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Revolution, Rum and Marronage

The Pernicious American Spirit at Port Jackson

I find it no small irony to write about enlightenment power at Port Jackson. As a historian who is interested in the nitty gritty of ordinary lived experience in the penal colony, I have found nothing at Port Jackson that looks enlightened.

White Australians would dearly like to have a lofty foundation story about how the nation sprang from enlightenment ideals, such as the American have invented for themselves, which is why Australians don't look too closely at the circumstances in which our nation was born in a godforsaken place at the end of the world that was constituted almost entirely by the brutalised and the brutalising. This narrative is not likely to be found in any popular account of the European settlement of Australia as there is no enlightened power to be found in this tale. Looming over the narrative is the omnipresent, and utterly venal, New South Wales Corps, who ran the colony for their own personal profit for nearly two decades.

My narrative begins on 14 February 1797, when a convict named John Winbow was footslogging through virgin bush about five miles west of Port Jackson in search of a fugitive convict with the single name of Caesar. Having reached a narrow rock shelter in a sandstone ridge he knew he had found his quarry then and settled down to wait for the outlaw to show himself. Having once made his living as a highwayman, it went against the grain for Winbow to be hunting a fellow outlaw, but the lavish reward of five gallons of undiluted rum was too enticing for scruples.¹ Rum was the local currency at Port Jackson and five gallons represented a small fortune.

That strong liquor should become the currency was certainly not the intention of the founding Governor Captain Arthur Phillip. From the outset he had decreed that there would be no economy of exchange in this new colony at the bottom of the world. There was to be no money, and everyone regardless of their status was to receive the exact same rations. However, the officers of the New South Wales Corps arrived on the Second Fleet with very different ideas. The rapacious bunch of ne'er-do-wells who had taken commissions in the newly raised army corps regarded their exile to this godforsaken place solely in terms of profit.

As soon as their feet hit dry land the New South Wales Corps were dealing in contraband. It was the arrival of the American whaler *Hope* with a large shipment of rum in 1792 that properly set them up. The commanding officer directed the commissary to buy up all 7600 gallons on the ship, which was given to his junior officers to dispense. He gave strict instructions that rum must not get into the possession of the convicts but he might have saved his breath.² The officers of New South Wales Corps were no respecter of persons. Having watered down the rum and decanted

1 The reward notice for the death and capture of the outlaw Caesar is reproduced in *Historical Records of New South Wales (HRNSW)*, Vol. 3, 11.

2 Francis Grose to Henry Dundas 9 Jan. 1793, *HRNSW*, Vol. 2, 2.

it into wine bottles, they sold to all and sundry at a profit of 400 per cent. They also used the rum as barter, which allowed them to concentrate all the colony's livestock in their hands.

The purchase from the *Hope* was merely the first of many of speculations with American whalers that brought vast quantities of rum to Sydney. The spirit was made available to anyone for the barter of goods or the issue of promissory notes. Landless labourers would work for rum, ex-marines happily handed over their 25-acre grants in return for the spirit, and farmers exchanged their produce for it. Judge Advocate David Collins lamented that convicts preferred receiving rum to clothing or provisions and they would go to any lengths to procure it.³ A visiting naval officer sardonically dubbed the New South Wales Corps, the "United Company of Traffic Merchants" and observed that they kept the flow of spirit unchecked by generously extending credit, then calling in their debt at the most auspicious time, just as a promising wheat crop was due.⁴ When the crop was harvested, they acted as the broker, buying grain in return for rum, or taking it as repayment for debt, and then reselling it to the commissary at a considerable mark up. Thanks to their complete monopoly of rum all the benefits of trade accumulated in the hands of the officers of the New South Wales Corps. As Judge Advocate Collins sternly lamented, the colony was awash in "this pernicious American Spirit".⁵

The convict bounty hunter John Winbow craved all the rum he could get. Only a few years earlier he had been unloaded like an ox carcass from the stinking hold of a convict transport in the Second Fleet. Scurvy-racked after six months of lying shackled and starved in the ship's hold, he was dragged onto the shore like a dead man, stupefied from the first intake of fresh air. Many of his fellow convicts *were* dead, but Winbow was one of the lucky ones. The native currants that grew around the settlement helped repair his body, but it was the American rum that obliterated his memory.⁶ As a convicted felon he had little capacity to pay the exorbitant prices charged by the New South Wales Corps, so reward for the death of the outlaw would be his ticket to oblivion.

