

## **Black Caesar and Billy Blue: Subversive African Performance in Early Colonial Sydney**

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On 14 February 1797, John Wimbow and his unnamed convict companion were footslogging through virgin bush about five miles west of Sydney Cove in search of a fugitive convict. Late afternoon they reached a ridge of sandstone where a narrow opening in the rock face was almost entirely obscured by gnarled she-oaks sprouting needles like a witch's broom. Having located the hideout of his quarry, Wimbow resisted making any rash assault, choosing to wait in the stifling summer heat until the fugitive showed himself. At dusk Wimbow's quarry made an appearance: a well-muscled man who stood a good head taller than most in the colony, holding a musket at the ready. The musket had been stolen from the commissary in Sydney Cove a few months earlier and was certainly loaded with shot, since, despite the governor's prohibition, there were ex-convicts in the outlying districts prepared to share ammunition with the outlaw. He was alone; there was no sign of the other convict runaways who had formed a band with him. One close shot brought him down. A case of self-defence, Wimbow would later insist.<sup>1</sup>

The first official to receive the news of the death was the judge advocate of the colony, David Collins, a meticulous chronicler of life in the infant colony. With relish he recorded how on 15 February his court was interrupted by the news that the outlaw known as Black Caesar had finally been killed. 'Thus ended a man who certainly

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during life, could never have been estimated at one remove above the brute', he wrote.<sup>2</sup> What was there about this particular individual that could merit such an obituary in a penal colony that was constituted almost entirely by the brutalised and the brutalising? In his seventeen years at Sydney Cove, Collins presided over numerous incidents of murder and child rape, yet nothing so wicked could be attributed to the dead man, whose only crime was to take to the bush and steal food. And what did it mean that he was called Black Caesar?

Australia's first bushranger was as black as pitch. He was not Aboriginal, as one might suppose, rather he was a man of the African diaspora – a runaway slave from America – who arrived in New South Wales as a convict aboard the First Fleet transport ship *Alexander* in 1788. Collins was used to venality in convicts; he expected it. What enraged him about this black man was not his race so much as his persistent refusal to be cowed; to be reduced to the position of a slave; to be fashioned by the lash into a creature without volition or agency.

Judge Advocate Collins had noticed Caesar very early. As another tall man, Collins noted that Caesar's tall muscular frame was 'well calculated to hard labour'. In March 1788 he thought of him 'as the hardest working convict in the country'. Unfortunately the ration took no account of size or the amount of labour undertaken. With remarkable fairness, Governor Phillip had decreed that, regardless of status, every man should have the same weekly ration: six pounds of beef, three pints of pease, seven pounds of bread biscuit or flour and six ounces of butter. This was nowhere near sufficient to sustain someone of Caesar's physique for eight back-breaking hours of labour per day. He was always ravenous, Collins observed, 'for he could in any one day devour the full rations for two days'.<sup>3</sup> On 30 April 1788, Collins's court heard several cases relating to the theft of rations, including a charge against Caesar. He was accused of stealing four pounds of bread from the tent of a fellow convict. Caesar denied the allegation, claiming the bread found in his bag was given to him by Lieutenant Shairp, who gave testimony in the case. However the trial record is fragmentary; Shairp's evidence, the verdict and sentence elude us.<sup>4</sup> If guilty, Caesar would have received the usual sentence for felons convicted of petty larceny: 300 lashes.

Flogging was an ordeal designed for psychologically emasculating offenders; a humiliating excoriation of the body that aimed to reduce the convict to the level of a butalised animal with no will to resist. Stripped naked to the waist, the offender would be tied at ankles and wrists to a tree and struck with the cat o' nine tails to the solemn and steady beat of a drum. Each time the flagellator drew back he would run the cords through his fingers to dislodge the gore. Three hundred lashes was an astonishingly brutal sentence, far in excess of the floggings meted out in the Royal Navy. Those flogged could consider themselves fortunate; another convict found guilty of stealing bread was hanged. He was a mere 17 years old. Determined that the theatre of execution should not be mocked and that its power to strike terror into the heart of potential miscreants remained intact, Collins left the boy's body dangling from the branch, while beneath the soiled and purple-faced corpse, a procession of lesser offenders, probably Caesar among them, was lashed to the trunk and flogged insensible.

