

Chapter 1

The Old Commodore: a transnational life

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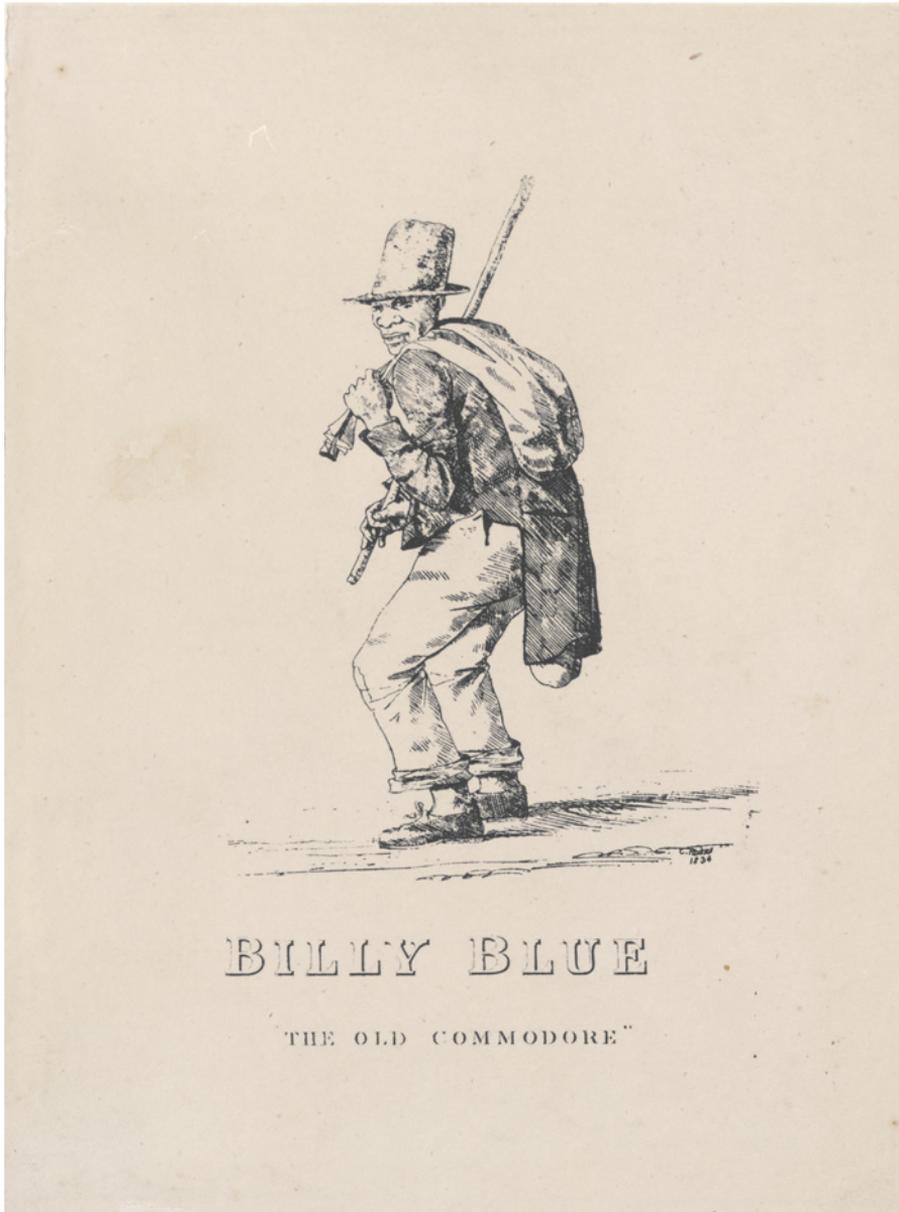
‘The world is all of one piece,’ according to the narrator of *All The Kings Men*, the iconic novel by Robert Penn Warren that was the centrepiece of my doctoral thesis on memory, history and narrative. I reprise it here in order to flag my fascination for the interconnectedness of human experience and my desire to transcend the limitations of the national narrative. For the past decade, my historical inquiry has focused on the lives of expropriated Africans throughout the Anglo-colonial world during the long eighteenth century. My subjects are obscure, illiterate and largely forgotten historical actors, whose lives I try to recover through a hybrid methodology that combines micro history and its attention to the small local archival details with biography that emphasises the primacy of personal agency and individual experience in the push and pull of historical forces. I persevere at this eye-straining and vastly time-consuming process because it is an article of faith that individuals make history, even if they cause no revolutions to be forged, create no dynasties, strike no great poses, and write no books. Without knowing the stories of such people, how can we comprehend our part in the world?

In this chapter I explore the life of one obscure African-American man whose long and varied career carried him many places and concluded in the remote colony of New South Wales. In painstakingly recovering his story from the vast detritus of the archives in three continents, I have sought to present a singular biography of a unique individual that can serve also as a window on the shifting constructions of race and class in the complex, interconnected sphere of the British colonial world.

