To maintain order amongst a disreputable people:

The case of Captain Armstrong, colonial governance and scandal at the antipodes, 1878-1887

Zoe Murray, 2012

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‘To maintain order amongst a disreputable people’: The case of Captain Armstrong, colonial governance and scandal at the antipodes, 1878-1887

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On 4 April 1882, the New South Wales government steamer Thetis arrived at Lord Howe Island bearing J. Bowie Wilson, recently appointed commissioner of an inquiry into the conduct of the Island's resident magistrate, Captain Richard Armstrong. Following a hastily convened investigation, Wilson recommended that the government confirm Armstrong's suspension from office. Armstrong claimed he had done nothing to deserve the dismissal and that Wilson's inquiry made a mockery of justice. So, while the colonial press initially expressed indignation against Armstrong's alleged wrongdoings, over time the focus of moral outrage shifted to Wilson. This thesis explores the case of Captain Armstrong, a prominent scandal in 1880s New South Wales. It traces Armstrong's connection with Lord Howe Island from its beginning in 1878 to its end in 1887, when he finally received tangible recognition of injustice, £1500 compensation. By untangling the many threads of the Armstrong case, it is possible to paint a vivid and detailed picture of colonial governance in late nineteenth-century New South Wales. It is not merely that the case highlights the experience of a minor official in a remote outpost – a much neglected area of Australian and imperial history – but that subsequent press and parliamentary debates reveal some of the most vexing issues in colonial society. It sheds light on the contemporary temperance movement, competing ideals of masculine character and pervasive anxieties surrounding the issue of the colony's reputation. The Armstrong case provides compelling evidence that colonial governance, whether in a remote outpost or an established colony, was a fragile enterprise, fraught with contradictions and anxieties.
Acknowledgments

Captain Richard Armstrong, the subject of my thesis, clearly understood the need for support when managing difficult tasks. Despite taking up residence on Lord Howe Island early in 1878, he did not officially announce his appointment as government representative until November that year. On the last day in October, the networks of empire unexpectedly delivered a capable British compatriot, Thomas Bryant Wilson, en route from Norfolk Island to Sydney aboard the Esperanza. Wilson had served alongside Richard’s brother, Captain Frederick Armstrong, in New Zealand during the Maori Wars. Richard convinced Wilson to stay as his manager and co-worker and, precisely one week later, officially read aloud his government commission to a gathering of Island settlers. I infer that he had been awaiting a trustworthy companion to aid him in his delicate and difficult role as the Island’s first resident magistrate.

Over the past months I, too, have benefited from much support while undertaking the hefty task of writing this thesis, and owe thanks to many people. My father, Chris Murray, first introduced me to Lord Howe’s history and pointed me in the direction of the Armstrong case. His enthusiasm for the Island’s history is infectious and often revived me when my own passion for the project was flagging. I am deeply grateful to Penny Russell, my supervisor, for her encouragement and critique which came in just the right measures and continually prompted me to extend myself. The finished product has been refined by the comments and feedback of various brave volunteers: thanks to Helen Tiffin, Nonie Low and Margaret Murray for their painstaking editing. Special thanks to Matt Allen for his help with chapter two; despite being in the final stages of handing in his own PhD, he took precious time to provide much needed clarification on
the late nineteenth-century temperance movement as well as reading and responding to my chapter. A final thanks goes to Laura Scott who generously offered to visit the ANU library for me, scanning and sending me countless pages of a past honours thesis.

If surviving records can be trusted, it seems that the immeasurable help Armstrong received from Wilson, and the serendipity by which it arrived, may have been forgotten over time – Armstrong does not recollect them in his autobiography. Wilson, in contrast, remained deeply touched by the experience. Many years later he recounted his first meeting with Armstrong and its subsequent effect on his life: he wrote that Armstrong ‘invited me onshore & induced me to remain with him & you know the result: splendid health, a loving wife and two beautiful children. Thank God.’ I echo this thanks.
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Introduction

'The Commissioner's Party' in J.B. Wilson, Lord Howe Island 1882, Mitchell Library
t began, like all good mysteries, with a suspicious death. In May 1869, on a little-known Island in the Tasman Sea, John Leonard was fatally stabbed by his father-in-law, David Lloyd. When news of the incident reached New South Wales (NSW) via a passing ship, the government steamer Thetis, bearing Police Magistrate Cloete, was sent to investigate. Cloete ruled the incident ‘justifiable homicide’ on the grounds that Leonard was the original assailant and his stabbing, an act of self-defence by Lloyd.1 Cloete’s ruling did little to dispel the growing impression that Lord Howe Island was ‘a lawless place, the resort of whalers and runaways’, or the perceived need to extend ‘the protection of the law to those who reside there’.2 Within a decade, this darker image had virtually supplanted alternative conceptions of the Island as a quiet utopian paradise where the predominantly European settlers led ‘very moral lives’ and ‘bickerings and open quarrels’ were rare and considered ‘distasteful’.3 The final blow came in 1878 when another ‘alleged disturbance’ broke out among ‘the islanders and others’.4 Again, the government wasted no time in dispatching someone to investigate. Retired British


2 Evening News, 31 May 1969 quoted in Ibid.

3 In the intervening years these two ideas sat uncomfortably alongside each other. Alfred T. C. Corrie, ‘Visit to Lord Howe Island,’ Proceedings of the Royal Geographic Society, vol. 22, no. 2 (1877-1878), 139.

naval captain Richard Armstrong spent five days on the Island before returning to Sydney to deliver his report. In consequence, the government appointed him the Island’s first resident magistrate, a necessary safeguard of British law and order in a remote colonial outpost.

Storms, it seems, do not dissipate easily in the Tasman Sea. Only three and a half years later, Armstrong himself was under investigation by another government official brought to the Island aboard the Thetis, J. Bowie Wilson. Wilson’s in situ commission hastily suspended Armstrong from office, dealing a severe blow to his character and also to his hopes for a prosperous life on the Island. The decision had longer term and more widespread repercussions, unleashing a powerful tempest in NSW government and society as Armstrong sought to overturn the decision and recoup his losses. A number of parliamentary inquiries ultimately ruled in his favour that, firstly, the commission had been conducted in an ‘irregular’ manner and that, secondly, Armstrong had done ‘nothing to justify his dismissal.’ Five years after being dismissed, Armstrong finally received the tangible recognition of injustice that he desperately needed: a £1500 payout.6

Despite its apparently neat conclusion, the case was riddled with unanswered questions. Most intriguing of all is the mystery of who instigated Armstrong’s dismissal. If Wilson’s report were read in isolation, without knowledge of its subsequent overturning, the dismissal would appear to be the government’s reasonable response to an abuse of power by one of its representatives. The history of the British Empire is littered with such stories: Hastings, Picton, Eyre, and even Australia’s Bligh, found their colonial governorships cut short by the stinging censure of the metropole, whose ideals of

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6 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 July 1887, 5-6.
empire were far removed from the often brutal realities of day-to-day governance.\textsuperscript{7} Wilson implicitly recalled such examples of imperial tyranny in his report, asserting that Armstrong had quite forgotten 'he was not the servant of an arbitrary despot, but the paid representative of a free and enlightened Government'.\textsuperscript{8} Based on the available evidence, however, neither the decision to investigate Armstrong's conduct nor the findings of the resulting report, appear rationally based.

An intriguing question remains: who instigated Armstrong's dismissal and why? This question underpins my examination of what one contemporary newspaper called – in honour of all its twists, turns and inconsistencies – the 'curious case' of Captain Armstrong.\textsuperscript{9} While this is a narrative question, it helps to elucidate the complexity of the case and uncover deeper analytical issues beneath the surface. Three alternative answers arise from distinct chronological periods and form the chapters in this study. Not one of these answers is complete: each highlights the unavoidable limitations of the others. Contemporary reporters themselves bemoaned the lack of concrete answers, impatiently demanding that 'guilt' be 'sheeted home to the proper quarter,' wherever that may have been.\textsuperscript{10} The NSW Parliament ultimately left guilt unassigned, preferring to acquit Armstrong while ignoring the implications of that decision. Given the corrosive


\textsuperscript{8} Armstrong, ed., \textit{re: Lord Howe Island}, 12.

\textsuperscript{9} "A Curious Case," \textit{Illustrated Sydney News}, 4 July 1885, 3.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
effect of time on the historical record, and the tangible possibility of a cover-up, it may be impossible to discover the ‘truth’ of the matter. Instead, my purpose is to gain insight into the historical context with which the case was inextricably interwoven. My focus is less on the destination than the dynamic interactions of characters and events that occurred along the way.

The first chapter will consider Armstrong’s time as Lord Howe Island’s first resident magistrate, exploring the way he conceived and enacted his role. For Armstrong, many of the contradictions inherent in governing a remote outpost were reconciled through a type of civilising mission, which gave his insignificant posting a deeper meaning and purpose through a meta-narrative of progress. Armstrong met with mixed success among his subjects on the Island, most of them European either by birth or descent. The Islanders initially accepted Armstrong’s new role but, over time, rumblings amongst a portion mounted ominously. The first provisional answer to who orchestrated Armstrong’s dismissal is a local one. It was an Islander mutiny, albeit a surreptitious one, against Armstrong and his imperially oriented ambitions.

Another solution to the puzzle places primary responsibility on Wilson whose decision, according to some contemporaries, had been pre-determined before arriving at Lord Howe. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Wilson’s inquiry set out to construct an elaborate new case against Armstrong, rather than weigh up local evidence. The second chapter, addressing this possibility, examines the trial in detail, as an ideological as well as personal contest. For Wilson, a staunch temperance advocate, Armstrong’s inexcusable vice was his liberal approach to alcohol. Armstrong, in contrast, prioritised ‘character’ as the key to resolving the case. Close attention to the inquiry sheds a probing light on the late nineteenth-century temperance movement and
Victorian conceptions of character. As both these issues are largely overlooked in historical literature, I am concerned to explore their contemporary meanings.

Neither of these answers explains why the dismissal of an inconsequential official became a colonial cause célèbre, attracting impassioned parliamentary debate and sustained press interest between 1882 and 1887. If Armstrong's dogged pursuit of justice forms part of the explanation, I argue that the entry of a far higher-profile antagonist to replace Wilson, Sir John Robertson, was the factor responsible for the case's transformation. Robertson's involvement has another intriguing implication – the third possible answer to my overarching question. Armstrong suspected that Robertson had his own pecuniary interests in the removal of the Island's resident magistrate. Armstrong's relentless lobbying and the drama of the case ignited a vivid flash of colonial scandal but it was Robertson's entrenched opposition and widespread anxiety about the colony's reputation that kept it ablaze for over five years.

The Armstrong case has proven elusive in more ways than one. Not only does the real reason for Armstrong's dismissal remain shrouded in mystery but it has hitherto evaded historical analysis. This is probably because it relates to the history of Lord Howe Island, a fascinating but ignored fragment of Australian history. I hope that, by offering a glimpse of the Island's rich and colourful history, others will be inspired to explore it more fully. As the Armstrong case demonstrates, there are mutual benefits from bringing Lord Howe into conversations about Australian history: the Island's so far parochial histories may be infused with deeper meaning while the boundaries of national histories are challenged and extended.

While the Armstrong case may be used to argue for enfolding the Island's history within national histories, it simultaneously highlights current limitations of Australian national
history. An underlying theme of this study is the deep nineteenth-century interconnectedness of local, colonial and imperial spheres. It will be evident that all three co-existed, thus affirming the growing body of work which seeks to write Australian national and imperial histories together.\textsuperscript{11} One commentator referred to Armstrong’s dismissal as ‘a ripple upon the usual placid surface of affairs in Lord Howe.’\textsuperscript{12} He could not have realised how appropriate the metaphor was for, at the time he wrote, the Armstrong affair had not begun to make waves in NSW. The ever-widening repercussions of Armstrong’s dismissal indeed resembled ripples in the Island’s calm lagoon, reaching even the distant shores of the metropole. It was neither in Lord Howe nor Britain, however, that the case reverberated most powerfully but NSW, where it became entangled with political and ideological debates that sometimes threatened to obscure its central issues.

