



# Stories from Australia's History

## Captain Bligh and the Rum Rebellion

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GRAPHIC  
PAGES!

When a word is printed in **bold**, click on it to find its meaning.

ON THE GRAPHIC PAGES, TEXT WITH THIS COLOURED BACKGROUND COMES FROM A HISTORICAL SOURCE.



# Stories from Australia's history

The story of modern Australia starts on 26 January 1788. On that day, Captain Arthur Phillip arrived at Sydney Cove from England with the **convict** ships of the First Fleet. The new **settlement** brought disaster to Australia's **Indigenous peoples** because the newcomers took their land. This event marks the beginning of Australia as we know it today.

In 1790, a **military** unit called the New South Wales **Corps** was sent to guard the new **colony** against invasion or attack. The colony was run by a **governor**, and the members of the Corps were supposed to answer to him. However, they quickly gained power and stopped taking orders. Soon, they were controlling all trade in the colony, and taking the best land for themselves. In 1806 a new governor, William Bligh, was sent to take back control of the colony.

The conflict that followed between Bligh and the New South Wales Corps is known as the '**Rum Rebellion**'. It is one of the key events in Australia's history.

## What does it mean?

**Rebellion:** Armed resistance against a government.

Australian soldiers, such as the Australian Federation Guard, are loyal to the prime minister, but early governors such as Bligh were not shown the same loyalty.



# Captain Bligh and the Rum Rebellion

In the early evening of 26 January 1808, Major George Johnston marched 300 armed soldiers of the New South Wales Corps up Bridge Street, Sydney, towards Government House. They were on their way to arrest Governor Bligh and take control of the colony. Settlers lined the street and cheered the troops because they disliked the tough and demanding governor. Bligh's great enemy, a former Corps captain named John Macarthur, marched with the troops. Macarthur and the Corps had overthrown the legal government of the colony and seized power for themselves.

The arrest of Governor Bligh by the New South Wales Corps was the result of a desperate power struggle between the military and the government. It was the only time in Australian history that the government was overthrown by the military.

This is the story of the people, the ideas and the events that led to the Rum Rebellion, and how it changed Australia forever.

This painting shows how the soldiers of the New South Wales Corps were cheered as they marched to arrest Governor Bligh.





# The big picture

The New South Wales Corps had a duty to obey the **governor** and support the government. However, most of the soldiers were rough and untrained, and their officers were poor leaders, loyal only to each other. Governor Arthur Phillip kept tight control over them, but after he left in 1792, the Corps began to do as they liked. They granted themselves land and **convicts** to work it, and took control of all the trade in the colony.

## Buying and selling goods

The officers of the New South Wales Corps were paid by the British government. They used their British pounds to buy food and other goods from **merchants** visiting Sydney. Nobody else in Sydney had any money – the settlers did all their buying and selling by swapping and bartering goods. By the 1790s, Corps officers were buying whole **cargoes**, then selling the goods to the settlers at much higher prices. Without money, the settlers could not buy supplies direct from the merchant ships. They had to buy goods from the Corps officers and pay whatever they demanded. Prices became very high, and poor settlers suffered.

Almost all the ships that visited the colony brought **rum**, and soon settlers were also making it themselves. Rum quickly became the most popular form of payment in the colony. Workers were often paid in rum, and the colony was full of drunken men and women. Corps officers made a lot of money from the rum trade – so much so that they were nicknamed the ‘Rum Corps’. Before long, they were the richest and most powerful people in the colony.

In the early 1800s, almost all supplies in the colony were shipped in from overseas, so trading ships were important to the survival of the colony.



## Power struggles

After Governor Phillip left, governors John Hunter (1795–1800) and Philip Gidley King (1800–1806) tried to break the power of the Corps. They passed laws taxing rum and limiting the amount of alcohol the officers could import. By 1800, rich Sydney merchants such as Robert Campbell began to take business away from the Corps officers. The power was shifting. When Governor Bligh came to New South Wales in 1806 he was determined to defeat the Corps. However, the men of the Corps would not give up their power without a fight.



Governor Bligh (below) was determined to achieve what former governors Hunter (left) and King (right) had not been able to do – control the Corps and restore power to the government.

## Eyewitness words

“I am not here for my ease or comfort but to do **justice** and relieve the poor settlers, who must be the support of the country and are **honest** (more honest) men than those who wish to keep them under.”

Letter from Governor William Bligh to Joseph Banks, around 1806





# Key people

Three people played key roles in the rebellion.

## William Bligh

**Born:** 9 September 1754 in the port of Plymouth, England

**Role:** Governor of New South Wales

**Age at the time of the rebellion (1808):** 53

**Died:** 1817

**Appearance:** Short, stocky, round face, pale skin, bright blue eyes, thinning hair

**Character:** Courageous, stubborn and proud, with a terrible temper. Bligh liked praise but was a poor judge of others. He hid self-doubt beneath a strict and formal mask.

**Comments:** Bligh was a brilliant seaman who showed great courage in battle. He was not violent, but his wild temper, poor judgement and proud manner turned men against him. Bligh suffered two rebellions, including the famous **mutiny** on the ship *Bounty* in 1789, during which he was thrown off his ship and set adrift in an open boat. He survived through brilliant seamanship, sailing 6700 kilometres to Timor. Bligh was a terrible choice of governor of New South Wales during the struggles with the **Corps**, and only made things worse.



### What does it mean?

**mutiny:** an uprising against a person or people in power

## John Macarthur

**Born:** 1767 near Plymouth, England

**Role:** The mastermind behind the rebellion

**Age at the time of the rebellion:** 41

**Died:** 1834

**Appearance:** Average height, thin, brown hair, narrow face, steely brown eyes

**Character:** Clever, cold, proud and determined, a loner with a fierce, slow-burning will to get his way, which made him many enemies.

**Comments:** Macarthur was a former officer of the Corps who had become extremely wealthy. He was brilliant businessman and **grazier** who did a lot to make the **colony** a success. Macarthur owned land and trading ships and had a great deal of power. However, he constantly picked fights with others and plotted against his enemies. An ideas man, he could fire up an angry crowd but could not inspire loyalty.



## Major George Johnston

**Born:** 1764 in Annandale, Scotland

**Role:** Commander of the New South Wales Corps and leader of the rebellion

**Age at the time of the rebellion:** 43

**Died:** 1823

**Appearance:** Tall, lean, handsome, thick white hair, kindly expression

**Character:** Popular, friendly, sensible and good-natured but easily led by others.

**Comments:** Johnston was a highly respected officer until the rebellion. However, he allowed himself to be heavily influenced by Macarthur and turned out to be a weak leader.





# Trouble in New South Wales

The British Government was worried about New South Wales. The settlement was awash with rum, trade was controlled by a few rich men and no one could control the New South Wales Corps. The colony needed a strong man to govern it. William Bligh, the famously strict and tough navy commander, was chosen for the job.

