

'A Fine Passage': Insights into Early Australian Convict Transportation

Issue 3: A Miniature of William Hill

– Gary L. Sturgess

Summary

A recently-discovered miniature of Captain William Hill, the proud and volatile NSW Corps officer who arrived with the Second Fleet, allows us to look into the eyes of a self-confident young man still early in his military career, who may have had an influence on the birth of the Australian wool industry.

The miniature, painted on ivory and surrounded by locks of his hair, is set into a pendant, the reverse of which has a miniature of his younger brother, Edward. It was brought to Australia in the 1828 by his nephew, Henry Edwards Hill, who came out as a lieutenant in the 56th Regiment, and has been passed down through his family.

Hill sailed from NSW in early 1793, so that unlike other NSW Corps officers, such as John Macarthur or Joseph Foveaux, he had very little impact on the colony. With this newsletter, Hill's profile is seen outside the family for the first time.

Establishment of the NSW Corps

The NSW Corps – or ‘Botany Bay Rangers’, as they were mischievously dubbed by the British press – was established in May 1789, to replace the marines who had been sent out with the First Fleet. The regiment was commissioned under Major Francis Grose, a veteran of the American War of Independence, with three companies under Lieutenants William Paterson, Nicholas Nepean and William Hill, all promoted to the rank of Captain.

It was intended that they would all proceed with the Second Fleet, commissioned in the autumn of 1789, with Grose, Paterson and most of the men sailing on *HMS Gorgon*, and Nepean and Hill, three lieutenants and an ensign distributed across the three convict transports, each with a detachment of soldiers as a guard. As it turned out, the *Gorgon* was delayed due to an outbreak of typhus, and the others went on ahead.

Nepean sailed on the *Neptune*, the largest of the three transports and the de facto flagship, with Lieutenant John Macarthur (later relocated with his family to the *Scarborough*) and 43 privates. Hill proceeded on the much smaller *Surprise* with an ensign and 28 men. The military detachment on the *Scarborough* consisted of two lieutenants and 32 men.

Captain William Hill

William Hill (baptised at St Lawrence Stroud on 1 June 1760) was the son of a well-to-do mill owner, also named William Hill, whose woollen mills were located alongside the canal at Stonehouse, Gloucestershire around three miles from Stroud. According to the family, his father had made his money out of manufacturing cloth for military uniforms. His mother, Mary Hopkins, came from landed gentry who (among other things) raised sheep in Herefordshire.

Captain Hill had the benefit of ‘a liberal education’, and in 1779, at the age of 19, he acquired an ensigncy in the 87th Regiment, then being raised in nearby Worcestershire. The American War was underway, and the regiment was immediately sent to the Leeward Islands, but William seems to have returned shortly thereafter, possibly because of illness. In May 1780, he purchased an ensigncy, and in October 1782, a lieutenancy in the 6th Regiment, based out of neighbouring Warwickshire. His father advanced him the £300 needed to acquire the promotion and fit himself out.

William Hill Sr. died two years later, and since the country was no longer at war, his eldest son took leave from the army to attend to the family’s affairs. He

arranged for his brother Edward, then only 19 or 20 years old, to take over the management of the mill, and he may have played a role in negotiating engagements for his two older sisters, Abiah and Priscilla.

Hill returned to duty with the 6th in October 1788, six months before the announcement that a new regiment was being formed for service at Botany Bay. His commission in the NSW Corps is dated 6 June 1789, and the appointment was conditional on him raising a complete company, consisting of three sergeants, three corporals, two drummers and 67 private men. He could name the lieutenant and the ensign himself and bank the associated fees, and he was to be paid three guineas by the Crown for every recruit. His nephew later wrote that it cost him £800 to raise his company, although some of this might have been the price of the captaincy.

Within weeks, Hill and his agents were recruiting men in and around Birmingham, understandable given the 6th Regiment's roots in Warwickshire, and by early September, his company was complete.