On 29 April 1789, Caesar was in court again for another charge of theft. This time Collins chose to extend Caesar's sentence of transportation from seven years to life, shrewdly guessing that while Caesar's powerful body could absorb the blow of the lash, the prospect of a life-time of forced servitude would strike fear in his soul. Only a fortnight into his extended sentence, Caesar decided that the terrors of the unknown hinterland were less fearsome than a penal system arbitrated by David Collins. Armed with a musket stolen from a marine and a cooking pot, he headed into the wilderness to take his chances. A week later, just after provisions had disappeared from the brickfields a mile west of Sydney, the discarded musket and a pot boiling on the fire was found nearby. Soon after, Collins was highly gratified when Caesar was caught by a young convict working at the brickfields. Weakened by hunger, he offered no resistance.

Reappearing in court, Caesar further incensed the judge advocate by expressing complete indifference to his death sentence, claiming he would turn his execution into a performance. What he was reputed to say, in the barely intelligible argot of convicts, was 'if they should scrag him he would quiz them all and show them some gig at the *nubbing-cheat*, before he was turned off'.<sup>5</sup> The subversive notion of

hanging as pantomime gave Collins pause. Hanging Caesar would not 'have the proper or intended effect', he decided, as the execution of 'a mere animal' could not function as a deterrent.<sup>6</sup> Caesar was confined in chains on an island in the middle of the harbour, where he was permitted to supplement his rations with the produce he grew. Released from his chains by his sympathetic marine guards in December 1789, Caesar made another bolt for the bush, taking a week's provisions as well as the canoe used by the marines to get to and from the island. Three days later, he stole a musket from the settlement. He was at large for six weeks before he was carried back, horribly lacerated by multiple spear wounds. He was taken to the hospital to recover from his wounds until he was healthy enough to be hanged.

Colonial diarist Watkin Tench took a sympathetic view, insisting that Caesar had been trying to ingratiate himself with the Aborigines 'with a wish to adopt their customs and live with them: but he was always repulsed ... and compelled to return to us in hunger and wretchedness'.<sup>7</sup> Tench was not alone in his sympathy for Caesar's situation. Even the unbending Collins agreed that his ravenous hunger compelled him to steal from others. Governor Phillip provided yet another pardon, and sent him to Norfolk Island, where at least there was the prospect of food. Here Caesar again proved a strong and willing worker. Within months, he and a fellow convict had cleared ten acres. To encourage self-sufficiency, Lieutenant Governor Ross instituted a policy that if a man undertook to maintain a woman, she would not be required to do any labour. This proved attractive to Ann Poore, aged 23, sentenced at Maidstone in 1787 for stealing sheets and transported per *Lady Juliana*. She became Caesar's wife and their daughter was born a year later.<sup>8</sup>

On 21 March 1793, the *Kitty* arrived from Norfolk Island with 172 male convicts, including Caesar, without his pregnant wife and daughter. Lieutenant-Governor King was taking pre-emptive action when he sent so many men back to Sydney. The unruly soldiers of the New South Wales Corps who replaced the marines on the island wanted the convict women. As King was later to complain, they became 'very intimate with the convicts, living in their huts ... and

perpetually enticing the women to leave the men they were married to.<sup>9</sup> Such an emotionally volatile environment invited violence. By removing so many of the men from contention, King was reducing the potential for conflict that threatened to destabilise completely the small, isolated world of Norfolk Island. It didn't work. Conflict over women on Norfolk Island erupted into a serious mutiny within a year. In the meantime Caesar was hauling carts in Sydney like a beast of burden.

By December 1795 famine was again looming in Sydney and Caesar once more fled into the bush. This time he stayed at large and rapidly became the model for and leader of an armed outlaw gang. The puzzle of where these escaped convicts got the guns was resolved when the commissary conducted a survey to establish that of 300 muskets less than fifty could be accounted for. The longer Caesar remained beyond official reach, the more he acquired the status of a celebrity. It was the Governor's view that Caesar presented a real alternative to the authoritarian carceral society of the penal colony. To the offer of a conditional pardon, Caesar responded 'that he would neither come in or suffer himself to be taken alive'.<sup>10</sup> Exasperated letters to the Colonial Secretary make it clear that Governor Hunter believed this was a challenge to British authority far more dangerous than the resistance of the Aborigines.

On 29 January 1796, Hunter published an official notice: 'Whoever shall secure this man Black Caesar and bring him in with his arms shall receive as a reward five gallons of spirits.'<sup>11</sup> That was the equivalent of a small fortune in early Sydney. Collins was confident that such a lavish reward would bring results, assuming that any sense of fraternal loyalty one convict might once have felt to a fellow convict would be extinguished by the promise of so much grog. He was right. Since Caesar's killer was himself a convicted felon still under sentence who was roaming unsupervised in the bush with a gun, it is almost certain that he was himself one of the outlaw band, which is why he knew where to find Caesar.