His quarry finally made an appearance at dusk. Caesar was a well-muscled man in his late twenties, a good head taller than most in the colony, and he was holding a musket at the ready. But Winbow's musket was already cocked. One close shot brought the outlaw down.⁷

Caesar's death was speedily communicated to Judge Advocate Collins in Sydney who recorded the momentous event in his diary writing: "Thus ended a man who certainly during life, could never have been estimated at one remove above the brute".⁸ This was an extraordinary comment for Collins to make. He had been seventeen years at Port Jackson, presiding over numerous incidents of murder and child rape, yet nothing so wicked could be attributed to the dead man, whose only crime

3 David Collins [1798]. *An Account of the English Colony in NSW, with Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners etc of the Native Inhabitants of that Country*, ed. by Brian H. Fletcher, 1975. Sydney: Reed/Royal Historical Society, 220.

4 The disgusted naval officer was Robert Murray quoted in: John Cobley, ed., 1962-1965. *Sydney Cove: 1788-1800*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson. Vol. 3, 68-70.

5 Collins, 219.

6 See for Winbow's biography and an account of the terrible Second Fleet: Michael Flynn, 1993. *The Second Fleet: Britain's Grim Convict Armada of 1790*. Sydney: Library of Australian History.

7 Hunter to Portland, 3 March 1796, *Historical Records of Australia, (HRA)*, Vol. 1, 1788-96, 554-55, for the official report of the death of Caesar.

8 For Caesar's obituary: Collins, 381.

was to take to the bush and steal food to stay alive. Yet Collins regarded Caesar as his particular *bete noir* because he refused to submit to British justice. Caesar was not a white Briton; he was an African American who arrived as a convict aboard the First Fleet transport ship *Alexander*, having been convicted at the Kent Assizes for stealing money.⁹ His mock-heroic name, with no surname, strongly indicated he was once a slave and was most likely a runaway from New York, who had come to England with the British army at the end of the American Revolution.¹⁰

At around six feet Caesar was a head taller than virtually all the Europeans at Port Jackson. Judge Advocate Collins identified Caesar as “the hardest working convict in the country; his frame was muscular and well calculated to hard labour”.¹¹ Caesar might have been one of the first of the new colonists to set foot on Australia in a small work party from the *Alexander* which landed at Botany Bay to cut grass to feed the livestock. The supervising officer, William Bradley reported that there was an African man in the party and he noticed that the Aborigines were especially curious to see this black man among the interlopers assaulting the land with strange weapons.¹² On arrival at Port Jackson, Caesar was allocated as servant to Lieutenant Maitland Shairp, one of a dozen officers who had served in the American Revolution. Bonds forged during that war ran deep, and for black runaways from America who had served with the British, it was a connection stood them in good stead as they began a new life at the other end of the world.¹³

There was never enough to eat at Port Jackson. The settlement may have been surrounded by water with abundant fish, but the newcomers were bewildered in this alien environment and none of them understood the seasonal movements of the shoals. Their nets remained empty. On shore they discovered a few wild berries and sweet leaves from which they concocted an interesting blend of tea for alleviating the worst effects of scurvy, but of little or no nutritional value. Within three months of landing, hunger determined the settlement’s pattern of life. This was a particular issue for a powerfully built man like Caesar, who was working as a beast of burden. On 30 April 1788, he appeared in court accused of stealing four pounds of bread from the tent of a fellow convict. Caesar denied the allegation, claiming the bread was given to him by Lieutenant Shairp. The trial record is fragmentary and it does not show whether Shairp’s evidence supported this claim or whether Caesar received a sentence.¹⁴ A year later Caesar was in court for another charge of theft of food. Judge Advocate Collins had some sympathy and agreed that Caesar’s ravenous hunger “compelled [him] to steal from others, and all his thefts were directed to that purpose”. Realising that flogging would fail to deter a starving man, Collins chose instead to extend Caesar’s sentence of transportation from seven years to life, shrewdly guessing that while Caesar’s powerful body could absorb the blow of the lash, the prospect of a life-time of forced servitude would strike terror in his soul. A fortnight into his extended sentence, Caesar decided that the unknown hinterland was less fearsome than a penal system arbitrated by David Collins.

