The 1808 'Rum' Rebellion


Bligh was arrested and the colony was placed under military rule. This was the only time in Australian history that a government was overthrown by a military coup.

The military stayed in power for two years until Lachlan Macquarie, the fifth Governor of NSW, assumed office at the beginning of 1810. The overthrow of Bligh much later became known as the ‘Rum Rebellion’ because the NSW Corps was heavily involved in the trade in rum in the colony and was nicknamed the ‘Rum Corps’. The term 'Rum Rebellion' was not used at the time. The factors leading up to Bligh’s arrest had much less to do with the rum trade and much more to do with a battle for power between the military and civil elites of the colony and the Governor.

A Governor representing the British government ruled the penal colony of New South Wales. He took instruction from the government in London and was responsible for implementing government policy and maintaining order in the Colony. The officers and men of the New South Wales Corps were stationed in the Colony to support the Governor. Many of the men in the New South Wales Corps were recruited from the unemployed in Britain though many were skilled, victims of the Industrial Revolution. New South Wales was a long way from home, and quick promotion, good wages and the opportunity to engage in trade alongside their military duties induced ambitious men to sign up.

Officers were also rewarded by early governors with large land grants and were assigned convict labour, which allowed them to build comfortable homes and cultivate farm produce, which they could sell at a profit. Before the end of the 18th century, trading ships were already calling in at Sydney Cove, knowing that the remoteness of the colony meant good business. The early governors bought some of the goods to replenish the government stores and allowed the military to purchase and market the rest, effectively allowing them to monopolise trade within the town.

Sydney Cove and Government House

![a128359r.jpg](a128359r.jpg) [1]
"[First Government House, Sydney], c. 1807, by John Eyre

[Image 45x410 to 553x785]

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Published on State Library of NSW (https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au)

Government House, Sydney

Lewin, J. W. (John William)
[Sydney from the western side of the Cove] [ca 1803]
Evans, George William
Call # XV1 / 1803 / 1 [9]
Digital ID: a1528462
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Note and coin money was in short supply, so a complex barter system developed which was controlled by those who had access to goods – particularly food, clothing and alcohol. Convicts and lower ranking military were regularly paid in goods, rather than money, and the most popular form of payment was rum. The NSW Corps involvement in this system led to its nickname in the 1790s – the Rum Corps.

Some of the officers in the Corps, like John Macarthur, became powerful and wealthy citizens in the small Colony. Macarthur was favoured with large land grants and other privileges under Lieutenant-Governor Francis Grose. As Officer-In-Charge of the NSW Corps, Grose had temporary charge of the Colony after Governor Phillip left and appointed Macarthur to several official positions of influence.

The power wielded by Macarthur and others lead to clashes with the second and third governors, John Hunter and Philip Gidley King, who tried to eradicate the military’s monopoly on trade and crack down on drunkenness, but too much money and power was at stake and they failed. The next Governor was William Bligh, who arrived in the Colony in 1806. ‘Bounty’ Bligh had a reputation for tough leadership and the British Government hoped that he could exert some control over the rum trade in Sydney.

Bligh came into conflict almost immediately with John Macarthur (who by this time was no longer a Corps officer)
over Macarthur's provisional land grant in the Cowpastures and Bligh threatened to remove Macarthur from his prime land. The animosity continued until Bligh had Macarthur taken to trial over an incident involving one of Macarthur's trading ships. The jury of Corps Officers refused to recognise the court and Bligh indicated that he intended to charged them with treason. Commanding Officer of the NSW Corps, George Johnston defended his men and claimed that removing them from duties would compromise the safety of the Colony. He claimed that Bligh needed to be removed from office for everyone's good.
Plan of the town of Sydney in New South Wales [cartographic material]
Sydney in 1808

In the period leading up to the 1808 rebellion, Sydney was a garrison town. Much of the town's buildings and infrastructure were centred around the military. This 1808 map clearly shows the parade ground, around which the military barracks were located (now Wynyard Park). On the evening of January 26, 1808, the men of the New South Wales Corps marched from the parade ground on High Street (now George) up Bridge Street to Government House. They marched to the tune of ‘British Grenadiers’ and were followed by hundreds of spectators. When they arrived at Government House, the soldiers searched the property, before finally locating Governor Bligh, who, according to legend, was hiding under the bed. He was arrested and deposed and the Corps' commanding officer George Johnston took control of the Colony.