David Collins had the contemptuous last word on Black Caesar as 'a man who ... could never have been estimated at one remove above the brute'. He was henceforth pretty well obliterated from

the Australian story, despite the fact that his short rebellious life so perfectly conforms to the requirements of the outlaw hero of folk myth. How much better Caesar's act of rebellion fits the archetype of one who would scorn to live in slavery, bound down by iron chains, than a murderous horse-rustler like Ned Kelly. What a powerful foundation story Black Caesar could provide to Australians, if only we knew about him.

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By the turn of the century the dazzling waters of Sydney harbour had become more than an alluring prison moat that separated convicts from home, offering boundless opportunities for exploitation as the focus of increasingly complex mercantile activity. On any given day half a dozen ships that had sailed from London, New York, Providence, Calcutta, Madras or China might be at anchor in the cove, and in the shadow of these large sailing ships were several smaller colonial vessels that plied the coastal routes between Sydney, Newcastle and Hobart. Among the hulls of these sea-going vessels, a plethora of small craft bobbed and weaved over the water, transporting people and goods hither and thither. In 1804 the ex-convict Billy Blue sought to make his mark from this unregulated watery space, ferrying passengers and goods from ship to shore and back again. With the growth of trade in the cove such boatmen were a crucial element of the burgeoning maritime economy. Blue was one of about twenty-five self-employed watermen plying their trade in and around the cove.

Blue was another runaway slave from America. He had been transported in 1803 and a year later was living in the Rocks with a woman of about 30 who arrived on the female transport *Experiment* in 1804. Governor King encouraged free men to look for partners among the new arrivals as a way of accommodating the relatively small number of female convicts arriving in the colony and when a female transport ship arrived, so Joseph Holt reported, King instructed the bellman to ring the bell through the town and announce that 'if anybody wanted mares or sows that they should be served out to them.'<sup>12</sup> Whether or not such crude insensitivity facilitated the

coupling, there can be little doubt that Blue took up with his wife Elizabeth straight off the boat.

From his work in the cove, Blue could look up and see his house. On the morning of 31 July 1805, he was 'tugging at the oars', bringing a sailor ashore, when he sensed something was amiss at home. According to his passenger, Blue asked him to mind his boat, then hurried away to discover his wife had been raped, or so he said in his charge against a man named in the *Sydney Gazette* as D. McKay. The paper reported the case's dismissal and was scathing in its assessment that Blue had attempted to frame the innocent McKay. According to the editor, evidence for the defence by witnesses, together with glaring inconsistencies in Blue's testimony, left no doubt that Mr Blue's centre was several shades darker than his extremities.

Blue explained that on the day in question he was 'looking towards his house he saw his wife struggling with someone'. On rushing back to the house he found his wife 'walking about with the baby in her arms' and she told him that 'McKay had carnal knowledge of her without her consent'. Elizabeth Blue maintained that McKay called into her house and after some conversation pulled her to the floor and raped her. A friend named Dulcibella Piper gave testimony that contradicted her friend, asserting that McKay 'took [Elizabeth] by the waist and she fell down and some conversation passed between them'. McKay remained in the house for ten minutes, she continued, and he had called Blue 'a second wooden Jo'. Her evidence that no carnal conversation took place was supported by George Darling, who claimed to have been with McKay at the time, so if a rape had occurred 'he must have seen it'. He also reported that McKay remained for ten minutes and 'when he saw Blue he said he was a second wooden Jo'. A neighbour gave evidence that he overheard the incident, confirming that McKay was in the house for 10 minutes and 'what he heard McKay say to Mrs Blue was that he [Blue] was a second wooden Jo'. Several days after the incident Ajar heard Blue beating his wife. 'I will. I will. I do not like to be beat', Elizabeth implored. In her evidence she was emphatic that 'she had not been beat or struck by any person'. Finally Chief Constable John Redman reported a conversation he had had with Blue on the way to see

magistrate Jamison. Blue said that on entering the house 'he saw his wife lying on the floor with her petticoat up' – a different story from that offered the court by Blue.<sup>13</sup>

Now it was downright foolhardy for a recently emancipated man to force his convict wife to concoct a rape case in the face of two eye-witnesses, especially considering the man who was accused. Daniel McKay was an emancipated convict who lived nearby and who earned his corn retailing spirits for the NSW corps in a public house kept by his common-law wife, a convict who had arrived on the *Experiment* with Elizabeth Blue. This man could well threaten Blue with gaol: he was the town gaoler, possessing the well-deserved reputation of a hard man. In addition, Chief Constable Redman was a long-time associate of McKay's, while all the members of the court who heard the case, with the possible exception of Atkins, had business entanglements with him. Dulcibella Piper was a free woman, but her husband remained a convict, as was the man who corroborated her evidence, George Darling. He happened to be the clerk to John Harris in his role as the collector of the gaol fund. These witnesses had good reason to give overly consistent testimony contradicting Blue's evidence and carefully repeating McKay's insult that Blue was 'a second wooden Jo', a sly Scots reference to Blue being an old black man and a cuckold to boot.