9 Trial of Caesar, National Archives of United Kingdom (NAUK): ASSI 94/1271, ASSI 31/14.

10 For a discussion of the exodus of runaways from America after the Revolution see: Cassandra Pybus, 2006. *Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and their Global Quest for Liberty*. Boston: Beacon Press.

11 Collins, 58.

12 William Bradley, 1969. *A Voyage to New South Wales: The Journal of Lieutenant William Bradley RN of HMS Sirius, 1786–1792*. Sydney: Public Library of NSW, 62.

13 For detailed account see: *Epic Journeys of Freedom*.

14 Records of the Judge Advocate’s Bench, *State Records of New South Wales (SRNSW)*: 1/296.

Armed with a musket and a cooking pot stolen from a marine, Caesar headed into the wilderness to take his chances. After he was gone Collins noted an increase in robberies of gardens and that someone had taken the lead weights from a fishing net to make shot for a musket. A week later, Collins was highly gratified when Caesar was apprehended at the brickfields. Reappearing in court, he further incensed the judge advocate by expressing complete indifference to his death sentence, claiming that he would “create a laugh before he was turned off, by playing some trick upon the executioner”. The subversive notion of hanging as pantomime gave Collins pause. Hanging Caesar would not “have the proper or intended effect”, he decided, as the execution of “a mere animal” could not function as a deterrent. He was sent to work in chains on an island in the middle of the harbour which was the site of the settlement’s first vegetables gardens. Here Caesar was permitted to supplement his rations with the produce he grew.¹⁵

By December 1789, Caesar had been released from his chains by his sympathetic marine guards and he made another bolt for the bush taking a week’s provisions as well as the canoe used by the marines to get to and from the island. Three days later, William Bradley reported that in the night Caesar had stolen a musket from the settlement. He was at large for six weeks before he was carried back, horribly lacerated by multiple spear wounds to the arms and legs, which suggested the Aborigines were trying to drive him from their territory rather than kill him. William Bradley was present on the day of Caesar’s surrender and in his journal he wrote that Caesar told him that he had survived because “when he saw a party of natives with anything on or about their fire, he frightened them away by coming suddenly on them swaggering with his musquet”.¹⁶ Once he lost the gun he was attacked.

Under sentence of death he was taken to the hospital to recover from his wounds until he was healthy enough to be hanged. Collins was furious when Governor Phillip gave him a pardon and packed him off to Norfolk Island with a large detachment of 186 convicts.¹⁷ On Norfolk Caesar was given land to clear and farm.¹⁸ Here he formed a liaison with a white convict woman named Ann Poore and they had a daughter, Anne.¹⁹ There was also a son, John, whom he never saw because he was torn away from his pregnant wife and sent back to Port Jackson as part of a large group of male convicts deported from the island.²⁰ These men were sent away in order to forestall violence against an unruly detachment of the New South Wales Corps who had been deployed to Norfolk Island. These men appropriated the male convicts allotments of land and demanded the sexual favour of the few women on the island.²¹

Collins was not pleased to see the “incorrigibly stubborn black” back again. By December 1795 famine loomed once more at Port Jackson and Collins reported that Caesar had fled into the bush to become the model for and leader of other convict

15 Collins, 58–59.

16 Collins, 73, 76.

17 Collins, 80.

18 Ross to Phillip, 11 Feb. 1791, *HRNSW*, Vol. 1, Part 2, 447. Mollie Gillen, 1989. *The Founders of Australia: A Biographical Dictionary of the First Fleet*. Sydney: Library of Australian History: It is the source for the relationship with Caesar. There are very few marriage records from Johnston’s time on Norfolk Island.