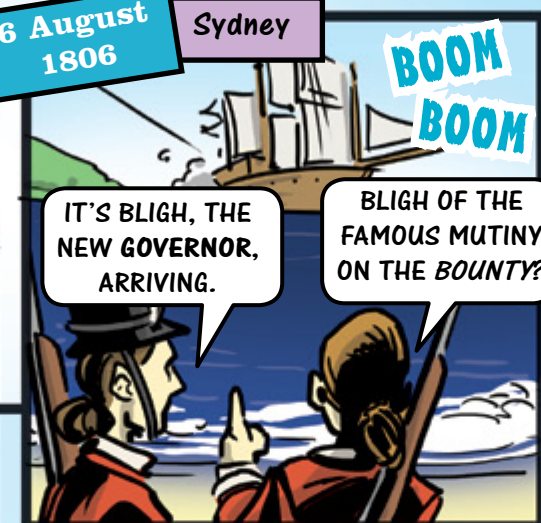
London, England



BE FIRM, BLIGH, AND WATCH OUT FOR THAT TROUBLEMAKER MACARTHUR.

I WILL TAKE CONTROL, SIR.

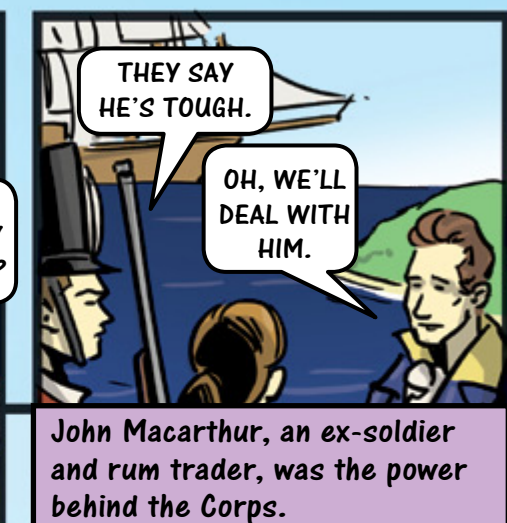
6 August 1806 Sydney



IT'S BLIGH, THE NEW GOVERNOR, ARRIVING.

BOOM BOOM

BLIGH OF THE FAMOUS MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY?



THEY SAY HE'S TOUGH.

OH, WE'LL DEAL WITH HIM.

John Macarthur, an ex-soldier and rum trader, was the power behind the Corps.

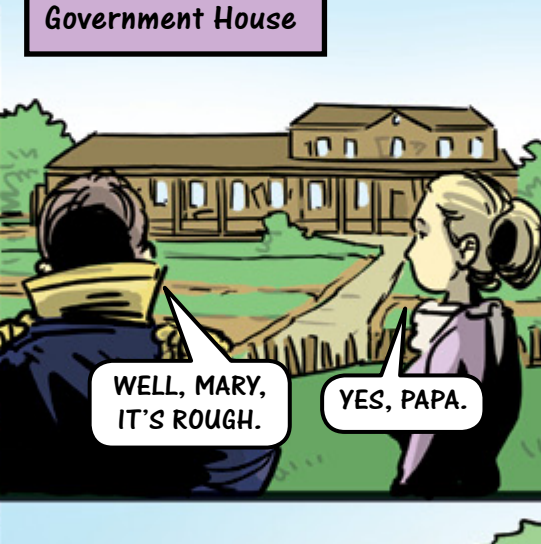


WELCOME, GOVERNOR.

THANK YOU, MAJOR JOHNSTON.

BANG

Government House



WELL, MARY, IT'S ROUGH.

YES, PAPA.



BUT I'M HERE TO WORK AND SET THINGS RIGHT.

A few days later, John Macarthur led an official welcome party ...



WE, THE FREE MEN OF SYDNEY, WELCOME YOU ...

SO THIS IS THE TROUBLEMAKER I WAS WARNED ABOUT.

HOORAY!

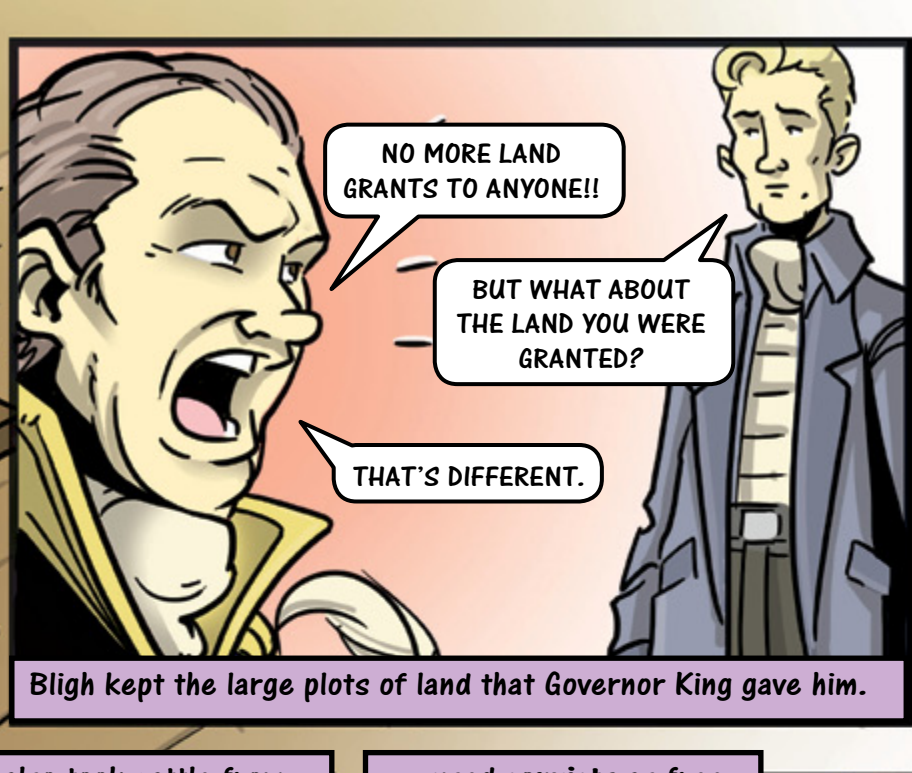
MACARTHUR DOESN'T SPEAK FOR US.

Governor Bligh got to work.



THEY'RE MOSTLY CORPS OFFICERS, SIR.

WHY HAVE ALL THESE PEOPLE BEEN GIVEN LAND?



NO MORE LAND GRANTS TO ANYONE!!

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE LAND YOU WERE GRANTED?

THAT'S DIFFERENT.

Bligh kept the large plots of land that Governor King gave him.



BLIGH HAS STOPPED OUR LAND GRANTS.

YES, HE'S KEEPING THE LAND FOR HIMSELF.

Bligh also took cattle from the government herd ...



... used convicts as free labour to work his land ...



... and used government money to build his houses.



IT'S NOT FAIR.