There is another sense in which the Armstrong affair had many concentric layers: the issues raised echoed at both personal and collective, local and colonial levels. The civilising mission was not only crucial to metropolitan understandings of imperial governance, but strongly informed Armstrong's role overseeing a remote colonial outpost. Again, Armstrong's passionate defence of his character was echoed in collective concern that the case should not damage the colony's reputation in the eyes of the metropole. Similarly, when doubt was cast on the integrity of Robertson, an eminent politician, it produced anxiety about the integrity of colonial governance. Colonial governance and reputation were intimately connected, generating anxieties that pervaded all levels of society, from the personal to the imperial.


\textsuperscript{12} 'Linneaus', "The Madeira of the Pacific II," \textit{Illustrated Sydney News}, 5 August 1882, 18-19.
Colonial governance, a topic largely neglected by the ‘New Imperial’ histories, is the central theme of this study. Zoe Laidlaw’s seminal work began to address this oversight, conceiving governance in terms of ever-evolving ‘colonial connections’, the ‘networks’ of information and relationships emanating from the metropole and underpinning the vast British Empire.¹³ Laidlaw’s overarching model is centred on the metropole and chiefly concerned with high-ranking officials and colonial centres. My analysis of the Armstrong affair not only complements Laidlaw’s study but also highlights an entirely overlooked area of colonial history, providing a detailed case study a minor official at an isolated outpost. As the repercussions of the case widened, it became increasingly concerned with issues of governance in a colonial centre, being infused with contemporary political debates in NSW. In an 1886 parliamentary debate, Joseph Abbott articulated his understanding of Armstrong’s role which was, ‘to maintain order ... amongst a people who were of a disorderly and disreputable kind’.¹⁴ Abbott implicitly acknowledged the chief concerns surrounding colonial governance at the time: the close connection between social and moral order, the underlying preoccupation with maintaining metropolitan standards and the way in which disorderly communities, however remote, represented an uneasy threat to the entire colony. The scandal of Armstrong’s dismissal was not simply that he apparently failed to fulfil his duties, but that the case cast doubt on the ‘orderliness’ and ‘reputation’ of New South Wales.

Scandal is a further interrelated theme. If scandals have often been conceived as mere window-dressing for otherwise ‘serious’ history, there is growing consensus that scandals themselves are worthy of historical analysis. Scandals are historically valuable because they reveal underlying standards and concerns that might otherwise remain

¹⁴ Sydney Morning Herald, 25 September 1886, 9.
hidden. As James Epstein has explained, historians use scandal to explore ‘the conditions of a story's telling, its fashioning, circulation and entangling with other stories and texts; we want to learn how the story worked more deeply on contemporary sensibilities.’

These ideas have strongly influenced this project, which is indeed concerned with the telling, fashioning and circulation of Armstrong's case and, particularly in the second and third chapters, proposes a range of reasons why it inflamed contemporary sensibilities.

A final implicit theme is the value of biography. My project’s original focus on a colonial scandal gradually expanded to embrace Armstrong’s connection with Lord Howe from its beginning in 1878 to its end in 1887. It was not just that the scandal coheres around Armstrong but also that the wealth of historical sources it generated reveal a life worthy of attention, though not for reasons traditionally valued by the biographer. Armstrong was not in possession of great genius; he did not become a national figure; he did not have a lasting impact on the course of history or even, to his considerable dismay, the conditions of life on Lord Howe. Rather, Armstrong's life reveals much about the historical conditions in which he lived. As Ian Donaldson noted, ‘social historians ... are beginning increasingly to discover how much can be learnt about an entire society, a wider historical moment, through following with close attention the trajectory of a single life’ which 'though seemingly unusual, [is] also in some sense exemplary.'

David Lambert and Alan Lester's *Colonial Lives Across the Empire* provides a model for exploring complex historical issues through the lens of a single life. I imagine my study

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as its thirteenth chapter, another example of an individual whose ideas, practices and identity were shaped by ‘imperial careering’ from one locality to another.\textsuperscript{17}

Armstrong, a supreme self-publicist, would have been delighted to be included in Lester and Lambert’s seminal reconceptualization of the personal and transnational aspects of imperial history. The dubious honour of occupying the thirteenth chapter would have held particular appeal. He was, after all, one of thirteen children born to Francis and Esther Armstrong, residents of Jersey, Channel Islands. On reflection, he wondered whether this ‘mysterious’ number, and his place in the line of siblings, left its indelible mark on his life, accounting for his ‘wanderings and adventures in the distant parts of the earth’. Its significance seemed even greater given that ‘Master Dick’ was thirteen years old when set out with his father for London to buy the uniform and sword which signalled the beginning of a life-defining naval cadetship.\textsuperscript{18}

Despite its challenges and periods of real suffering, the following decade was Armstrong’s golden era. He grew from youth to manhood on the Mediterranean and Atlantic oceans, literally tracing out Laidlaw’s ‘networks of empire’. Naval life was certainly eventful, punctuated by tragedies and thrilling escapades. As a young cadet, Armstrong was appointed Queen Adelaide’s aide-de-camp on her tour of Lisbon and Madeira.\textsuperscript{19} He was constantly surrounded by the invigorating camaraderie of fellow cadets or officers. But there was also war, violence, slavery, punishment and death.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 23-25.
Gradually, boyish pranks gave way to manly acts of bravery – including more than one leap into shark-infested waters to save a fellow officer. As he progressed through the naval ranks – from cadet to ‘middie’, Lieutenant to Commander – his experiences embodied many of the contradictions of empire. Patriotic duty and self-interest were deeply entangled. Service in the name of Empire held out the tantalising promise of self-advancement and financial reward, especially through the capture of enemy ships, but could demand the ultimate sacrifice of life. Tension also underpinned the desired ends of imperial service. When combatting the West African slave trade, the navy crusaded under a banner of freedom. When battling the Russian Empire in the Crimean War, the objective was brutal conquest.

In 1856, after receiving a gunshot wound to his leg, Armstrong was discharged from active service. Nevertheless, he believed that these early experiences had a lasting impact, epitomised in his description of the difference between an ordinary Briton and a ‘blue-jacket’:

I maintain that the blue-jacket, after being at sea for a few years, is far superior to his fellow whom he left behind ... When he joins, he is at once subject to a system of discipline and is in continual contact with nature's elements, he has practical knowledge... and consequently his brain is naturally more active, and he becomes observant and reflective. He has all the advantage of travel in distant lands, mixing up in different societies and his character in ever way becomes more responsible, manly and thoughtful, gentle, brave and kind. He is always to the fore to assist in distress and trouble.  


21 Ibid, 43
However, it was the continuing influence of the ‘thirteens’ that seemed to dominate Armstrong’s subsequent life rather than the idealised afterglow of his naval career. After being discharged, Armstrong returned to Jersey and, on 20 August 1857, married Eliza Malet. Within a few years, the couple and their fourteen-month-old son William set out to try their luck in the colonies, equipped with knowledge gleaned from Mr and Mrs Hursthouse’s *New Zealand or Zealandia: Britain of the South*. Like many immigrants before them, they discovered that conditions in the colonies were not as the Hursthouses described.22

The rose-coloured tint of Armstrong’s autobiography barely conceals that, rather than being filled with colourful adventures, his life in the colonies was a string of *misadventures*. As David Armstrong, Richard’s great-grandson observed, ‘he had hopes of publishing his [autobiography], thereby making some money. It was one more scheme of his that failed to make his fortune.’23 Previously, Armstrong had tried his hand at farming in New Zealand, cotton and copra plantations in Fiji and mining in New South Wales. None brought reward for his labour and in 1876, after a failed mining venture, Armstrong was declared insolvent.24 In an earlier tight spot, he had been employed by New Zealand’s colonial service as Chief Immigration Commissioner and Administrator of Charitable Aid in Canterbury Province.25 In 1878, when an opportunity arose to represent the government on Lord Howe, Armstrong again put his hope in the steady,

22 Muir and Armstrong, eds., *Book of Adventures*, 257


albeit small, income afforded a minor official and the possibility of financial gain through the development of the Island.

It is impossible to know how Armstrong felt as he journeyed to Lord Howe Island: there is no surviving diary, no letter to friends or family, no living person in whom he confided. Eliza was certainly hoping it would prove to be a fresh start. In an infrequent diary she expressed hope that Dick’s new appointment would ‘do better than his other ventures for he has somehow slipped out of all share in his mine which has passed into other hands.’ It is no wonder Eliza longed for an improvement to their ‘straitened circumstances’ – she was working to repurchase all the family’s furniture, which had been given as security for a loan to fund a failed wine venture.\(^26\) As Armstrong leaned against the ship’s railing, did he strain for a glimpse of Lord Howe Island, his mind already brimming with schemes for his and the Island’s improvement? Or did he grip it tightly, praying that the ‘thirteen’ would not follow him across the Tasman? We shall probably never know.

Captain Armstrong’s ‘reign’ on Lord Howe Island and the local response to his imperial civilising mission
Even with a strong north-easterly wind blowing, 4 November 1878 was a fine day, perfect for Captain Armstrong’s purpose of gathering together the Island’s inhabitants for an outdoor meeting.¹ The forty or so men, women and children would have mostly arrived on foot, although the few who travelled further distances from the South may have ridden horse-drawn sleds along the palm-fringed beach.² The site of the meeting was a gentle rise overlooking the northern end of the Island’s picturesque lagoon, not far from Mrs Field’s residence where Armstrong and his newly recruited manager, Thomas Wilson, had taken temporary lodgings.³

Despite the fact that Lord Howe Island was extremely peripheral to both the British Empire’s geography and interests, and that the settlers before him were a small and motley group, Armstrong did not spare any pomp or ceremony. First of all, in the style of any colonial governor, he read aloud his commission as government representative, explaining that the colonial government wished to extend the protection of British law and order to the community. Over ninety years earlier, the Supply’s Lieutenant Ball had made the very first landing on the uninhabited Island and ‘displayed the English colours’, naming the Island after Earl

¹ Thomas Bryant Wilson, *Journal written at Lord Howe Island*, 1878-1896, Mitchell Library.
² See Figure 1.
³ A crude map drawn by an early settler indicates that the present flagstaff site has been used for this purpose since the 1850s. Dr Foulis, ‘Sketch of Lord Howe Island,’ 1853, in Chris Murray, ed., *Lord Howe Island 1788-1988* (Sydney: National Library of Australia, 1988), 11.
Howe, first Lord of the British Admiralty, and taking ‘formal possession of the Island in the name of His Britannic Majesty’. At his commissioning, Armstrong re-enacted this quintessentially colonial moment of conquest. Having erected a flagstaff, he unfurled the Union Jack and, as it snapped proudly in the stiff breeze, ‘proclaimed the Island a British settlement’. By Armstrong’s estimation, the Islanders ‘all seemed well pleased’ with this performance, responding with ‘three hearty cheers’ for the raising of the British colours, three more for the declaration of British rule and, not least, three for the new Government representative.

This chapter will consider the significance of Armstrong’s time as resident magistrate, the first period of direct governance on Lord Howe Island. Firstly, it is the best-documented period of Lord Howe’s nineteenth-century history, providing valuable insights into the minutiae of early Island life. Secondly, Armstrong’s enactment of his role as resident magistrate is a fascinating case study of a much-neglected area of imperial history, colonial governance. If Laidlaw’s study of the bureaucratic ‘networks of empire’ began to address this deficiency, the stories of minor officials in remote locations remain almost untold. Armstrong’s location may have been obscure but his role on Lord Howe is not without wider relevance, highlighting many of the enduring issues of colonial governance. The most obvious is the fragility and vulnerability of governance, subject everywhere to the tyranny of distance but especially heightened in this case by Lord Howe’s extreme isolation. There are, however, other realities brought into sharp relief by Armstrong’s story: the likely entanglement of a colonial official’s public and private interests; the sometimes menial, even domestic, nature of the tasks undertaken; and the way governmental policy was shaped by personal beliefs and past

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4 David Blackburn, *Letters Received by Richard Knight*, 12 July 1788, Mitchell Library.


6 Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections*, 3.
experiences. Thirdly, it vividly demonstrates the interplay between local and colonial issues. The maintenance of law and order on Lord Howe became an issue of heightened concern for the NSW government and wider society in the light of its possible impact on the colony's reputation.