My narrative does not begin with William Blue’s birth, about which I know nothing, though I presume it to have been in New York about 1736.¹ Rather, the narrative begins when Blue was in his early twenties in the spring of 1761. I picture him somewhere in Europe, scrambling across the steep, rocky shore of an unfamiliar island in a futile attempt to storm a heavily fortified enemy garrison, while about him his fellow marines are being cut to pieces by enemy gunfire. With 500 marines dead or captured, the survivors were rowed back to the waiting British ships. Two weeks later, using the advantage of fog cover,

the marines led a second, successful assault on an even more inaccessible cliff face. Blue was lucky not to have been one of the 700 killed, though he was probably one of many wounded. Bloodied and traumatised, he still had no idea where he was.

Figure 1.1: Billy Blue, The Old Commodore.



Charles Rodius, 1834. National Library of Australia: nla.pic-an6016496 .

I was able to reconstruct this minor incident from the fag end of the Seven Years War by following clues in the short and inchoate autobiography that Blue left to posterity. In 1823, when he was an old man living on another rocky shore at Sydney Cove, Blue hired an amanuensis to write a petition to Governor Thomas Brisbane. The petition stated:

Petitioner is now 89 years of Age was in the service of his Majesty King George the third at the time he was crowned And went as a Marreen on the first expedition after his Crownation to Germany, Pet^r was at Queabeck with General Wolf when he was killed, also with Major Andrews when he was taken, And with Lord Cornwallace at Little York in Virginea as a Spie or Guide for his Army, and was also for a considerable time, a Serj^t of Pineneers on the continent. Pet^r was his whole Lifetime in his Majestys Service untill Pet^r came to this colony.²

A second version of the petition added that Blue had been twice wounded. Nine years later, Blue explained in his own words to the Magistrate's Court that he had served with General Wolfe and General Howe.³

Those historians who have considered Blue's petition have dismissed this illiterate black man's claim to an illustrious military career as strategic lying in order to curry favour with the governor.⁴ Certainly, it was not possible for Blue to have been a marine in Germany; the war in Germany was finished by the time George III ascended the throne. I was, however, inclined to take Blue's account at face value because I was familiar with the career of Gustavas Vassa (known to us as Olaudah Equiano), slave-servant to a British naval officer during the Seven Years War, who wrote one of the most famous autobiographies of the late eighteenth century. In *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano The African*, he described how his ship sailed into Spithead in October 1760 to join a 'large fleet that was thought to be intended against the *Havannah [Hanover]*', and he went on to explain that 'about that time the king died', so the expedition was aborted. The ship and crew waited idly at the Isle of Wight 'till March 1761, when our ship had orders to fit out again for another expedition'.⁵ Military records confirm that just a week before the demise of George II, 8000 men were embarked for a secret expedition to Germany, but they disembarked when they received news of the allied defeat at Kloster Kampen. Six months later, after George III had become king, these same troops, including two marine battalions, embarked once more, on 29 March 1761, headed for an unknown destination that many still believed to be Germany. It was only some time after they had taken control of an enemy garrison that their destination was revealed to be Belle Isle, an island off the coast of France. The heavily fortified island proved to be of no strategic value and subsequently the Belle Isle campaign was largely ignored in accounts of the Seven Years War. By 1823 there could be no advantage gained from inventing participation in such a long-forgotten episode.

While no surviving musters or pay lists survive to verify Blue's employment as a marine, the circumstantial evidence strongly supports his claim. A search of the surviving records of the marine divisions reveals that the strength of the marine companies was seriously compromised by mass desertion during the long wait and, immediately before the fleet departed, a ruthless press was instigated.⁶ Blue was a stranger to England who had probably arrived as a seaman, without any legal or community protection—all of which made him a perfect fit for the press-gang.⁷ He was easily mistaken in geography; as an illiterate man from America, he probably never understood that Belle Isle was not in Germany. He might not have lingered long enough to find out the name of the place. Given the extraordinarily high casualty figures among marines, this was probably one of the occasions when Blue was wounded and so was sent straight back to England to be discharged as unfit.

If Blue is to be believed, this was not his first bloody battle, as he claims to have been at the earlier battle of Quebec, where General Wolfe was killed on 13 September 1759. Blue was originally from New York, a colony that raised independent companies of more than 9000 men for the war.⁸ Inevitably, blacks found their way into these companies as free men who willingly signed up for the bounty paid, as slaves substituting for reluctant whites or as slave runaways who had absconded to enlist.⁹ This explanation does not, however, allow for Blue to have arrived in England by the time of King George III's ascendance to the throne. It is far more likely that he was one of the many African-Americans recruited as seamen.

The sudden and hurried dispatch of a massive British fleet to the St Lawrence River in February 1759 left many ships shorthanded. In April 1759, Rear Admiral Charles Holmes was sent to New York specifically to find additional recruits.¹⁰ A black man in his early twenties, slave or free, was an ideal recruit, whether a volunteer or a victim of the 'hot press'.¹¹ Blue could have been recruited as a boatman, as these were in great demand, or as a cook, barber, tailor or fiddler. He could have been one of the many officers' servants, just like Gustavas Vassa, who was engaged in the earlier siege of Louisbourg on the St Lawrence. All these ship's 'idlers', as they were called, were used in active combat during the siege: they fed the cannons that pounded the French defences, carried troops and supplies from place to place, acted as scouts for the army and were used as the decoys that distracted the French at the final assault. After the capitulation of Quebec, the ships left on 21 September 1759. Since the official documentation tended to identify only the warships and rarely the names of any of the many transport ships, frigates, brigs and sloops, it is impossible to locate the muster lists for the majority of the fleet, so we cannot know for certain whether Blue was aboard. If he were, he would have arrived in England to be paid off just before the death of George II, on 25 October 1760.¹²

What then of Blue's claim to have been 'with Major Andrews when he was taken, And with Lord Cornwallace at Little York in Virginea as a Spie or Guide for his Army'? These slivers of autobiography place him at two of the most famous episodes of the American Revolution: the capture and execution of Major André as a British spy in New York in 1780 and the ignominious defeat of Lord Cornwallis in Virginia in 1781. In addition, Blue's verbal account of having served under General Howe places him in America as early as 1776, when William Howe was the British Commander-in-Chief. What happened to him between 1761 and 1776 and what is the evidence for Blue's military service in those years?

