Majesty’s service in September 1796, when England was engaged in an exhausting war with France. Blue was over fifty-five when the French Revolutionary War began and was thus too old to serve. But there is evidence that he served the King in another capacity. Much later in his life in New South Wales, Blue gave the explanation for the nickname by which he was universally known: “I got the name of the Commodore for being in charge of the old *Enterprise* at Tower-hill”.⁷⁹

HMS *Enterprise* was a hospital ship moored on the Thames just below the Tower. From December 1793 to 1806 it was also used as a receiving ship for impressed sailors. At first glance there would seem to be little connection between employment related to these activities and the appellation “commodore,” except that the term also had a non-naval connotation in 1790s’ London. The “commodore” was the name given to the man in charge of gangs of men labouring

in the warehouses lining the Pool of London and was also used by seamen to describe the leader of a gang of sailors ashore. In this context, it is apparent that Blue must have been in charge of one of the press gangs of the *Enterprise*. There were about eight such gangs in operation, made up of local men known for their strength and aggression. It was disreputable, casual work, but it could be profitable. The leader or “commodore” of the gang answered to a Navy Board employee who carried the rank of Lieutenant and who paid in cash for each man pressed into service. From 1793, business was brisk and the money earned would have been good. During the period prior to Blue’s arrest, the musters of the *Enterprise* list some 34,000 men held for a day or so, before being transferred to their ships.⁸⁰

Lumping was casual, seasonal work, so doubtless Blue was employed at both jobs. In September 1796 he may have lost one of his sources of income. From the beginning of 1796 there was a sharp drop in the returns from the Impressment Service. Prime Minister Pitt’s introduction of the Quota Acts, required each city to provide a set number of men for service. London’s quota was achieved largely by relieving convicted criminals of serviceable age if they agreed to serve. The number of impressed men on the *Enterprise* in 1796 was less than half what it had been in previous years. By the time the Impressment Service returned to strength, Blue was a member of a different gang: the chain gangs put to work raising gravel from the bed of the River Thames.⁸¹

After nearly five years on the prison hulks, Blue finally embarked on the *Minorca* for New South Wales. He arrived in Sydney to find a town of 2,200 adults, of whom only forty per cent were convicts under sentence, the majority being emancipated convicts, soldiers and free settlers. The colony had weathered several bouts of famine to become almost self-sufficient in food, but it remained entirely dependent on the importation of household necessities such as tea, sugar, tobacco and soap as well as manufactured goods and spirits. Once Blue attained his freedom in 1803, he moved into a small house located in the steepest part of the Rocks, a jumble of ramshackle dwellings linked by a web of steep footpaths sprung up along the ridge above the dazzling harbour that was fast becoming Sydney’s commercial centre. Housed within the hotchpotch of one- and two-roomed huts was a growing population of tradesmen and labourers, as well as enterprising men and women who ran from their homes bakeries, laundries, forges, pubs and shops. Below them, at the edge of Sydney Cove, more imposing commercial enterprises were taking shape—solid stone wharves and warehouses.

At the time Blue moved into the Rocks half-a-dozen ships that had sailed from London, New York, Providence, Calcutta, Madras and China were at anchor in the cove. Once their merchandise was unloaded, their holds were refilled for the return leg with whale oil, sealskins and timber. In the shadow of these large sailing ships, which represented the infant colony's lifeline to the outside world, there were several smaller colonial vessels that plied the coastal routes between Sydney, Newcastle and Hobart. Among the hulls of these sea-going vessels, a plethora of small craft bobbed and weaved over the water, transporting people and goods hither and thither. In this unregulated watery space, Blue sought to make his mark, setting himself up as a waterman, ferrying passengers and goods from ship to shore and back again. He was one of about twenty-five self-employed watermen plying their trade in and around the cove, most of whom were emancipated convicts.⁸²

By July 1804, Blue was living with Elizabeth Williams, a woman of about thirty, who arrived at the end of June on the female transport *Experiment*. Governor King encouraged free men to look for partners among the new arrivals as a way of accommodating the relatively small number of female convicts arriving in the colony and, if the Irish political prisoner Joseph Holt is to be believed, the governor's *modus operandi* revealed his penchant for vulgarity to poor advantage. When a female transport ship arrived, Holt reported, King instructed the bellman to ring the bell through the town and announce that "if anybody wanted mares or sows that they should be served out to them".⁸³ Whether or not such crude insensitivity facilitated the coupling, there can be little doubt that Blue took up with Elizabeth Williams straight off the ship. They married on April 27, 1805, and their witnesses were Edwin Piper, a convict with Blue on the *Minorca*, and his wife Dulcibella, who came free. Blue's daughter, Susannah, was born shortly after.⁸⁴