I propose that Armstrong's approach to governance on Lord Howe is best understood as a type of civilising mission, a term referring to colonising ventures that sought to spread Christianity and civilisation to those lacking their apparent benefits, especially in foreign lands. That Armstrong conceived his role in this way is suggested by the flag-raising ceremony, his first recorded public act. Several decades after it was first settled, Armstrong re-imagined the Island as virgin land and re-proclaimed it British territory, positioning himself as not merely a representative of the NSW government but also an agent of British civilisation. Armstrong's was a secular rather than overtly religious civilising mission but nevertheless drew upon his status and knowledge as a citizen of the 'Christian and civilized' British Empire. It was typical of a broadly applicable mid-nineteenth century shift identified by Alison Twells, from the earlier, strongly Evangelical civilising missions to a broader national civilising mission.

The full extent of Armstrong's vision for the Island was revealed in the months and years following his commissioning. He worked tirelessly to re-make the Island in the image of British ideals: endeavouring to render the land economically productive and its inhabitants industrious, respectable and educated. It was an Enlightenment-style reform

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agenda, carried out with zeal and motivated by an expectation of progress, a hallmark of both civilising missions specifically and Enlightenment ideology more generally.\(^9\) Over time, Armstrong’s strategies – such as shutting down the Island’s stills, starting a school and importing labour – provoked trenchant opposition from a group of settlers led by Thomas and Mary Nichols, ultimately resulting in his dismissal. The fact that the majority of the Island settlers were white, including Thomas and Mary, highlights an often disregarded aspect of colonial administrations and civilising missions generally. Scholars have predominantly considered both Evangelical and secular missions in racial terms, as white projects to re-make non-whites in their own image.\(^10\) However, Britain’s own lower classes, both ‘at home’ and abroad, became the object of similar scrutiny,\(^11\) particularly because, as Philippa Levine argues, the existence of disorderly white communities ‘made the claims of empire as a civilising mission fragile’.\(^12\) Armstrong and his supporters drew on this contradiction as they campaigned against his dismissal, portraying the Islanders as unruly, a threat to the colony’s claims to respectability and good governance if not constrained by British law and order.

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\(^10\) See especially: Hall, *Civilising Subjects*.


\(^12\) Levine, *The British Empire*, 113. See also: Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 112-113.
‘Engaged in the gardens’: civilising the land

If the meeting’s formality made the afternoon of 4 November rather extraordinary, the morning’s activities were altogether mundane. Armstrong was ‘engaged in the gardens’, as he had been all week, planting Irish potatoes with Wilson, his manager.13 This was not unusual. In fact, phrases like ‘employed in gardens’, ‘weeding the garden’ and ‘transplanting onions’ are ubiquitous throughout Wilson’s journal, surpassed in frequency only by his daily commentary on the weather. Clearly, governance in the antipodes was not merely a matter of bureaucracy and paperwork but routinely required hard physical labour.

Increasing the Island’s agricultural productivity was central to Armstrong’s vision for improving the Island. He recalled that his ‘first anxiety’ was to ensure the Islanders were supplied with ‘the absolute essentials of existence’ and his ‘subsequent action’ was to ‘promote in every way the pursuit of those industries for which the Island appeared’ most ‘eminently adapted.’14 Indeed, civilising the land – taming the ‘wilderness’ and moulding it to provide for European needs – was a key feature of the way Europeans brought the intellectual framework of the Enlightenment to bear on their experience of colonisation. Just as the stadial theory of development presented human societies as gradually progressing through various stages – from ‘savagery’ to ‘civilisation’ – colonial landscapes needed to undergo a similar transformation – from ‘wilderness’ to ‘industry’.15

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15 This vision, similar to Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, celebrated ‘wild woods’ being replaced first by pastoralism, then by agriculture and finally commerce. Tim Bonyhady, The
Colonial responses to the landscape borrowed not just a belief in progress from the Enlightenment, but also the notion that it was the application of reason and industry that wrought the longed-for transformation. Like earlier Australian colonists, Armstrong sought to transform the landscape by sideling customary practice, instead, applying rational principles to agriculture and learning by trial and error. Onions were the Island's main crop. If Island tradition is correct, a single onion picked up off the beach by Mrs Andrews in the mid-nineteenth century became the progenitor of the abundant Lord Howe onion, which routinely fetched high prices in Sydney. Armstrong encouraged cultivation of the Lord Howe onion while endeavouring to diversify not just the varieties of onion grown but also overall agricultural production. The transportation and cultivation of exotic plants, and finding those best adapted to local conditions, was the cutting-edge of agricultural science in the nineteenth-century. During periods away from the Island, and through exchanges with colonial Botanic Gardens, Armstrong secured a staggering array of fruit, vegetable, herb, flower and timber varieties to test in the Island's fertile soil and temperate climate: tapioca, vanilla, beets, pineapples, oats, apricots, strawberry, white and black pepper, willows, Norfolk Island pine and gum trees all appear on his list of imports. He also expanded the range of domestic animals utilised by the Islanders, adding Angora goats, sheep, land rails, bees, Egyptian geese


17 Ibid, 10.

18 Lord Howe Island Board, Lord Howe Island, 30.

and oysters to the cattle, pigs, dogs and fowl already present. Armstrong’s experimentation with varieties of plants and animals – observing their suitability to local conditions – reflected a rational, scientific approach to agriculture and met with resounding approval from one of the colony’s eminent horticulturalists. William Clarson lauded Armstrong’s ‘most interesting experiments in the way of introducing exotic plants and personally testing their value’ as evidence that he was ‘exactly fitted for developing to the utmost the resources and capabilities of the region’.

Armstrong did not simply transplant Enlightenment ideology with the many seedlings he imported. Past experiences in the colonies impacted on his approach to agriculture specifically and governance generally. On Lord Howe, Armstrong utilised the agricultural skills gained through cattle and sheep farming in New Zealand and running a cotton plantation in Fiji. It was most likely his time in Fiji which informed the decision to use indentured labourers to increase productivity. Similarly, Armstrong’s apparently good relationship with his labourers, for whom he demonstrated considerable concern and respect, was influenced by his repulsion for slavery formed during his earlier experiences in the Navy, combatting the slave trade. As Lester and Lambert assert, travels through the imperial network wrought changes in individuals’ subjectivity, shaping subsequent courses of action in other places. However, Armstrong also responded to local conditions, working within the Islanders’ existing agricultural and economic patterns while expanding their scope. He readily adopted the Islanders’ technique, borrowed from traditional Polynesian subsistence practice, of

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23 Part II in Muir and Armstrong, eds., Book of Adventures, 75-147.

farming in small cleared 'gardens', and named part of his own property 'Garden Valley'.

Clearing the native vegetation to make room for gardens was one strategy for rendering Lord Howe productive, utilising its natural assets was another. Armstrong explored, and exploited, every corner of the Island to develop productive local industries. Following a request for native species from Charles Moore, director of Sydney’s Botanic Gardens, Armstrong began exporting the Island’s flora, a potentially lucrative resource given the contemporary European craze for colonial exotics. On 25 May 1879, Wilson reported having '17 packages of plants & seeds' ready for shipping. When Armstrong used a quaint agricultural metaphor to describe North Bay as a 'grand place for a fish paddock', he implied that the same principles governing his approach to farming applied to the Island’s abundant waters. Finding North Bay's fish difficult to catch owing to sharp coral, Armstrong proposed 'making a wall and working it with a wire net.' Thus, even the sea was regularly put to 'work' by Armstrong’s seine net, sometimes yielding as many as '300 small fish'. Armstrong’s resourceful attention was also drawn to the guano deposits underlying the seabird colonies of Lord Howe’s outer Islands. The scant details of

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27 Wilson, *Journal*.

28 'Jan 9th 1878' in Ibid.

29 See: 'Jan 7th 1878', 'Jan 9th 1878', 'Feb 6th 1878', 'Jany 16th 1880' and 'Feby 16th 1880' in Ibid.
Wilson’s diary imply that Armstrong began exporting guano in small quantities as early as June 1879. When a New Zealand company obtained a licence to more fully exploit the guano, highly valued as a nineteenth-century fertiliser, Armstrong saw the possibility of securing ‘remunerative labour’ for the Islanders and initially ‘encouraged in every way the action of this company’. Armstrong explored the economic potential of a range of Lord Howe’s resources as he laboured to bring the Island’s land and seas into productivity.

Importing European infrastructure, making roads and erecting buildings, was another facet of improving the landscape. Armstrong constructed infrastructure not only for his personal use – a dry store, pig sty and fowl house were quickly erected to supply his personal needs – but also to meet the needs of the wider community. Access to the Island’s sheltered harbour by Islanders’ longboats and passing ships was critical to trade. On 5 and 6 December 1880, Armstrong and Nathan Thompson set about using dynamite to ‘destroy two rocks lying just inside the North passage’ through the reef. Until this time, the narrow passage presented a perilous path through the reef with the obtruding rocks making it inaccessible at low tide. Also during his stay, Armstrong facilitated the ‘making of a good road from one end of the Island to the other’.

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30 See: ‘June 30th 1879’, Ibid.


32 Gascoigne, The Enlightenment, 77.

33 ‘Dec 24th 1878’ in Wilson, Journal.

34 See entries in Ibid.

As a result of his efforts, Armstrong described coming ‘to take a keen interest in the advancement of the Island’. His wording was revealing, for not only did Armstrong become interested in the Islanders’ welfare, he also had financial interests in Lord Howe’s development. Particularly after being granted a 100-acre lease by the Government (an area that exceeded all the Island’s other smallholdings put together and engulfed some), Armstrong’s fate became entangled with that of the Islanders. By the time of his dismissal, Armstrong estimated, no doubt with some exaggeration, that he had invested £3000 ‘in developing the resources of the Island’, ten times his annual government salary. It is difficult to separate Armstrong’s official duties from his own pursuit of economic gain but this does not undermine the argument presented in this chapter. In fact, a powerful image presented by Enlightenment ideology was that, by pursuing personal wealth, colonists were part of a larger imperial project that brought colonial wildernesses and wastelands into productive use.

‘To show by example’: Civilising hands, hearts and minds

The year before Armstrong arrived, surgeon Alfred Corrie visited the Island aboard H.M.S. Pearl, reporting that the Empire-wide downturn in whaling left Lord Howe isolated and in severe recession. During the whaling boom, from the 1850s to 70s, the Islanders benefited from steady trade with passing ships. By 1877, twelve months could pass between ships’ visits. In Corrie’s opinion, the most alarming consequence

36 Ibid.
37 Berry, ‘Plan of portion No. 25 on Lord Howe Island’, NSW State Records.
38 Ibid.
was not material – though the Islanders frequently lacked basic essentials such as tea, sugar, flour and clothing – but moral. ‘The old families’ on the Island had ‘lost all zeal for cultivation’ having previously seen ‘the fruits of their labour rotting in storehouses’, lacking any means of transporting produce to market.  

Like Corrie, Armstrong recognised idleness as a chief threat to the Island community. His civilising mission encompassed the Island’s inhabitants as well as its land, seeking to render them industrious rather than idle, married rather than cohabiting, and educated rather than ignorant.

To combat idleness, Armstrong demonstrated the benefits of industry, endeavouring 'to show by example how [the Island’s] capabilities might be developed'. Armstrong and Wilson exhibited a rigorous daily regimen. Getting up at 4am was ‘usual’ and before breakfast Armstrong would light the fire, fetch water from the tanks or nearest well, boil the kettle, inspect the gardens and feed the animals. The rest of the day would generally be spent carrying out equally menial tasks: treating blighted onions; weeding the garden; transplanting seedlings; building, inspecting, or mending fences; gathering palm nuts or thatch; hunting pigs; gathering seabird eggs from the Admiralty Islands; or trying to signal a passing ship. Armstrong also rewarded industry in others. To promote renewed energy in cultivation he gave ‘seeds, cuttings and plants’ away but only to ‘such of the islanders’ as ‘would do justice to them’.

The unreliability of trade with the mainland continued to undermine economic incentives to produce an agricultural surplus. Even ships contracted to deliver mail

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41 Corrie, 'Visit to Lord Howe Island,' 139.