Blue's sense of temporal sequence was about as good as his geography. The answer can be found in his final claim to being 'for a considerable time, a Serj^t of Pineneers on the continent'. At first, this made no historical sense until I chanced upon a clue that showed Blue's enigmatic claim provided the key to the veracity of his account. I knew that a British expeditionary force was raised from among troops at Belle Isle to fight alongside the Portuguese army in 1762. When I was searching among the sparse documents relating to this episode, I found a request from the Portuguese commander for non-combatants to provide logistical support services to the British force.¹³ In response to this request, two officers who had resigned their regimental commission in order to be attached to the Portuguese army raised a company of 100 'pioneers' in Britain. This corps of pioneers was quasi-military and not part of the formal army structure, so there were no records—regimental, departmental or otherwise—to indicate who was recruited and what happened to them. Few people, other than those directly involved, would have known that this irregular corps was deployed on the Continent in the last months of the Seven Years War or that, along with the British officers, they stayed with the Portuguese army for many years after. So, once again, Blue was providing information known only to those directly involved.¹⁴

In May 1775 the first wave of the British army invaded the American colonies, led by three brigadier generals: Henry Clinton, a political appointment; John Burgoyne, a veteran of Belle Isle and Portugal; and William Howe, who had served at Quebec and Belle Isle. Howe's order book clearly indicates that a pioneer corps was attached to the army. Nearly one year later, Howe led a massive assault of British troops and Hessian mercenaries to take New York.¹⁵ Howe's order for the occupation of Manhattan on 18 October 1776 stated that 'the Pioneers of the Army are constantly to march at the head of each brigade'.¹⁶ This is obviously how Blue came to return to America and presumably he stayed within the huge British garrison in New York until 1780. In late September of that year, the dashing Major John André was sent up the Hudson River to secretly negotiate with the American turncoat Benedict Arnold. When André was captured and subsequently executed as a spy, the entire British army was

plunged into shock and grief. The young officer's charisma, as well as his gallantry in the face of ignoble death, even won the admiration of his captors. Popular songs celebrating the bravery of 'Major Andrews' were sung on both sides of the ideological divide. Of course, Blue could not have been present at André's capture, since André was alone at the time. Blue could, however, have been a member of a corps of pioneers attached to the British garrison at Stony Point, which was just near the place on the Hudson River where the fateful meeting and later arrest took place. Whether Blue was on duty at Stony Point, or in the garrison at New York, the emotional effect could have been so profound that 50 years later he believed that he was part of these dramatic events.

His claim that he was 'with Lord Cornwallis at Little York in Virginia as a Spie or Guide for his Army' is also easily resolved. He would have gone to Virginia at the beginning of 1781, when the turncoat General Arnold was dispatched to Virginia with a force of 1600 men to establish a naval base at Portsmouth. For this operation in enemy territory, Arnold wanted black spies who would blend unobtrusively into the local population. Certainly, he took black pioneers with him from New York and he recruited others in Virginia, all of whom were later transferred to the army of Lord Cornwallis on the march through Virginia to catastrophe at the garrison Cornwallis established on the bluff above the York River.¹⁷ After Cornwallis's ignominious surrender, this besieged garrison was instantly memorialised as Yorktown. Very few people outside Virginia ever knew that the small town Cornwallis chose for the British garrison was originally known as Little York. It is very telling that it was this anachronistic name that Blue used in his 1823 petition.

The Articles of Capitulation signed by Cornwallis stipulated that nearly 9000 soldiers and sailors be detained in Virginia as prisoners of war, and only officers were paroled. HMS *Bonetta* was permitted to sail immediately for New York with Cornwallis's dispatches and several ships were allowed to take the officers. Cornwallis arranged for the black spies and guides to be secreted on these ships and taken to New York to avoid retribution.¹⁸ It was certainly not safe for Blue to stay in America once the British began to leave and he would have left New York for England during the hasty evacuations of 1782 and 1783, probably working as a seaman on one of the British ships desperate for crew. Such was the chaos of the Loyalist evacuation of some 150,000 people that no proper records were kept.

Like many other black seamen, Blue fetched up in Deptford, an impoverished maritime district of London that was geared towards serving the needs of the huge naval dockyard, where warships were built, refitted and supplied. Many merchant ships also moored off Deptford, even though the cargo had to be unloaded upriver, on the north side of the river, where the customs houses were. Even before the American Revolution, Deptford had a noticeable black presence,

which swelled rapidly with the discharge of thousands of African-American seamen from the Royal Navy and the privateers in 1783 and 1784.¹⁹ In the period immediately after the American Revolution, the two Deptford parishes registered a tenfold increase in the number of black adult baptisms.²⁰ Within a year or so of arrival, almost all were out of work and living by their wits in an alien and uncongenial environment.