From his work in the cove Blue could look up and see his house. On the morning of 31 July 1805, he was "tugging at the oars" when he sensed something amiss at home. He hurried to his house to discover his wife had been raped, or so he said in his charge against a man named Daniel McKay. The case was heard by the judge advocate, who was assisted by a bench that included the collector of the jail fund, John Harris, a man who held other important colonial positions. Blue explained to the bench that on the day in question he was "looking towards his house he saw his wife struggling with someone". On rushing back to the house, he found his wife "walking about with the baby in her arms" and she told him that "McKay had carnal knowledge of her without her consent". Elizabeth Blue maintained that McKay called at her house and after some conversation pulled her to the floor and

raped her. Dulcibella Piper was visiting at the time, and her testimony contradicted this, claiming only that McKay “took [Elizabeth] by the waist and she fell down and some conversation passed between them”. George Darling, who claimed to have been with McKay at the time, supported her evidence. If a rape had occurred, he must have seen it, he said, emphatic that he saw no such thing. A neighbour gave evidence that he overheard the incident and further reported that McKay wanted to send Blue to gaol and that Blue was looking for revenge. Finally, Chief Constable John Redman reported that Blue told him that, on entering the house, “he saw his wife lying on the floor with her petticoat up”—a different story from that offered to the court.⁸⁵

McKay lived close to Blue. He made his money retailing spirits in a public house that was kept by his convict wife, who had arrived with Elizabeth Blue on the *Experiment*.⁸⁶ This man was well placed to threaten Blue with gaol: he was the town gaoler, possessing a well-deserved reputation as a hard man. John Harris was a close business associate of McKay and the witnesses were all indebted to him one way or another, and had good reason to give overly consistent testimony that contradicted Blue’s evidence. The *Sydney Gazette* reported that the case against McKay was dismissed and concluded that the attempt to frame the innocent McKay “left no doubt that Mr Blue’s centre was several shades darker than his superfcies.”⁸⁷ But there were significant people in Sydney who regarded Blue’s challenge of McKay as a sign of his moral integrity. One of them was the new governor, William Bligh. One of his first actions in the colony was to remove John Harris from all his offices and to incarcerate McKay in his own gaol.⁸⁸ Bligh, who was not known for his soft heart, explained that he had removed McKay “out of motives of humanity”.⁸⁹ Blue by contrast suffered no retribution other than the scorn heaped upon him by the *Sydney Gazette*, and his economic and social standing saw a marked improvement. The *Sydney Gazette* of 2 August 1807, carried an advertisement that William Blue was ‘the only waterman licensed to ply a ferry in this harbour’.⁹⁰

But where Blue found grace and favour with the new governor, few others did. On 26 January 1808 Bligh faced his second mutiny when the New South Wales Corps placed him under arrest. For a day or so soldiers were kept busy escorting people to the barracks to sign the ex post facto petition imploring the military to arrest Bligh. Among the 150 signatures, written in neat and fluent letters, was the name ‘William Blue.’ Someone had forged this name, probably without Blue’s knowledge or consent, since he was completely illiterate and could sign only his mark. Rather than join the chorus of assent, Blue was more likely to have kept his

head down and his opinions to himself, waiting for the inevitable recriminations to begin.

Indeed, Blue emerged as a winner from the new order that took shape when Lachlan Macquarie stepped ashore on the morning of December 31, 1809. On August 17, 1811, he announced that Blue was appointed the watchman and water-borne constable of the cove.⁹¹ With the new position came a hexagonal stone house at the edge of the governor's domain, where Blue and his growing family lived rent-free for the next eight years.⁹² Blue employed an assistant for his ferry business, but he himself was always at the oars when it came to ferrying the governor and his family about the harbour. By 1814 it was well known that he had become a favourite of the Macquaries. Blue personified the governor's vision of the reformed convict, the figure who would become the backbone of the orderly and respectable society he aimed to create in New South Wales: a hard-working entrepreneur who had, with all propriety, married his convict partner and bestowed legitimacy upon his children. Yet there was something more profound in the governor's friendship with this illiterate ferryman; a bond of shared experience between the professional soldier and the "sable veteran".⁹³

