John Macarthur (1767 - 1834)

John Macarthur arrived in New South Wales in 1790 as an officer in the NSW Corps. He was an ambitious and forceful young man who was attracted by the possibility of wealth and promotion, which the NSW Corps offered. Two years later, the colony came under military rule with the departure of the first Governor, Arthur Phillip. Officer-in-Charge of the Corps, Francis Grose, took over as Lieutenant Governor. He appointed Macarthur paymaster and Inspector of Government Works, giving him control over a significant portion of the Colony's resources. Grose also gave Macarthur generous land grants and he and his wife established Elizabeth Farm at Parramatta.

The Macarthurs were enthusiastic farmers and were particularly keen to start a profitable wool trade. They were soon the biggest landholders in the colony and were earning a good profit by selling produce to the government store. Macarthur developed a reputation for being outspoken, ambitious and argumentative where his own interests were concerned. He even sent complaints about the Governor John Hunter’s administration (1795-1800) direct to the Secretary of State in London.

Hunter, who was the Colony's second Governor, was recalled in 1801 and was replaced by Philip Gidley King (1800-1806). King soon clashed with Macarthur over the amount of influence Macarthur held in the colony. When Macarthur was involved in a duel, King lost no time in sending him back to England to stand trial. Thanks to influential patrons, the trial collapsed and Macarthur returned to NSW.

While in England, Macarthur showed samples of wool from his Sydney flock to cloth traders. They were favourably reviewed and Macarthur sought support for a colonial wool industry to be led by himself.
John Macarthur, c.1850s?
Macarthur developed a reputation for being outspoken, ambitious and argumentative where his own interests were concerned.

The British cloth market was desperate for new sources of wool as prices had risen sharply due to the Napoleonic Wars. Macarthur managed to convince the authorities to allow him to resign his commission in the NSW Corps in order to devote himself to the NSW wool industry.
On his return to Sydney, he presented Governor King with an official order to grant him 5000 acres of land in the Cowpastures – the largest land grant ever given to a single person. The location of the grant was not specified, though Macarthur wanted it at the Cowpastures - the finest land yet discovered in the Colony. King granted the land there only provisionally, and requested confirmation of the grant from London. Before this could be given, however, King was recalled to London. His successor, William Bligh, arrived in 1806.
Adm.l W. Bligh

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William Bligh (1754 - 1817)

William Bligh was a naval officer. He had been master of the Resolution on Captain Cook’s third Pacific voyage, later working on trading ships and in 1787 he was appointed commander of HMS Bounty. The Bounty was to sail to Tahiti to gather breadfruit to establish an industry in the West Indies – a scheme devised and underwritten by Sir Joseph Banks, who became a strong supporter of Bligh.

The Bounty was to sail to Tahiti to gather breadfruit to establish an industry in the West Indies – a scheme devised and underwritten by Sir Joseph Banks, who became a strong supporter of Bligh. The tale of the mutiny on the Bounty remains one of the most intriguing stories of adventure on the high seas more than 200 years after the ill-fated voyage that made Captain Bligh and Fletcher Christian such controversial figures.

The Bounty was underway to the West Indies when, on the morning of 28 April 1789, Fletcher Christian and part of the crew mutinied. He set the captain and 18 members of the crew adrift in the ship’s cutter. Bligh was a master seaman. He managed to sail the tiny vessel almost four thousand miles to Timor. Back in London a court-martial, routine in cases where captains lose ships, acquitted him of any wrongdoing, and he continued his naval career, although his short temper continued to antagonise his crews and gave Bligh a reputation for tyranny.

In 1805, Joseph Banks recommended Bligh for the post of Governor of NSW, replacing Philip Gidley King. Bligh arrived to find the colony in a terrible state. Convict labour was in short supply, floods had ruined the crops and livestock of settlers in the Hawkesbury and the monopoly on trade by the NSW Corps and a small handful of traders made life very difficult for the average citizen. Bligh came into conflict almost immediately with John Macarthur over his land grant, with Bligh threatening to remove Macarthur from the Cowpastures. Macarthur’s haughty and belligerent manner and the new Governor’s quick temper and rigid adherence to his instructions led to lasting animosity between the two men.

Bligh was determined to carry out his duties to the letter. He issued laws banning all forms of barter using spirits and outlawed illegal stills. He tightened port regulations to control the flow of rum into the colony. He also questioned the validity of property leases of several prominent citizens, including Macarthur. They were angered by his interference and became more and more hostile towards Bligh. Bligh’s new port restrictions also affected Macarthur who was by now part owner of several trading ships.

Bligh had a reputation for tough, sometimes harsh leadership. This contributed to unrest and dissatisfaction amongst some of his men and they rose up against him, leading to the infamous mutiny on the Bounty.

When an escaped convict was discovered on one of Macarthur’s ships, the crew was detained on board ship as punishment. Macarthur reacted by disowning the ship, rather than supporting his crew, forcing them to come ashore illegally to seek food and other necessities. Bligh took Macarthur to trial over the incident. Macarthur was enraged and claimed that Bligh was depriving him and his circle of their right to liberty and property. On 25th January 1808, the trial began before Judge-Advocate Richard Atkins and a jury of six NSW Corps officers. After a rallying speech from Macarthur, the officers on the jury refused to recognise Atkins’ authority and would not serve with him. The next day, Bligh indicated he intended to charge the officers with treason, a capital criminal offence. Their commanding officer, Major George Johnston, was informed of Bligh’s charges.
Lt. Col. George Johnston, 1810 / watercolour portrait by R. Dighton

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George Johnston (1764 - 1823)

George Johnston had arrived in the colony in 1788 with the First Fleet and is said to have been the first of the newcomers to set foot in the new colony. By 1800 he was commanding officer of the NSW Corps during the long and frequent absences of Lieutenant-Colonel William Paterson. Johnston was proud of his position and defensive of the honour of the NSW Corps. He argued with several Governors, including Bligh, whom he felt meddled in the administration of the military. When Bligh threatened six of his officers with treason Johnston determined that the removal of these officers from duty would lead to an uprising by the soldiers and that Bligh needed to be removed from office for his own safety and for the good of the Colony.

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