For all that the charges were adjudged groundless, Blue suffered no retribution other than the scorn heaped upon him by the *Sydney Gazette*, while Daniel McKay quit his social calls upon Elizabeth for horizontal conversations. Blue's challenge to McKay worked to his advantage, as the new Governor William Bligh saw it as a sign of integrity and strength of character. On 2 August 1807 the *Sydney Gazette* carried an advertisement that William Blue was 'the only waterman licenced to ply a ferry in this harbour'. Not only that, but Bligh, not known for his soft heart, had Daniel McKay locked up in his own gaol, telling the Colonial Secretary that he had removed McKay from his post as gaoler 'out of motives of humanity'.<sup>14</sup> Having acquired the patronage of the new governor did Blue little good in the short term. Only four months later on 26 Jan 1808 Bligh himself was placed under arrest by the NSW Corps and Daniel McKay was



immediately reinstated as the gaoler.

Yet within three years Blue emerged a winner from this turmoil. When the new Governor Lachlan Macquarie created a rudimentary authority to monitor the workings of the harbour he appointed Blue as watchman of the cove and guardian of the shore all along the governor's domain. With the new position came a hexagonal stone house at the edge of the domain, where Blue and his growing family lived contentedly and rent-free for the next eight years. Blue's ferry business did not interfere with his role as constable and watchman, as he was at pains to assure the governor when he petitioned him to establish another ferry to Lane Cove. Although Blue employed an assistant, he himself was always at the oars when it came to ferrying the governor and his family about the harbour, or up the river to Parramatta. By 1814 it was well known that he had become a favourite of the governor and his wife.

Blue personified Macquarie's vision of the reformed convict, the figure who would become the backbone of the orderly and respectable society he aimed to create in New South Wales: a hard-working entrepreneur who had, with all propriety, married his convict partner and bestowed legitimacy upon his children. For Elizabeth Macquarie, the governor's strong-willed wife, Blue was a guileless, rough-hewn man, the no-nonsense type she most trusted. He proved an excellent companion for their adored child. But there was something more profound in the unlikely friendship of the governor with this illiterate black ferryman.

Blue was never too shy to boast of his military service in some of the most extraordinary military campaigns of the eighteenth century and this undoubtedly formed a bond of shared experience between him and the governor. The American Revolution was a formative period in Macquarie's life and doubtless these traumatic events were indelibly stamped on his psyche. Even if Macquarie had never before set eyes upon Blue, once he boarded the black man's ferry in Sydney Cove in 1810 it was enough that Blue was able to recount stories about soldiers from Macquarie's Highland regiments with whom he had shared the bombardment, starvation and ignominious defeat of Yorktown in 1781 for a unique bond to be forged between them. Blue

provided a glimpse of this relationship when he gave evidence in a court case in 1832. He and the governor 'were always together', he told a court, and it was a relationship of equals. 'I was just the same as the governor. He never countermanded any orders of mine ... he built the little octagon house at the corner of the domain for my especial accommodation.'

This reminiscence also provided Blue with the opportunity to describe the exchange in 1814 when he asked the governor to give him land for his ferry terminus at Miller's Point.

'Poh, poh!' says he. 'Billy, you have got land enough, you can use as much as you want.' 'Please your honour' says I, 'I want a landing place.' 'Well come,' says he, 'Show me the place.'

And so, when I showed him the place, 'Jemmy,' says he to [Surveyor] Meehan, 'run the chain over the Commodore's land.'

Lord bless you. We were just like two children playing.<sup>15</sup>

Blue was well into his nineties when he gave this evidence. He ended the intriguing vignette by dissolving into laughter, which might have encouraged the magistrates to think it was a piece of tomfoolery. Not so. In the colonial secretary's correspondence, dated 23 April 1814, was a letter from Macquarie to say that Blue was to receive a grant of 80 acres of land and although the location was not specified, other evidence suggests that Blue owned land at Miller's Point. On 11 June 1814 Blue was among those listed in the *Sydney Gazette* as eligible to receive cows from the government herd, presumably to be put to graze on his land there. In October 1816 Blue's government duties and remuneration were increased when he was formally appointed the keeper of the Government Domain, and three months later he received another 80 acres for his ferry on the opposite side of the cove, (now called Blues Point). This made him a relatively substantial, and very well-appointed, landowner, while the number of his little ferry boats had grown to seven or more.