It was a desperate predicament to be unemployed in England in 1784, when the labour force was swamped with demobilised soldiers and sailors. The black refugees from America who flooded the city had no support networks on which they could draw, and their situation was worsened because they did not fit easily into the existing framework of the Poor Laws. Blue joined an indigent black community eking out a precarious existence without access to poor relief. The bitter winter of 1784–85 was especially cruel for those struggling to survive on whatever could be begged, borrowed or stolen.²¹ The plight of indigent black people in London became a matter of public concern in 1786, when the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor was formed to provide a relief payment of sixpence a day, paid weekly out of Treasury coffers. Blue was one of the first to sign on for the bounty of three shillings and sixpence, travelling across the river to Mile End to collect it. He was listed as number 50 of the 659 people to whom payments were made throughout August 1786.²² As many of these black refugees were unhappy about finding themselves marooned in a destination they had not chosen, the idea took root among the committee members to relocate them to a new colony to be established in Sierra Leone, on the west coast of Africa. Blue chose not to join the emigration to Africa. After 4 September 1786, his name no longer appeared among those listed as receiving the bounty.

Nor did Blue choose to willingly immigrate to the colony being established at exactly the same time at the opposite end of the globe. Like most early settlers to New South Wales, Blue was an immigrant who arrived in chains, having been sentenced in 1796 to seven years' transportation for stealing sugar. At that time, England was engaged in an exhausting war with France, but Blue had not enlisted in the army or navy, as he was too old to serve. When he was arrested, he was working as a lumper on the West Indian ships. Why then did he insist he had always been in His Majesty's service before his transportation?

In attempting to resolve this conundrum, I literally stumbled over the crucial evidence in the National Archives when I was searching for the meaning of Blue's nickname. It had always been assumed that 'the Commodore' referred to his long employment as the ferryman at Sydney Cove, but Blue himself suggested the moniker predated his time in the colony. 'I got the name of the Commodore for being in charge of the old *Enterprise* at Tower-hill,' he told the Magistrate's Court in Sydney in 1832.²³ A search of the National Maritime Museum database established that in the 1790s HMS *Enterprise* was a hospital ship moored on the

River Thames, just below the Tower of London. The musters of the *Enterprise* at the museum, however, yielded next to no information: each book had only a few pages listing the 20 or so crew, none of whom were named Blue.

Old muster books are very heavy and very dirty items, rarely consulted by historians. As I was lugging one filthy book back to the counter, I stumbled slightly and it fell open at the back pages where I saw hundreds of names listed under the heading 'Supernumerary'. Looking closely, I realised that these were the names of sailors who were aboard for one night only. Beside their name was written the letter 'P' and the name of a naval lieutenant. There were five such lieutenants named in the lists. By cross-searching the admiralty records, I established that these were the half-pay officers responsible for the operation of London press-gangs. I realised I had stumbled onto the records of an impressment ship. Ten muster books later, I had counted more than 34,000 men impressed on that one ship between 1792 and 1796.²⁴ I could see no connection between press-gangs and Blue's nickname until I searched the Old Bailey online for the use of the term 'commodore'. Here I found multiple references to a non-naval use to refer to the man in charge of gangs of men labouring in the warehouses lining the Pool of London, or as a term used by seamen to describe the leader of a gang of sailors ashore. In this context, it became apparent that Blue was indeed in the king's service: he must have been in charge of one of the press-gangs of the *Enterprise*. It was disreputable, casual work, but it could be profitable. Deptford was a very promising hunting ground for a press-gang. From 1793, business was brisk and the money earned would have been good. By September 1796, however, this source of income was severely reduced by the introduction of the *Quota Acts* that required each city to provide a set number of men for service. London's quota was achieved largely by reprieving convicted criminals. By the time the Impressment Service returned to strength, Blue was a member of a different gang: the chain gangs put to work raising gravel from the bed of the River Thames.²⁵

In order to make ends meet, Blue took on the dangerous seasonal work as a lumper on the ships that carried merchandise from the West Indies. Lumpers unloaded the cargo of the merchant ships that moored side by side in the Thames in tiers of seven or eight. All cargo was offloaded onto lighters and taken to the riverside warehouses. Lumpers were among the lowest-paid workers in London; shipowners did not even provide them with food or drink, requiring them to go ashore for their unpaid food breaks. Compensation for the poor lot of the lumper was the toleration of small-scale plundering, referred to in the business as drainage, spillage or leakage—hence the other connotation of the word 'lumper': a pilferer of cargo. A couple of regular trips ashore during the day for sustenance gave lumpers the opportunity to relieve the cargo of small quantities of merchandise, a practice that was customarily regarded by all parties as an element of the wage.²⁶ Generally, merchants allowed up to 2 per cent of the

shipped weight to disappear as spillage. It was a fine balance. Small quantities taken regularly were acceptable, but larger amounts were regarded as plunder, which was how Blue came to grief. Even though he protested the customary rights of spillage on his arrest, claiming that ‘all the lumpers had some sugar’, he was singled out because he took too much, too often.²⁷ Four times on 26 September as he was leaving the *Lady Jane Halliday* to go ashore, the mate had taken a 20-pound (9 kilogram) bag concealed under the voluminous smock worn by Blue.

