

COLONEL DAVID COLLINS

(1756-1810)

by

Reg. A. Watson

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David Collins accompanied Governor Arthur Philip as Judge-Advocate to Sydney Cove, serving in that capacity at Parramatta. Later under the orders of Governor Gidley King he was ordered to set up a colony at Port Phillip, Victoria.

Collins was then a mature officer. Aged 47 years, he had followed his father Arthur David's steps and had served with the Royal Marines. His mother was Henrietta Caroline nee Frazer. David was born in London, 3rd March 1756 and spent much of his childhood in Devon, as did Bowen. Collins was educated at the Rev. John Marshall's Grammar School and when, but 14 years old, he joined his father's division as an ensign. The following year he was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant, while only 15 years old.

In 1776 as a 20 year old he was stationed at Halifax, Nova Scotia. During the War of American Independence he distinguished himself at the battle of Bunker's Hill. The British suffered heavy losses in the battle. At Halifax, Collins met and fell in love with Maria Stuart.

They were married on June 13th, 1777. Soon afterwards he returned to England with his bride. They enjoyed some years of blissful peace but this was marred by the death of a daughter in infancy. By the time of Hobart's recommendation, he was only on half pay. His father was long dead (1793) who died while Collins was in New South Wales, with the position as Deputy Judge-Advocate of the colony.

Collins financial difficulties would accompany him to his grave. Collins, however, had well-connected friends, one being Arthur Phillip and through Phillip, Collins met other influential people such as Viscount Sydney. There is little doubt, Lord Sydney, helped Collins's career.

The British government ordered him to settle Port Phillip with some urgency. Lord Hobart, the then Secretary of Colonies and for War became aware of this urgency from a despatch from Governor King because of the fear of the French.

Before Port Phillip of course, Collins arrived with Phillip arriving at Botany Bay 20th January 1788. Six days later they moved on and settled at Port Jackson and Collins was given the full responsible for the legal situation of the colony and formed the band of magistrates. Tension arose between the Governor and the commanding officer of the marines, Major Robert Ross in which Collins had to intervene and to judge, most times siding with the governor. Ross was to be sent to Norfolk Island which pleased Collins to no end.

Early in 1789 Phillip appointed him as secretary to the Governor which gave him an extra five shillings a day. Eventually Phillip returned to England while the Second Fleet had arrived bringing with them the New South Wales Corp relieving the marines.

In October 1795 when Governor John Hunter had arrived, Collins asked for a pay rise as the amount of responsibilities shouldered on him had increased dramatically. Hunter supported the claim.

Prior to this of course, Collins had gone to Parramatta (then Rose Hill) and constructed a military enclosure. Collins wrote in February 1789 that it was "*only of posts and shingles fastened with pegs on battens*" and that at Rose Hill, "*people are principally employed in cultivating and clearing the land*".

The first season in 1789 produced a bumper crop and by February the following year things were indeed improving and of course this was the year government had commenced construction.

Collins was responsible for law and order in Parramatta. The criminal court consisted of six military men or naval officers and the Civil Court of "*fit and proper persons*" presided over by the Judge Advocate.

Collins used the first Parramatta court house built on the south west corner of George Street and as a residence when visiting. In March of 1790 Collins held his first court at Rose Hill judging on cases which were primarily to do with food and clothing. Whippings were

applied by Collins to deter crime, such on George Bannister who was sentenced to 50 lashes for stealing three pounds of flour while Peter Hopley received 25 lashes for stealing a quarter of a pound of bread.

One problem Collins found with Parramatta was the heat and bush-fires, describing it as “*extreme*” and that Mr. Arndell (Dr. Thomas, surgeon) was a great sufferer by it. With everything in flames, it had once spread to his farm.