Blue was never too shy to boast of his military service in some of the most extraordinary campaigns of the eighteenth century and his intense fidelity to His Majesty's cause would certainly have endeared him to the governor. Macquarie began his military career aged fifteen, and he saw service immediately in America. It is feasible that both Macquarie and Blue were caught in the dreadful siege at Yorktown and were among the lucky few evacuated by ship to New York. Even if Macquarie had never before set eyes upon Blue, it was enough that the "old commodore" was able to recount stories about soldiers who had shared the bombardment, starvation and ignominy of Yorktown, for a unique bond to be forged between them. Blue provided a glimpse of this relationship with Macquarie in evidence he gave at a court case in 1832. He and the governor "were always together", he explained, and it was a relationship of equals: "I was just the same as the governor. He never countermanded any orders of mine ... he built the little octagon house at the corner of the domain for my especial accommodation". The sense of intimacy was captured in Blue's observation that "the Governor had a bit of the 'old brown' in him."⁹⁴

This reminiscence also provided Blue with the opportunity to describe the exchange in 1814, when he asked the governor to give him land for his ferry terminus at Millers Point:

“Please your honour”, says I, “I want a landing place”. “Well come,” says he, “Show me the place”. And so, when I showed him the place, “Jemmy”, says he to [Surveyor] Meehan, “run the chain over the Commodore’s land”. Lord bless you. We were just like two children playing.⁹⁵

Blue ended the intriguing vignette by dissolving into laughter, which might have encouraged the magistrates to think it was a piece of tomfoolery. Not so. In the colonial secretary’s correspondence, dated April 23, 1814, a letter from Macquarie instructed that Blue should receive a grant of eighty acres of land. Other evidence locates the land in question at Millers Point. In January 1817, Blue received another eighty acres on the opposite side of the cove, now the landmark called Blues Point. These grants made him a relatively substantial, and very well appointed, landowner, while the number of his little ferry boats had grown to seven.⁹⁶

Blue had clandestine sources of income in addition to his public duties, ferry business and farms on his land either side of the harbour. This became apparent in the early hours of the morning of October 10, 1818 when Chief Constable John Redman apprehended Blue as he was rowing his boat toward the wharf of a well-known spirit dealer. The police had been informed that someone was illegally to land spirits that night and a plan was hatched for four constables to lie in wait near the wharf. About three o’clock in the morning the waiting constables noticed a flurry of activity as one of the ships at anchor in the harbour was lit up and the sound of tackle was heard, suggesting “the people on board the ship were getting something over the side”. Half an hour later the lights were extinguished and the rhythmic splash of oars drifted over the water toward them. Intercepting the boat, the constables discovered the man at the oars was none other than Billy Blue. Lashed on either side of the bow, level with the gunwales, were two barrels each containing 120 gallons of rum. Later that day, one of the constables visited Blue at his house, trying to persuade him to inform on the person who had inveigled him into carrying smuggled goods. Blue drew the side of his hand across his throat in a quick motion, saying “I would suffer this first”.⁹⁷

The *Sydney Gazette*’s report of the case hummed with outrage about “this unfortunate man Blue ... a man of colour with a very large family, who has been very much indebted to the humane feeling with which his Excellency the governor has for many years been pleased to view him”. In the editor’s view, the crime “was more than usually criminal”, as Blue was a constable, appointed “for the purpose of *detecting* or *preventing* smuggling”. After inveighing Blue’s manifest

delinquency, the editor changed tack to observe that a small player with as small a fortune as Blue had “a vast deal more of personal character at stake than his trifling profits”, implying that Blue was the victim of the entrepreneur who possessed the capital, contacts and infrastructure to run a successful smuggling enterprise. The reader might presume that the identity of such a person was suspected, but the pity was, the editor lamented, that Blue steadfastly refused to give any names. Having been caught red-handed, he was inevitably found guilty of “aiding and assisting in illegally landing a quantity of spirits, with intent to defraud His Majesty’s revenue of the duties”.⁹⁸ On October 24, he was dismissed from his government positions and sentenced to twelve months’ imprisonment.⁹⁹