Blue was just the type of lumper of whom West Indian merchants deeply disapproved: someone engaged in vertical integration, able to create a commercial opportunity from lowly, life-threatening labour on their ships. As he explained in his deposition, Blue also traded in Deptford as a chocolate maker. Almost certainly he lumped on the West Indian ships that imported cocoa beans from plantations in Jamaica, where he would have found the large quantity of beans required. For 80 pounds (16 kg) of sugar, he would need 100 pounds (45 kg) of ground cocoa, which together would have produced as much as 180 pounds (82 kg) of chocolate—nothing less than a serious commercial enterprise. When the case came before the Kent Assizes, the judge and jury were reasonably well disposed to the defendant, although they did not believe that Blue was guiltless. He was found guilty of only one charge of stealing sugar and sentenced to seven years’ transportation to New South Wales. He spent nearly five years on the prison hulks before he finally embarked on the *Minorca* for New South Wales in 1801.

A search of the Colonial Secretary’s correspondence reveals that Blue received his conditional pardon in 1803. The *Sydney Gazette* indicates that he moved into a small house located in the steepest part of The Rocks, where he applied his energy to various small-time enterprises, including the collection and sale of oysters.²⁸ At that time, at least half a dozen ships from London, New York, Providence, Calcutta, Madras and China were always at anchor in Sydney Cove.²⁹ In the shadow of these large sailing ships, which represented the infant colony’s lifeline to the outside world, there were several smaller colonial vessels that plied the coastal routes between Sydney, Newcastle and Hobart. Among the hulls of these seagoing vessels, a plethora of small craft bobbed and weaved over the water, transporting people and goods hither and thither. In this unregulated watery space, Blue sought to make his mark, setting himself up as a waterman, ferrying passengers and goods from ship to shore and back again.

By July 1804, Blue was living with Elizabeth Williams, a woman of about thirty, who arrived in Australia at the end of June that year on the female transport *Experiment*. 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 Elizabeth moved directly into Blue’s small

dwelling in the turbulent Rocks. They married on 27 April 1805, and their witnesses were Edwin Piper, a former convict who had been with Blue on the *Minorca*, and his wife, Dulcibella, who was free. Blue's daughter, Susannah, was born shortly after.³⁰

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' when he sensed something amiss at home. He hurried to his house to discover his wife had been raped, or so he said in his charge against a man named in the *Sydney Gazette* as McKay. The case was heard by the judge advocate, who was assisted by a bench that included the collector of the jail fund, John Harris, a man who held other important colonial positions. Blue explained to the bench that on the day in question '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 at her house and after some conversation pulled her to the floor and raped her. Dulcibella Piper was visiting at the time, and her testimony contradicted this, claiming only that McKay 'took [Elizabeth] by the waist and she fell down and some conversation passed between them'. George Darling, who claimed to have been with McKay at the time, supported Piper's evidence. If a rape had occurred, 'he must have seen it', he said, emphatic that he saw no such thing. A neighbour gave evidence that he overheard the incident and further reported that McKay wanted to send Blue to jail and that Blue was looking for revenge. Finally, Chief Constable John Redman reported that Blue told him that, on entering the house, 'he saw his wife lying on the floor with her petticoat up'—a different story from that offered to the court.³¹

Daniel McKay lived close to Blue. He made his money retailing spirits in a public house that was kept by his convict wife, who had arrived with Elizabeth Blue on the *Experiment*.³² This man was well placed to threaten Blue with jail: he was the town jailer, possessing a well-deserved reputation as a hard man. John Harris was a close business associate of McKay and the witnesses were all indebted to him one way or another and had good reason to give overly consistent testimony that contradicted Blue's evidence. The *Sydney Gazette* reported that the case against McKay was dismissed and concluded that the attempt to frame the innocent McKay 'left no doubt that Mr Blue's centre was several shades darker than his superficialities'.³³ There were, however, significant people in Sydney who regarded Blue's challenge of McKay as a sign of his moral integrity. One of them was the new governor, William Bligh. One of Bligh's first actions in the colony was to remove Harris from all his offices and to incarcerate McKay in his own jail.³⁴ Bligh, who was not known for his soft heart, explained that he had removed McKay 'out of motives of humanity'.³⁵ Blue, in contrast, suffered

no retribution other than the scorn heaped on him by the *Sydney Gazette*, and his economic and social standing saw a marked improvement. The *Sydney Gazette* of 2 August 1807 carried an advertisement that William Blue was 'the only waterman licensed to ply a ferry in this harbour'.³⁶

Where Blue found grace and favour with the new governor, few others did. On 26 January 1808, Bligh faced his second mutiny when the NSW Corps placed him under arrest. For a day or so, soldiers were kept busy escorting people to the barracks to sign the ex post facto petition imploring the military to arrest Bligh. Among the 150 signatures, written in neat and fluent letters, was the name 'William Blue'. Someone had forged this name, probably without Blue's knowledge or consent, since he was completely illiterate and could sign only his mark. Rather than join the chorus of assent, Blue was more likely to have kept his head down and his opinions to himself, waiting for the inevitable recriminations to begin.