Bush-fires were common: “*Many people at the time were much affected with inflammation of the eyes, attended with some pain and supposedly by the medical gentlemen to be occasioned by the dry and sultry weather which has prevailed for some time*”. (Legal History of Parramatta – Helen Watchris. C 1983)

In 1792 he took leave to return to England but it was not until September 1796 that he left the colony at a considerable financial loss reaching London in 1797. It was during this time he saw the publication of his “*Account of an English colony in New South Wales*” followed by a second volume in 1802.

He was told he must return to duty on full pay, but found wife, Maria, well-nigh worn out by fretting over his absence. During his married years, Collins wrote some more, (“*Royal William*” in 1802) but unlike his earlier work, it was not overly well received. As a result Collins became frustrated over his slow career progress. However, that was soon changed with his appointment at Lieut. Governor of the new colony at a salary of 500 pounds a year.

Maria stayed behind in England. She came to miss him and was to later write: “*He had stayed too long in that infernal place*”.

King was convinced that the French, especially because of Baudin’s recent southern voyage, would settle south of Sydney, at Port Phillip. King was acutely aware of the ideal location. In a private letter to Sir Joseph Banks, his Patron, he wrote: (5th June 1802) “*The soil is excellent and the timber thin, added to which the security and expansiveness of the harbour seems to point it out as absolutely necessary that a settlement should be made there...*

“I have in a very earnest manner recommended the making of a settlement at Port Phillip for the very advantageous account given of it both by Captain Flinders and Lieut. Murray.”

It was not long before the HMS *Calcutta* was fitted and able to take 400 males convicts and a small number of settlers to Port Phillip. The government of the new settlement was to be placed under control of Port Jackson.

The *Calcutta* under the command of Collins was a naval ship originally built for the East India Company and had been purchased for service during the war with France.

Hobart in his proposal added, “*With a view to this Service and for the purpose of keeping open the communication between the two Settlements and with Port Jackson, it is thought*

necessary that a small vessel should be stationed in the Straights, to be employed in such manner as the Lt. Governor acting under the orders of Captn. King may point out.

“Experience having proved the great inconvenience arising from the Establishment of the New South Wales Regiment at Port Jackson, it is conceived that considerable benefit would result from selecting a Detachment of the Royal Marines for this Service.

“With a view of exciting the Convicts to good behaviour, it is proposed that such of them, as shall merit the recommendation of the Governments abroad, should be informed that their Wives and Families will be permitted to go to them at the public expense as indentured Servants; and to render this act of humane policy as conducive to the benefit of the Colony as the circumstances of the case will permit, it will be necessary that those Families should on no account be sent upon Ships on which Convicts should be embarked, and that they should be informed their reunion with the objects of their regard would depend upon their own good behaviour, as well as that of their Husbands.”

Transport of convicts at this time was the responsibility of the navy and Royal Marines were to be sent as part of the Navy's fighting force. Lord Hobart states that he was only a *“little acquainted with Collins”*, but in a letter to His Majesty, Hobart humbly recommended Lt. Colonel Collins of the Marines as a *“person peculiarly well qualified for the position of Lt. Governor.”*

At 9am April 24th 1803 Collins sent sail from Portsmouth with his small party of settlers. Collins on the *HMS Calcutta* arrived at 9 October 1803 Port Phillip they were joined by the store vessel *HMS Ocean* unloading supplies and personnel. Collins was not impressed with the amount of water available and the standard of the soil. In a letter from King (26th November 1803) to Lt John Bowen who had made a settlement at Risdon Cove, four miles north on the River Derwent from Sullivan's Cove, stated that if the place at Port Phillip was not fit for a settlement, Collins was to proceed either to Port Dalrymple (north of the island) or to Sullivan's Cove (south) and that, *“you will immediately resign the command of the settlement to him”*.

Collins did indeed sailed on the *Ocean* for Risdon Cove knowing of course that the 21 year old Lt John Bowen RN had already settled there (12th September 1803) , but he carried with him the authority of Governor King. Arriving at Risdon Cove in February 11 1804 Bowen was greatly put out by his arrival and the taking away of his command of the colony. Indeed Bowen wrote to King saying that he was not giving up to his *“Instructions”* which Governor King had previously given to him. In the letter he is quite angry at Collins asserting his authority.