19 The birth of Mary-Ann Poore was registered subsequently when she was baptised by Rev. Henry Fulton, see: Register of Henry Fulton, *SRNSW: BDM*, Vol. 4, R5005.

20 Collins, 57, 232.

21 King to Phillip, 19 Sept. 1792; Phillip to Dundas, 4 Oct. 1792, *HRNSW*, Vol. 1, Part 2, 653–60. King to Grose, 3 March 1793; King to Sydney, 31 March 1793, King Papers, ML C188. King to Dundas, 10 March 1794, *HRNSW*, Vol. 2, 136–37. For problems over women see: *HRNSW*, Vol. 2, 103–10.

runaways, who he had amalgamated into an outlaw gang.²² In all probability John Winbow was one of this gang. A government survey to establish the whereabouts of 300 muskets belonging to the crown found that less than fifty could be accounted for. The Governor had a good idea that these weapons were now in the hands of Caesar and his gang. This runaway presented a threat to the penal colony far more dangerous than the hostile Aborigines and what was needed was a reward lavish enough to turn one of his gang into an assassin. Five gallons of rum did the trick.²³

The outlaw 'Black' Caesar presents the very first instance of that iconic marker of colonial Australia: the bushranger. Historian Russell Ward has gone so far as to suggest that the early convict bushranger embodied more of the Australian character than any other participant in the nation's history.²⁴ The bushranger has become celebrated in history and folklore, even revered in the person of Ned Kelly with his home-forged suit of armour, who became in novelist Peter Carey's words, "an empty vessel for Australia's wildest dreams".²⁵ The romantic myth of the bushranger crystallized into the folk ballad that is second only to *Waltzing Matilda* as Australia's national song, *The Wild Colonial Boy*, which celebrates a man *who'd scorn to live in slavery, bound down by iron chains*.

In perpetuating the national myth of the bushranger commentators have missed to claim that tradition is not uniquely Australian. It is in fact an American import. The early convict bushranger, of which Caesar was the prototype, was enacting a long-established tradition among enslaved in the American colonies known as marronage, where slaves would escape into the bush and create marginal outlaw communities in alliance or mutual toleration with Indigenous people. Watkin Tench was a veteran of the American slave colonies and he clearly recognized that Caesar was engaging in marronage. Tench believed Caesar had been trying to ingratiate himself with the Aborigines "with a wish to adopt their customs and live with them: but he was always repulsed".²⁶ The assassination of Australia's first bushranger brings together the interaction of two key aspects of the pernicious American Spirit at Port Jackson: rum and marronage.

Now, Caesar was not the only slave runaway to fetch up at Port Jackson. They were eleven black convicts on the First Fleet, most of them from America, part of a large diaspora of runaway slaves who attached themselves to the British during the American Revolution. Another of these black Americans was John Randall, originally from Connecticut, convicted in Manchester for stealing a watch.²⁷ When he disembarked at Port Jackson, John Randall was especially fortunate in being appointed as servant for Lieutenant George Johnston, the Governor's aide-de-camp, who was an elite marine officer with excellent connections. Even before they both took the long voyage to Port Jackson Johnston may have known Randall. Johnston was another officer who had served in the American War, when, as mere boy of 12, he took a commission in the regiment of Lord Percy (later the Duke of Northumber-

22 Collins, 37, 377.

23 HRNSW, Vol. 3, 11.

24 Russel Ward, 1966. *The Australian Legend*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 136.

25 "Truth and Consequences", *Time International*, 30 October 2000, 60.

26 Watkin Tench [1789/1793]. 1788: *Comprising A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*, ed. by Tim Flannery, 1996. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 116.

27 The 63rd Regiment, originally raised in Manchester and later reconstituted as the West Suffolk Regiment, still had black drummers on its establishment a decade after 1785. Randall's trial was reported in the *Manchester Mercury*, 19 April 1785.

land) stationed in New York. Lord Percy particularly encouraged slave runaways into his service and took some back to England with him.²⁸

Once the fleet disembarked, it was expected that local game would supplement the rations, but the native kangaroo was acutely sensitive to danger and moved with astonishing speed. The cumbersome Brown Bess musket was virtually useless for hunting unless handled by a first-rate marksman. The three best shots in the colony were chosen as game-shooters. The Governor and his second in command each employed white convicts as game shooters, but the third convict licensed to shoot game was George Johnson's black convict servant John Randall.²⁹ These three game shooters were permitted an enviable freedom to move through and beyond the settlement, without supervision, ranging at will through the bush, tracking and shooting kangaroo.

