

Rum rebellion



Each year, 26 January marks the anniversary of a date in Australian history that is positive for some and negative for others. It marks the start of both European settlement and the first stages in the dispossession of the country's Indigenous people.

Another key event in Australia's colonial history also occurred on the same day — the Rum Rebellion. On 26 January 1808 a group of men from the New South Wales Corps, led by Major George Johnson, overthrew the unpopular governor, William Bligh. This coup was the only forced takeover of a government ever to occur in this country.

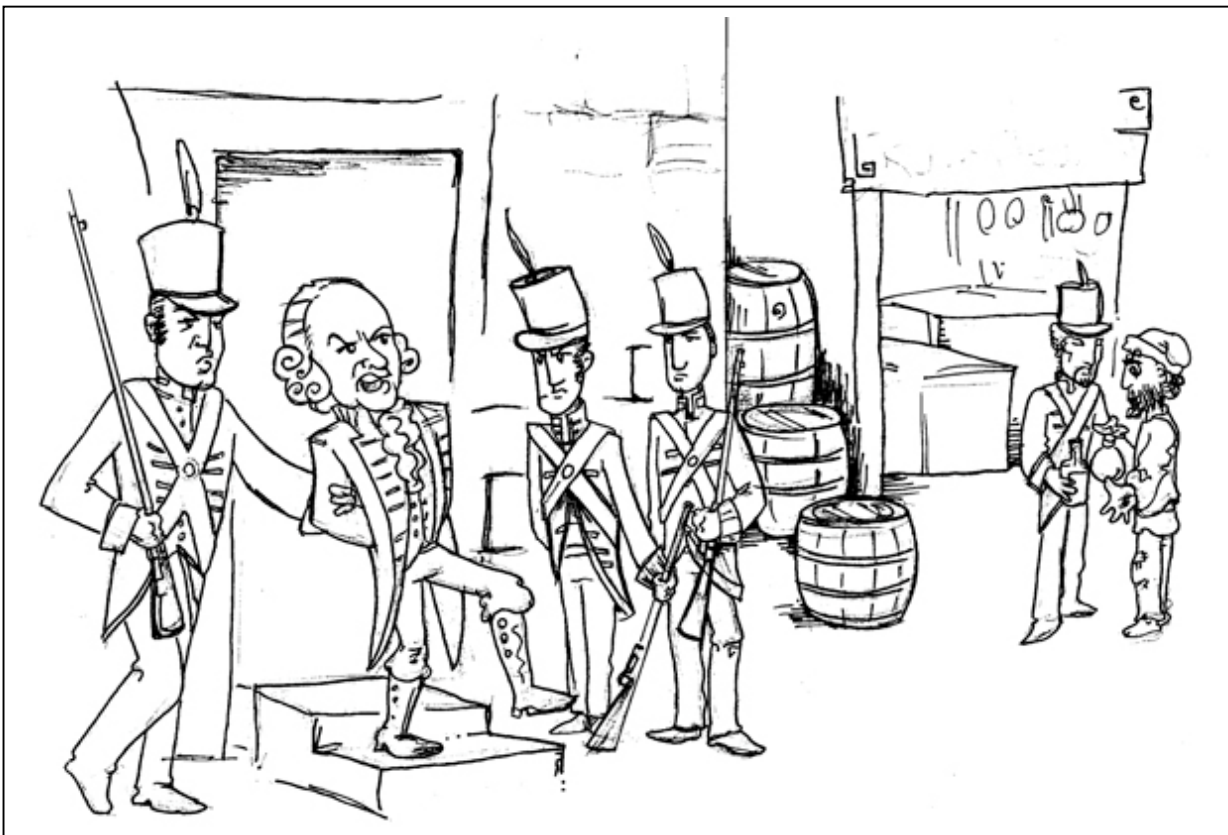


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Background to the rebellion

The trigger for the Rum Rebellion was the shortage of official currency. This had forced people to start bartering (i.e. offering goods and services for other goods and services). Alcohol — particularly rum — became a major bartering tool.

Soon a prosperous (but illegal) rum trade was operating. Governor Bligh was not happy with this. He was aware that the trade in rum was making the rum merchants — and the New South Wales Corps (also heavily involved in the trade) — very powerful. When he interfered and tried to stop it, it made many people very angry. This was the final straw for many people who already disliked the volatile and overbearing governor. They rebelled against him.



Role of Macarthur

One of the New South Wales Corps officers unhappy with the way Bligh was running the colony was John Macarthur (who later became the 'father' of Australia's wool industry). Being fiery and strong-minded like Bligh, it is not surprising that he and Bligh clashed.



After the rebellion was over

After the coup, Bligh was kept under house arrest by members of the Corps for a year before saying that he would return to England. No sooner was he on the ship, however, than he tried to head back to the colony and retake control. British authorities realised that they had a problem, so they ordered Bligh back to England and gave him a promotion (in the navy). Major Johnson was court-martialled in England for his part in the rebellion. When the new governor (Macquarie) arrived in 1810, he abolished the New South Wales Corps and slowly life in the new colony began to improve.

Using the above notes as a guide, choose one of the following activities/questions to complete below:

- Imagine that you are Governor Bligh under house arrest. You are angry that you have lost control of the colony. You are spending your time reviewing the events that led up to the rebellion. Write a series of diary entries that convey your thoughts about what has happened.
- In essence, the Rum Rebellion reflected a clash of two fiery personalities — William Bligh and John Macathur. Research in more detail the role that these two individuals played in the time leading up to the rebellion. Describe their involvement below.
- Imagine that people in the world of tomorrow had to develop a *bartering* system. Money and credit cards no longer exist. Think about the number of times over a typical day that you use money (or credit cards). In a world without such currency, what might you offer to obtain the things you currently buy? For example, how would you go about bartering for your lunch at the school canteen?

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References: SOSE Alive 3, pp. 25, 36–9, 78–9 • SOSE Alive History 2, pp. 25, 36–9, 78–9 • Internet and/or library sources