Lt. John Bowen RN

He wrote to King, (1st March 1804) *"I am extremely sorry that my intensions were not fully explained or sufficiently understood in my letter of 24th April"*. Bowen had returned to Sydney to meet with King returning again to the River Derwent settlement on the vessel *Pilgrim*. It appears that Collins charged Bowen of withholding stores and provisions, a charge to which Bowen strongly denied. However, the writing was on the wall, Bowen resigned and left the colony to fight in the French wars, leaving behind his lady friend, Martha Hayes Quinn and a daughter. Another daughter was to be born of his after his departure. Descendants till live in Tasmania.

Arriving with Collins was the first ever Anglican cleric, Robert (Bobby) Knopwood who kept a most important diary of the settlement, which for the early years was the only source of the settlement.

Collins gave orders after Bowen's departure that all buildings, huts and provisions be removed from Risdon Cove to his new settlement, where the soil was better with plenty of fresh water to Sullivan's Cove, now Hobart city. It is important to record that Hobart was firstly the name of the settlement at Risdon Cove.

Collins erected his tent at the corner of what is now Macquarie Street, where the Town Hall stands. There was much for him to do organising the settlement of a new colony. In Hobart he shared accommodation with Margaret Eddington, who was fifteen years at the time. She had arrived with her mother Elizabeth (her husband Thomas had passed away) from Norfolk Island and already had a one year old son, John. It was believed that the boy's father was John Piper the commander of Norfolk Island. Collins's relationship and Margaret's was quite open and with the arrival of Captain Bligh in the Derwent; horror was expressed by him at the arrangement, he in a letter to Lord Castlereagh referring to her as "a poor, low woman".

Collins had previously an open relationship with Mrs Hannah Power, wife of convict Matthew Power. Hannah's relationship with Collins was with the consent of her husband, who received benefits from the Lt Governor, such as having his sentenced reduced and after he became a prosperous trader he was accused of fraud with Knopwood one of his accusers.

It was recommended that Power be sent to Sydney for investigation, but on the recommendation of Collins, this was abandoned. People such as Edward Lord was appalled with Hannah and Collins's relationship.

Bligh's arrival was a nightmare for Collins. Bligh arrived on the vessel *Porpoise* and while Collins offered him hospitality they soon fell out. Bligh decided to remain on the vessel moored in the River Derwent, first off Sullivan's Cove, later off Sandy Bay, then to the mouth of the river where Bligh was to stop vessels entering the Derwent hoping to proceed to Sullivan's Cove. At that time, Bligh was to take off the in-coming vessel provisions which he could use for himself on the *Porpoise* while denying it to the colony. To be fair, Bligh paid for them. It was all about the question of Bligh's authority and Collins decided to write to Acting Governor William Paterson in Sydney, asking just who was now supreme commander of the colonies, which included Sydney and Van Diemen's Land. Paterson asserted that it was he and Bligh had no authority to which Collins took as the ultimate answer. Relations between Collins and Bligh deteriorated further. Bligh, however, had his supporters at Hobart Town, leading among them was James Belbin. On board the *Porpoise* was Midshipman George Reynolds Collins, fifteen year old son of David who had hoped to get a free voyage to Hobart Town to be with his father. Bligh punished George Reynolds Collins for drunkenness and was given twenty four lashes, which it is believed was prompted by Bligh's thirst for revenge.

Collins, however, could be just as nasty. Collins had Belbin arrested for going to the *Porpoise* and meeting with Bligh against the orders of Collins who forbade anyone having contact with him. After being held for four weeks without trial, he was sentenced by magistrates Bobby Knopwood and William Collins (no relation) to receive five hundred lashes. The beating was stopped by doctors, William l'Anson and Matthew Bowden, after fifty lashes. Belbin was taken away and imprisoned to wait the fulfilment of the rest of his sentence. Fortunately for him, it was not carried out.