October

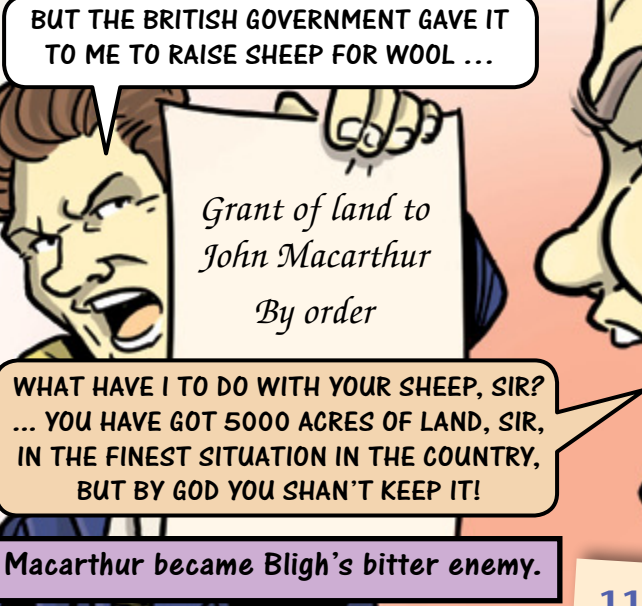
Macarthur visited Governor Bligh.



WHEN CAN I TAKE UP MY NEW LAND?

YOU HAVE PLENTY OF LAND ALREADY!

BUT THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT GAVE IT TO ME TO RAISE SHEEP FOR WOOL ...



Grant of land to John Macarthur By order

WHAT HAVE I TO DO WITH YOUR SHEEP, SIR? ... YOU HAVE GOT 5000 ACRES OF LAND, SIR, IN THE FINEST SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY, BUT BY GOD YOU SHAN'T KEEP IT!

Macarthur became Bligh's bitter enemy.



Meanwhile, the poor settlers asked Bligh for help.



THE FLOODS RUINED OUR CROPS, SIR.

WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH FOOD.



MACARTHUR HAS PLENTY OF MEAT LAMBS HE COULD SELL YOU.

HE'S KEEPING THEM SO SUPPLY IS SHORT AND HE CAN DRIVE UP THE PRICE.

HMM ...



GIVE THESE TO THE POOR FARMERS.

THAT'LL DRIVE DOWN THE PRICES. MACARTHUR WON'T BE HAPPY.

YES, GOVERNOR.



**February 1807**

Bligh tried to stop the trade in rum.

No man or woman shall make or trade in rum or spirits. By order. Governor Wm Bligh

THIS WILL RUIN OUR BUSINESS!



BLIGH IS MAKING TROUBLE FOR US.

HE'S TAKEN OUR LAND AND RUINED OUR TRADE.

I WON'T STAND FOR IT!



**Macarthur's house, Parramatta**

BLIGH WON'T STOP ME TRADING RUM, ELIZABETH.

NO, DEAR.

Macarthur had ordered a rum-making kit called a still from England.



**22 October**

YOUR STILL IS HERE, SIR.

GOOD.

STOP! I'M TAKING THIS. STILLS ARE BANNED.

SORRY - GOVERNOR'S ORDERS.

BUT I ORDERED IT BEFORE HE BANNED THEM!



THE GOVERNOR HAS NO RIGHT TO TAKE A MAN'S PRIVATE PROPERTY!

Macarthur decided to take the matter to court.



**The Magistrates Court, Sydney, a few days later ...**

... A BRITISH SUBJECT ... HAS HAD HIS PROPERTY WRESTED (TAKEN) FROM HIM ... WITHOUT ANY AUTHORITY ... OR REASON ... THAN IT WAS THE GOVERNOR'S ORDER.



HE HAS A POINT, ATKINS.

I AGREE, MAJOR JOHNSTON.

YES, SO DO I.

Macarthur won his case against Bligh.

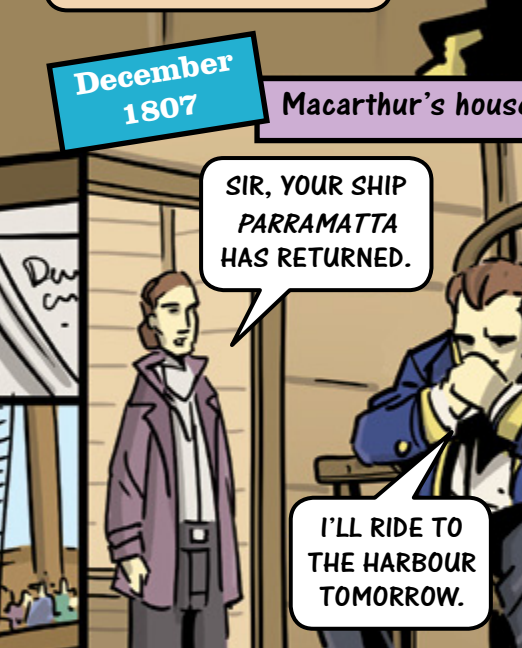


**Government House**

WHAT?! YOU IDIOT, ATKINS!

BUT, SIR, I ...

DON'T YOU SEE MACARTHUR'S MAKING ME LOOK A FOOL?



**December 1807**

**Macarthur's house**

SIR, YOUR SHIP PARRAMATTA HAS RETURNED.

I'LL RIDE TO THE HARBOUR TOMORROW.



WHAT'S GOING ON?

THAT SHIP AND CREW STAY THERE UNTIL YOU PAY UP.

A convict had escaped on the Parramatta's last trip, so Macarthur, the ship's owner, had to pay a fine.



I WON'T PAY IT!

THEN YOU CAN'T UNLOAD THE CARGO.

Macarthur left the Parramatta and her crew stranded in the harbour.



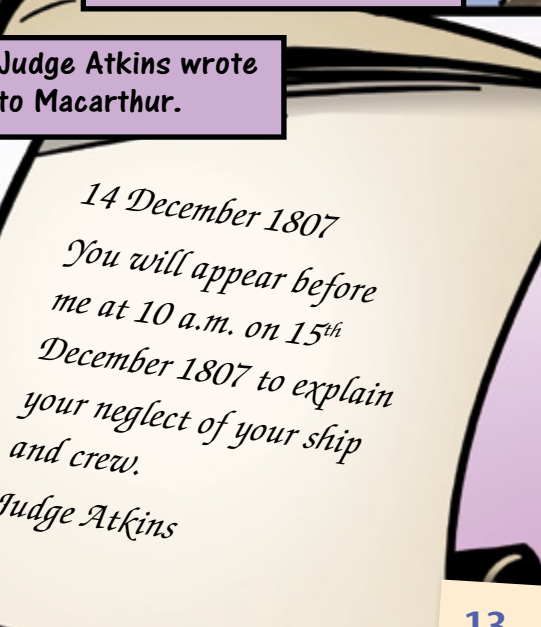
WHAT'LL WE DO, CAPTAIN GLEN?

