The Skottowe manuscript and the Cook connection

Kenneth R. Dutton

Emeritus Professor, The University of Newcastle, New South Wales

Email: kenneth.dutton2@bigpond.com

Abstract

Thomas Skottowe was Commandant of the Penal Settlement at Newcastle from 1811 to 1814. A keen naturalist, he made extensive notes on the local flora and fauna and had them illustrated by one of the convicts at the Settlement, Richard Browne. The resulting manuscript was acquired by David Scott Mitchell and donated to the State Library of New South Wales as a gift to the people of the State. In 1988, the Skottowe manuscript was published as part of Australia's Bicentennial celebrations. Thomas Skottowe's father was Lord of the Manor in Great Ayton, Yorkshire, where the navigator James Cook spent much of his childhood. He was instrumental in helping Cook gain an education and perhaps in encouraging him to enlist in the Royal Navy. The significance of the manuscript lies, in Sir David Attenborough's words, not in the scientific information it contains, but in "something much rarer — the glimpse it brings to our jaded and only too knowledgeable eyes of a land full of marvels seen with wonder and innocence" [Foreword, *The Skottowe Manuscript*, 1988].

Historical background

The expedition led by Lieutenant-Governor William Paterson in June and July 1801 to survey the mouth of the Hunter and to travel as far as possible up-river had, amongst the other purposes outlined by Governor King, that of loading the colonial schooner *Francis* with "the best coals that can be procured" and dispatching it to Sydney "without loss of time."[1] Under the command of Lieutenant James Grant, that most serviceable of colonial vessels the brig *Lady Nelson* set off for Newcastle with a party of eight comprising Paterson himself, the surgeon Dr John Harris, the French cartographer Ensign Francis Barrallier, the naturalist and artist John Lewin, a pilot and second mate, a sawyer and an Indigenous man variously referred to as Bungery or Bongary.

The party was quick to act in carrying out King's instructions. Having left Sydney on 10 June and reached the mouth of the Hunter after four days, Paterson was able to dispatch the *Francis* back to Sydney as early as 24 June with a cargo of coal samples and various kinds of wood. King lost no time in moving to exploit Newcastle's coal deposits. In July 1801, he sent Corporal John Wixstead with a party of eight privates and 12 convicts to form a post and begin mining operations.

Things did not go well. Accused by disloyal subordinates of offering an inducement to a female convict to sleep with him and of supplying convicts with spirits, Wixstead was the subject of a "court of enquiry" consisting of Ensign Barrallier (who made a second journey to Newcastle in October–November 1801) and the surgeon Dr Martin Mason. The "court," convening in October, found Wixstead guilty of "imprudence"

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1 *Historical Records of New South Wales [HRNSW]*, 1896, 4: 390–391.

and reduced him to the rank of private.[2] Mason took over the superintendence of the Newcastle post in the role of magistrate. Things then went from bad to worse. Mason remained at the settlement for three months, until his harsh and tyrannical rule made a mutiny by the convicts almost inevitable. He was recalled by Governor King in early 1802, whereupon the post was abandoned and all soldiers and convicts returned to Sydney. So ended what is usually referred to as the First [Penal] Settlement.

Nothing more happened until March 1804, when Governor King appointed Lieutenant Charles Menzies of the Royal Marines as Commandant of the settlement, which King had been ordered by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to re-establish "without loss of time."[3] This Second Settlement was a great deal more successful than the First, lasting until the early 1820s, when the remaining convicts were removed to Port Macquarie, where a Penal Settlement was opened in 1821. In addition to the general Commission given him by Governor King, Menzies was instructed to use the convicts, among other tasks, to get "as many coals as possible" and "to enforce a due observance of religion and good order." Though he remained Commandant in Newcastle for only a year, Menzies established the Second Settlement on a sound basis, King reporting that he had "brought it to a forward degree of perfection" (Flowers, 1967). Resuming his post in the Royal Marines in March 1805, Menzies went on to a career of great distinction, playing a notable part in the wars against Napoleon. In 1852 he was appointed

aide-de-camp to Queen Victoria and ended his military career as General Sir Charles Menzies KCB KH.