Collins had asked Maria his wife to join him, but she declined stating she was required by her ailing mother.

Further problems confronted Collins with the compulsory removal of the settlers on Norfolk Island. They were sent to Tasmania expecting as was promised to them by Sydney, supplies and convict help something which Collins had not the resources to give. Their continual arrival doubled the population setting new strains on its viability.

Collins had complained to Dr Matthew Bowden of shortness of breath. Bowden thought it nothing more than the common cold. Calling on his patient at Government House, Bowden considered that his patient was much better and conversed over matters while sipping tea. Collins then suddenly fell back into his chair, observed by Bowden who thought he was having a fit. He summoned the servant, but it was too late. Collins was dead. Collins died March 24th 1810 7:30pm it was said because of the stress of office.



St David's Cathedral, Murray Street, Hobart. Reg Watson photo.

He was buried with full military honours dressed in his full military uniform in what is now St David's Park. Nearby St David's Cathedral is dedicated to him. While many lamented his passing, not all colonists did. John Pascoe Fawkner as an example said, "Those who did not like the loose unChristian behaviour of the governor gave it out that his Satanic Majesty had taken both the church and governor" after the first church called St David's erected of wood was blown down by a storm not long after its construction.



David Collins Memorial St David's Park, Hobart.

In England, Maria continued to struggle financially. She was entitled only to a pension of a captain's salary. In 1813 fortunately she was granted a yearly allowance of 120 pounds.

George Reynolds Collins's mother was Ann (Nancy) Yates a prior mistress of David Collins. The last resting place for George (bn 1793) is not known, but he died in 1821. There is

another George (Haywood) Collins who came to Tasmania about this time, a convict. He is often confused with George Reynolds Collins with the former dying at George Town, Tasmania in 1870. George Reynold's sister, therefore Collins's daughter, Marianne Letitia, married Samuel Rodman Yates, who died about 1826. Marianne then married on the 7th May 1829, John Davidson. She died on the 23d July 1860 aged 72 years and is buried in the Oatlands Cemetery, pictured below.



DAVID COLLIN'S BODY EXHUMED 1925

Soon after Colin's death there were rumours that he had been buried with many official papers and that he was even buried with colonist George Harris who died seven months later. Documents found after his death were sparse and it was considered there had to be more.

In 1921 an Act of the Tasmanian Parliament allowed the land known as St David's Park pass into the hands of the Hobart City Council. The Church of England in Tasmania had previously owned it as it was a cemetery. The park, named after the founder of Hobart, Lt-Governor David Collins, was then a place of overgrown grass, scrub and neglected tombstones. Improvement work began, but stopped briefly in April 1925 when a coffin was discovered.

John Reynolds, historic researcher (1899-1986) was informed that the coffin contained the body of none other than that of David Collins who died 24th March 1810. To exhume the body would be an opportunity to find out whether those stories had any merit.

In the late 1970s Reynolds gave a lecture on the subject at the Collins's Memorial in the Park at which time this author was present.

In April 1925 in front of many witnesses who included the Governor, Sir James O'Grady, Anglican Bishop Hay, the Mayor of Hobart, Alderman Valentine and others such as Reynolds, the workmen brought the coffin to the surface. Reynolds recalled that the outer part of the coffin was of oak, the inner wood being possibly Huon Pine, all completely encased in a lead covering.

Carefully two master plumbers opened the coffin and found that the body had been embalmed and was full of embalming plants.

Collins, when died when he was fifty four, but amazingly the body had not deteriorated at all. He was a large man, over six feet tall, handsome with very fine features. He was dressed in his uniform with his buttons still sparkling. A sword was alongside of him.

Reynolds recalled that a small beard had grown on him and that his fair hair had also grown. He wore medals and decorations, but no revealing and interesting historical papers were discovered with him. Folklore said that significant revealing papers were to be found in the coffin. Reynolds was surprised how different he looked from the photographs and engravings, which he had seen.