LET'S ASK JUDGE ATKINS.



YOU HAVE COME ASHORE AGAINST THE GOVERNOR'S ORDER!

WE HAD TO, SIR. MACARTHUR LEFT US NO FOOD.



**Judge Atkins wrote to Macarthur.**

14 December 1807

You will appear before me at 10 a.m. on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1807 to explain your neglect of your ship and crew.

Judge Atkins





16 December 1807

Magistrates Court

WE CANNOT ALLOW HIM TO IGNORE THE LAW, JOHNSTON.

YOU'RE RIGHT, ATKINS. I'LL TALK TO HIM.

Macarthur plotted to get Atkins sacked as a judge ...

21 December 1807  
Governor Bligh,  
Atkins owes me £82 and refuses to repay the debt. This makes him unfit to sit in judgment at my trial.  
John Macarthur

... but Bligh ignored the complaint.



Oakes rode to Macarthur's house in Parramatta.

YOU'RE UNDER ARREST, MACARTHUR.

... I NEVER WILL SUBMIT TO THE HORRID TYRANNY ... I CONSIDER IT WITH SCORN AND CONTEMPT AS I DO THE PERSONS WHO HAVE [SENT YOU].

Parramatta, later that day.

FACE THE COURT AND ARGUE YOUR CASE, MACARTHUR.

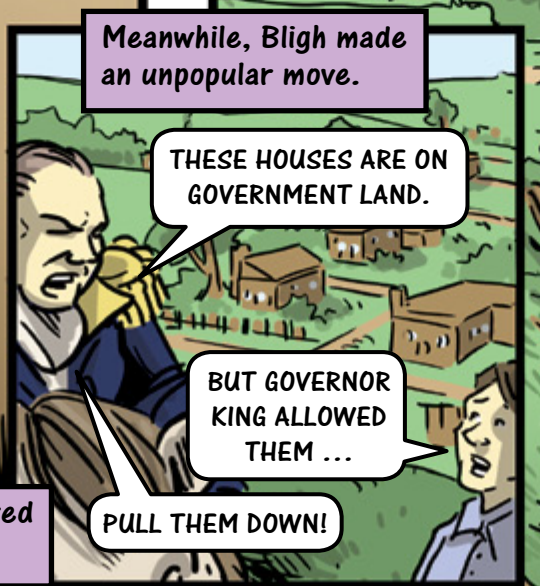


ALL THE OTHER MAGISTRATES SUPPORT YOU. YOU'LL GET OFF.



Next day, Macarthur appeared in court ...

... and was let out on bail to await his trial.



Meanwhile, Bligh made an unpopular move.

NO ONE'S HOUSE IS SAFE.

WHERE CAN WE GO?

NO!

Bligh warned all the settlers not to build on government land.



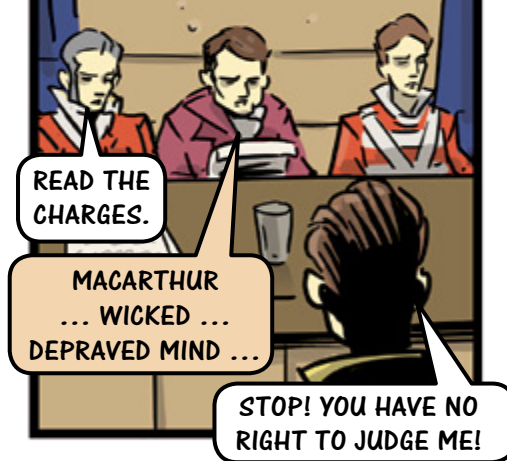
13 January 1808

Bligh warned Macarthur not to break the new law.

BLIGH CAN'T STOP ME. I'LL SHOW HIM!

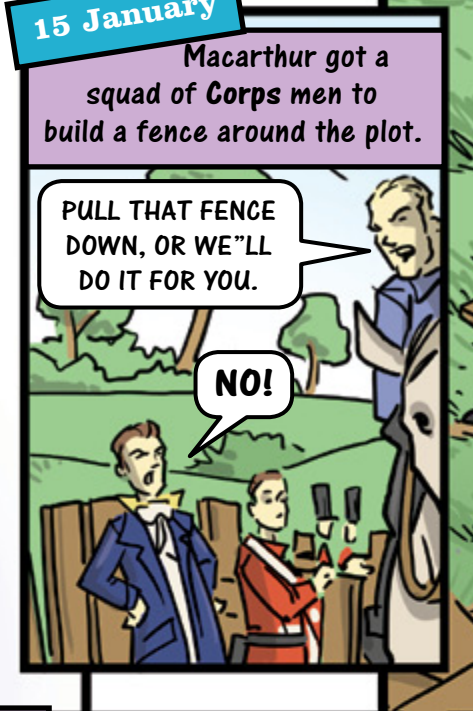
25 January

The court case about Macarthur's ship began. Apart from Atkins, the magistrates were Macarthur's friends.



The other judges wrote to Bligh asking for a new judge.

HOW DARE THEY SACK ATKINS - THAT'S A CRIME!



15 January

Macarthur got a squad of Corps men to build a fence around the plot.



Macarthur put the fence up again, defying the governor's orders.



4 p.m.

Bligh regarded Macarthur as an escaped criminal because he had not faced trial.

CAPTURE MACARTHUR!

YES, SIR.

Bligh also ordered the judges to come to him the next day to face criminal charges.



Judge Atkins was scared and ran away. The other magistrates set Macarthur free, although he had not had a proper trial.

5.30 p.m.

Bligh sent for Major Johnston, the Corps commander, who was sick in bed.



Bligh had lost control of the colony.



# Viewpoints

Some people in New South Wales saw **Governor Bligh** as a dangerous, power-mad leader who threatened people's lives and twisted the laws to suit himself. They felt that by standing up to Bligh, John Macarthur was defending **justice** and freedom. However, others believed that Bligh had done no wrong, and that Macarthur was determined to destroy the legal government so he could hold on to his power. The following extracts show these two different points of view.

## The rebels

John Macarthur and his supporters claimed they had to act against Bligh to uphold freedom and justice in the **colony**. They wrote to William Bligh and accused him of committing crimes:

“... it appears that you (Governor Bligh) have been acting upon a settled plan to subvert (undermine) the laws, to terrify and influence the Courts of Justice, and to ... (take away from) every person who had the misfortune to be obnoxious (offensive) to you ... their property, **liberty** and lives.”

Nicholas Bayley and others in a letter to William Bligh, 28 January 1808



After his arrest, the New South Wales Corps circulated this cartoon of Governor Bligh hiding under the bed to make him look foolish and try to justify their actions.