The shooters were often out for days at a time, with bountiful occasion to procure fresh meat for themselves and for their close associates. They were regularly included in the Governor's exploratory excursions and John Randall was almost certainly one of the two marksmen who, in April 1788, accompanied Governor Phillip, Lieutenant Johnston and a bevy of officers on the expedition to Broken Bay, north of Port Jackson. He also escorted Phillip and Johnston to Botany Bay in May 1788, and was surely the black tent-carrier mentioned on the third expedition to Broken Bay in August 1788.³⁰

By August 1788 there was the chronic shortage of able-bodied workers at Port Jackson and any person who could stand upright and carry a load was pressed into labour. John Randall was a strong man over six feet tall, so it was inevitable he was put to work. No doubt he resented this demotion to a life of hard labour. On 17 October 1788 he and his work mate were charged with disobedience to the master carpenter. Curiously, the charge against Randall was withdrawn the next day, but not against his workmate, indication that this black man had someone of influence looking out for him. That someone was surely George Johnston.

As a strong man with a powerful patron, freedom of movement and regular access to fresh meat, Randall was a cut above any ordinary felon at Port Jackson and an enviable catch as a husband. It is highly significant that within weeks of arrival Randall was married to a white female convict, given that the few women convicts on the First Fleet were almost exclusively taken up as partners by the marine officers and soldiers. Ester Howard was the first of three white women Randall would marry in the course of his life in the colony.

Randall maintained good relations with the Aborigines while he was in the bush with a gun, but his fellow white shooter, convict John McIntyre, inspired a deep enmity among the Aborigines, probably for interfering with their women. One night in December 1790 all three game-shooters were hunting at Botany Bay, south of Sydney and had constructed a hut after the Aboriginal fashion, waiting until dawn to hunt the wary kangaroo. Around midnight, they found themselves surrounded by Aboriginal men with spears. McIntyre reassured his fellow shooters that he knew these men, putting down his musket to walk towards them. Suddenly one of the Aborigines jumped on a fallen log and deliberately speared McIntyre in his left side.

28 The most famous of the black recruits of Lord Percy was the bare-knuckle boxer Bill Richmond.

29 Collins, 108, names Randall as one of the three official game shooters.

30 Phillip to Sydney, *HRNSW*, Vol. 1, Part 2, 191.

The weapon used was specially designed to cause the maximum damage, serrated with a series of stone barbs, attached by gum resin, that broke off and lodged within McIntyre's body. A slow and excruciatingly painful death was guaranteed.

Watkin Tench knew that McIntyre had given serious offence to the Aborigines and told the Governor so, but Governor Phillip insisted that the killing was unprovoked and determined upon a massive reprisal. Tench was instructed to lead an expedition to Botany Bay to bring back the Aboriginal leader Pemulwuy and the heads of another six men. John Randall was one of the two guides for this grisly expedition of fifty men who left at dawn carrying muskets, hatchets for decapitation and bags for the heads. When the over-heated, insect-bitten party finally reached Botany Bay they were unable to find a single Aborigine and they had to trudge back to Sydney, only to be ordered out again. This time Tench instructed his guides to find the quickest route to Botany Bay and the game-shooters led them to a swampy area, which, they advised, was bad to cross but the quickest way. Desperate for the advantage, Tench urged his men on, only to become mired in quicksand. He and his men would have been smothered had not the ropes intended for the Aboriginal victims been used to pull them free. Badly shaken and encrusted with mud, they continued a rapid march to the designated Aboriginal settlement. "To our astonishment [...] we found not a single native at the huts", wrote Tench, "nor was a canoe to be seen on any part of the bay".³¹ The Aborigines had been gone for days.