42 ‘Jan 10th 1879’ in Wilson, Journal.

43 Ibid.

sometimes appeared on the horizon but, despite frenzied signalling, failed to call into the Island.\textsuperscript{45} The difficulty of securing a passage to get produce to market left Armstrong ‘disappointed & disgusted’.\textsuperscript{46} Armstrong was especially frustrated that most Islanders failed to learn from his demonstration of reason-driven, industrious labour. He was bemused, if not confounded, by the attitude of Alan and Johanna Moseley who worked according to the irrational principle that once ‘the seed had been planted’ they could rely upon Nature to ‘look after the rest’. The obvious problem was that,

\begin{quote}
when the season came round for gathering in for Market, the crops would be smothered with weeds [and] consequently returns would not meet anticipations, but the great consolation to them was, that there would always be a good supply of thistles and weeds for their pet calves &c., so the year went round.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

Even the Moseleys, who were ‘hard-working’ but with ‘no system,’ were not as disappointing as William Nichols, Thomas Nichols, Alice Stevens and Harry Wilson who were judged unrepentantly ‘lazy’.\textsuperscript{48} Armstrong’s labours may have been able to re-make the Island in the image of British productivity but he struggled to reform these Islanders from idleness to industry.

Even the Islanders’ intimate relations were included in Armstrong’s extensive program of reform. In her study of Baptist missionaries in Jamaica, Catherine Hall emphasises that missionaries hailed English middle-class ideals of marriage and domesticity as

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\textsuperscript{45} ‘Nov 27\textsuperscript{th} 1879’ in Wilson, \textit{Journal}.
\textsuperscript{46} ‘Jan 27\textsuperscript{th} 1879’ and ‘Oct 25\textsuperscript{th} 1879’, Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Muir and Armstrong, eds., \textit{Book of Adventures}, 299.
\textsuperscript{48} Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, ed., \textit{Lord Howe Island}, 3.
\end{flushright}
benchmarks of civilisation. ⁴⁹ On Lord Howe, Armstrong frequently concerned himself with the Islanders' marital relations, not just in the mechanics of his role as Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages but also to uphold morality and social order. ⁵⁰ When Armstrong arrived, he was particularly concerned that Nathan Thompson, whom he described as 'the leading man of the Island', was 'in full enjoyment and happy possession' of two Gilbertese Island women. Corrie earlier reported Thompson's influential position in the Island community, noting that the Islanders referred 'all disputed questions' to him and regarded his decisions as final. ⁵¹ This created a difficult impasse: the man Armstrong 'looked to chiefly' for 'support and the maintenance of order' was, by his way of life, undermining the community's moral order. Armstrong recounted discussing the issue with Thompson, characterising himself as a bearer of reason and Thompson as a grateful and worthy recipient. Armstrong 'reasoned' with him 'as to the advisability of altering his connubial position' and, happily, Thompson 'soon saw the sense of [his] advice' only 'asking a night to consider the matter and talk it over with the women'. And so, on a very hot day in January 1879, Armstrong performed his first marriage, of Thompson and Bogue, the mother of his family, 'for which they were very grateful'. ⁵² Armstrong was not the only one to posit a crucial relationship between moral and social order: his commission instructed him to, 'with all diligence and care ... watch over the moral well-being of the inhabitants of the said Island.' ⁵³ Armed with faith

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⁴⁹ Hall, Civilising Subjects, 125-138.


⁵¹ Corrie, 'Visit to Lord Howe Island,' 139.


in the fundamental rightness of British standards of morality, Armstrong set about re-making Island relationships.

But not everyone was so eager to tie the knot. Marriage became a major point of contention in Armstrong’s relationship with Perry and Sarah Johnson. With clear exasperation, Armstrong described the couple as, ‘a black man from America who is living with a black woman from the Cape ... I have tried to persuade this couple to marry without avail.’ Race rarely featured in Armstrong’s writing – he never explicitly mentioned the ‘blackness’ of his indentured labourers – indicating the significance of his repetition of ‘black’ in this instance, which conjures images of savagery and sin. He presented himself as a crusader against moral evils, albeit one who was frustrated by the difficulty of the task. The likely problem was that the couple had taken marriage vows on Lord Howe years before and, not realising this original ceremony did not fulfil legal requirements, took umbrage at Armstrong’s suggestion that they were living in sin. Armstrong evidently failed to recognise that the couple thought they were married, later seeking to dismiss their legal testimony on the grounds that they were living together unmarried.

Deeply entwined with the Enlightenment impulse to moral improvement was a faith in education and improving the mind. Gascoigne argues that colonial confidence in the possibility of individual improvement and, indeed, wider societal improvement rested

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54 Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, ed., *Lord Howe Island*, 3.

55 Armstrong, ed., *re: Lord Howe Island*, 20. It would have pleased Armstrong that the Johnsons were eventually re-married in 1915. Perry died 10 months later, aged 88. Edgecombe, *Lord Howe Island*, p. 27
‘largely on the belief in the saving power of education’. It is not surprising, then, that establishing an educational institution on Lord Howe was another pillar of Armstrong’s program of reform. Like many colonists in mainland Australia, Armstrong espoused education for its contribution to social order. In an 1880 letter to the Department of Public Instruction, Armstrong implicitly linked the progress of education on the Island to the broader wellbeing of the community. He was pleased to report that ‘the children are progressing well and favourably, and that the community in general is orderly and well disposed.’

Exactly one week after his commissioning, Armstrong spent the day visiting the Island households. When he penned his autobiography, he recalled one particular deficiency – finding ‘a number of children ... without education of any kind.’ Of this he made an ‘especial mental note’ and ‘took the first opportunity of petitioning the government to appoint a schoolmaster’. It is difficult to confirm the sequence of events that led to the appointment of Thomas Wilson as schoolmaster or whether Armstrong played the central role he later cast himself. Armstrong remembered that, judging Wilson to be an ‘intelligent, steady and practical man’, he temporarily designated him schoolmaster and later had the government confirm the appointment. The Department of Public Instruction’s records indicate that they first approached Armstrong to comment on the

57 Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, ed., Lord Howe Island, 10.
59 Ibid, 302.
60 Ibid, 303. Wilson’s journal confirms that he was giving lessons to the Island children before his official appointment. See: ‘April 4th, 1879’ in Wilson, Journal and ‘Minute by the Minister for Public Instruction,’ 21 July 1879, Lord Howe Island Pre-1939, New South Wales State Records.
condition of education on the Island, not the other way around. Armstrong’s response – that Wilson had been providing informal tuition on the Island for a number of months – implies that Armstrong’s later account may also have obscured Wilson’s agency in the arrangements.61

Whatever his role in establishing the school, Armstrong was heavily involved in promoting education on the Island. He not only recommended the appointment of a schoolmaster but also petitioned the government for a grant to erect ‘a small substantial building which could be used for a general reading-room, school-house and for religious observances’.62 When Wilson unsuccessfully requested a supply of stationery, being informed that ‘teachers were not supplied with such articles’, Armstrong presumably continued to stock the school from his own store.63 Until the erection of a schoolhouse in 1880, the children were taught in Armstrong and Wilson’s shared lodgings. When Wilson wrote to the Department in August 1879 that he had ‘given instruction to some of the children of the Island at my own residence’, he was referring to Armstrong’s house as well as his own. Promoting education entailed liaising with the colonial government but also frustrating negotiations with the Island settlers. Thomas and Mary Nichols resented what they saw as Armstrong’s interference in their family life and refused to allow their children to attend school. In a letter to the Department, Armstrong reported that the Nichols’ only priority was to get their children ‘at the work on the farm etc.’, lamenting their inability to see the broader benefits of education. He concluded


62 Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, ed., Lord Howe Island, 10.

63 Thomas Bryant Wilson, ‘Letter to the Department of Public Instruction,’ 1 November 1880, Lord Howe Island Pre-1939, New South Wales State Records.
that ‘they strongly object to any interference of the Government and are very obstinate as to the advantages to be derived therefrom.’

*Two or three turbulent spirits*: civilising anxieties

It was not only Armstrong’s promotion of education that revealed tensions regarding his role in the Island community. In fact, every aspect of his administration in some way provoked conflict and anxiety amongst the settlers. The Islanders’ grievances were many and varied, ranging from Alan Mosely’s doubtful complaint that Armstrong shot his fowls and poisoned his dogs, to a number of accusations that Armstrong had monopolised trade (including the liquor trade) on the Island. Armstrong’s policy of importing labour was the most contentious. On 19 August 1879, Armstrong returned from New Caledonia with three indentured workers. Following their arrival, Tommy, Charlie and Willie were employed building Armstrong’s new house, clearing gardens, fishing and generally assisting with cultivating the land. From the start, there were grumblings regarding the presence of ‘the boys.’ Wilson’s journal reveals a number of subtle signs of resistance: Harry Wilson refused to finish the canvas jackets Armstrong had commissioned for them, Mosely stole Tommy’s knife and all the Island inhabitants, bar ‘the boys,’ were invited to attend the funeral of a Nichols’ child.

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64 Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, ed., *Lord Howe Island*, 11.


67 See, for example: ’Aug 19th – 28th 1879’ in Wilson, *Journal*

Given the multicultural and relatively harmonious nature of the Island community, the Islanders’ objection to ‘the boys’ is somewhat puzzling. Opposition to Armstrong pre-dated the arrival of his Islander labourers, with Nichols threatening to lodge a formal complaint as early as May 1879. Antipathy toward Armstrong later became conflated with fears about Tommy, Charlie and Willie but this was probably not the original cause of the Islanders’ objection to their presence. Tracey Banivanua-Mar has identified a variant of ‘Orientalism’ applied to Islander labourers in Queensland which she terms ‘Melanesianism.’ She argues that colonial violence, construed broadly, was legitimised by representations of Islanders as black, savage, tribal, violent and physical.69 Thompson’s wife and her companion, from the Gilbert Islands, had already settled on Lord Howe without issue, so it seems likely that the Islanders’ concerns were not merely racial but also gender related. Armstrong’s importation of Tommy, Willie and Charlie swelled the Island’s adult male population by one fifth. In an histrionic letter of complaint, Mary Nichols described Tommy derisively as Armstrong’s ‘black labourer’, conflating racial fears with concerns about his physical masculinity.70 Nichols objected to Armstrong sending Tommy to convey a message ‘after dark’, inferring fears for her safety and the security of her children.71

These anxieties were fully expressed by the entire community on 11 April 1881 when, in the midst of drunken celebrations following a ship’s delivery of gin and during Armstrong’s absence from the Island, Tommy was accused of ‘criminal assault on a girl...


70 See Anne McClintock on how race, gender and sexuality were frequently conflated in colonial contexts. Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1995).

71 Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, ed., Lord Howe Island, 16.
of tender years.’  Eva Rose was the nine-year-old daughter of Armstrong’s new manager, Mr Rose, who called the male residents together for a meeting the following day. The intention was not just to discuss what would be done with ‘the prisoner’ (Tommy had spent the night tied to a chair with a rifle pointed at his head) but also ‘to consider the advisability of protecting’ the community against the imminent arrival of more imported labour. Armstrong had arranged to apprentice five ‘Vernon boys’ – named for the ship Vernon, a floating juvenile reform centre. Again, community alarm was probably not merely a result of the implied criminality of the ‘Vernon boys’ but also their masculinity – their presence would increase the Island’s male population by another third. Given the previous night’s drama, the implied objects of ‘protection’ were the Island’s women and children. The men voted to prevent the boys’ arrival at all costs.

When, on 16 April, H.M.S. Alacrity approached Lord Howe to land the ‘Vernon boys’, Lieutenant Commander Coombes was handed a document opposing their arrival. From an adjacent whaleboat, Rose explained their reasoning. Nevertheless, Coombes insisted the boys would be landed, threatening to use force if necessary.

This emotionally charged climax gave way to an uneasy truce. Tommy was released after Thompson and Wilson investigated the alleged assault. Wilson’s journal does not mention the ‘Vernon boys’ in the month following their arrival or any further discontent amongst the Islanders. Nevertheless, sides had been taken and factions formed. On 20 December, a group of Islanders petitioned the government, requesting Armstrong’s removal. They purported to represent ‘the majority of this Island’ and begged the government to ‘take into consideration the many causes for complaint’ they had against Armstrong even though those causes were not detailed.