Blue had clandestine sources of income in addition to his public duties, ferry business and farms, as became apparent in the early hours of the morning of 10 October 1818 when Blue was apprehended by Chief Constable John Redman as he was rowing his boat toward the wharf of George Williams, a spirit dealer. The day before, when

two constables were patrolling Williams's wharf, they detected suspicious signs of 'some casks having been rolled up the yard from the water side'. Having been tipped off that that some spirits were to be illegally landed, they went into Williams's premises and found 'two casks which were not yet dry'. After informing the chief constable, a plan was hatched for four junior constables to lie in wait near the wharf that night. About three o'clock in the morning the waiting constables noticed a flurry of activity as one of the ships at anchor in the harbour was lit up and the sound of tackle was heard, suggesting to Matthews 'the people on board the ship were getting something over the side'. Half an hour later the lights were extinguished and the rhythmic splash of oars drifted over the water toward them, while simultaneously signs of frantic activity were discerned at Williams's wharf. Intercepting the boat, the constables discovered the man at the oars was none other than Constable William Blue. Lashed on either side of the bow, level with the gunwales, were two barrels containing 120 gallons of rum. Later in the day one of the junior constables visited Blue at his house on the Domain, trying to persuade him to inform on the person who had inveigled him into carrying smuggled goods. As the constable later told D'Arcy Wentworth, the superintendent of police and magistrate, Blue drew the side of his hand across his throat in a quick motion, saying 'I would suffer this first'.<sup>16</sup>

The *Sydney Gazette* report of the court case hummed with outrage about this double-edged fraud on the people of Sydney, who were cheated of the benefits the revenue would bring, while paying the price for the smuggled rum as if duty had been paid. As for 'this unfortunate man Blue ... a man of colour with a very large family, who has been very much indebted to the humane feeling with which his Excellency the governor has for many years been pleased to view him', the crime 'was more than usually criminal'. Blue was a constable, after all, appointed 'for the purpose of *detecting* or *preventing* smuggling'. After inveighing against Blue's manifest delinquency, the editor changed tack to observe that a small player with as little money as Blue had 'a vast deal more of personal character at stake than his trifling profits', implying that Blue was the victim of the entrepreneur who possessed the capital, contacts and infrastructure

to run a successful smuggling enterprise. The reader might presume that the identity of such a person was suspected, but the pity was, the editor lamented, Blue had so far refused to give any names.

The frustration of the judge advocate about Blue's obstinacy to 'make confession against the parties to whom he has so improperly and illegally lent himself' was evident in a letter sent to the governor on the day of the hearing. Judgment against Blue had been deferred in the hope that the deceived patron could bring to bear 'a higher influence' on Blue's sense of duty and obligation to get him to expose the real miscreants and avoid a criminal sentence. If Macquarie did make an intervention, it was to no avail; Blue remained tight-lipped. Having been caught red-handed, he was inevitably found guilty of assisting in the illegal landing of spirits and sentenced to twelve months imprisonment.

This was a curious case. Smuggling was a major problem for Macquarie; its persistence deprived his government of substantial revenue. Despite the reorganisation of policing, he had no adequate regulations to deal with the problem, other than confiscation of the smuggled goods. Yet Blue was the only person ever brought before the bench to answer charges. The whole thing looked like a set up. The constables had been tipped off about the spirits and probably knew who it was they were lying in wait for. But why was Blue set up and by whom? Clearly the authorities believed there were more significant figures behind the illegal transaction. On the face of it, Blue's determined silence could be read as loyalty of the criminal class to their accomplices. However, a glance at the commercial world of Sydney in 1818 suggests a more sinister reading. The captain of the *Portsea*, Captain Nicholls, had been in trouble before for contraband trade and at that time his employer was a business partner of D'Arcy Wentworth, the superintendent of police who sat on the magistrate's bench to hear the case against Blue. Another of Wentworth's partners was Alexander Riley, whose brother was their Calcutta agent for the importation of 10,000 gallons of rum. Edward Riley had recently arrived in Sydney and established a business as agent for the importation of Bengal spirits. As well as the partnership with Riley, Wentworth had a longstanding commercial arrangement with the

third magistrate, Simeon Lord, described by a previous governor as a notorious smuggler.