One person who gained an advantage from these farcical events was John Randall. Having failed to lead the head-hunting marines to their quarry, he incurred no personal enmity from the Aborigines and he continued to hunt unmolested. At the same time, he had demonstrated his trustworthiness and loyalty to the Governor, which stood him in good stead. With the arrival of the Second Fleet his circumstances improved even further. He was married for a second time to Mary Butler who arrived on the Second Fleet. Also on that fleet was the New South Wales Corps and Randall was appointed to be the personal shooter for a senior officer, Nicholas Nepean, who was a man with powerful family connections. Randall was permitted to live in absolute independence at Parramatta, armed and at liberty to move outside the settlement. When he finished his sentence in April 1792 he remained in Parramatta, where he was appointed as a shooter for the dilatory Major Francis Grose, commanding officer of the New South Wales Corps who had finally arrived in Sydney for what proved to be a very brief stay.

Grose sought to augment the New South Wales Corps' strength by recruiting a second company from among those discharged marines who had chosen to remain in the colony. Governor Phillip put forward George Johnston as the man most deserving to command this company, and he was given a commission as captain. Randall technically remained the shooter for Major Grose, who had promptly returned to England, so in reality he was George Johnston's man, and George Johnston proved to be the most successful entrepreneur in the corps. As well as benefiting from the officers' monopoly of the rum trade, Johnston had been granted many hundreds of acres and he appropriated cattle from the government herd for his land. He was by far the richest man in the colony and in 1799 he was appointed Governor Hunter's aide-de-camp. Randall came with him.

31 Watkin Tench, *1788: Comprising A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*, ed. by Tim Flannery, 164-176.

He appears to have been living at Government House on the evening of Wednesday 5 June 1799 when a servant at Government House intercepted Randall carrying “sundry plates and glasses” between the kitchen and the gate to the sentry box. Randall gave an ambiguous explanation for this behaviour and the items were returned to the kitchen. That would have been the end of the matter, except that at ten o’clock that night the constable on duty saw Randall sneaking out of the house with more kitchenware. After making a tackle, the constable arrested Randall, the evidence surrounding him on the ground: five whole and two broken glasses.

When the case came before the court a few days later, the judge took a very dim view of a black man who was time-served convict caught stealing from the Governor and his letter to the Governor sternly advised “exemplary punishment” for Randall. The judge was astonished to receive Governor Hunter’s response the following morning. The Governor advised that he had received “a petition from Black Randall expressing his sincere contrition” and required the judge to “take the trouble to order him to be liberated”.³² John Randall was illiterate and had been incarcerated in gaol for four days, so clearly some well-placed person interceded on his behalf. Captain George Johnston, no doubt.

Randall continued in his accustomed position for a few months, with Hunter’s indulgence, but in November 1799 his circumstances changed when Colonel William Paterson arrived in the colony as the new commanding officer. Paterson carried explicit orders to clean up the abuses practiced by the officers of the New South Wales Corps and the officer most immediately in his sights was George Johnston, who was soon arrested for selling over-priced spirits and sent back to England for trial.³³

At the time of Johnston’s arrest, Randall was living back in Parramatta, where he appeared as plaintiff in a criminal case against a recently arrived Irish convict accused of stealing a pound of tea [a substantial luxury] from his house. Randall stated in his evidence that Kit Murphy had come to his house asking for a gill of “spiritous liquor” and then she drank a lot more before stealing his tea, or so Randall claimed. The constable at Parramatta testified that he often saw the woman “in the habits of intercourse with Randall and she was frequently at his house”. Her version was that “Black Randall had been beating her and offering her tea to sleep with him”. The assistant surgeon said he found marks of violence on her thighs and knees and the case against her was dismissed.³⁴

The magistrates obviously believed that Randall had the capacity to liberally provide large quantities of spirits to the woman who called at his house and to make such an expensive gift of tea. The evidence clearly indicates that Randall was a retailer of commodities and spirits on behalf of an officer of the New South Wales Corps, who always used trusted ex-convicts for this purpose, as a gentleman could not be seen to engage in anything as tawdry as trade. In just this way an ex-convict servant to a prominent military officer could become a wealthy man.