Commandants and artists

Among Menzies' successors as Commandant, two in particular were in the fortunate position of having among their charges a convict who had been transported for the crime of forgery, and who — having re-offended while in Sydney — was punished by being sent to what the historian John Turner described as "Sydney's Siberia" (Turner, 1980), namely the Penal Settlement at Newcastle. These convict forgers, for obvious reasons, proved to be quite accomplished artists, and this talent was put to good use by the Commandant of the time.

The better-known of the forger/artists was Joseph Lycett, by profession a portrait and miniature painter. Convicted of forgery at the Salop (Shropshire) Assizes in 1811, he was sentenced to transportation for 14 years. As it happened, the transport *General Hewitt* on which Lycett's journey to Sydney took place was also carrying Captain James Wallis of the 46th Regiment, himself an amateur artist, who was travelling to New South Wales with his regiment. After commanding a company of grenadiers of the 46th Regiment in a skirmish against hostile Indigenes on Sydney's outskirts, Wallis was appointed in 1816 Commandant of the Newcastle Penal Settlement, for which he embarked on 8 June in the *Lady Nelson* with a detachment of his regiment. Meanwhile, in the course of his employment as a clerk in the police office, Joseph Lycett had managed to acquire a small printing press and in May 1815 had flooded Sydney with hundreds of skilfully forged five-shilling bills drawn on the postmaster. He was again convicted

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2 *Corporal Wixstead and the Fate of Newcastle's First Settlement in 1801*, n.d

3 *HRNSW*, 1896, **5**: 362

of forgery and sent to Newcastle. After enduring the severity of the strict regime imposed by Lieutenant Thomas Thompson, Commandant since February 1814, Lycett found that his fortunes improved considerably once Wallis succeeded Thompson in June 1816.

A keen amateur artist, Wallis had come to Newcastle equipped with paints and brushes, and quickly set Lycett to work, not only in recording views of Newcastle but in drawing up architectural plans for a church known as "Christ's Church" or "Christ Church." When the latter was completed in 1818, it was Lycett whom Wallis commissioned to paint an altar piece. In return for his work, he was granted a conditional pardon on Wallis' recommendation and was able to leave the Newcastle Penal Settlement for Sydney. Three of the views of Sydney painted by Lycett were sent by Governor Macquarie to Lord Bathurst, and by way of reward Lycett was granted an absolute pardon in November 1821. The following year, he left for England and carved out a modest career there as an artist until his death in Birmingham in 1828.

The lesser-known forger/artist in the Newcastle Penal Settlement was one Richard Browne. Just as Lycett had been set to work by Commandant Wallis, Browne had been commissioned to produce drawings and paintings by an earlier Commandant, Lieutenant Thomas Skottowe, who was in charge of the Settlement from December 1811 to February 1814. Born in Dublin in 1771, Richard Browne was sentenced to transportation in 1810, presumably for the crime of forgery, and was sent directly from Ireland to New South Wales, where he arrived in July 1811. In October that year he was sent to Newcastle for committing a second offence.

During his time in Newcastle he formed a liaison with a female convict named Sarah Coates, with whom he had at least two daughters who were born in Newcastle. On the completion of his sentence in 1817 he lived in Sydney, where he was designated "free by servitude" (Hyde, 2012). He died in Sydney in January 1824.

Just how it was that Thomas Skottowe came to commission Browne as an artist and illustrator is not recorded, nor is there any record of artworks created by Browne before his period of penal servitude. It seems most likely that Skottowe selected Browne purely on the basis of his conviction for forgery, on the assumption that his keen eye for detail and skill in the visual reproduction of objects would meet the requirements of the task. In the event, Skottowe's faith in Browne's ability proved to be justified. As his most characteristic work is generally considered to date from the emancipist period of his life between 1817 and 1821, it seems that his work for Thomas Skottowe served as his apprenticeship as an artist. After his sentence in Newcastle was completed, he lived in Sydney selling watercolour illustrations of natural history subjects, particularly birds, and of Indigenous Australians. As would later be the case with Joseph Lycett, Browne contributed many of the original watercolours for James Wallis' *An Historical Account of the Colony of New South Wales and its Dependent Settlements* (London, 1821).