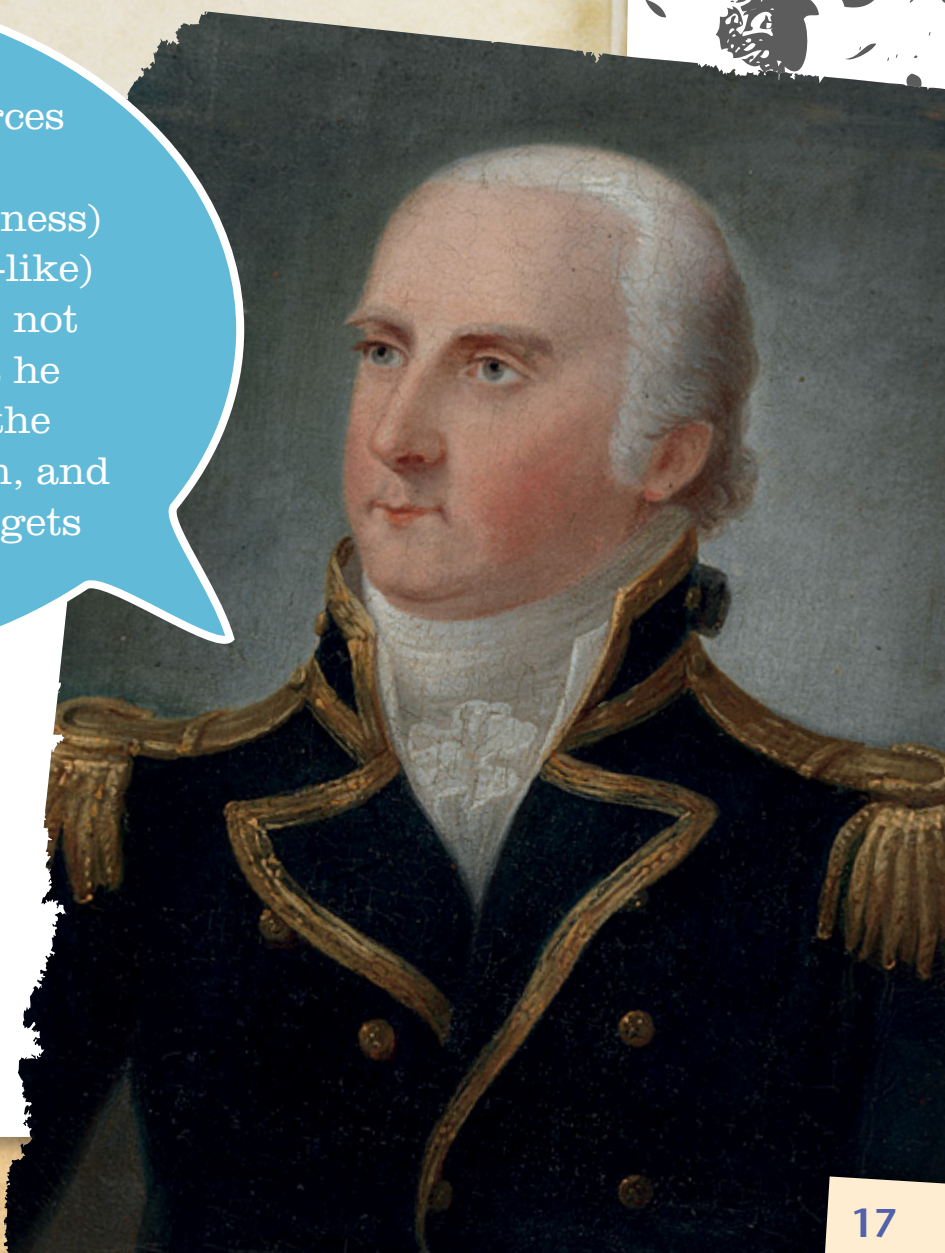
## Philip Gidley King, governor of New South Wales, 1800–1806

Philip Gidley King was governor of New South Wales before Captain Bligh arrived. Like Bligh, King tried hard to limit Macarthur's trade in **rum** and weaken his power. However, Macarthur plotted to have King removed by writing letters of complaint to the government in England. Governor King believed Macarthur was an evil, greedy man who would stop at nothing to get his way. He wrote this letter to the Duke of Portland complaining about Macarthur:

“... there are no resources which art, cunning (sly cleverness), impudence (rudeness) and a pair of basilisk (snake-like) eyes can afford that he does not [use] ... to obtain any point he undertakes ... one half of the colony already belongs to him, and it will not be long before he gets the other half.”

Philip Gidley King, 1801

Like Bligh, Governor Philip Gidley King believed John Macarthur would stop at nothing to get his way.





# Rebellion in the Corps

Macarthur had ended his own trial and threatened the chief judge. The other magistrates backed Macarthur and refused to work with Judge Atkins. It was open rebellion! Major Johnston, the army commander, was torn between loyalty to his friends in the Corps and his duty to Governor Bligh.

Morning,  
26 January  
1808

Major  
Johnston's  
house



I SHOULD HELP BLIGH ... BUT HE'S MAD WITH POWER!

Johnston felt bad about defying Bligh. But then ...

Afternoon

SIR, BLIGH HAS CHARGED YOUR OFFICERS WITH TREASON.

THAT MEANS HANGING!

GET MY HORSE AND CART.



BLIGH THREATENS OUR LIVES AND PROPERTY.

HE MUST BE STOPPED!

BUT HOW?

Macarthur wrote a statement calling for Johnston to replace Bligh.

... every man's property, liberty and life are endangered... [we beg you] to place Governor Bligh under arrest and... [take] command of the colony.

Over 100 soldiers and civilians signed it.

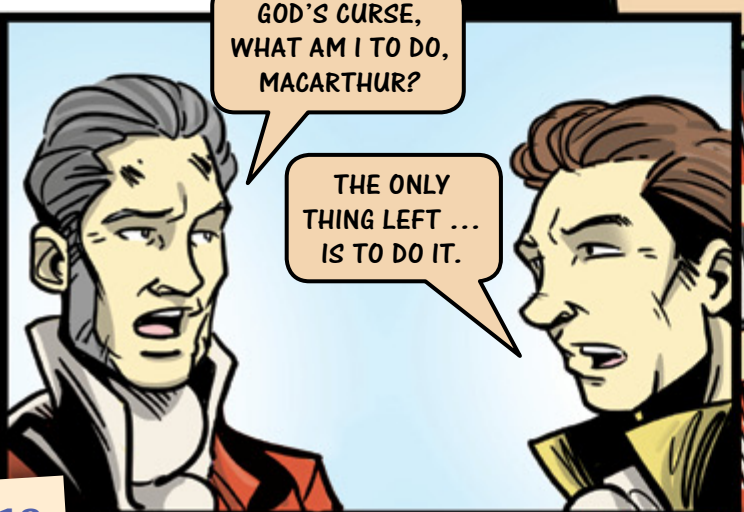
5 p.m.

Johnston decided to go and ask Macarthur what to do.



ARREST BLIGH!

HOORAY! YES!