Nothing was touched and before the coffin was completely uncovered workman began to clamp it down again, just after half an hour.

The stress of office for Collins had shown on his facial features and his slim face, Reynolds said, was "drawn".

Reynold's stated the opening of the coffin, after 115 years of the Governor's death, was done with the greatest of decorum. He also said, he regretted not having more opportunity to see it in more detail. Within that short space of time he took in as much as possible.

The body was reburied immediately after the brief opening. Whether it decomposed or not it is impossible to say. His death now is nearly two hundred ago. I do not believe any photographs were taken of the event.

Tasmania remembers him having named after him St David's Cathedral*, St David's Park, Collinsvale, Collins Cap and Collins Streets in Hobart, Melbourne and Sydney. A daughter and a granddaughter are buried at the Oatlands cemetery.

*There are those who believe that the cathedral was named after the patron saint of Wales, St David. The Cathedral's own archives testify that it was named after David Collins as is stated by pioneer priest Robert (Bobby) Knopwood in his diary.

So how can we sum up Collins's career in Van Diemen's Land?

Simply, he did his best against insurmountable odds. He moved the settlement from Port Philip (Victoria) and by-passed Port Dalrymple for a reason still not fully understood. He then sailed for Risdon Cove, knowing that Bowen was already there. Within a short period of time he moved to Sullivan's Cove, Hobart Town. There he had the arduous job of carving out a settlement from a raw environment. Naturally there were the personality clashes with the settlers and his own officers. One of the main problems was lack of supplies being received either from Sydney or London. This promoted the situation of a lack of goods and food. Famine looked upon the colony more than once. Then came the arrival of the Norfolk

Islanders after London and Sydney, having no idea or any appreciation of what Collins was going through, promised goods, chattels, provisions, land and convict labour to the new arrivals. He had no resources to fulfil for such promises. Their arrival more than doubled the existing population of the small settlement which was already struggling. His problems took a huge hike with the arrival of Bligh, recently deposed as Governor from Sydney and his ailing daughter and widow, Mary Putland. Bligh sailing to England decided to go south to Hobart Town. At first Collins was relieved when Bligh gave assurances that he would not interfere with the administration of the colony and initially while the relationship was formal, it was cordial. Collins was also in a quandary over the recent mutiny in Sydney, he not wanting to be seen, especially in London, to taking sides. Yet the soon-to-be, William Paterson, his friend was to go to Sydney and become Governor there.

Bligh, unwilling not to express his opinion on matters, did indeed clash with Collins. Arguments with grew with – as we have seen – Bligh taking to the vessel *Porpoise* and blocking the River Derwent extracting vital supplies destined for the colony, supplies which was sorely needed.

Bligh sent blistering complaints regarding Collins's behaviour and his administration to London and also to Sydney. In turn, so did Collins, putting his argument across. Finally the disgruntled Bligh left our shores, never to return, much to the pleasure of Collins, but by this time, his health had deteriorated never to repair, although at times he did feel better.

Collins as a man could be very fair and impariall, but he also could be very harsh with his judgements and punishments. He was certainly not free from that. Like Bligh, he had no time for insubordination, which initially had him support Bligh believing that it was deplorable that the King's appointment could be removed by junior men. That sympathy for Bligh turned sour, as we have learnt, not because of Collins's support for the mutiny, but because of Bligh's character, who was appalled at Collins's open relationship with two women with whom he was not married while one of the women was actually still married.

It was all very political and all must have taken its toll upon poor Collins and a great deal of stress and back-biting which goes with any such job. All in all, as said, he did best he could as anyone could and should be remembered for that. Over all, he did a fine job.

Further reading:

- "Parramatta-Tasmania Colonial Connections Volume I & II" by Reg A. Watson.
- "John Bowen, the Founder of Tasmania" by Reg A. Watson
- "David Collins" by John Currey. Melbourne University Press. 2000.