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72 Ibid, 14.
73 ‘Apr 17th 1881’ in Wilson, Journal.
74 Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, ed., Lord Howe Island, 1.
The petition initiated the inquiry which later suspended Armstrong from office. Thus, Armstrong’s dismissal can be seen as a local mutiny by a group of Islanders, their hostile response to his Enlightenment-style reform agenda. Rather than representing the final word on Armstrong’s civilising mission, however, his dismissal prompted a wider discussion about the nature and purpose of governance. The Islanders’ complaints against Armstrong seemed to be a judgement on his methods, but he and his supporters reversed that notion. They argued that his dismissal fully revealed the Islanders’ lawlessness and highlighted their need for direct governance. Clarson, who earlier lodged with Armstrong on Lord Howe, beseeched the Colonial Secretary to recognise that Armstrong’s dismissal was not a victory for the worthy ideals of ‘good order and governance’ but rather ‘two or three turbulent spirits … averse to any semblance of authority’. He predicted a grim future for the Island ‘unless some representative of order be firmly established there’ for the people would certainly ‘drift into a state of barbarism’. Other defenders of Armstrong also appealed to images of savagery to discount the Islanders’ complaints and to represent an unsupervised Island community as a grave threat to the colonial government. The *Cumberland Times* declared it ‘clear’ that:

The Howe Islanders would be quite willing to revert to the primitive savagedom from which but few of mankind have either clearly or cleanly emerged. They are evidently a lazy, improvident lot, to whom the trammels of civilisation are irksome, and who hold in detestation all properly constituted authority.\(^75\)

\(^{75}\) *Cumberland Times*, 12 May 1883.
Even a more circumspect *Herald* article which freely discussed Armstrong’s ‘imprudence’ did not hesitate to term the Islanders a ‘semi-civilised people’.\(^7_6\) Like Armstrong, colonial commentators envisaged the Island community as uncivilised and the overwhelming majority advocated the desirability of conveying to them the sure remedy of direct British rule.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has considered the first period of direct governance on Lord Howe Island, examining how Armstrong conceived his role as resident magistrate. Despite the Island’s relative insignificance, from the time he read aloud his commission, Armstrong approached the task with total dedication. The ideological framework Armstrong brought to bear on his position elevated the importance of the task and also helped to reconcile many of the tensions inherent in colonial governance. Thus, the civilising mission was not only a key metropolitan justification for empire but could also help an individual make sense of an isolated posting, giving meaning and purpose to the job of overseeing forty souls on a little-known Island in the Tasman Sea. The most mundane duties – building roads, mucking out pigsties and treating onions for blight – took on renewed significance in light of a wider quest for improvement. Similarly, the deep entanglement between Armstrong’s public duties and private interests, which caused some disquiet at the time, could be explained as a necessary first step in ensuring that colonial landscapes yielded their bounty.\(^7_7\) The subsequent commentary on Armstrong’s dismissal indicates that NSW society generally concurred with Armstrong’s conception of his role, expressing an exaggerated concern regarding the governance of even peripheral areas of empire.


\(^7_7\) This disquiet underlay the charge that Armstrong had ‘monopolised trade on the Island.’ Ibid.
It is no wonder, then, that the government gave some consideration to the Islanders’ petition, requesting feedback from all departments to which Armstrong reported. As a result, he was served with a list of charges on his next trip to Sydney, refuting them in a frenzied exchange of letters with Colonial Secretary Sir John Robertson. At the same time, Armstrong sought to contextualise the petitioners’ original complaint, discreetly forwarding a document outlining his uncomplimentary estimate of the majority of the Island’s inhabitants. Much to his surprise, these measures did not forestall further official investigation. The next chapter will explore the subsequent inquiry into Armstrong’s conduct and how both sides appealed to key contemporary ideals to construct their cases.
How to Make a Case:

Temperance and character and how they framed the trial of Captain Armstrong
he arrival of the government steamer *Thetis* at Lord Howe Island on 4 April 1882 took Armstrong entirely by surprise. Given his refutation of the charges against him, he was 'utterly bewildered' to be delivered notice of suspension from office by J. Bowie Wilson, recently appointed commissioner of an inquiry into his conduct.\(^1\) Wilson was accompanied by a number of officials including surveyors, scientists and botanists.\(^2\) In his autobiography, Armstrong satirised the ostensible business trip, implying it was difficult to see where pleasure ended and business began. It took five boats to land the party's abundant stores, a farcical situation considering the Islanders had lacked basic provisions for weeks. Armstrong 'could not help laughing at the whole turnout'.\(^3\)

Other aspects were less amusing. Armstrong likened the execution of the party's landing to a military exercise overseen by Wilson, their 'experienced General'. The troops were 'mustered and kept together, evidently prepared to meet a formidable enemy, and ... marched to the intended camping ground in martial array'.\(^4\) In his re-telling, Armstrong was not a *formidable* but rather a *pitiful* enemy, rendered helpless over the following days as Wilson presided over the inquiry as 'self-appointed Judge, President and Jury, all in one'.\(^5\) This, according to Armstrong, was a *coup d'état* of the most outrageous kind. He was a lone official, without even a lock-up to enforce law and order, being ousted with military precision by a representative of the government whose interests he sought to defend. Armstrong returned to Sydney aboard the *Thetis*, hoping to resolve the

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misunderstanding, but instead found that the government endorsed the findings of Wilson’s report, confirming his dismissal.⁶

This chapter focuses on Wilson’s inquiry and Armstrong’s tireless rebuttal of its findings. I examine how Wilson and Armstrong constructed their cases and, in so doing, implicitly or explicitly appealed to influential contemporary ideals. The recommendations of Wilson’s report, based on his conviction that Armstrong had sold liquor to the Island’s inhabitants, were strongly informed by the ideals of temperance to which he personally subscribed. The contemporary preoccupation with alcohol and its regulation initially bolstered Wilson’s case, magnifying Armstrong’s apparent transgression. In the long term, however, temperance proved an ineffective frame of reference, threatening to complicate rather than clarify the case’s central issues. Armstrong was perhaps cognisant of this danger as he sought to shift the debate to safer territory, appealing to his exemplary character to refute the charges. Ultimately, Armstrong’s argument resonated more powerfully: his career and lifestyle were construed as positive proof of his integrity. While understanding these ideals helps to unlock the key issues of the dismissal, I also use the trial to gain greater insight into their meaning and significance in late nineteenth-century NSW.

Armstrong’s dismissal is more than a tale of the vicissitudes of colonial governance in a remote corner of the empire. It also tells of a personal and ideological contest between two government officials. It was not that temperance and character were contradictory concepts; on the contrary, both were concerned with respectability and social order. However, Wilson and Armstrong stood for competing understandings of these ideals, effectively disputing the nature of ‘character’ and what constituted a responsible official approach to alcohol in a remote outpost, in many ways their contest spoke into existing

⁶ Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, ed., Lord Howe Island, 27.
fissures in colonial society; the issues it raised were both personal and collective. Armstrong and Wilson’s initial encounter at the Island on 4 April is, therefore, a symbolic meeting between the local and colonial. It was the first stage in the ever-widening repercussions of Armstrong’s case, to be discussed more fully in chapter three. Laidlaw has argued that the influence of personal relationships on colonial governance declined from the mid-1830s due to the increasing bureaucratization of the Colonial Office. This did not mean that ‘colonial connections’ ceased to impact on governance altogether. As Armstrong found out, personal relationships could too easily intrude on the workings of bureaucracy, with consequences resonating across the colonial public arena.

‘His mind inflamed by drink’

Bowie Wilson, by this stage in his early sixties, was over six feet tall, ‘corpulent in proportions,’ and sported a long greying beard. Born in Scotland in 1820, Wilson immigrated to NSW at age 22, later returning to Scotland and travelling around America. During his travels, he developed an interest in the Victorian

Figure 3: J. B. Wilson, Bulletin, 12 May 1883

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7 Laidlaw, Colonial Connections.

'sciences' and subsequently styled himself a 'doctor' of hydrotherapy, dabbled in phrenology and maintained a life-long interest in Spiritualism.\textsuperscript{9} In 1854, Wilson again immigrated to NSW and, according to one admirer, became the ‘father of the cause’ and ‘a pillar of strength’ for Spiritualism.\textsuperscript{10} Not everyone was so enthusiastic about Wilson’s interests, especially after he entered politics in 1859, winning the seat for Goldfields South. In 1863, liberal politician David Buchanan derided Wilson’s mind as ‘a soil upon which every delusion seems to fructify.’\textsuperscript{11} Wilson frustrated Buchanan because, although an ultra-radical who campaigned tirelessly for the abolition of state aid to religion and the establishment of an eight hour working day, he often sided with the conservatives when he felt the Liberals were not taking reforms far enough. Parkes quipped,

Bowie went a little further

Than Tom Paine himself would go

Judges he accused of murther

Wept he o’er the felon’s woe.\textsuperscript{12}

Wilson’s political activism also encompassed the temperance movement in which he took a leadership role in the late 1860s. In 1872, after holding a number of ministerial


\textsuperscript{10} Emma Hardinge Britten, \textit{Nineteenth Century Miracles or Spirits and Their Work in Every Country on the Earth} (Kessinger Publishing, 1884), 260-61.

\textsuperscript{11} David Buchanan, \textit{Political Portraits of Some of the Members of Parliament of New South Wales} (Sydney: Davies & Co., 1863), Mitchell Library.

positions and being defeated in an election, Wilson retired from politics, working as a land agent and speculating in various mining ventures. Wilson's final official appointment was commissioner of the inquiry into Armstrong's conduct.

4 April 1882 was not the first time Wilson and Armstrong had met. Armstrong recounted a trip to Sydney where the men became acquainted and discussed Lord Howe. Wilson showed an unusual interest in the Island, making many inquiries. Evidently, Armstrong was not as familiar with the NSW political scene because he soon offered the prominent temperance activist a glass of wine. Wilson appeared ‘very much shocked’ at the suggestion and, declaring himself a teetotaller, berated Armstrong for his indulgence. The men parted after tense discussion, ‘not the best of friends.’

In his autobiography, Armstrong introduced the account of his dismissal by describing this meeting. On one level, he was providing support for his contention that Wilson acted unjustly in his role as commissioner. He portrayed Wilson as a despotic ‘Great Moghul’, implying that he abused his delegated authority to exact personal revenge. More persuasively, Armstrong was drawing connections between the primary charge against him, ‘supplying the inhabitants of the Island with wine and spirits without a licence’, and Wilson’s own preoccupations. It was undoubtedly Wilson’s adherence to the principles of temperance that prompted his fierce condemnation of Armstrong’s medicinal distribution of small quantities of wine to the Island’s inhabitants.

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13 Lyons, *Wilson, John Bowie (1820-1883).*


15 Ibid, 338.

During the course of the inquiry, it became clear that Wilson was not merely investigating the validity of the original complaints against Armstrong. These were a list of mostly petty grievances: that Armstrong had short-changed Charles Moore for a pre-paid seed order, that he had not fully accounted for residual funds after the building of a schoolhouse and that he had unnecessarily delayed a delivery of the post in October 1881. Instead, Wilson substituted a number of more scandalous indictments he gleaned ‘by observation and general inquiries’ during his time on the Island: allowing the ‘Kanaka boys’ to ‘wantonly’ destroy pigs, neglecting to prosecute Tommy for sexual assault, giving ‘undue preference’ in assigning government employment, attempting to monopolise trade on the Island and ‘selling intoxicating liquor to the Island’s inhabitants’.

Despite compiling this range of allegations, Wilson’s report concluded that there was only ‘satisfactory evidence’ to establish the veracity of the final two. Even then, ‘attempting to monopolise trade on the Island’ was perhaps ‘too strongly worded’ and merely unwise in its likelihood of creating ‘antagonism with the inhabitants’ rather than indictable. Wilson’s recommendation that the government confirm Armstrong’s suspension was based, therefore, on one charge – his having ‘sold’ alcohol to the Islanders. Although Wilson used the provocative phrases ‘illegal’ and ‘sly’ grog selling to refer to Armstrong’s misdemeanour, it is not clear which law he had supposedly broken. Wilson did not extrapolate nor did parliamentary debates produce any conclusive answer. Given the small quantities of liquor involved, it seems that he was guilty of a moral faux pas rather than an illegal offence. When Wilson penned ‘sly grog selling’ into the margin next to the original wording of the charge, ‘selling intoxicating liquor to the

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17 Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, ed., Lord Howe Island, 12.