Thomas Skottowe and the manuscript

Thomas Britiffe Skottowe was born in Great Ayton, Yorkshire, in or about 1787, the son of Thomas Britiffe Skottowe IV (1767–1841) and Sarah Lydia Pococke (1768–1844). The Skottowe family (the surname is of Scandinavian origin) had a long record of distin-

guished government service, Thomas Skottowe III having held the office of Register and Secretary of the Province under the Appointment of His Majesty in Charleston, South Carolina, at the outbreak of the American Revolution. Thomas Skottowe IV was Lord of the Manor of Great Ayton and owner of the nearby Aireyholme Farm. It is most likely that his son, later to become Commandant of the Newcastle Penal Settlement, was born at Ingleby Manor House, Great Ayton.

Having enlisted as an ensign (equivalent to second lieutenant) in the 73rd Regiment, our Thomas Skottowe was ordered to the colony of New South Wales under the regiment's Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Lachlan Macquarie, sailing from St Helens, Isle of Wight, on 25 May 1809 and arriving in Sydney on 1 January 1810. He was promoted to (first) lieutenant and made Commandant of the Newcastle Penal Settlement the following year. While in New South Wales, Skottowe, amongst other dalliances, formed a liaison with Mary Ann McCarty,[4] who already had a son from an earlier association on Norfolk Island. On 28 August 1811, a month after Skottowe had left Sydney to take up his post at Newcastle, Mary McCarty gave birth to a son, named by the couple Augustus John (*discussed below*). Mary did not join Thomas in Newcastle, at least not immediately, as Augustus was baptised in St Philip's Church, Sydney, on 20 September 1811.

Unlike Commandant Wallis, Skottowe was not himself an artist, but as a keen naturalist he may well have arrived in Newcastle armed with a stock of paintbrushes and pig-

ments in the expectation of either finding there a person capable of illustrating the native flora and fauna or, in default of this, doing the best he could on his own. Indeed, for a keen naturalist of that era not to have travelled with a stock of artists' materials would be the equivalent, in a more modern period, of a tourist travelling without a camera. In any case, Richard Browne found himself equipped with the necessary prerequisites to undertake the commission that was given him by Thomas Skottowe.

Intensely interested in the flora and particularly the fauna of Newcastle and its region, Skottowe wrote extensive notes on animals, birds and fish, leading to the production of a manuscript entitled *Select Specimens from Nature of the Birds, Animals, &c, &c, of New South Wales, Collected and Arranged by Thomas Skottowe, Esqr*[5] (1813). The manuscript at one time was in the possession of a certain A. Cahill, who gave it to his son Frank Cahill on 3 August 1852. It was acquired by the great bibliophile and philanthropist David Scott Mitchell from an unknown source before 1907, when he bequeathed his collection to the people of New South Wales, forming the Mitchell Library.

The Skottowe Manuscript was dismembered by the Library in June 1979 for conservation reasons. The binding from which it was removed appears to date from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century and is possibly English. A facsimile edition of the manuscript was published as a Bicentenary project in 1988 by the Newcastle-born publisher David Ell in conjunction with the bookshop Hordern House, a firm specialis-

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4   In the entry on Thomas Skottowe on the *People Australia* website, Mary Ann McCarty's surname is incorrectly given as McCarthy.

5   See 56 pages of the 1813 MS on-line at the State Library of NSW, at http://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110320794 [Ed.]