So, the most plausible contender for the chief smuggler who was relying upon Blue's integrity was one or more of those sitting in judgment upon him. As the hand across the throat signified, he knew he had a better chance of survival keeping quiet than spilling the beans. As it transpired, the magistrates claimed to be so impressed by the weight of Blue's previous public service, and so concerned for his large family, that they submitted the case to the governor with a strong request for mercy. Macquarie pardoned Blue's custodial sentence, although he did dismiss him from all his positions and evict his family from the pleasant stone house. Despite his disgrace, Blue still kept his ferry business and his land, although at some stage he was forced to sell a large portion of the Miller's Point holding. He even managed to regain the friendship of the governor and his family during the few short years before Macquarie's recall in February 1822.

Once Macquarie quit the colony, the sharks began to circle Blue's enterprise. William Gore, who had accumulated a 600-acre property on the northern shore at Artarmon, made the first overt move against Blue's ferry business. On 22 September 1823, he petitioned the local magistrate Edward Wollstonecraft, who was a free settler with massive landholdings on the North Shore, that the ferry be put in the hands of more a trustworthy person than Blue. Gore insisted that Blue's ferry was the reason that the lives of his family and his property were exposed to a raft of 'armed dangerous and suspicious individuals who constantly infest and perambulate in the surrounding forest'. As Wollstonecraft was foremost among those who regarded the emancipist class with distaste, he responded enthusiastically to Gore's request. To this accusation, Wollstonecraft added his own view that Blue was the main cause of lawlessness in the region. claiming the area of Hunter's Hill and Lane Cove was a magnet for escaped convicts, ships' deserters and stolen goods, with Blue as 'the principal agent in carrying into effect this system of plunder, smuggling and escape'. The complaint was laid before his fellow magistrates, Edward Riley and D'Arcy Wentworth. They agreed to remove the licence from Blue and appoint two 'fit and trustworthy

persons' to manage the ferry.<sup>17</sup>

Blue fought back. He may have been illiterate but was a match for William Gore when it came to deploying the rhetoric of outrage. On 28 October, Blue petitioned Governor Thomas Brisbane, emphasising his age, his illustrious military record and his service to Macquarie, for which he claimed he was rewarded with land on either side of the cove and the ferry licence. 'Mr Wollstonecraft, and such Gentlemen as correspond with him, wish to take said premises from poor petitioner by arbitrary power.' In a second petition sent on 17 November 1823, Blue upped the ante by slyly hinting at malice on the part of Magistrate Edward Riley. When Blue was a water constable, the petitioner explained, he had seized a load of timber 'landed in a prohibited manner by Mr Reilly', and it was his zeal in preventing the evasion of duties 'agst the interest of such gentlemen as Mr Reilly' that prompted the previous governor to reward him with the ferry that 'such gentleman' had now taken from him.<sup>18</sup>

Blue lost his ferry but he got his revenge. At the very time Blue was deprived of his main source of income (clandestine or otherwise) his nemesis William Gore was overwhelmed by spectacular disgrace. Gore shot a soldier who had come on to his land to cut grass for the regiment's horses and on 19 January 1824 the very same magistrates to whom Gore appealed for the resumption of Blue's ferry licence sentenced him to life transportation to the coalmines at Newcastle. A year later magistrate Edward Riley killed himself. Blue may have been too preoccupied with the death of his wife and the problem of feeding his motherless children to notice this death, but he could not have failed to be aware of the announcement in the *Sydney Gazette* on 25 January 1825 that he was to be restored to the use and occupation of his ferry.

By this time he had begun to fashion a curious public persona. He had taken to walking about Sydney wearing a travesty of a naval uniform with a top hat, twirling the carved stick he always carried and calling out in a preemptory fashion to all and sundry that they must acknowledge him as 'the commodore'. Blue was far from senile however, as he showed that same year when he won a writ for £12 against a Sydney gentleman for unpaid ferry fees. Nor did

the magistrate's bench think he had lost his wits when they issued a summons against him for harbouring a runaway convict in early July 1829. Blue had long been suspected as a conduit for runaways to the North Shore who would then follow known tracks through the bush to lose themselves in a community of renegades around Pittwater and beyond. His son was arrested and jailed for the same offence – harbouring an escapee – a month prior, which suggests Blue's household was under surveillance, initiated, perhaps, by Magistrate Wollstonecraft, who would have been delighted to see the last of his disreputable neighbour. By this time Blue was a Sydney celebrity, as was clear from the newspaper report of the trial: '[t]he old commodore, Billy Blue is about to be had up for harbouring a prisoner of the crown', the *Gazette* told its readers. 'Billy considers himself a privileged person, for this is not the first time he has been caught tripping.'<sup>19</sup> He received a fine, or gaol in lieu of payment, which was promptly paid for him by another wealthy neighbour.<sup>20</sup>