Blue emerged as a winner from the new order that took shape when Lachlan Macquarie stepped ashore on the morning of the last day of 1809. On 17 August 1811, the governor announced that Blue was appointed the watchman and waterborne constable of Sydney Cove.³⁷ With the new position came a hexagonal stone house built at the edge of the governor's domain, where Blue and his growing family lived rent-free for the next eight years.³⁸ By 1814, it was well known that Blue had become a favourite of Macquarie. Blue personified the governor'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 hardworking entrepreneur who had, with all propriety, married his convict partner and bestowed legitimacy on his children. There was, however, something more profound in the governor's friendship with this illiterate ferryman: a bond of shared experience.

Macquarie began his military career at age fifteen, and he saw service immediately in America in a regiment raised in New York from veterans of a Highland regiment from the Seven Years War. By 1781 he was a lieutenant in the Seventy-First Regiment of Foot, another Highland regiment, which first saw action in the invasion of New York in 1776 and later served at the garrison at Stony Point, where Blue might also have been stationed. Several companies of the Seventy-First marched away with Cornwallis to disaster at Yorktown. It is feasible that Macquarie and Blue were caught in the dreadful siege and were among the lucky few evacuated by ship to New York. Blue provided a glimpse of this relationship with Macquarie in evidence he gave in a court case in 1832. He and the governor 'were always together', he explained, 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.' The sense of intimacy

was captured in Blue's observation that 'the Governor had a bit of the "old brown" in him'.³⁹

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 Millers Point:

'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.⁴⁰

Blue 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 is a letter from Macquarie dated 23 April 1814, giving instructions that Blue should receive a grant of 80 acres (32 hectares) of land. Other evidence locates the land in question at Millers Point. In January 1817 Blue received another 80 acres on the opposite side of the cove, now a notable landmark called Blues Point. These grants made him a relatively substantial and very well-appointed landowner; the number of his little ferryboats had grown to seven.⁴¹

Blue had clandestine sources of income in addition to his public duties, ferry business and farms on his land on either side of the harbour. This became apparent in the early hours of the morning of 10 October 1818 when he was arrested for smuggling 120 gallons (546 litres) of rum. The *Sydney Gazette's* report of the case hummed with outrage about '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'. In the editor's view, the crime 'was more than usually criminal', as Blue was a constable, appointed 'for the purpose of *detecting* or *preventing* smuggling'. Blue was clearly the victim of the entrepreneur who possessed the capital, contacts and infrastructure to run a successful smuggling enterprise. The pity was he steadfastly refused to give any names. When the constables tried to persuade Blue to inform on the person who had inveigled him into carrying smuggled goods, he drew the side of his hand across his throat in a quick motion, saying, 'I would suffer this first.'⁴²

Blue's determined silence might be read as the loyalty of a member of the criminal class to his accomplices, but an examination of the commercial world of Sydney in 1818 suggests a rather different reading. The captain of the suspect ship had come to the attention of the authorities before for engaging in contraband trade. At the time of his first offence, his employer had been a business partner of D'Arcy Wentworth, the superintendent of police and one of those who sat on the bench in judgment of Blue. Another of Wentworth's partners was the

magistrate Alexander Riley, whose brother Edward was an agent for the importation of Bengal spirits. Besides 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, many of the plausible contenders for smuggler-in-chief were sitting before Blue, passing judgment on the man and his crime, and relying on his silence. As the hand across the throat signified, he knew silence was the most sensible strategy for long-term survival and comfort. The magistrates submitted the case to the governor with a forceful recommendation for mercy and Blue suffered no custodial sentence, though he was evicted from the pleasant stone house.⁴³

In his disgrace, Blue still possessed his ferry business and his land. He even managed to regain the friendship of the governor in the few short years before Macquarie's recall in February 1822. Once Macquarie quit the colony, the sharks began to circle Blue's enterprise. A wealthy free settler successfully demanded of magistrates Riley and Wentworth that the ferry be put in the hands of more a trustworthy person. Blue fought back with a petition to Governor Thomas Brisbane, on 28 October 1823, protesting the gentlemen's use of 'arbitrary power' and emphasising his age, his illustrious military record and his service to Governor Macquarie. On inquiry, the colonial secretary was persuaded by the argument that the north shore was a magnet for escaped convicts, ships' deserters and stolen goods, and that Blue was 'the principal agent in carrying into effect this system of plunder, smuggling and escape'. Blue, however, persisted in asserting his rights and, on 25 January 1825, the *Sydney Gazette* announced he had regained use of his ferry service.⁴⁴

In March 1827, Blue was a widower with six children to support when he again petitioned the governor to take his sons into an apprenticeship at the shipyard, as a carpenter and a shipwright. When this was refused, the wealthy merchant Simeon Lord stepped into the breach, taking both boys as apprentice weavers, even though Blue was too poor to purchase their indentures. Perhaps Lord recalled with gratitude Blue's stubborn silence in the smuggling case nine years before.⁴⁵ It was about this time that Blue took 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 peremptory fashion to all and sundry that they must acknowledge him as 'the commodore'.