18 Ibid, 14.
Island's inhabitants', he was effectively overlaying it with his personal objections to alcohol.

The prominence that Wilson assigned to this charge, as well as the language he used, suggest that the ideals of temperance were his salient, if unspoken, frame of reference. Not only was he prepared to recommend Armstrong's dismissal on the basis of 'selling' liquor but Wilson also judged this to be his 'most serious' alleged offence; more, it seems, than 'neglecting to prosecute ... Tommy for a criminal assault on a girl of tender years'. Temperance activists, in Australia and beyond, identified alcohol as fundamental to society's most entrenched problems – crime, immorality, poverty and insanity – and advocated abstinence or teetotalism as the ultimate solution. Wilson presumably felt that Armstrong's alleged encouragement of the liquor trade on Lord Howe was responsible for his apparently poor governance and the unrest that resulted. Joseph Abbott MLA articulated this view in 1886, arguing that 'a gentleman occupying the position of Captain Armstrong had no right to sell the liquor at all' for 'it was the very stuff that would have the effect of making [the Islanders] rebel against all law and authority'.

19 Ibid.


21 Sydney Morning Herald, 25 September 1886, 9.
In the years following Armstrong’s dismissal, Wilson’s initial frame of reference inevitably linked the case with broader political discussions about alcohol and temperance. Armstrong’s 1883 plea to the Sydney public indicates the symbolic weight of the drink issue:

Sir, with reference to the paragraph ... announcing my removal ... for ‘selling wines and spirits’ without a license to the inhabitants of Lord Howe’s Island, I would ask the public kindly to suspend their judgement until in possession of the full facts of the case.22

In the 1880s, temperance was both a prominent and controversial issue in NSW politics and society. The local options campaign in particular dominated politics, part of a broader shift towards viewing intemperance as a social evil rather than the result of individual weakness and, consequently, advocating legislative remedies.23 Local option targeted the liquor trade, aiming to give residents the right to veto liquor licences in their area.24 By 1882 these ideals had been partially realised by a new Licensing Act which imposed restrictions on trade and introduced a limited form of local option. However, as Quentin Beresford argues, the partial measures embodied in the Act ultimately increased the controversy surrounding alcohol, confirming ‘its central place in politics’ as ‘anti-drink forces’ continued to campaign for legislation to outlaw public

References:

22 Armstrong, ed., re: Lord Howe Island, 40.

23 J.D. Bollen, Protestantism and Social Reform in New South Wales, 1890-1910 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1972), 50.

houses. Coinciding as they did with this late nineteenth-century climax of the temperance movement, the findings of Wilson's inquiry had deep political resonance.

As parliamentarians and commentators debated the legitimacy of Armstrong's dismissal, the case became conflated with political discussions about alcohol. Disagreements over the 'seriousness' of the central charge against Armstrong were one expression of the entanglement of the two issues. Not everyone agreed with Wilson's original assessment. An 1883 select committee inquiry into the dismissal re-ordered Wilson's ranking of Armstrong's alleged offences, singling out 'neglecting to prosecute ... Tommy' as 'by far the most serious' charge. Buchanan, a consistent opponent of liquor regulation who was earlier expelled from parliament for drunkenness, argued that the charges against Armstrong were 'vexatious', 'frivolous' and 'groundless' and 'that, in consideration of the insignificance of the charges, the magnitude of the punishment was absolutely appalling'. Nevertheless, the majority of commentators, whether or not they agreed with Wilson's conclusion that 'the evidence of the truth of the charge is overwhelming', affirmed his opinion that selling alcohol to the Islanders was Armstrong's most serious alleged offence, one which would make or break his case. In 1884, the Herald unequivocally affirmed Wilson's assessment of 'the two most serious charges against Captain Armstrong', concluding that, 'in view of the importance of these

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28 Sydney Morning Herald, 21 April 1886, 7-8.
two, the others may be very properly allowed to sink out of view'.
This polarisation of opinion, however, was not neatly split between Wilson’s and Armstrong’s supporters. Those who affirmed Wilson’s conclusions could concede that Armstrong had been ‘too harshly dealt with’ and those who contested them might emphasise the seriousness of the charge but plead Armstrong’s innocence. Thus, it was not merely that actors on either side of the debate appealed to a weighty political issue to bolster their positions, but rather that many used the case to express pre-conceived positions on a range of issues relating to alcohol.

The case became entangled with broader debates about the harmful effects of alcohol, and even the particular remedies advocated by the local options campaign. Armstrong himself invoked its ideals and language in his argument against the charge of ‘sly grog selling’, emphasising his strong ‘objection to the liquor trade being legalised on the Island’. He declared that one of his chief aims as resident magistrate had been ‘to exercise salutary control over the supply of alcohol’ by preventing the distillation ‘of a rough spirit from figs and banana’. Armstrong repeatedly corrected Wilson’s misrepresentation of his ‘trade’ in liquor, countering that he had ‘only supplied these articles in cases of illness, or what I considered necessity, in very limited quantities’. Not wanting to ‘encourage a spirit of pauperism’, he began to accept produce in

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31 Daily Telegraph, 7 May 1883.
33 Armstrong, ed., re: Lord Howe Island, 21. See also: 10-11, 22, 32-33 and 35.
exchange although, as Islander Albert Nichols stated, this was ‘almost valueless’ given the lack of any profitable market for Island produce.\textsuperscript{34} Nevertheless, Armstrong’s simultaneous appeal to the medicinal qualities of alcohol in fact placed him on the conservative side of the alcohol question for, in Australia, more radical temperance groups had begun to challenge the benefits of its medicinal use.\textsuperscript{35} Armstrong’s defence suggests that the liquor trade had become a prominent issue in colonial politics. Despite holding more conservative views, he astutely drew upon the language of the local options campaign to articulate his defence and represented himself as judiciously crusading against, rather than profiteering from, the moral ills of alcohol.

If the Armstrong case highlights the politicisation of alcohol consumption in late nineteenth-century NSW, it equally points to the fact that the ideals of temperance did not necessarily translate into lived realities. Armstrong’s construction of himself as opposed to liquor traffic on the Island was an edited version of what he called the ‘full facts’. As Alice Stephens and Mary Nichols highlighted, and Thomas Wilson’s diary attests, in the first few months after his arrival, Armstrong was involved in distilling spirits from an abundant harvest of peaches.\textsuperscript{36} Wilson’s final reference to the peaches was on 30 December 1878 when the 600 peaches gathered earlier were ‘fermenting

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 10 and 25.


well’. More extraordinary is the fact that, according to Armstrong, Bowie Wilson was equally flexible in his adherence to teetotalism. He reports that, on arrival at Lord Howe, Wilson was ‘dipping heavily into some brandy’ to lessen the effects of seasickness, an affliction he continued to ‘medicate’ after spending numerous days on solid ground. Armstrong’s autobiography includes an apologetic letter from Wilson’s colleague George Ranken, attesting that Wilson was unfit to conduct the inquiry not merely because of his poor state of health but also because ‘his mind [was] inflamed by drink’ and ‘indignation against [Armstrong’s alleged] wrongdoing.’ The phrase ‘inflamed by drink’ is apt precisely because its meaning is uncertain – it could be a metaphorical description of his passionate devotion to temperance or a more literal description of his drunken state.

As parliamentary debates circled endlessly around the ‘seriousness’ of the primary charge against Armstrong and whether there was indeed enough evidence to convict him of this offence – could a mere £30 worth of alcohol distributed over three years be classified as ‘sly grog selling’? – the case was in danger of being paralysed by the drink issue. The topic generated passionate opinions but few lucid answers. In a rare moment of clarity, Abbott identified ‘the real question’ others had skirted around: ‘was the conduct imputed to Captain Armstrong sufficient justification for removing him from the position?’ His conclusion was less insightful, conflating moral objections to alcohol with

37 Wilson, Journal.
39 This sentence does not appear in another version of the letter earlier published in one of Armstrong’s pamphlets. It is unclear whether the phrase was removed from the pamphlet version in the interest of Wilson’s memory or inserted into the version Armstrong published in his memoir. Ibid, 343. Compare: Richard R. Armstrong, ed., Captain Armstrong’s Case (Sydney: Hector Ross, 1887), 7.
the necessary legal justifications for Armstrong’s dismissal. He asserted that since Armstrong was sent down ‘to maintain order … amongst a people who were of a disorderly and disreputable kind’, there was ‘no justification’ for his selling even ‘one glass of wine’.\textsuperscript{40} To achieve closure, the case needed to be disentangled from the temperance movement, which threatened to overwhelm its central issues.

\textit{‘I defy any man impugn my character’}

In the plethora of documents Armstrong published in its wake – pamphlets, letters to newspapers and finally his autobiography – he railed against Wilson’s handling of the inquiry.\textsuperscript{41} He exposed its one-sidedness: Wilson had only heard evidence from the anti-Armstrong faction and had denied Armstrong’s right to give evidence or bring forth his own witnesses. Strangely, Armstrong did not mention what must have been its most humiliating moment. During the proceedings, Wilson took out a letter all too familiar to Armstrong – one marked in his own writing ‘Official, private and confidential’ – and publicly interrogated witnesses on the character references Armstrong had appended to his private refutation of the charges.\textsuperscript{42} Wilson’s questions can be reconstructed from his report. He asked Mrs Moseley:

\begin{quote}
Do you know Mrs Nichols? Do you believe her to be, as Captain Armstrong does, a vindictive woman and the cause of mischief among other Island women? Do you have any knowledge of an alleged impropriety between Mrs Nichols and a certain Captain Amora?\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 25 September 1886
\textsuperscript{41} Muir and Armstrong, eds., \textit{Book of Adventures}, 339.
\textsuperscript{42} Armstrong, ed., \textit{re: Lord Howe Island}, 12.
\textsuperscript{43} Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, ed., \textit{Lord Howe Island}, 2-3 and 18-19.
\end{flushright}
This scene highlights the tensions surrounding a crucial concept in Armstrong's defence: character. From the time he was notified of the petitioners’ complaints until he penned his autobiography eight years later, Armstrong consistently drew upon gendered Victorian ideals of character to articulate his defence. In an 1883 letter to parliament he declared that, 'all through this inquiry the matter of character has been urged by me as absolutely necessary to be taken into account.'

He implied it was not the charges themselves that should command parliament's attention but the character of the people bringing them. Character enabled Armstrong to make a two-pronged case. Firstly, by representing his own career and lifestyle as exemplifying the ideals of manly character, Armstrong put himself above reproach, constructing a shield to blunt the volley of accusations against him. Secondly, Armstrong questioned the character of his accusers, undermining the power of their armoury by discounting their testimony as unreliable.

This section will consider the notion of character raised by the trial, arguing that Armstrong's case drew upon nascent ideals of 'muscular' manliness and corresponding ideals of feminine character.

Given the plethora of literature on Victorian gender ideals, it is surprising that the interrelated notion of 'character' has received scant attention from either Australian or British historians. Kirsten McKenzie's study of character and 'fair fame' among the middle classes in the early nineteenth-century Australian and Cape colonies is the most comprehensive. She asserts that, by the 1830s, masculine character had become a crucial aspect of business throughout the imperial domain, integral to a man's credibility and credit rating. This older conception was connected to Armstrong's preoccupation with character; he lamented that the 'unjust dismissal' would 'damage and blight my

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prospects in a country which I had adopted as my home.’ 46 Similarly, in a letter to the
Cumberland Times, Armstrong assured readers of the trustworthiness of one of his
advocates, testifying ‘that neither word nor his cheque would be questioned for one
moment, I have always heard of him as bearing a high reputation’. 47 Used in this sense,
character and ‘reputation’ were synonyms, both frequently invoked in Armstrong’s
defence. The Islander petitioners who wrote to John McElhorne MLA in 1882 expressed
frustration at the fact that ‘on the unsworn evidence of a few illiterate men and women,
a gentleman of Captain Armstrong's attainments, and a faithful servant of the nation,
should have his character so thoroughly blighted’. 48 Again, in a petition to Parliament,
Armstrong described himself emphatically as a ‘heavy sufferer; ruined in character’. 49
Evidently, in the 1880s, a man’s character and reputation were bound together and
powerfully impacted one's economic livelihood. Character was a precarious social and
economic resource that could be lost as well as gained, attacked as well as protected.