On the face of it, his determined silence might be read as the loyalty of a member of the criminal class to his accomplices. However, a glance at the commercial world of Sydney in 1818 suggests a rather different reading. The captain of the suspect ship had come to the attention of the authorities before for engaging in contraband trade. At the time of his first offence, his employer had been a business partner of D’Arcy Wentworth, the superintendent of police and a magistrate to boot. Wentworth was one of those who sat upon the bench in judgment of Blue. Another of Wentworth’s partners was Alexander Riley, whose brother Edward had recently arrived in Sydney as agent for the importation of Bengal spirits. As well as the partnership with Riley, Wentworth had a longstanding commercial arrangement with the third magistrate, Simeon Lord, described by a previous governor as a notorious smuggler. Any of these merchant traders had good reason to smuggle large quantities of Bengal rum into the colony: they would profit hugely from the evasion of duty. So, many of plausible contenders for smuggler-in-chief were sitting before Blue, passing judgment upon the man and his crime and one or more of them was relying upon his integrity. As the hand across the throat signified, he knew silence was the most sensible strategy for long-term survival and comfort, if not prosperity. As it transpired, the magistrates submitted the case to the governor with a forceful recommendation for mercy. Blue suffered no custodial sentence, though he was evicted from the pleasant stone house.¹⁰⁰

In his disgrace, Blue still possessed his ferry business and his land. He even managed to regain the friendship of the governor in the few short years before Macquarie’s recall in February 1822. Once Macquarie quit the colony, the sharks began to circle Blue’s enterprise. A wealthy free settler successfully demanded of magistrates Edward Riley and D’Arcy Wentworth that the ferry be put in the hands of more a trustworthy person. Blue fought back with a petition to Governor Thomas Brisbane, on 28 October 1823, protesting the gentlemen’s use of “arbitrary power” and emphasizing his age and his illustrious military record. On

inquiry, the colonial secretary was persuaded by the argument that the north shore was a magnet for escaped convicts, ships' deserters, and stolen goods, and that Blue was "the principal agent in carrying into effect this system of plunder, smuggling and escape".¹⁰¹ Yet Blue persisted in asserting his rights and on 25 January 1825, the *Sydney Gazette* announced he had regained use of his ferry service.

In addition to the ferry fees, Blue sold oysters and his farm's produce as a pedlar. Elizabeth, his wife of twenty years, died in 1824, leaving him with six children to support. In March 1827, Blue claimed he was barely able to put food in his children's mouth and he petitioned the governor to take his sons into an apprenticeship at the shipyard: as carpenter and shipwright. When this was refused it was the wealthy merchant Simeon Lord who stepped into the breach, taking both boys as apprentice weavers, even though Blue was too poor to purchase their indentures. Perhaps Lord recalled with gratitude Blue's stubborn silence in the smuggling case nine years before.¹⁰²

It was around this time that Blue took to walking about Sydney wearing a travesty of a naval uniform with a top hat, twirling the carved stick he always carried and calling out in a peremptory fashion to all and sundry that they must acknowledge him as "the commodore". Blue was far from senile however, as he showed in 1827, when he won a writ for £12 against a Sydney gentleman for unpaid ferry fees. Nor did the magistrate's bench think he had lost his wits when it issued a summons against him for harbouring a runaway convict in early July 1829. Blue received a hefty fine, which he could not afford, or gaol *in lieu* of payment, but he was saved from incarceration by a wealthy neighbour who paid the fine.¹⁰³

Understanding, perhaps, that notoriety was his best defence, Blue increasingly became ostentatious in his displays of eccentricity. On December 15, 1829, the *Sydney Gazette* noted that "Billy Blue, the Commodore of Port Jackson, has of late grown uncommonly eloquent; scarcely a morning passes without a loud oration from his loyal lips, descanting on the glories of the standard". He had also adopted the habit of boarding ships that arrived in the harbour wearing his tattered uniform and top hat, to welcome the captain in his official capacity as commodore. As such, Blue expected to receive "suitable homage from all of His Majesty's subjects, as befitted a man of his position", so the *Sydney Gazette* explained. Twirling his stick and declaiming "True Blue forever", the old man demanded that men salute, children doff their hats and women curtsy. Any who failed to respond

suffered a cascade of salty abuse. This highly subversive performance, calculated or not, had the curious effect of endearing Blue to all levels of Sydney society.¹⁰⁴

Not everyone was prepared to indulge this disreputable, aged black man. An outraged correspondent to the *Sydney Gazette* on October 31, 1833 made a unkind pun about the “*black* guardism of Billy Blue” when expressing his resentment at “this sweep [who] made use of such language as must have shocked every modest person.”¹⁰⁵ He demanded it was high time a stop was put to “this *crying* nuisance”, so that respectable people could walk the streets without being insulted. Immediately the editor and several other correspondents sprang to the defence of Blue, as a “privileged person” who meant no harm.¹⁰⁶ Equally, the author Alexander Harris took it in good part when Blue told him, with “a fatherly sort of authority” that he had rowed across the harbour a good many times that day, so Harris must pay the fare to row himself to Sydney, and Blue would pull the boat back again. With bemused good humour, Harris accepted this odd bargain, reflecting that the old ferryman was “considered to possess a sort of universal freedom of speech”.¹⁰⁷