The Second Fleet

Hill went on board the *Surprise* on the evening of 18 November 1789, shortly before she was to sail from Gravesend, and announced to Donald Trail, then the master of that ship, that the convicts were *his* prisoners. He would hold the keys to the hatchways. He would decide when the men were allowed on deck. He would hang them, if required, and he would not consult anybody else. Trail explained that he had signed a financial bond for each of the prisoners, and that when it came to the security of the ship, he was responsible to no one other than the Navy Board's Agent for Transports, Lieutenant John Shapcote, who would sail on the *Neptune*. The keys would have to be prized out of his hands by force. Hill replied that he would do that if necessary.

Trail immediately wrote to Camden, Calvert & King, the owners of the *Surprise* and the Second Fleet contractors, who wrote to the Navy Board, insisting that the matter be resolved before the ships sailed. Hill sent a message to the Home Office, also asking for the limits of his authority to be clarified.

This was more than a disagreement over who was responsible for security: this was about social status. Hill objected to the fact that the officers would be crowded together with Trail in the great cabin:

. . . it is impossible to suppose that Men bred up Gentlemen must be obliged to herd against their Inclinations with a Set of Men who for the Most Part are so illiterate & uneducated as not to be able to write their Names. . .¹

Hill had probably acquired his airs and graces from his mother, but his sense of superiority would have been sharpened by more than a decade in the army. Trail was the son of a weaver from Orkney and would have spoken with a broad Scottish accent. But he was not illiterate, he had served as the master on a naval vessel under Horatio Nelson, and he had already made the first steps towards becoming a man of independent means.

Conflict between soldiers and sailors on naval vessels was not unusual, even with the marines, who were embedded within the Royal Navy. Tensions were to be expected on troop ships: with *HMS Gorgon*, the War Office found it necessary to remind Major Grose that she was a King's ship, commanded by a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, 'who is entitled to the full exercise of the Chief Command on board'.²

Relationships on contracted naval transports were more difficult, since the masters of merchantmen were regarded with even greater disdain. And convict transports were more complicated again, because the soldiers were responsible for guarding the convicts, and at the time when the conflict between Trail and Hill occurred, the limits of their authority had not been clarified.

Once the matter was raised, the Navy Board was quick to respond, asking the Secretary at War to direct Captain Hill that he was not to interfere with the contract. Having boasted that he would pull the contractors by the nose, Hill was humiliated and stewed over this loss of face for the rest of the voyage.

On arrival in the colony, he wrote a long letter to William Wilberforce, the MP who was leading the parliamentary campaign against the slave trade, protesting about the treatment of the convicts throughout the voyage. He complained about the state of the vessel, overcrowding of the prison, the lack of proper medical care, and the routine use of bar irons instead of chains, which made it difficult for them to exercise.

It, therefore, highly concerns Government to lodge, in future, a controlling power in each ship over these low-lived, barbarous masters, to keep them

honest, instead of giving it to one man (an agent) who can only see what is going forward in his ship.³

Since the Navy Board would not give that authority to the military guard, it was incumbent upon them, he argued, to have a naval officer on every ship.

There was a great deal of merit in this, although the state of the vessels, the extent of overcrowding and the appointment of government overseers were the responsibility of the Navy Board, not the contractors. He was exaggerating about the use of bar irons: they were not routinely employed, even in the slave trade, and on both the First and Second Fleets, they were confined to the incapacitation of violent and disruptive prisoners.

Service in NSW

Hill arrived in Sydney Cove in late June 1790, and two months later, he accompanied Marine Captain Watkin Tench, Marine Lieutenant William Dawes, surgeon George Worgan and two privates on a six-day exploration of the Sydney Basin, when they discovered and named the Nepean River. Four months later, he joined Tench and Dawes again on a punitive expedition against Aborigines who had been ambushing and killing some of the invaders: the raid had been ordered by Governor Phillip, and failed, in part, because Tench did not approve. Hill did not bear any animosity towards these people, and formed a close relationship with an Aboriginal boy, Bon-del who 'had particularly attached himself to Captain Hill'. When he sailed for Norfolk Island in March of the following year, Bon-del accompanied him.⁴

But Hill did not enjoy his time in NSW: while he got along with some of the marines, who were in the process of handing over their responsibilities and preparing to sail for home, he fought with others. Marine Lieutenant Ralph Clark initially saw Hill as 'a Genteel well behaved man', who shared his tea, coffee and sugar, but relations quickly soured. Hill had one of the servants of Major Ross, the marine commander and the Lieutenant Governor, arrested for not showing him sufficient respect. Clark wrote that they were:

. . . without Exception the most Selfish Set of men I ever came a Cross and as for Hill I don't know what to call him. . . we are Constantly in hott water with them Majr. Ross has removed them all to Phillipsburg (Cascade) where they have been for some time. . . I don't much admire him [Hill] myself for he talks too much of having people before Kings Bench for me.⁵

He threatened to take his sword to one of the marine lieutenants, fought a duel with Major Ross, tried to have Nicholas Nepean court-martialled, and according to family tradition, did not like John Macarthur.

But along with the other officers of the NSW Corps, he saw commercial potential in the colony. He was one of the principal buyers of consumer goods brought out on the *Pitt* in February 1792, and he was the largest investor in the first known venture of the legendary Rum Corps in December of that year. By that time, he had tendered his resignation and was getting ready to sail for home.

Contribution to the Wool Industry

Having spent only two and a half years in the colony, Hill did not leave much of an impression. It is possible, however, that he made a contribution to the establishment of Australia's wool industry. The earliest flocks in the colony were based on around 100 sheep that were imported from Bengal on the *Shah Hormuzear* in February 1793. While Major Grose – at that time the Acting Governor – purchased a large quantity of provisions for the public storehouse, there is no evidence that he acquired any of the livestock. They were bought by officers of the NSW Corps.

We do not know exactly who these men were. John Macarthur claimed that his flock was founded on 30 ewes imported on the *Shah Hormuzear*, but said that he bought them from another officer. Hill had already handed in his resignation and would shortly depart for home on this same ship, so unless he was making an investment that would be managed by someone else in his absence (a proposition that should not be lightly dismissed), it seems unlikely that it was him. Nepean had invested heavily in the early Rum Corps' syndicates, and would leave the colony in September 1793 – so it is possible that Macarthur purchased the foundations of his flock from Nepean shortly before he sailed. There is no evidence that Grose was building his own flock, and while the other two captains, Foveaux and Johnston, might well have been making purchases, it is unlikely they would have been selling to Macarthur in these early years.

Whether or not Hill was one of the purchasers, it seems possible that he might have advised his fellow officers on the acquisition of these sheep and the establishment of their flocks. None of these other officers had experience in the wool industry. Hill's father had operated woollen mills, and Hill himself had overseen the management of these facilities for several years following his father's death. It is likely that he had seen his father negotiate over the purchase of raw material, and heard him speak about such matters many times. His

mother's family raised sheep. Of all the officers in NSW at the time when the *Shah Hormuzear* arrived, it was William Hill who possessed the requisite knowledge.

Hill's Return

He sailed from NSW on the *Shah Hormuzear* in April 1793, in company with the *Chesterfield*, another private adventurer on her way to India. They touched at Norfolk Island on their way north, and Hill was sufficiently concerned about the homeward voyage that he made out another will while he was there.

Captain Bampton, the owner and master of the *Shah Hormuzear*, had decided to make his return to India through the Torres Strait, a passage that had been shunned by most of the returning ships because of the currents, reefs and sandbanks. On the afternoon of the 1st of July, when they had only just entered the strait, they touched at Erub Island – named Darnley Island by Bligh (after the Earl of Darnley), and Tate Island by Bampton (after a leading Bombay merchant).

A boat was sent ashore to barter for refreshments and water: the chief officer of the *Chesterfield*, the purser of the *Shah Hormuzear*, Captain Hill and an emancipated convict made up the party, supported by the crew of the boat. They were initially welcomed by the islanders and directed to a safe landing spot. After distributing gifts, several of the officers made their way to the top of a nearby hill to survey the surrounding seascape. Hill remained behind with the crew to protect the boat.