GOD'S CURSE, WHAT AM I TO DO, MACARTHUR?

THE ONLY THING LEFT ... IS TO DO IT.

6 p.m.

Johnston gathered his troops ...

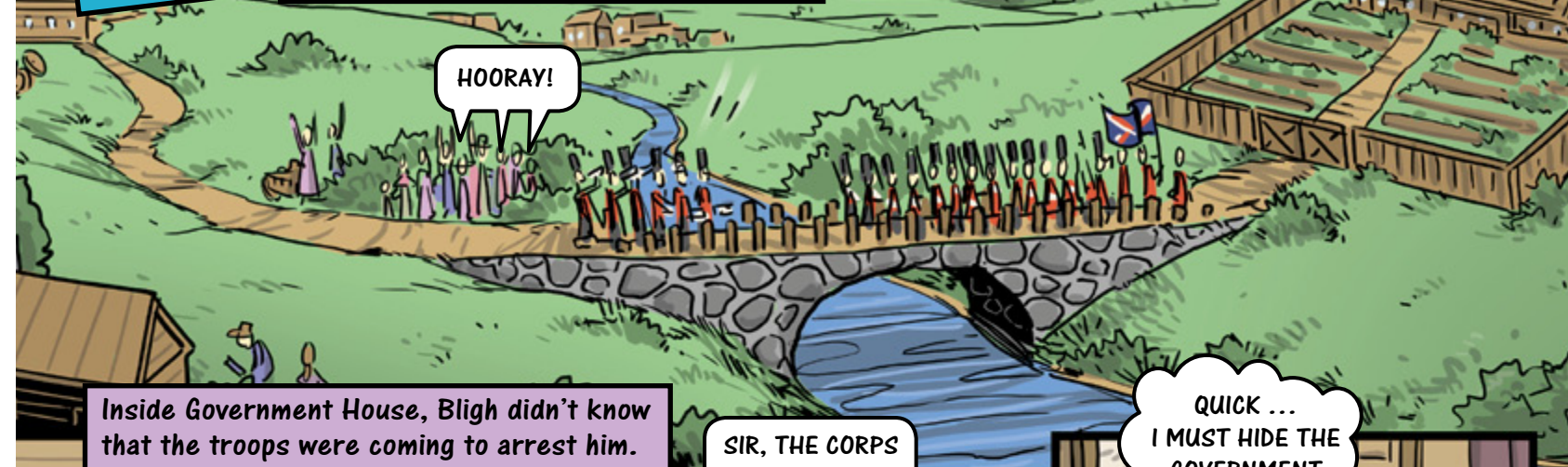


I HOPE I'M DOING THE RIGHT THING.

More than 300 soldiers lined up.

6.30 p.m.  
26 January

Major Johnston and the Corps marched on Government House to arrest Bligh.



Inside Government House, Bligh didn't know that the troops were coming to arrest him.



I'LL DEAL WITH THE TRAITORS TOMORROW.



SIR, THE CORPS IS COMING!

THEY'RE ARMED!

WHAT??



QUICK ... I MUST HIDE THE GOVERNMENT PAPERS.

Without official papers, the rebels couldn't govern the colony.

Meanwhile, Bligh's daughter Mary rushed outside.



HOW DARE YOU THREATEN MY FATHER!

STAND ASIDE!



SURROUND THE HOUSE!

YOU'LL HANG FOR THIS!



YOU'RE ALL UNDER ARREST!

... but Bligh wasn't there.





WHERE'S BLIGH?

I DON'T KNOW.

SEARCH THE HOUSE.



Meanwhile, upstairs ...

THEY WON'T GET THEIR HANDS ON THESE!

HE'S NOT HERE.

The soldiers searched for two hours, then ...

Bligh destroyed as many papers as he could.



I'LL HIDE THE PAPERS HERE.

AHA!



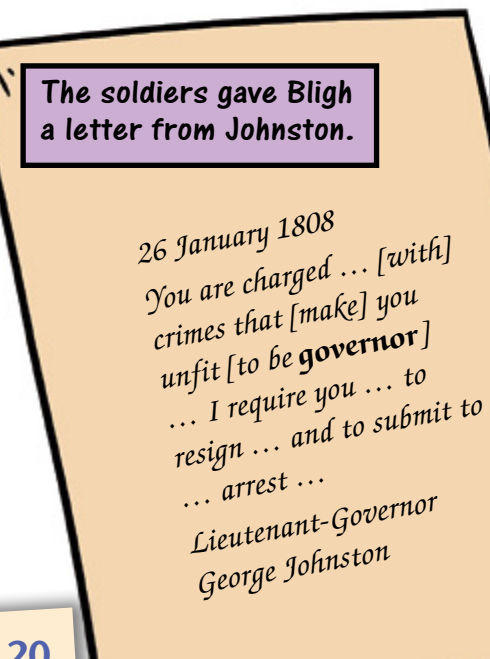
GET YOUR HANDS OFF ME!

They took Bligh downstairs.



HE WAS HIDING UNDER A BED!

HA HA!



The soldiers gave Bligh a letter from Johnston.

26 January 1808  
You are charged ... [with] crimes that [make] you unfit [to be governor] ... I require you ... to resign ... and to submit to ... arrest ...  
Lieutenant-Governor George Johnston



THIS IS TREASON, JOHNSTON!

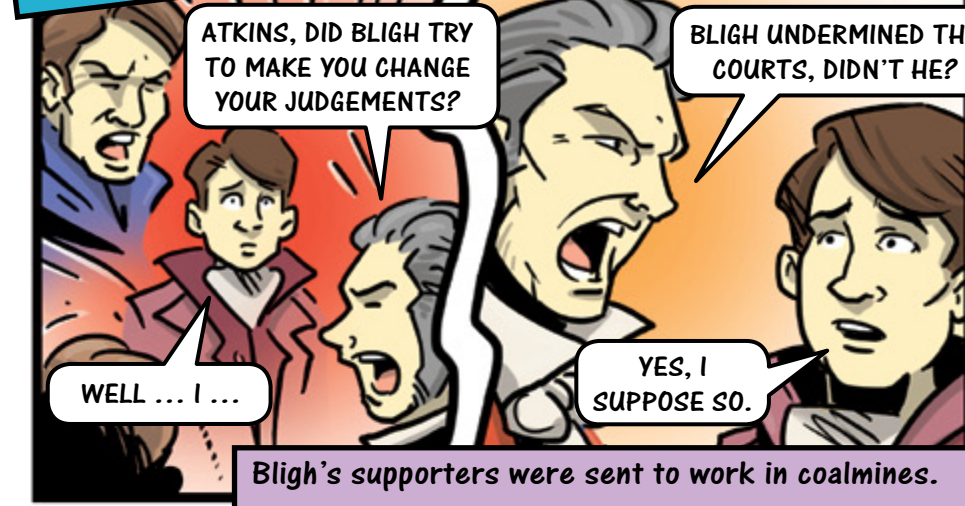
SILENCE! YOU ARE NO LONGER GOVERNOR!

