

From Sydney to Sierra Leone - The Travels of NSW First Fleet Surveyor William Dawes

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Key words: History; Keyword 1; Keyword 2; Keyword 3

SUMMARY

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Keywords: William Dawes, NSW First Fleet, Sydney, early surveys and exploration, local indigenous records, astronomical records, Sierra Leone Governor, death in Antigua.

ABSTRACT

“... one of the excellent of the earth.” of Dawes by Zachary Macauley.

Dawes Point under Sydney Harbour Bridge is named after him but few really know exactly who William Dawes was. In this paper you will meet the man responsible for building the first observatory on the site named after him which he had originally called Maskelyne Point for the British Astronomer Royal. You will be amazed by his world travels after his few years surveying and star gazing in Sydney where he ends up on the opposite of the world in Sierra Leone to serve three terms as Governor then moves again to Antigua in the West Indies where he passes away in 1836.

Staying in New South Wales for only the first four years of its settlement Dawes was a defiant

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character cognizant of the upheaval inflicted upon the indigenous Australians suffering under the onslaught of what they perceived as an invasion. His interaction and concern for the local Aboriginals was demonstrated in his refusal to join a punitive party sent to avenge the slaying of a farmer in direct insubordination of the order of Governor Phillip. The notes on the local tribes and their language has survived as a valuable and rare resource of the indigenous culture and spoken tongue. Watkin Tench speaks of the skill of Dawes in estimating the distances travelled by uncannily accurate pacing on their various expeditions which opened up the outer regions radiating from the central township areas. On some of these exploratory trips the Governor himself took part along with other notable early colonial identities like John Hunter, William Gore, David Collins and Aboriginal guides like Colebee and Bennelong. Tench describes that Dawes had the assignments of marking out the proposed townships of Sydney and Parramatta due to his skills as a surveyor as well as possessing some useful training as an engineer for other duties.

Despite his short stay in Sydney the contribution of William Dawes was considerable. Some details of his early life before embarking on the Sirius then his life becoming Governor of Sierra Leone and final days in Antigua will also be highlighted so that the elusive history of one of Australia's lesser known characters can be outlined for your surprise and enlightenment. From my perspective it makes me proud to bring to the attention of lovers of early colonial history another man whose surveying talents were fruitful in the ordered and thoughtful development of the colony in its earliest years so that we can enjoy the wonderful lifestyle currently enjoyed by us all today. Adding to his mystique, his three terms as Governor of Sierra Leone during its infant period of development make an unbelievable tale evolve into an incredible example of an individual striving to better his community for all of those growing up within it.

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