ing in rare books. Along with an accompanying volume containing a commentary by the cultural historian Professor Tim Bonyhady and a foreword by Sir David Attenborough, the manuscript was published in a limited edition of 550 numbered copies. The editors acknowledged the assistance given by the distinguished mammalogist Dr John Calaby who acted as natural history consultant.
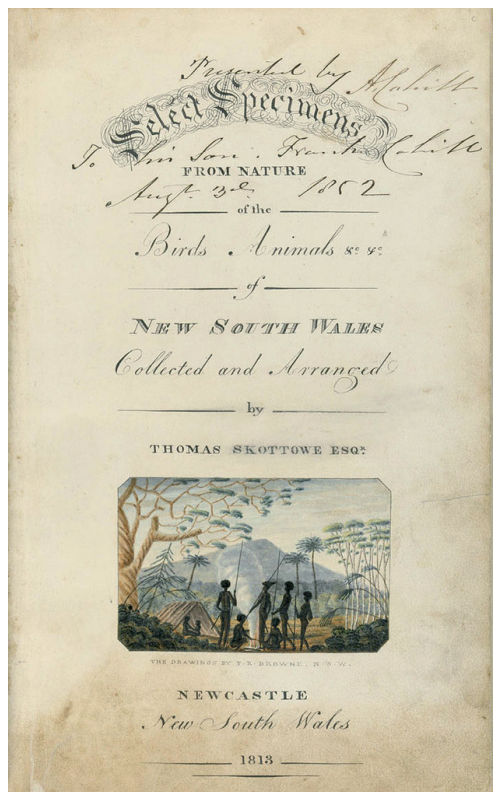

Fig. 1: Title page of the 1813 MS. (Courtesy Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW)

Attenborough's foreword opens:

> Lieutenant Thomas Skottowe stationed, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, on the rim of an almost unexplored continent reacted in just the same way as many of us do today on seeing a beautiful bird or an extraordinary mammal. He felt an urgent desire to record it, perhaps even to tell others about it. He knew, doubtless, that by doing so he could rekindle his initial delight and enjoy himself all over again. So he set about compiling this book [Foreword, *Skottowe Manuscript*, 1988].

Though a keen amateur naturalist, Skottowe was — as Sir David remarks — not a particularly knowledgeable one. Moreover, as Louise Anemaat has pointed out, "[t]he quality of drawings by convict artists is often variable. Some are poorly executed" (2019: 209). This is sometimes the case with Richard Browne's depictions, particularly of the local fauna, which are, in Sir David's words, "less than scientifically accurate." He goes on to observe, however, that "the skill needed to portray the true proportions of a totally unfamiliar animal is much greater than those of us may suppose who, these days, take our natural history notes by pressing the button of a camera" (Foreword, 1988).

Lieutenant Thomas Skottowe remained in New South Wales after the departure of the larger part of his regiment, but was ordered to Ceylon (Sri Lanka)[6] with the last of the 73rd Regiment and departed the colony on the colonial brig *Kangaroo* on 18 April 1815. He was accompanied neither by his son Augustus nor by his common-law wife Mary Ann McCarty, who may again have been pregnant by him. He was promoted to the rank of captain while in Colombo, and served there and in Kandy until December 1817, after which he returned to his family in England — probably for reasons of failing health, since he died at the age of 33 while on leave of absence "for the recovery of his health" ("Thomas Britiffe Skottowe"). He

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6   Not Calcutta, as stated on the findagrave website ("Thomas Britiffe Skottowe").

was buried on 18 November 1820 in St Bartholomew Churchyard, Tweedmouth, Berwick-upon-Tweed. His son Augustus John (1811–1898) emigrated to Ontario, Canada, where he took the name John Augustus McCarthy and had numerous descendants.

The Cook connection

James Cook (1693–1779) was a Scottish farm labourer who came as a young man to live in the village of Marton, near Middlesborough in Yorkshire, where he found employment as what was known as a "day labourer." He and his locally-born wife Grace Cook, *née* Pace, were married on 10 October 1725 and had eight children, four of whom died in childhood. Their second son, born on 7 November 1728, was baptised in St Cuthbert's Church, Marton, on 14 November that year[7] and given his father's name of James. In 1736, the family moved a few miles from Marton to Aireyholme Farm at Great Ayton, where the Lord of the Manor, Thomas Skottowe IV, had offered James senior the position of farm manager or "bailiff." The Cooks lived on the farm in an estate cottage until James senior retired in 1755. Thomas Skottowe, impressed by the promise shown by James junior, paid for him to attend the charity school founded in 1704 by the landowner Michael Postgate. Having received only the most basic of schooling in Marton, James Cook junior began his formal education in Great Ayton, where between 1736

and 1740 he was taught reading, writing and arithmetic.