From that point onward, Blue kept clear of the law, while at the same time he became much more ostentatious in his displays of eccentricity. Perhaps he understood that notoriety was his best defence. On 15 December 1829 the *Sydney Gazette* noted that 'Billy Blue, the Commodore of Port Jackson, has of late grown uncommonly eloquent; scarcely a morning passes without a loud oration from his loyal lips, descanting on the glories of the standard'. He had adopted the habit of boarding ships that arrived in the harbour wearing his tattered uniform and top hat, to welcome the captain 'in his official capacity as Commodore'. Blue expected to 'receive suitable homage from all of His Majesty's subjects, as befitted a man of his position', so the *Sydney Gazette* explained. Walking about, twirling his stick and declaiming 'True Blue forever', the old man demanded that men salute, children doff their hats and women curtsy. Woe betide any who failed to respond; they suffered a cascade of abuse: 'You brute – you long legged brute – [you] forget the commodore!'<sup>21</sup> His performance, calculated or not, had the effect of endearing Blue to all levels of Sydney society.

When the European aristocrat Baron von Hügel arrived in Sydney in February 1834 he was shocked to be confronted by an old

black man standing in the middle of the street with a sack over his shoulder, 'saying something crazy in a loud voice at every passer by'. Addressing one passing gentleman, Blue called out: '[w]ho is that long legged beauty, Your Honour? I won't say anything to your lady'. To another pedestrian he was slyly conspiratorial: '[n]ot a word about the pig'. On enquiring about this disreputable apparition, von Hügel could scarce believe his ears to be told that this was 'the old commodore whom Governor Macquarie appointed port captain'.<sup>22</sup> Blue must have been delighted to have so thoroughly fashioned his own legend.

When Blue died three months later each of the three Sydney newspapers dedicated prime space to an affectionate obituary, with the editor of the *Sydney Gazette* producing two columns of high-flown praise where he extolled 'the gallant old commodore' as a privileged person whose memory would be 'treasured in the minds of the present generation, when the minions of ambition are forgotten in the dust'.<sup>23</sup> Within days the *Australian* announced that a painting of Blue could be viewed at Cummings Hotel: in the opinion of this paper the likeness, executed in oils, 'ought to be preserved in Government House or some other institution'.<sup>24</sup> The artist was J. B. East, a painter of some note who exhibited at the Royal Academy. East arrived in the colony a few years before Blue's death, seeking commissions, and undoubtedly he had produced the portrait as a speculative venture. It was very much a commemorative portrait: Blue was presented as a tall, almost graceful black man with a beatific smile, dressed in his rag-tag clothes and his signature top hat, carrying the well-known accoutrements of a bag slung over his shoulder and the carved stick. In acknowledgement of his supposed patron, the setting was Lady Macquarie's Chair in the governor's domain, while behind him the harbour provided glimpses of the shipping activity mistakenly thought to provide his *raison d'être* as 'the old commodore'.

That a disreputable black man and serial offender should be the subject of a commemorative portrait must have enraged the exclusionist settlers such as Wollstonecraft, and Blue would surely have relished the irony that the *Sydney Gazette* had published such an extravagant obituary. That very paper, thirty years earlier, had



pronounced that Blue's heart was blacker than his extremities, and had berated his uncommon criminality. Blue's past misdemeanours were swept aside by the second-generation *Gazette*, which chose to see 'the gallant old commodore' as a foundation father of New South Wales, telling the readers that 'the reign of Billy is coeval with the foundation of the colony'.<sup>25</sup>

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Clearly the performances of Black Caesar and Billy Blue were highly subversive of imperial authority, but I would like to argue that these men continue to be subversive in other ways. Take the case of Billy Blue. His story subverts our easy assumptions about the fixed racial boundaries and the naturalness of racialised identities in early Australian history. For the modern Australian it is utterly incongruous that extravagant praise, the use of the word *reign*, and a commemorative portrait meant for Government House should be reserved for a disreputable ex-convict and multiple offender who was poor, illiterate and black as the ace of spades. It runs counter to everything our national history would lead us to expect. The tendency to read late nineteenth- and twentieth-century racial assumptions into early colonial Australia is almost universal among historians and social commentators, regardless of what side of the history wars they fight. In any discussion of the foundation of Australia it is a given that racialisation was at work from the beginning, but that is not what the stories of Billy Blue and other early black settlers play out.