Retailing for the New South Wales Corps kept Randall and his family comfortably housed and supplied with the best goods, but his situation became precarious when Johnston was arrested. With a wife and three children to support, Randall was

32 Court of Criminal Jurisdiction 7 June 1799, *SRNSW*: R655, 8.

33 *HRNSW*, Vol. 4, 82–83, for the arrest of Johnston, and King’s sustained attack upon his character.

34 Barbara Hall, 2000. *A Desperate Set of Villains*. Sydney/Coogee, NSW: B. Hall, 193.

hard-pressed. He was forced to take up farming on the land he had been granted years before. In the face of relentless drought, bushfire, and a plague of caterpillars, his harvests were so meagre that he was unable to produce enough food. In the 1800 census he was listed with four pigs, five goats, and four acres planted, but he, his wife and three children were all being fed by the government store.³⁵ To better his prospects Randall looked to the solution he knew best: the New South Wales Corps.

There had been an increase in the pay for privates and instructions were issued in London for the Corps to recruit more of them from within the colony. Time-expired convicts were allowed to enlist if they were military veterans with a record of good behaviour and required a well-placed person to write a recommendation.³⁶ Randall was a veteran, but the stolen glasses from Government House presented a problem. He discovered a solution in the unlikely form of the Irish rebel Joseph Holt, who was managing the farm of the New South Wales Corps' paymaster, William Cox, which was close to Randall's land grant. Holt agreed to Randall's proposal that he should buy Randall's grant for a reduced price in return for sending a glowing recommendation to Colonel Paterson.³⁷

Paterson was, of course, well aware of Randall as an expert marksman and guide, both useful skills. But Randall had more to offer: he played the flute and drum. Paterson had grand ambitions to establish a regimental band. Randall was readily accepted as a soldier, and he soon held a privileged position as member of the band. To all intents and purposes, playing in the band was all that was ever required of him, although he probably did a bit of game shooting as well.³⁸ A curious French visitor noted that "a numerous and well composed band" was in concert every morning at the parade ground in front of the officers barracks. Nearby he noticed the officers' mess, which like the band instruments, was financed from the public purse.³⁹ The most important diversion for the officers was the formal mess dinner, where they and their guests would eat, drink and carouse, while the regimental band entertained them. These dinners were uninhibited affairs and Randall's regular attendance would have afforded him a more intimate interaction with the officers than an ordinary private might normally enjoy.

The soldiers displayed remarkably strong bonds of loyalty to their officers, strengthened by the trickle-down effect from the trade in rum. In turn the officers closed ranks to protect soldiers from being exposed to criminal charges. George Johnston was especially idolised. Randall would not have been alone in rejoicing when Johnston returned to Sydney in December 1801 with the charges against him quashed thanks to his patron, the Duke of Northumberland.

Randall's life in the New South Wales Corps continued to be singularly untaxing: he was never rostered on guard duty, though other band members were and when members of his company were detached to Norfolk Island or Port Dalrymple,

35 Carol J. Baxter, ed., 1988. 1800 Muster Book, *Musters and Lists, New South Wales and Norfolk Island, 1800–1802*. Sydney: ABGR.

36 For the policy on recruitment of ex-convicts see: Collins, 254. King to Bowering, 24 March 1799, *HRNSW*, Vol. 3, 651, and recruitment notice, 24 Nov. 1799, *HRA*, Vol. 3, 593.

37 Joseph Holt, *A Rum Story: The Adventures of Joseph Holt Thirteen Years in New South Wales, 1800–1812*, ed. by Peter O'Shaughnessy, 1988. Sydney: Kangaroo Press, 66–67.

38 For regimental details see NÅUK: WO12/9900.

39 The French visitor was Peron, quoted in Tim Flannery, ed., 1999. *The Birth of Sydney*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 177. For the transaction on musical instruments see the Cox and Greenwood Ledger reproduced in: Pamela Statham, ed., 1992. *A Colonial Regiment: New Sources Relating to the New South Wales Corps, 1789–1810*, Canberra: P. Statham, 106, 140.