In 1745, at the age of 16, James Cook junior moved some 20 miles to the fishing village of Staithes, to be apprenticed as a shop-boy to a grocer and haberdasher. After 18 months, proving to be unsuited for shop work, he travelled to the nearby port town of Whitby. Here he was taken on as a merchant navy apprentice, plying coal along the English coast. As part of his apprenticeship, he applied himself to the study of mathematics, navigation and astronomy, and from his subsequent career must have done so with considerable success. After his three-year apprenticeship, Cook began working on trading ships. Having passed his examinations in 1752, he progressed through the merchant navy ranks, being promoted that year to the position of mate on a collier brig. Although offered command of that vessel, he decided instead to volunteer for service in the Royal Navy and did so in 1755.

It was in that same year of 1755 that James Cook senior, aged 67, retired from the position of bailiff on Aireyholme Farm. He then either built, re-built or bought (it is not clear which of these three was the case) a cottage in Bridge Street, Great Ayton. Some sources have suggested that the land on which the cottage was built might have been purchased for the Cooks by Thomas Skottowe senior as an inducement for James junior to join the Royal Navy. It was common at the time for landowners to provide encouragements for young men to volunteer for service in the armed forces at a time when Britain was re-arming for what was to become the Seven Years' War. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the naval career of the man to become Captain James Cook FRS owed a great deal to the support and encour-

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7   The Captain Cook Birthplace Museum website gives Cook's date of birth as 27 October 1728, and his date of baptism as 3 November that year. These are the dates found in the Parish Register of St Cuthbert's Church, Marton. They are based on the Old Style (O.S.) dating system, which was changed to the New Style (N.S.) system when England moved from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar under the *Calendar (New Style) Act* of 1750.

agement he received as a youngster from Thomas Skottowe of Aireyholme Farm.

The cottage

James Cook senior and his wife Grace lived in the Bridge Street cottage until Grace's death in 1765, after which James continued to live there on his own. It is probable that James junior had called on his parents while on leave in 1757, and it is known that in December 1771 he visited his widowed father. He managed to persuade James senior to move from the cottage in 1772 and live with James junior's sister Margaret [Fleck] at Redcar, where James senior died in April 1779 — the same year as his son. The house passed through a number of hands until, in 1933, its then owner, a Mrs Dixon (who did not live in the house but was well aware of its significance), decided to put it up for auction. She made it a condition of the sale that the house should stay in England, in order to prevent its purchase by Americans, but was later persuaded to change "England" to "the Empire."

A bid of £800 by the Australian businessman and philanthropist Russell (later Sir Russell) Grimwade was able to secure the purchase, being much greater than the highest local offer of £300. Russell Grimwade arranged for the house to be dismantled and packed into 253 cases and 40 barrels for shipping from Hull. It arrived in Melbourne in April 1934 and was reassembled in Fitzroy Gardens, as Grimwade's donation to the people of Victoria for the centenary anniversary of the settlement of Melbourne in October 1834. The relocated house was originally known as Captain Cook's Cottage, but this misleading nomenclature was later corrected, the house now being referred to as Cooks' Cottage.

In the year 2020, the Australian Government's decision to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Captain James Cook's arrival in Australia has become a subject of bitter controversy. Some Australians, particularly those of Indigenous heritage, see the event as an occasion of mourning rather than as a reason to celebrate Cook's achievements. A few have taken their protests to the extent of vandalising statues of Cook by spraying them with paint and daubing them with slogans. It is not the intent of the present article to express an opinion on this matter, other than to comment on the sad irony of the fact that the vandalising of Cooks' Cottage in Melbourne and its daubing with the word "Shame" (see Figure 2) appears to have been somewhat misplaced, given that Captain James Cook never lived in the cottage and that he set foot in it, at most, on only two possible occasions. What remains valid, however, is the testimony offered by this story of encouragement of local talent wherever found, to the power of education and science: these at their best are what extend our understanding of human culture and the natural world.

Fig. 2: Cleansing the graffiti from Cooks' Cottage, Melbourne, *The Age*, 24 January 2020.

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