In 1834 Baron von Hügel landed in Sydney to be confronted by an old black man standing in the middle of the street with a sack over his shoulder, “saying something crazy in a loud voice at every passer by”. Addressing one passing gentleman, Blue called out: “[w]ho is that long legged beauty, Your Honour? I won’t say anything to your lady”. To another pedestrian he was slyly conspiratorial: “[n]ot a word about the pig”. On enquiring about this disreputable apparition, the European aristocrat could scarce believe his ears to be told that this was “the old commodore whom Governor Macquarie appointed port captain”.¹⁰⁸

Within days of Blue’s death on 6 May 1834, the *Australian* newspaper announced that East’s fine portrait of the old commodore was on public view and “ought to be preserved in Government House or some other institution”.¹⁰⁹ Two colonial newspapers wrote affectionate obituaries, but it was the *Sydney Gazette*, where Blue had been often vilified, which produced the most glowing tribute. The paper dedicated two full columns to “the gallant old commodore”, extolled Blue as a founding father of New South Wales, whose memory would be “treasured in the minds of the present generation, when the minions of ambition are forgotten in the dust”. Indulging in high-flown prose, the editor told the readers of the *Sydney Gazette* that “the reign of Billy is coeval with the foundation of the colony”¹¹⁰. For the modern historian it is utterly incongruous that such extravagant praise, of the use of the word *reign*, and of a commemorative portrait meant for government

house should be reserved for a disreputable ex-convict and multiple offender who was poor, illiterate and black as the ace of spades. It runs counter to everything our national history would lead us to expect. The story of Billy Blue is a fine example of how an individual life, examined in grainy detail, can confound what we historians like to think we know about the past.

⁷⁰ Blue's convict indent said he was a sailor from the West Indies, however this was a misreading of his indictment where he was charged with stealing from a West India ship. He was by no means the only man of African descent in Sydney. A dozen had arrived in the First Fleet in 1788 and several more came on subsequent transports, almost all of them from America. For black settlers in colonial Australia, see Cassandra Pybus, *Black Founders: The Unknown Story of Australia's First Black Settlers* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006) and *A Touch of the Tar: African Settlers in Colonial Australia and the implications for issues of Aboriginality* (London: Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, 2001).

⁷¹ Susannah Scofield, granddaughter of Blue, provided a document, now lost, stating that Blue

had told her father that he was born in New York. This account was reproduced in *The Star*, September 21, 1808.

⁷² Blue's later claims are made in evidence given in the civil case *Martin v. Munn*, reported in *Sydney Gazette*, October 25, 1832, n.p.

⁷³ There is no doubt that Blue was baptized, but I have not yet found his baptismal notice. He was probably baptized in America.

⁷⁴ It is possible that the operation of the Poor Laws explains why some of the black refugees got baptized, which, in effect, attached them to a parish.

⁷⁵ For the death of indigent blacks see Stephen Braidwood, *Black Poor and White Philanthropists: London's Blacks and the Foundations of the Sierra Leone Settlement 1786–1791* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994), 32.

⁷⁶ The quote from an early newspaper report is given without a source in Meg Swords, *Billy Blue* (Sydney: North Sydney Historical Society 1979), 10.

⁷⁷ My understanding of lumping and customary pillage owes much to Linebaugh, *The London*

Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 416–25. He suggests that in the mid-1790s there was a crack-down on informal wages with customary rights becoming criminalized. My reading of the Old Bailey records does not fully support his thesis. There are very few prosecutions for lumpers in this period; nearly all the trials for plundering and pillage come from the East India warehouses.

⁷⁸ Indictment of William Blue, Kent County Archives (KCA), Q/SIW 422

⁷⁹ Deposition of William Blue, September 29, 1796, KCA Q/SB 225.

⁸⁰ To find the use of the terms 'commodore' I went through the Old Bailey trial records for the decade 1790. For the records of the *Enterprise* see National Archives of UK, (NA) ADM 102.208, ADM 36/15418 to ADM 36/15428.