Armstrong’s primary emphasis on character, however, was not in the sense of
reputation. In fact, Armstrong's main usage of the term draws attention to its
overlapping if contradictory meanings in the late nineteenth-century. Both feature in the
opening pages of an 1884 pamphlet, where Armstrong addressed Robertson’s claim that
his early retirement from the navy was the consequence of misconduct. Armstrong
decried Robertson’s slander, asserting that ‘to malign a gentleman’s character in this
way is ... not actionable’. Yet he also appealed to character to refute Robertson
recounting that, since his retirement, he had migrated to the colonies in search of a
healthier climate and, in New Zealand, held a number of ‘high offices’ which he ‘left

48 Ibid, 28.
49 Emphasis original. Ibid, 33.
without a stain on my character’. Character was not merely a commodity that could be lost in a public dispute but also a bulwark against slights upon one’s reputation – Armstrong issued a bold challenge, defying ‘any man to impugn [his] character’. Paradoxically, character referred to both an unchanging inner nature and an ever-fluctuating socially constructed commodity. There is little scholarly analysis on character in this sense of the word. John Tosh’s conception of the relationship between manliness and character, though only a brief sidenote, is insightful. He argues that, ‘writers on manliness were essentially concerned with the inner character of a man, and with the kind of behaviour that displayed this character to the world at large.’ Two points can be extrapolated from Tosh’s explanation. Firstly, character was a gendered concept, evoking different standards and meanings for men and women. Secondly, although character referred to an inner quality, it was demonstrable through words and actions. For Armstrong and his supporters, character was inextricably linked to ideals of masculinity and femininity and the extent to which these were expressed in everyday life.

The cornerstone of Armstrong’s defence was his apparently exemplary character, demonstrated by the extent to which he lived the ideals of Victorian manliness. In another rare study, Peter Cain identified traits British political elites associated with character: energy, industry, thrift, prudence, perseverance and honesty. Cain failed to acknowledge the gendered nature of character, but all the ideals he cited were associated with Victorian manliness – feminine character was construed differently.

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52 Peter Cain, ‘Empire and the Languages of Character and Virtue in Later Victorian and Edwarding Britain,’ Modern Intellectual History, vol. 4, no. 2 (2007), 249-273. See also: Tosh,
Armstrong's character, and his relentless challenge to those who impugned it, was defined with explicit reference to these manly ideals. He and his supporters framed his energy and industry against the Islanders' laziness; his honesty in contrast to Wilson's hypocrisy; and used Robertson's 'innuendos' to highlight his directness.

These qualities contributed to an image of Armstrong as manly, moral and independent but were not his ultimate trump card which was, instead, his naval career and numerous acts of bravery. Armstrong's self-representation epitomised a wider shift in British conceptions of manliness, from the 'masculine domesticity' of the 1830s to 1860s to more heroic ideals characterising the era of new imperialism from the 1870s onwards. Armstrong's defence was peppered with descriptions of naval achievements, references from superior officers and anecdotes of his own heroism. As the Bulletin noted with sincere approval and only a hint of facetiousness, Armstrong responded to the accusations by 'publishing credentials of which any man might be proud, apparently covering every day of his career in the service'. Another measure of his 'gallant and honourable' character appeared in three of four pamphlets published in relation to the

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53 Bathurst Independent, 4 January 1884.
57 “Two Reputations,” Bulletin, 5 January 1884
case and more explicitly in his autobiography.\textsuperscript{58} After first describing the particulars of the dismissal and his longsuffering quest for justice, he continued with an account of his actions to save a small schooner, the \textit{Eva}, in 1881. Included was a glowing testimony from the \textit{Eva}'s Captain – it recounted how Armstrong had swum a lifeline through rough seas as the vessel foundered on the Island’s reef – a tale which would, Armstrong added, ‘speak for itself’.\textsuperscript{59} The account concluded with the crew’s ‘plucky and genial host’ wishing them a ‘hearty farewell’ and swinging himself over the side ‘with the activity of a true sailor, which he undoubtedly is’.\textsuperscript{60} Armstrong implied that his self-sacrificial bravery, the mark of a ‘true sailor’, was indisputable evidence of character, a clear indication that the charges were entirely false.

Armstrong cast himself as what Graham Dawson terms a ‘soldier hero’, a quintessential figure of masculinity celebrated in real and fictional adventure stories especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Soldier heroes were not merely the apogee of physical, muscular manhood but were also presented as moral exemplars, especially through narratives that ‘fused military adventure with the evangelical genre of the ‘exemplary life’’.\textsuperscript{61} Images of Armstrong as a soldier-saint were most fully realised


\textsuperscript{59} Muir and Armstrong, eds., \textit{Book of Adventures}, 341.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 342.

\textsuperscript{61} Dawson, \textit{Soldier Heroes}, 1 and 81-83. J. A. Mangan argues this was part of a wider cultural shift that emphasised physical exercise, over intellectualism in particular, as fundamental to morality
in his autobiography, a fact that did not escape the attention of contemporary readers. The publishers to whom Armstrong sent manuscripts noted the autobiography’s close resemblance to popular adventure stories. D. Jeffries of the London Times felt it most ‘eminently suited as a serial tale for the columns of the Boys’ Own Annual’ and James Smith of Melbourne was staggered by ‘the narrative of a career which has been so full of variety and almost romantic adventure.’ No wonder – three quarters of its content recounted in detail Armstrong’s decade of naval service especially his boyish escapades, daring exploits, acts of self-sacrifice and numerous promotions. The final quarter concerned Armstrong’s immigration to the colonies, encompassing a much longer period despite its comparative brevity. Still, the narrative represents colonial life as an equally heroic undertaking. Armstrong bravely overcame numerous hardships, participated in dangerous exploratory excursions and even had a run-in with ‘Blackbirders’ during his time in Fiji.

The fact that this part of the narrative retains its exclusive focus on Armstrong, despite the presence of his wife and children, strengthens the image of Armstrong as a soldier hero. Martin Danahay has explored the tendency of male Victorian autobiographers to represent themselves as autonomous, repressing other voices, such as family and community, and their influence in the subject’s life. Armstrong does not merely


Angela Woolacott asserts that the soldier hero figure was epitomised in ‘books for boys’ which saturated Victorian popular culture and valorised ‘bravery, honour and national and imperial service.’ Angela Wollacott, Gender and Empire (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 59-61.


repress other voices but erases their presence altogether. Armstrong married Eliza Malet in 1857 after retiring from the Navy but, although the entire Armstrong family emigrated to the colonies, Eliza and their children are never mentioned in Armstrong’s autobiography. Armstrong located his autobiographical self in an idealised masculine realm of imperial adventure, exorcised of domestic influences, and befitting an exemplar of masculine character.

Armstrong was the only protagonist in his story but not the only character. In fact, questioning the character of his accusers was just as important as constructing himself as a manly hero. Immediately after Armstrong learned of the Islanders’ petition against him, he forwarded the Government his ‘private opinion of the character of the people’ which, he felt, would ‘speak for itself’. With a few notable exceptions – Nathan Thompson, Mrs Robbins and William Brown, ‘a quiet old sailor on his last legs’ – Armstrong judged the ‘low character’ of the Islanders against Victorian ideals such as industry, sobriety and sexual propriety and found them wanting. Most Islanders were criticised for their lack of industry; a great number for their former dissipation or frequent drunkenness; and a few for sexual impropriety. Wilson was criticised for his lack of sobriety and also his hypocritical claim to be a teetotaler.

Armstrong’s critique of his female detractors highlights the gendered nature of Victorian ideals of character. Mary Nichols and Alice Stephens were two of Armstrong’s arch-antagonists, even undertaking the long journey to Sydney to testify against him. To Armstrong, the character flaws of these women were flagrantly obvious. He noted that Police Magistrate Cloete had earlier declared the ‘violent and vindictive temper’ of Alice


67 Extract from *Hansard*, 20 November 1883 in *Papers, Documents and Reports*. 
Stephens (nee Lloyd) chiefly responsible for her husband's death at the hand of her father-in-law, the Island's first homicide. He also drew attention to Alice's previous domestic situation, living unmarried with 'her paramour' Campbell Stevens, thus insinuating sexual impropriety. Similarly, Armstrong emphasised Mary Nichols' 'violent temper', which drove her eldest son (an Armstrong supporter) from the Island when she struck him with a spade and 'threatened to shoot him'. According to prevailing views women were naturally gentle, emotional, nurturing, weak-willed and dependent creatures whose essential purpose was motherhood. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argue that virtuous femininity was associated with fragility, beauty and delicacy. Armstrong's deft caricatures cast Alice and Mary as the antithesis of Victorian womanhood – reprobates who wreaked destruction in the lives of the families they were supposed to nurture. As Dawson points out, this same image of women was integral to the new imperial masculinity; the physicality and violence exercised by soldier heroes was legitimised by the need to protect dependent women at home. Armstrong's denunciation of Alice and Mary's character, though judged according to different standards, was intimately connected to his deification of himself as an exemplar of manly character.

This element of the defence evoked Wilson's hearty disapproval; he inverted the argument, asserting that Armstrong had proved himself tyrannical and 'unmanly' by

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68 Armstrong, ed., re: Lord Howe Island, 46.

69 Ibid.


72 Dawson, Soldier Heroes, 2.
‘blackening’ the character of the Islanders. Like temperance, character did not offer an inherently stable frame of reference. It was open to challenge not just because ideals of character and masculinity change constantly in any society but also because competing notions of character exist simultaneously. Wilson questioned the standards by which Armstrong judged manly character. His alternative conception of manliness was likely informed by involvement in both the temperance movement and radical politics. Marilyn Lake has argued that, from the 1880s, the incipient NSW Labor movement and, in particular, its charismatic leader William Lane fostered an alternative vision of masculinity which predominated from the early twentieth century. Lane’s ‘manly’ man was straight, temperate and monogamous, starkly contrasting the hyper-masculinised Australian bushman or imperial soldier hero. In addition, sympathy for the working classes was central to Wilson’s manliness. The connection between gender and identification with the working classes was made explicit by Buchanan who derided Wilson and his ideals, feminising them as ‘weak’, ‘the most nauseous sickly sympathy and wretched maudlin sentimentality’ and ‘perfectly effeminate and childish’. In contrast, it was Armstrong’s apparent lack of regard for the Islanders that led Wilson to describe him as ‘unmanly’: Armstrong’s ‘official, private and confidential’ character diatribe was a cowardly ‘attempt to stab a man in the dark’.

If Wilson’s more domestic masculinity prevailed in the early twentieth-century, it was Armstrong’s conception of character that resonated with the public in the 1880s.

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73 Armstrong, ed., re: Lord Howe Island, 12.
74 Tosh, ‘What Should Historians Do with Masculinity,’ 191.
76 Buchanan, Political Portraits.
77 Armstrong, ed., re: Lord Howe Island, 12.
Newspaper articles bemoaned the fact that the dismissal had ‘cast a shadow on the reputation of one holding such a high position as Captain Armstrong’. Various commentators echoed Armstrong’s views about the Islanders’ low character and unreliability. A. McDonald, presumably Armstrong’s lawyer, drew on the double meaning of the word when he described Islanders Campbell Stevens and John Robbins, whom Wilson appointed special constables, as ‘two worthless characters’ and Clarson described the petitioners as ‘a few designing fellows whose antecedents are not of the most creditable character’. The Bulletin in particular propagated Armstrong’s portrait of himself as a soldier hero, reprinting a summary of his naval career and publishing an article about Armstrong’s ‘plucky’ efforts to save the Eva. The Bulletin’s support was in spite of Armstrong being ‘very little to the people of New South Wales generally’ but rather because ‘the character of an apparently gallant officer and straightforward man is a precious thing anywhere.’ When a select committee exonerated Armstrong from blame in 1883, at least in part due to the ‘bad or doubtful character’ of ‘several of the most prominent persons’ against him, they were effectively endorsing his assertion that character was

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78 Daily Telegraph, 7 May 1883.