9 p.m.

The troops left, putting Bligh under house arrest. He was a prisoner in his own home.

27 January 1808

Next day, Macarthur held trials of Bligh's men.



ATKINS, DID BLIGH TRY TO MAKE YOU CHANGE YOUR JUDGEMENTS?

BLIGH UNDERMINED THE COURTS, DIDN'T HE?

WELL ... I ...

YES, I SUPPOSE SO.

Bligh's supporters were sent to work in coalmines.



The rebels gathered evidence to show they had done the right thing.

THANK YOU, CAPTAIN ABBOTT.

IF JOHNSTON HADN'T TAKEN CHARGE, THE PEOPLE WOULD HAVE RIOTED.

Next day, Government House.



YOUR FRIENDS HAVE ADMITTED YOUR CRIMES.

DIABOLICALLY FALSE!



SAVE IT FOR YOUR COURT CASE.

YOU CAN'T TRY ME! I ANSWER ONLY TO MY KING.



BLIGH WILL MAKE TROUBLE, MACARTHUR.

DON'T LET HIM SPEAK TO ANYONE.

They kept Bligh locked up in Government House.

Inside Government House

WHAT ARE YOU DOING, PAPA?

WRITING TO THE GOVERNMENT IN ENGLAND.

... the colony [is] in the hands of the military ... Nothing but calamity (disaster) upon calamity [is] to be expected, even massacre and secret murder.



BUT HOW WILL YOU SEND IT?

I'LL FIND A WAY.



The rebels set up a new government with Johnston in charge.

GRIMES, WE NEED A NEW JUDGE TO REPLACE ATKINS. WILL YOU DO IT?

OF COURSE, SIR.

Grimes was a good friend.

**2 February 1808**

Macarthur's unfinished trial was re-started.

WE FIND YOU NOT GUILTY OF NEGLECTING THE PARRAMATTA AND ITS CREW.

THANK YOU, GENTLEMEN.

Macarthur was cheered in the streets of Sydney.

Macarthur became Colonial Secretary and took charge of the law courts ...

SACK JUDGE GRIMES!

WHY?

HE JAILED MY FRIEND.

... bought government land and cattle for himself...

... and refused to help poor settlers and ex-convicts.

Soon ...

MACARTHUR LOOKS AFTER HIMSELF.

YOU CAN'T TRUST HIM.

I WISH I HADN'T BACKED HIM.

MACARTHUR'S A DISGRACE!

THE COURTS ARE A JOKE!

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Johnston couldn't keep control.

**April**

Meanwhile, in Government House, Bligh at last got a chance to smuggle out his letter.

MAKE SURE THIS LETTER REACHES ENGLAND.

Bligh's friend hid the letter ...

HALT! WHAT'S THAT?

JUST SOME BILLS.

... and sent it to the government in England.

The rebels quarrelled.

BANG

MACARTHUR FIGHTS WITH EVERYONE!

As the rebels became unpopular, the settlers began to support Bligh. They asked the Lieutenant-Governor Paterson of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) for help.

To Lieutenant Paterson,  
We, the free settlers of Sydney,  
beg you to come and set  
Governor Bligh free and restore  
justice ...

Paterson refused, but the rebels became nervous.

**July**

... Macarthur resigned ...

THEY'RE ALL FOOLS!

PHEW!

GOOD RIDDANCE.

... and Johnston was replaced, too, but the Corps still ruled the colony.

Meanwhile, Bligh's letter arrived in England.

THIS IS AN OUTRAGE!

WE MUST SEND A NEW GOVERNOR TO RESTORE ORDER.

Lachlan Macquarie was chosen and sailed for Sydney.

**March 1809**

Bligh remained under arrest at Government House until ...

WE'RE SENDING YOU BACK TO ENGLAND.

I REFUSE TO LEAVE!

**13 March**

Finally, Bligh pretended to sail for England ...

... but he anchored off Sydney, waiting for a chance to regain power.

Johnston and Macarthur were afraid of being arrested for treason.

THEY COULD HANG US IN ENGLAND.

LET'S GO BACK AND ARGUE OUR CASE.

They sailed together for England.

**December 1809**

Macquarie arrived in Sydney and became the new Governor.

HOORAY FOR THE NEW GOVERNOR!

He sent the Corps back to England, restored order to the colony and governed wisely and well. The Rum Rebellion was over.



# What happened next?

When **Governor** Lachlan Macquarie arrived in New South Wales in December 1809, he quickly took control. He announced that Johnston would be arrested in England, and sent Bligh back to London to be a witness at the trial. Macquarie sacked the officers of the **Corps** and replaced them with his own loyal troops. All the laws that had been passed during the rebellion were reversed, and Bligh's supporters were rescued from the coalmines. Macquarie's actions won the trust of the settlers.

## Johnston's trial

George Johnston was put on trial for mutiny in England in May 1811. Macarthur and Judge Atkins spoke in his defence. Bligh was in the witness box for three days. He was there to help convict Johnston, but instead, his own failings as governor were revealed. Johnston argued that he had to overthrow Bligh to avoid disaster. On 2 July 1811, Johnston was found guilty, but his only punishment was to be sacked from the army. The other rebels were punished lightly, too.

Governor Lachlan Macquarie restored order to the **colony** of New South Wales and went on to become one of Australia's finest leaders.



## Eyewitness words

The judges at Johnston's trial believed that Bligh was partly to blame for the rebellion and that Johnston had acted in good faith. They explained his light sentence:

“The court, in passing a sentence so inadequate (not enough) to the ... [seriousness] of the crime of which the prisoner (Johnston) has been found guilty, have ... been [moved] ... by ... the ... extraordinary circumstances ...”

After his trial, George Johnston returned to Sydney and lived out his days in his home, Annandale House.

## Aftermath

William Bligh was outraged at the **rebels'** light punishments – he thought they should have been hanged. He wrote a book giving his version of the events of the rebellion, but his reputation had been damaged by the trial, and no one took him seriously. Bligh was promoted to vice-admiral, but never given another command and he became a bitter man. He retired to his country house in Kent, England, where he died of cancer on 7 December 1817, aged 63.

George Johnston returned to Sydney in May 1813. He became a successful **grazier** and, surprisingly, a trusted friend to Governor Macquarie. Johnston never again showed any interest in rebellion.





# The effects of the Rum Rebellion

The **Rum** Rebellion had important and long-lasting effects on Australia.

## Limited military power

After the Rum Rebellion, the British government was determined to make sure that the **military** never gained power over the government again. Under **Governor** Macquarie, military courts were banned and trials were overseen by strictly independent judges. Government officials had to be **civilians**, not military men, and soldiers were kept firmly under the governor's control. These changes formed the basis of Australia's strong civilian government, which is still in place today.