Randall always remained in Sydney, lounging about the barracks, or engaged in some informal activity not recorded in the regimental ledger. A senior officer ensured that Randall's soft billet continued and this had to be George Johnston, now promoted to Major. His nice life continued for another eight years.⁴⁰

Successive Governors were impotent to control the officers of the New South Wales Corps and they didn't really try. That changed in 1806/07 when Governor William Bligh took hold of the reins. As a naval officer Bligh was instantly despised. For his part he saw the colony's elite as opportunistic riff-raff who needed to be brought into line. Foremost in his sights were the senior officers of the corps, in particular the outgoing paymaster John Macarthur, who had resigned his commission to become the largest landholder in the colony. Early in 1808 Bligh took the fatal step of having Macarthur arrested for treason, thereby igniting a dramatic coup.

On 26 January 1808 400 soldiers with bayonets fixed marched to Government House led by the regimental band where they put the Governor under arrest. Major George Johnston was declared the new Governor to great public acclaim.⁴¹ For a day or so it was unsafe for civilians unless they indicated their support for the new Governor by posting signs in their windows saying "Johnston for Ever". Two days after the Governor's arrest the colony celebrated around an enormous bonfire at the waterfront, where officers and their ladies mingled happily with the excited soldiers and common folk, while John Randall and the regimental band struck up the tune "Silly Old Man".⁴²

The reign of the New South Wales Corps came to an end on the morning of 31 December 1809, when Governor Lachlan Macquarie stepped ashore at the Government Wharf and led the 73rd regiment on an unsteady march towards the parade ground. The regimental band played, though John Randall was not present. He was on the sick list; sick at heart, perhaps that his cosy career in the New South Wales Corps was finished. His patron George Johnston had been sent to England to face a court martial for treason and Randall was discharged on 24 April 1810. For the first time Randall was forced to rely solely on his own resources.

In December he secured a lowly position as one of the constables appointed to patrol the town at night. His job was to keep an eye out for disorderly characters, to ensure that places licensed to sell spirits were shut by nine o'clock, and to arrest anyone found drinking in unlicensed premises. For a man with Randall's history, this was expecting the fox to look after the henhouse. He was abruptly dismissed a year later.⁴³

In February 1814, Randall put his land, with house and furniture, up for auction to repay debts. Soon after he accepted employment as the resident manager of a remote 700-acre property at distant Broken Bay. He was still at Broken Bay in 1816 when he was mentioned in the *Sydney Gazette* because his two sons were drowned attempting to cross over to Manly. After that he disappeared from the record.⁴⁴ He

40 For the details of Randall's army career in New South Wales: NAUK: WO12/9900, WO12/9901, WO12/9902, WO12/9903, WO12/9904, WO12/9905, WO12/8000, WO 25/642, WO25/1342.

41 For accounts of the coup see *HRNSW*, Vol. 6, 549; Watkin Tench to Edward Macarthur, 2 Sept. 1808, *HRNSW*, Vol. 6, 728; Bligh to Castlereagh, 30 June 1808, *HRA*, Vol. 6, 533.

42 John Ritchie, ed., 1988. *A Charge of Mutiny: The Court-Martial of Lieutenant Colonel George Johnston for Deposing Governor William Bligh in the Rebellion of 26 January 1808*. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 114.

43 Notices 1 Jan. 1810, and 7 Sept. 1811, *HRNSW*, Vol. 7, 479–86, 585–86.

44 *Sydney Gazette*, 20 July 1816.

must have died before 1822, when his third wife Fanny Randall petitioned the Colonial Secretary for her two daughters to be taken into the orphans' home.⁴⁵

John Randall may have eventually come to a poor end, but it is extraordinary that this unlettered black convict who was a serial offender fared so well for so many years at Port Jackson. The unlikely relationship of close patronage between this runaway slave and the elite officer who made himself the Governor, points to the most potent American spirit that influenced the course of events in the early years at Port Jackson: the American Revolution.⁴⁶

45 Petition to Colonial Secretary, 8 May 1822, SRNSW: CS R6040, 4/403, 85.

46 The profound impact of the American Revolution on the founding of Australia is explored in: Cassandra Pybus, 2006. *Black Founders: The Unknown Story of Australia's First Black Settlers*. Sydney: UNSW Press.