Blue was far from senile, as he showed in 1827, 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 it issued a summons against him for harbouring a runaway convict in early July 1829. Understanding, perhaps, that notoriety was his best defence, Blue became increasingly ostentatious in his displays of eccentricity. 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'. He had also 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. As such, Blue expected to receive 'suitable homage from all of His Majesty's subjects, as befitted a man of his position', the *Sydney Gazette* explained. Twirling his stick and declaiming, 'True Blue forever,' the old man demanded that men salute, children doff their hats and women curtsy. Any who failed to respond suffered a cascade of salty abuse. This highly subversive performance, calculated or not, had the curious effect of endearing Blue to all levels of Sydney society.⁴⁶ When Baron von Hügel landed in Sydney in 1834, he was 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'. On inquiring about this disreputable apparition, the European aristocrat could scarcely believe his ears when he was told that this was 'the old commodore whom Governor Macquarie appointed port captain'.⁴⁷

Within days of Blue's death on 6 May 1834, the *Australian* newspaper announced that J. B. East's fine portrait of the old commodore was on public view. East was a painter of some renown who had exhibited at the Royal Academy and his painting captured a tall, graceful man with intelligent eyes and a beatific smile, dressed in rag-tag clothing with a cloth bag slung over his shoulder and carrying a carved stick. East positioned his subject beside Mrs Macquarie's Chair in the Domain, an obvious acknowledgment of Blue's patron, Governor Lachlan Macquarie, with distant harbour views to remind the viewer of Blue's position as the commodore. It was the view of the *Australian* that the portrait 'ought to be preserved in Government House or some other institution'.⁴⁸ Two colonial newspapers wrote affectionate obituaries, but it was the *Sydney Gazette*, in which Blue had often been vilified, that produced the most glowing tribute. The paper dedicated two full columns to 'the gallant old commodore', extolling Blue as a founding father of New South Wales, whose memory would be 'treasured in the minds of the present generation, when the minions of ambition are forgotten in the dust'. Indulging in high-flown prose, the editor told the readers of the *Sydney Gazette* that 'the reign of Billy is coeval with the foundation of the colony'.⁴⁹

For the modern historian, it is utterly incongruous that such 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 transnational biography of Billy Blue is a fine example of how an individual life, examined in grainy detail, can confound what we historians like to think we know about the past.

Notes

¹ It was said Blue was aged between ninety-seven and ninety-nine years at his death in 1834. The evidence of Blue's place of birth comes from Susannah Scofield, granddaughter of Blue, who provided a document reproduced in the *Star* (21 September 1808) stating that Blue had told her father that he was born in New York.

² 'The Humble Petition of William Blue...', State Records of New South Wales (hereafter SRNSW), 17 November 1823, CS R6052, 4/1764, p. 21; and 21 and 28 October 1823, CS R6017, 4/5783, pp. 438–40.

³ Blue's later claims are made in evidence given in the civil case *Martin v. Munn*, reported in *Sydney Gazette*, 25 October 1832

⁴ See Duffield, Ian 1999, 'Billy Blue: power, popular culture and mimicry in early Sydney', *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 33, no. 1 (Summer); and Swords, Meg 1979, *Billy Blue*, North Sydney Historical Society, Sydney.

⁵ Carretta, Vincent 2005, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a self-made man*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, pp. 68–70.

⁶ Marine recruitment for Belle Isle, The National Archives of the Government of the United Kingdom (hereafter TNA), WO1/16, ADM 2/1157, WO1/165.

⁷ The coronation of George III took place after the fleet had sailed, but Blue was not to know that; it was enough that he knew George III was the new king.

⁸ For the evidence of New York's contribution, see Anderson, Fred 2000, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years War and the fate of empire in British North America, 1754–1766*, Faber & Faber, London, pp. 227, 318–21, 473, 529, 795.

⁹ Runaway-slave notices of the period mention slaves absconding to enlist: see *New York Gazette*, 30 May 1757. See also Hodges, Graham Russell and Brown, Alan Edward (eds) 1994, 'Pretends to be Free': *Runaway slave advertisements from colonial and revolutionary New York and New Jersey*, Garland, New York.

¹⁰ The reference to Holmes' ships in New York, as well as ships being 'weak-handed', is contained in the letter of General Wolfe to the Admiralty, 6 June 1759, quoted in Wood, William Charles Henry (ed.) 1909, *The Logs of the Conquest of Canada*, Champlain, Toronto, p. 110. For information about the wide-scale recruitment of sailors in New York, I am indebted to Matthew Ward at the University of Dundee, author of *The Battle for Quebec, 1759: Britain's conquest of Canada* (2005, Tempus, London).

¹¹ For information on the crisis in maritime labour in 1759 and the regular resort to the 'hot press', see Gradish, Stephen F. 1980, *The Manning of the British Navy During the Seven Years War*, Royal Historical Society, London.

¹² The musters are held in TNA, ADM 36.

¹³ Ligonier to Townshend, 26 June 1782, TNA, SP 89/57.

¹⁴ See Francis, A. D. 1981, 'The fantasy war of 1762–63: the campaign in Portugal', *Journal for the Society for Army Historical Research*, vol. 59, no. 237, (Spring).

¹⁵ For the evacuation, see 'William Howe's General Order Book', TNA, WO 36/5.

¹⁶ Kemble, Stephen 1883 [reprint], 'The order book of Lt. Col. Stephen Kemble, Adjutant General of the British forces, 1775–1778', *Collections of the New-York Historical Society for the Year 1883*, vol. 16, New-York Historical Society, New York, p. 389.