## A more equal society

The rule of the New South Wales **Corps** led to an unequal and unfair society. While Macarthur and the Corps officers grew rich, poor settlers and ex-**convicts** struggled to survive. Governor Macquarie changed all this. Poor settlers were granted more land and given convicts to help farm it. Ex-convicts were invited to Government House and given important jobs. Australia became a place where people had a chance to succeed no matter what their background.

## What ever happened to ...

### John Macarthur?

After Johnston's trial, Macarthur was warned that he would be arrested if he went back to Sydney. He stayed in England for six years until he was allowed to return to Australia in 1817. He developed a thriving merino wool export business at Elizabeth Farm in Parramatta. Macarthur was elected to the Legislative Council in 1825, but his mental health declined in 1832 and he died two years later.

## Timeline

This timeline shows the most important events related to the Rum Rebellion.

**1788**

Major George Johnston arrives in New South Wales with the First Fleet



**6 August 1806**

Governor William Bligh arrives in Sydney



**October 1807**

Macarthur's rum still is seized. Macarthur takes the matter to court and wins.



**25 January 1808**

Macarthur appears in court and defies Judge Atkins.

**February 1808**

Macarthur is re-tried and acquitted. Johnston appoints Macarthur as colonial secretary and he takes control of the colony.



**December 1809**

Governor Lachlan Macquarie arrives in New South Wales and restores order.

**1790**

**1790**

The New South Wales Corps arrives in Sydney. John Macarthur is a member.



**1793-95**

Corps officers govern New South Wales

**1805**

**February 1807**

Bligh bans the use of rum as payment for goods



**14 December 1807**

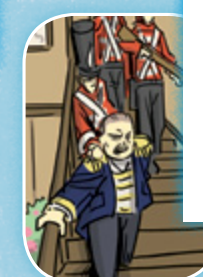
Macarthur is charged with neglect of his ship Parramatta.

**July 1808**

Macarthur resigns.

**26 January 1808**

The Rum Rebellion – Johnston backs Macarthur and places Governor Bligh under house arrest.



**March 1809**

Bligh is released from house arrest. Johnston and Macarthur sail for England.

**May-July 1811**

Johnston is tried and found guilty of mutiny. He is sacked from the army.

**1810**



# What do you think?

The **Rum** Rebellion raises important issues about the abuse of power and the right to question people in authority. Try the following activities to test your own ideas about these subjects.

## Who was right?

The two sides of the rebellion of 1808 had different ideas about the absolute power of the **governor**. Read the following opinions and have a discussion about who you think was right.

### The governor

The position of governor should be respected without question. As the legally appointed governor, Bligh had the right to rule as he saw fit. No one had the right to question his actions or defy his authority.



### The rebels

Authority should not be obeyed if people's rights are being threatened. Bligh was unfit for the position of governor and abused the power he had been given. For the good of the colony, he had to be arrested and removed from power.



## What would you do?

The following scenes actually occurred at the time of the Rum Rebellion. Read each scene, then choose what you would do.

### Scene 1

You are Governor Bligh before the rebellion. The wealthy Sydney **merchant** Simeon Lord wants to transfer **cargo** from one ship to another without bringing the goods ashore. Normally, this would be illegal because it would avoid taxes. Simeon Lord writes to you asking permission to transfer the goods directly from one ship to the other. Would you ...

- A** imprison Simeon Lord and his business partners for making an improper request
- B** fly into a rage at first, but give in the next day and agree
- C** agree to the request but take some of the cargo as a payment for the favour?

### Scene 2

You are Constable Oakes, a policeman who has been loyal to Governor Bligh. You hear that the **Corps** have arrested Bligh and his supporters. Would you ...

- A** run away and hide
- B** arm a group of settlers and try to rescue Bligh
- C** find a trusted officer to get help for Bligh?

### Scene 3

You are David Collins, lieutenant-governor of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). When Bligh is released from house arrest in Sydney, he sails to Hobart and demands to take control there as governor. Would you ...

- A** refuse to get involved and wait for orders from England
- B** turn Bligh and his ship away and tell them not to come back
- C** gather an army and prepare to march on Sydney and restore Bligh as governor of New South Wales?

Once you have chosen what you would do in each scene, find out what actually happened on page 31.



# Find out more

## Website

[http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/discover\\_collections/history\\_nation/terra\\_australis/rebellion/index.html](http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/discover_collections/history_nation/terra_australis/rebellion/index.html)

This website from the State Library of New South Wales includes background information and original maps, paintings and documents from the time of the rebellion.

## Book

**William Bligh, *Account of the Rebellion of the New South Wales Corps*, edited by John Currey, Banks Society Publications, 2003**

This is Bligh's own eyewitness account of the events of the **Rum** Rebellion, secretly smuggled to England. It includes original letters and documents from the period.

## DVD

***Rogue Nation*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Screen Australia, 2009**

This two-part documentary focuses on the early years of New South Wales. It explores the personalities, issues and motives behind the Rum Rebellion and includes a historically accurate dramatisation of the events.

## Place to visit

**Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta, New South Wales**

Elizabeth Farm, built by John Macarthur in 1793 and named after his wife, is Australia's oldest homestead. Macarthur and his family lived there during the Rum Rebellion, and the property later became the centre of Australia's merino wool industry. Elizabeth Farm is now a museum and welcomes visitors.

Elizabeth Farm,  
Parramatta, New  
South Wales





# Glossary

- cargoes** shipments of goods
- civilians** non-military people
- colony** an area of land that is controlled by a distant country
- convict** someone serving a sentence in jail for committing a crime
- corps** a unit of soldiers and officers
- governor** a person in charge
- grazier** a sheep or cattle farmer
- Indigenous peoples** the original peoples of Australia
- justice** fairness and rightness
- liberty** freedom
- merchants** people who buy and sell goods
- military** army
- rebels** people who fight against the government
- rum** an alcoholic spirit made from sugar cane. In the 1800s 'rum' was also a general term for all alcoholic spirits.
- settlement** a place where people live
- still** a kit for making alcoholic drinks such as rum
- traitors** people who betray trust
- tyranny** oppressive, unjust rule
- warrant** a written authority to make an arrest

## What actually happened in the 'What would you do?' scenes described on page 29:

Scene 1: A. Bligh was outraged at Lord's letter. He had Lord and his two business partners arrested, fined and sent to prison for one month for 'writing to the governor in improper terms'.

Scene 2: C. Oakes rode through the night to Parramatta, dodging **Corps** roadblocks, to ask Captain Abbott, a respected officer and magistrate, for help. When Oakes told him about the rebellion, Abbott said: 'Very well, it must be for the best'. Abbott was a **rebel** supporter.

Scene 3: A. Lieutenant-Governor Collins was sympathetic to Bligh but refused to become involved until he heard from England. In Hobart, Bligh was such a nuisance – he even flogged the governor's son – that Collins confined him to his ship and refused to have anything more to do with him.



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