⁸¹ The records of Old Bailey trials also suggest that the press gangs in London were less aggressive in the period 1796–97. The number of reprieved criminals failed to fill the shortfall, especially as they were drafted into the West Indian regiments where they died like flies. Nevertheless, the press-gangs continued to take huge numbers of men off the streets.

82. For shipping in Sydney Oct.–Nov. 1803, see Historical Records of NSW, vol. 5, 288.
83. Peter O’Shaughnessy, ed., *A Rum Story: The Adventures of Joseph Holt Thirteen Years in New South Wales, 1800–1812* (Sydney: Kangaroo Press, 1988), 89. Alan Atkinson gives credence to this story in *The Europeans in Australia: A History* vol I (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), 267.
- 84 Marriage and baptism register of St Philips, Sydney.
- 85 Trial of Daniel McKay, Judge Advocate’s Bench, 17 August 1805, State Records of NSW, (SRBSW) R 656, 601.
- 86 Daniel McKay arrived on the Royal Admiral in 1792. In 1810 he petitioned the colonial secretary for amelioration of sentence for his common-law wife, Judith Quinlan, from the Experiment.
- 87 Sydney Gazette, 18 August 1805.
- 88 Harris to King, 25 October 1807, Historical Records of NSW, vol. 6, p.343
- 89 Bligh to Castlereagh, 30 June 1808, Historical Records of Australia, vol. 6, p. 533. The men were immediately reinstated after Bligh’s arrest.
- 90 Blue’s ferry was the first of its kind in the port; Sydney Gazette, 2 August 1807.
- 91 Notice, August 17, 1811, SRNSW CS SZ758 (Reel 6038), 226.
- 92 “The Humble Petition of William Blue ...”, November 17, 1823, SRNSW CS R6045, 4/1735, 151.
- 93 Description of Blue as a ‘sable veteran’ from his obituary, Sydney Gazette, May 8, 1834
- 94 This was not a racial reference, but expressed the sense that Macquarie shared some of the qualities of poor folk. In the argot of late eighteenth-century ‘a brown’ was a copper halfpenny.
- 95 Quotes from Martin v. Munn reported in Sydney Gazette, October 25, 1832.
- 96 For Blue’s various grants and appointments: “Return of Horned cattle from the Government herd”, SRNSW CS R6048, 4/1742, 42, and R6045 4/1735, 151.
- 97 Case against Blue, Court of Criminal Jurisdiction, “Informations, Depositions and Related Papers,” October 10, 1818, SRNSW COD 445, SZ795, 421–35.
- 98 Sydney Gazette, October 17, 1818.
- 99 Judge Advocates’ Bench of Magistrates, Minutes of Proceedings Bench Book 1815–21, October 24, 1818, SRNSW R 659, SZ775, 147.
100. Wylde to Macquarie, October 16, 1818, SRNSW CS R6047, 4/1741, 47–50; Wylde to Macquarie, October 30, 1818, *ibid.*, 76–77.
- 101 William Gore to Edward Wollstonecraft, 23 September 1824, SRNSW, CS R6056, 4/1765; Blue’s petitions to Governor Brisbane are 28 October 1823 Reel 6017; 4/5783, pp. 438–40 and 17 November 1823, SRNSW, CS R6045, 4/1735, 151; Colonial Secretary to Wollstonecraft, 6 December 1823, SRNSW R6011 4/3509 p.
- 102 “The Humble Petition of William Blue...” to Governor Brisbane, August 12, 1825, SRNSW CS R6062, 4/1782, 86; “The Humble Petition of William Blue...” to Governor Darling, March 12, 1827, SRNSW Box 4/1926, item 27/2898.
- 103 SRNSW R852, 4/6431, 23 and 25. Quote from the Sydney Gazette in Swords, Billy Blue, 45; Sydney Gazette, July 9, 1829.
- 104 Swords, Billy Blue, 39; other descriptions from Blue’s obituary in the Sydney Gazette, May 8, 1834.
- 105 In this sense the term “sweep” is used to denote the lowliest of any street life.
106. Sydney Gazette, October 31, 1833.
- 107 Alexander Harris, *Settlers and Convicts, or, Recollections of Sixteen Years’ Labour in the Australian Backwoods* (Melbourne University Press, 1964), 90
- 108 Extract from Baron von Hügel, *New Holland Journal*, in Tim Flannery (ed.), *The Birth of Sydney* (Melbourne: Text Publications, 1999), 251.
- 109 *Australian*, 8 May 1834.
- 110 *Sydney Gazette*, 8 May 1834