¹⁷ See 'Memorial of Walter Harris', TNA, PRO AO 12/99/33; and 'Mary Willing Byrd to Jefferson' in Boyd, Julian P. (ed.) 1954, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson. Volume 4*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, pp. 690–92.

¹⁸ Walter Harris and Thomas Johnston each gave the Loyalist Claims Commission an account of being smuggled out on the *Bonetta*: see TNA, AO 12/99/334; and AO 13/ 70b1/301–2.

¹⁹ The majority of the black claimants to the Loyalist Claims Commission were seamen from the Royal Navy.

²⁰ There is no doubt that Blue was baptised, but I have not found his baptismal notice in England. He was probably baptised in America.

²¹ For the death of indigent blacks, see Braidwood, Stephen J. 1994, *Black Poor and White Philanthropists: London's blacks and the foundations of the Sierra Leone settlement 1786–1791*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, p. 32.

²² Payment lists, 14 August – 4 September 1786, TNA, T1/635.

²³ The quote is from *Martin v. Munn*, Supreme Court of New South Wales, 22 October 1832, reported in the *Sydney Gazette*, 25 October 1832.

²⁴ For the records of the *Enterprise*, see TNA, ADM 102.208, ADM 36/15418–28.

²⁵ The records of Old Bailey trials also suggest that the press-gangs in London were less aggressive in the period 1796–97; see www.oldbaileyonline.org

²⁶ My understanding of lumping and customary spillage owes much to Linebaugh, Peter 1992, *The London Hanged: Crime and civil society in the eighteenth century*, Cambridge University Press, New York, pp. 416–25.

²⁷ Indictment of William Blue, Kent County Archives (hereafter KCA), Q/SIW 422; Deposition of William Blue, 29 September 1796, KCA, Q/SB 225.

²⁸ Blue's emancipation is listed in the *Register of Pardons and Tickets of Leave*, SRNSW, vol. 1/540–41. In 1804, Blue gave evidence in two court cases concerning violent disturbances between his neighbours in The Rocks, both reported in the *Sydney Gazette*.

²⁹ For shipping in Sydney, October–November 1803, see *Historical Records of New South Wales* (hereafter *HRNSW*), vol. 5, p. 288.

³⁰ Marriage and Baptism Register of St Philips Church, Sydney.

³¹ Trial of Daniel McKay, Judge Advocate's Bench, 17 August 1805, SRNSW, R 656, 601.

³² Daniel McKay arrived on the *Royal Admiral* in 1792. In 1810, he petitioned the colonial secretary for amelioration of sentence for his common-law wife, Judith Quinlan, from the *Experiment*.

³³ *Sydney Gazette*, 18 August 1805.

³⁴ Harris to King, 25 October 1807, *HRNSW*, vol. 6, p. 343.

³⁵ Bligh to Castlereagh, 30 June 1808, *Historical Records of Australia*, vol. 6, p. 533. The men were immediately reinstated after Bligh's arrest.

³⁶ Blue's ferry was the first of its kind in the port; *Sydney Gazette*, 2 August 1807.

³⁷ Notice, 17 August 1811, SRNSW, CS SZ758, Reel 6038, 226.

³⁸ 'The Humble Petition of William Blue...', 17 November 1823, SRNSW, CS R6045, 4/1735, 151.

³⁹ This was not a racial reference; it expressed the sense that Macquarie shared some of the qualities of poor folk. In the argot of the late eighteenth century, a 'brown' was a copper halfpenny.

⁴⁰ The quotes from *Martin v. Munn* were reported in *Sydney Gazette*, 25 October 1832.

⁴¹ For Blue's various grants and appointments, see SRNSW, CS R6048, 4/1742, 42, and R6045, 4/1735, 151.

⁴² Case against Blue, Court of Criminal Jurisdiction, 'Informations, Depositions and Related Papers', 10 October 1818, SRNSW, COD 445, SZ795, 421–35.

⁴³ John Wylde to Lachlan Macquarie, 16 October 1818, SRNSW, CS R6047, 4/1741, 47–50; John Wylde to Lachlan Macquarie, 30 October 1818, SRNSW, CS R6047, 4/1741, 76–7.

⁴⁴ William Gore to Edward Wollstonecraft, 23 September 1824, SRNSW, CS R6056, 4/1765; Blue's petitions to Governor Brisbane are from 28 October 1823, Reel 6017; 4/5783, pp. 438–40, and 17 November 1823, SRNSW, CS R6045, 4/1735, p. 151; Colonial Secretary to Wollstonecraft, 6 December 1823, SRNSW R6011 4/3509.

⁴⁵ 'The Humble Petition of William Blue...' to Governor Darling, 12 March 1827, SRNSW, Box 4/1926, Item 27/2898.

⁴⁶ Other descriptions are from Blue's obituary in the *Sydney Gazette*, 8 May 1834.

⁴⁷ Baron von Hügel (*New Holland Journal*) is quoted in Flannery, Tim (ed.) 1999, *The Birth of Sydney*, Text Publications, Melbourne, p. 251.

⁴⁸ *Australian*, 8 May 1834.

⁴⁹ *Sydney Gazette*, 8 May 1834.