Likewise for Black Caesar. It comes as a shock to most Australians to discover that our national folk myth, the bushranger's resistance to oppressive authority – a story which reaches its apotheosis in the Kelly saga – does not have its beginnings in the historical struggle of the Irish against the English but in the resistance of appropriated Africans to slavery in the Americas. His unexpected story works to subvert the dominant national narrative that considers Australian history as connected by the iron sinews of officialdom to the imperial centre in the United Kingdom, but otherwise isolated from and unconnected to happenings in the rest of the world. Despite the obvious fact that settlement of Australia is a direct product of the loss of the American

colonies, the national narrative of Australia's foundation and early development wilfully ignores the history of the Atlantic world. The story of Black Caesar shows how mistaken that reading is and how events of the American Revolution and its aftermath reverberate through our history.

## Notes

- 1 For the official report of the death of Black Caesar, promising a Coroner's inquest, see Hunter to Portland, 3 March 1796, *Historical Records of Australia*, (HRA) vol.1, 1788–96, pp.554–55.
- 2 David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony of New South Wales: With remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, etc., of the Native Inhabitants of that Country*, vol.1, ed. Brian Fletcher, Sydney, 1975, p.381.
- 3 Collins, *An Account of the English Colony*, p.58.
- 4 Records of the Judge Advocate's Bench, *State Records of New South Wales* (SRNSW) 1/296.
- 5 Caesar's response rendered in the convict argot can be found in *George Barrington's Voyage to New South Wales*, ed. Suzanne Rikard, Leicester, 2001, a work that purported to be authored by the flash pickpocket George Barrington, who was transported to New South Wales in 1790.
- 6 Collins, *An Account of the English Colony*, pp.58–59.
- 7 *Watkin Tench, 1788: Comprising a Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay and A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*, ed. Tim Flannery, Melbourne, 1996, p.116.
- 8 Ross to Phillip, 11 Feb. 1791, *HRNSW*, vol.1, part 2, p.447. Mollie Gillen, *Founders of Australia: A Biographical Dictionary of the First Fleet*, Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1989, is the source for the relationship of Anne Poore with Caesar. The birth of Mary-Ann Poore was registered subsequently when she was baptised by Rev. Henry Fulton, see Register of Henry Fulton, *SRNSW BDM*, vol.4, R5005.
- 9 King to Grose, 3 March 1793, King Letterbook, Mitchell Library, C187.
- 10 Collins, *An Account of the English Colony*, pp.377, 378.
- 11 The reward notice is reproduced in *HRNSW*, vol.3, p.11.
- 12 Joseph Holt, *A Rum Story: The Adventures of Joseph Holt Thirteen Years in New South Wales, 1800–1812*, ed. Peter O'Shaughnessy, Sydney, 1988, p.89. Alan Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia: A History*, vol.1, Melbourne, 1997, p.267, gives credence to this story, citing King's behaviour as evidence of his 'low jokes'.
- 13 Trial of Daniel McKay, Judge Advocate's Bench, 17 Aug. 1805, *SRNSW* R656, p.601. The exact meaning of the term 'second wooden Jo' is

unknown; McKay was a Scot and 'Jo' is a Scottish term for lover. 'Wooden' most likely derives from Scots word 'wuid', which means, among other things, an inferior form of coal; yet another meaning was to be crazy or beside oneself with rage.

- 14 Bligh to Castlereagh, 30 June 1808, *HRA*, vol.6, p.533.
- 15 Quotations from *Martin v. Munn*, Supreme Court of New South Wales, 22 and 23 Oct. 1832, reported in the *Sydney Gazette*, 25 Oct. 1832.
- 16 The case against Blue, 10 Oct. 1818, Court of Criminal Jurisdiction, Informations, Depositions & Related Papers, *SRNSW COD 445, SZ795*, pp.421–35.
- 17 Gore to Wollstonecraft, 23 Sept. 1824, *SRNSW CS R6056, 4/1765*.
- 18 Blue's Petitions in 1823, *SRNSW: 28 Oct., CS R6017; 4/5783*, pp.438–40; 17 Nov., *CS R6056 4/1764*, p.215.
- 19 *Sydney Gazette*, 9 July 1829.
- 20 The Blue cases, son and father, are in *SRNSW R852, 4/6431*, pp.23, 25.
- 21 Descriptions of Blue's behaviour from his obituary in the *Sydney Gazette*, 8 May 1834.
- 22 Extract from Baron von Hügel, *New Holland Journal*, in Tim Flannery, ed., *The Birth of Sydney*, Melbourne, 1999, p.251.
- 23 *Sydney Gazette*, 8 May 1834.
- 24 *The Australian*, 8 May 1834.
- 25 *Sydney Gazette*, 8 May 1834.