As they made their way back down the hill, the party was suddenly attacked: several of them were seriously wounded, but they saw off their assailants by discharging their muskets. On their arrival at the beach, they found Hill and one of the seamen dead, 'cut and mangled in a most shocking manner', the other two crewmen floating in the water, their throats cut. They launched the boat and managed to get away, and as they sailed, they saw the islanders dragging

the bodies of Captain Hill and the crew members towards large fires, which they supposed had been prepared for the occasion, 'yelling and howling at the same time most dismally'. When a second boat was sent ashore to ascertain what had happened, they found the first boat missing and assumed that everyone was dead. Two of the men managed to make their way to Timor and eventually to England.⁶

The Hill Miniature

The miniature is part of a pendant which has paintings of two different men on the front and back. The image on the front is that of a young man in a red military jacket, with buff facings. His hair is powdered and tied back in the military fashion. It is under curved glass, in an oval case around 9 cm in length. The portrait is surrounded by locks of hair.



Pendant showing image of William Hill. © Gary L. Sturgess

On the reverse, under flat glass, is an image of another young man in a blue coat, with loose powdered hair: this is completely surrounded by woven hair. He has been identified by the family as Edward Hill, William's younger brother. The pendant is kept in its original case.



Miniature of Edward Hill. © Gary L. Sturgess

The current owner, a direct descendant of Edward Hill, has always known the pendant – which was kept in a deed box in the family home along with the jewellery – to contain the images of William and Edward Hill. She has in her possession a note written in 1893 by the daughter of Henry Edwards Hill (Edward Hill's son and William's nephew), who brought the pendant to Australia in 1828, when he came out as a lieutenant in the 56th Infantry. The note was based on 'Memos' made by her father and grandfather (now missing), as well as recollections of her own, and includes the following passage: 'The miniature paintings on ivory are of Edward Hill & Captain William Hill'.

There is also a letter written on 27 December 1931 by a son of Henry Edwards Hill to his brother, 'regarding the Officer in Scarlet in our Grand-father's miniature oval'. He quotes from a note written by their father, which identifies him as Captain William Hill.

Date of the Miniature

It is difficult to be certain about the date of the painting. Short, unpowdered hair became fashionable in English society almost overnight, from the autumn of 1795, but long powdered hair and wigs remained popular for longer in the army

and in the provinces. It is reasonably certain, however, that the miniature dates from the final two or three decades of the 18th century.

It is also difficult to date the painting based on the uniform, in part because so little of it is shown, but also because many of the regiments had similar facings, buttons and loops, the principal identifying features. It was probably not made when he was preparing to sail for NSW in 1789 – this is not the face of a 29 year old man. And it seems unlikely that it was made in 1782 when he purchased his lieutenancy, since the facings on the uniform of the 6th Regiment were deep yellow.

My conclusion is that this is probably the uniform of the 87th Regiment, and the painting was made in the summer of 1779, when Hill was 19 years of age and about to head off to war.

Research

The miniature was uncovered by the author while he was researching a biography of Captain Hill. This resulted in a conversation on a genealogical website with a member of the family living in England who was not entirely sure whether Captain William Hill was one of her relatives. There followed an exchange of emails, an introduction to the owner of the miniature, a visit to regional Australia to see the artefact, research into hair styles and uniforms, and a trawl through the family archives to locate all supporting documentation.

Conversations are currently underway with an Australian museum so an artefact that is of historical importance to the nation can be made available to the public.

¹ Trail to Camden, Calvert & King, 19 November 1789, UK National Archives (hereafter TNA) T1/674/268; Camden, Calvert & King to Navy Board, 21 November 1789, TNA T1/674/265; Shapcote to Navy Board, 21 November 1789, TNA T1/674/266; Hill to Barnard, 21 November 1789, TNA T1/674/259-260.

² Lewis to Grose, 17 October 1789, TNA WO4/845/18a.

³ Extract from Hill to Wilberforce (missing) quoted in Hill to Wathen, 26 July 1790, TNA CO201/5/281-283.

⁴ Watkin Tench, *A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*, London [1793], published in Watkin Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, Sydney: Library of Australian History, 1979, p.218.

⁵ Paul G. Fidlon, et al (eds.), *The Journals and Letters of Lt. Ralph Clark, 1787-1792*, Sydney: Australian Documents Library, 1981, p.297.

⁶ 'Account of the Deliverance of Three Persons. . . from the Savages of Tate's Island. . .', *Methodist Magazine*, June 1798, pp.292-296 & July 1798, pp.343-349.

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