80 Armstrong, ed., re: Lord Howe Island, 43 and 47.
indeed, ‘absolutely necessary to be taken into account.’

Conclusion:

The records surrounding Wilson’s inquiry suggest a second reason for Armstrong’s dismissal. Wilson’s substitution of new charges against Armstrong, his abrogation of legal process and his emotive presentation of the findings point to a personal conflict between the two men. At one level, it was an ideological contest. Wilson and Armstrong drew upon competing understandings of temperance and character to articulate their case. Wilson, whose ideals were informed by radical temperance, condemned Armstrong’s limited distribution of wine on the Island, indicative of an older and more conservative approach to alcohol. Armstrong appealed not to temperance to prove his integrity, but to his heroic masculinity, which starkly contrasted Wilson’s more radical and domestic conception of manliness. Temperance and character were interrelated markers of respectability, but neither could provide an inherently safe frame of reference because both were subject to interpretation and contestation.

Armstrong’s hunch that the conflict was more tangible must also be considered. His intimation that bad feeling from an earlier meeting was largely responsible for these extraordinary circumstances seems farfetched. Nevertheless, Wilson’s conduct points strongly to the possibility that Armstrong’s dismissal was predetermined, a foregone conclusion before his first witness had been called. The next chapter will consider this scandalous idea, proposing that the clash between Wilson and Armstrong was not merely the result of ideology but a deeper conflict of personal interests involving other major political players.

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81 Ibid, 34.
How to Create a Scandal

the mundane, the dramatic and the symbolic and how they transformed Captain Armstrong’s case
On 17 September 1885, Robert White presented another petition to the Legislative Assembly on Captain Armstrong’s behalf. In his Sydney residence the following day, Armstrong affixed his signature to a prepared letter and attached it to his latest pamphlet, ready to be distributed to the House. It was a passionate entreaty, urging them to give their ‘full consideration to the petition’. He conjured a vivid image of himself as ‘cruelly ill-treated’, subjected to ‘a bitterness of hostility’ and punished with a ‘harshness so exaggerated … as left me with no possible conviction than that the intention’ was ‘to crush me’. Armstrong did not shy from naming Sir John Robertson as chiefly responsible for his present sufferings but expressed bewilderment over how he had managed to incur the eminent politician’s ‘bitter hatred’. In a poignant conclusion he appealed to the members’ ‘common sense and desire to do right,’ asking them to ‘give their cool judgement to the case’ and declaring that, ‘before God all I ask is justice and redress.’

In the two years since his dismissal, Armstrong had successfully lobbied for the establishment of two select committees to investigate his case, both of which had reported in his favour. Yet he still suffered ‘under the meretricious and mendacious statements’ of a few men who, he claimed, had ‘banded together to misrepresent facts’. Not only was he ‘exhausted in means’ – a direct result of pursuing the case and losing his position on the Island – but certain members of parliament continued to affirm the veracity of Wilson’s original report, to the detriment of his character. As the case drifted


2 Ibid.

in and out of parliament, Armstrong's tireless campaign for justice and the resulting press commentary turned the affair into a prominent colonial scandal. In 1885, the *Illustrated Sydney News* observed that 'the somewhat famous case of Captain Armstrong' had 'again cropped up,' deeming it 'unnecessary to go over the weary ground again of this Lord Howe Island affair'.

Two years earlier, the *Newcastle Morning Herald* expressed certainty that 'everyone' – even 'Newcastle people' – would be 'conversant with the Captain Armstrong case'.

This chapter considers why the dismissal of a minor official from a relatively insignificant post became a sizeable colonial scandal, 'weary ground' for NSW newspapers. I draw on Victor Turner's discussion of 'social drama' which, though focused on developing a universal processual model of scandal, also illuminates the factors that prompt this transformation. In fact, Armstrong's letter to the Legislative Assembly introduces all the case's scandal-producing elements. It exemplified Armstrong's skilful promotion of his case, imbued the affair with drama, dwelt on Robertson's involvement and concluded that justice was central to its resolution. Although Armstrong's persistent lobbying was a pre-requisite for the escalation of the scandal and the unfolding drama of events increased its entertainment value, neither is sufficient to explain its sudden public notoriety. Building on Thomas Laqueur's assertion that a scandal often 'assumes a symbolic weight far in excess of its manifest political importance,' I discuss the symbolic meanings of Armstrong's case.

Two themes stand out. Firstly, what Armstrong referred to as Robertson's 'gigantic' presence: as an eminent and controversial politician, Robertson's entrance as Armstrong's chief

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5 "Captain Armstrong's Case," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner's Advocate*, 28 July 1883.

antagonist inevitably raised the stakes. It was this factor, above all others, that ensured consistent public interest. Secondly, discussion of the case was riven with contemporary colonial anxieties about governance. Many commentators bemoaned that Armstrong’s unjust dismissal and parliament’s slowness in rectifying the situation undermined the integrity of the colony’s governance and reflected adversely on its reputation.

NSW society was familiar with scandalous controversies. Scandals were not only prevalent in the colonies but, as Kirsten McKenzie has convincingly argued, played a crucial role in delineating the boundaries of respectable and disreputable behaviour in the infant European societies. Scandals about imperial governance were not new either – the British Empire had been plagued by scandal since its earliest days. It is significant, however, that the Armstrong case, a scandal fundamentally concerned with colonial governance, was conducted in New South Wales, not metropolitan Britain. At one level, this was entirely reasonable: the colonial government had both appointed and dismissed Armstrong. It does reflect, however, the gradual devolution of decision-making power to the Australian colonies following Britain’s concession of independent self-governance in 1852. The Armstrong case offers a glimpse into the larger story of

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7 McKenzie, *Scandal in the Colonies*.

NSW beginning to assert control over ungoverned spaces like Lord Howe Island, the colonies becoming colonisers.⁹

Yet there was a sense in which colonial governance was a Janus-faced enterprise, concerned with local issues but anxious to fulfil metropolitan expectations and standards. The spectre of metropolitan censure, both individual and collective, was a subtle yet consistent preoccupation in the Armstrong case. Armstrong’s supporters asserted that ‘his degradation ... was the talk of the clubs in England’ and warned that his failure to obtain justice would bring New South Wales into disrepute.¹⁰ Britain, though primarily an imagined space in the Armstrong affair, nonetheless had a bearing on its resolution.

More remarkable is that Lord Howe was also rendered an imagined location, a distant space which could be re-moulded to meet the needs of an argument. When Armstrong returned to Sydney following the inquiry, it signalled not just a change in his personal geography but also the case’s centre of gravity. Its main players, Armstrong and Robertson, were both situated in NSW, and the Legislative Assembly and press became its central arena. As chapter two has shown, the case became entangled with contemporary political issues far broader than the local concerns originally raised by the Islanders. This chapter argues that these symbolic concerns so transformed Armstrong’s cause that the case became largely disconnected from its place of origin.

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⁹ Queensland’s 1883 annexation of New Guinea is a more explicit example of the Australian colonies becoming colonisers. Roger Thompson argues that, despite not being a fully sovereign state, from the 1880s onwards relations between Australian colonies and the Pacific Islands can be construed as a type of ‘foreign policy’. Roger C. Thompson, Australian Imperialism in the Pacific: The Expansionist Era 1820-1920 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980).

'A very uphill' task

Most scandals are unleashed when private transgressions escape into the public arena against the will of those involved. McKenzie draws a broad distinction between private gossip and public scandal, where scandal is information about private transgression writ large in the public domain. By contrast, Armstrong was his own scandalmonger – actively publicising his alleged transgressions in order to decisively refute them and, in the process, highlight the greater injustice of his dismissal. Lobbying was a fundamental but also mundane element in the transformation of Armstrong’s case, requiring copious amounts of ink, paper, energy and persistence. Armstrong lamented its difficulty, describing the ‘task of vindicating’ himself as ‘a very uphill one,’ but he proved adept at recruiting public support.

Between 1882 and 1885, Armstrong published four pamphlets relating to particular aspects of the case. These ranged from 15 to 55 pages in length, comprised various forms of evidence (reports, witness statements, letters, newspaper articles) linked by commentary, and were distributed not only to members of parliament but also the press, Islanders and the general public. His letters to Sydney newspaper editors,

11 McKenzie, Scandal in the Colonies, 8-9.

12 Armstrong, Letter to the Honourable Members.

responding to recent articles or parliamentary debates, were frequently published. He ‘felt it incumbent upon' himself, he wrote to the Herald in 1883, 'having been under the stigma of dismissal for 18 months' to publish a full statement of his defence. Both Armstrong’s supporters and detractors alike noted the tireless energy with which he pursued his case. William Trickett MLA praised Captain Armstrong for having ‘courageously and persistently kept his case to the front’ – the natural result he felt, of having 'so strong a feeling and knowledge of being right'. Others made similar observations but with less enthusiasm. ‘Libra’ wrote with palpable exhaustion that the defence ‘has been stated by Captain Armstrong himself, orally and in writing, over and over again’.

Equally important were his personal appeals to influential colonists. It must have been Armstrong’s personal connections that resulted in a string of select committee inquiries into his dismissal, first in 1883, then 1884 and, finally, in 1887. A group of loyal parliamentary supporters consistently represented his case in the Legislative Assembly, often in the face of fierce opposition: George Day (Member for Albury), William Trickett (Member for Paddington and Minister for Public Instruction), David Buchanan (Member for Mudgee), George Griffiths (Member for East Sydney), William Lyne (Member for Hume) and Robert White (Member for Gloucester). On 6 May 1884, Day drew attention to Armstrong’s earlier petition for the establishment of another select committee inquiry, fending off James Farnell’s objection that ‘some time ago a select committee

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15 Sydney Morning Herald, 18 June 1886, 10-11.

reported upon the cause of Captain Armstrong’s removal ... what the hon. member now asked for [I am] at a loss to know.’\textsuperscript{17}

It is difficult to know how Armstrong gained such ‘influential friends’ but, judging by letters re-published in his pamphlets, personal correspondence must have played a crucial role.\textsuperscript{18} Armstrong wrote to the NSW Premier Sir Henry Parkes on various occasions, expressing optimism that he would ‘deal satisfactorily with a case ... deemed a great miscarriage of justice’.\textsuperscript{19} While Parkes maintained a discreet distance, never becoming one of ‘Captain Armstrong’s many friends’,\textsuperscript{20} Armstrong’s correspondence with another influential figure, former Chief Justice Sir Alfred Stephen, was more rewarding. Having studied the literature forwarded by Armstrong, Stephen affirmed that ‘no sufficient grounds had been shown for your removal from office’ and gave Armstrong permission to show his remarks ‘to any one who may in any degree be influenced by them in your favour’.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, Armstrong and his supporters extracted all they could from Stephen’s testimony, which frequently reappeared in literature and debates as decisive proof of his innocence. In one parliamentary debate, Mr O’Connor declared, ‘Sir Alfred Steven analysed the case and came to the conclusion that the case against Captain Armstrong was worthless.’\textsuperscript{22}

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\textsuperscript{17} Sydney Morning Herald, 7 May 1884, 7.
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\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 26-27. For Parkes’ position on the case, see: Sydney Morning Herald, 2 April 1887, 9
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\textsuperscript{20} “The Case of Capt. Armstrong,” Singleton Argus, 12 May 1883, 1.
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\textsuperscript{21} Armstrong, ed., re: Lord Howe Island, 52.
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\textsuperscript{22} Sydney Morning Herald, 25 September 1886.
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Victor Turner has proposed a model for ‘social drama’ comprising four phases: breach, crisis, redress and either reintegration or schism. To use Turner’s terminology, it was in Armstrong’s interest to ensure that the initial breach – whether regarded as his own indiscretion or Wilson’s irregular inquiry – prompted a crisis where ‘sides were taken, factions were formed’. The Armstrong case was to some extent a self-made scandal. His persistent lobbying was vital in bringing a little-known breach to a crisis-point, causing the public to rally to either Armstrong’s or Wilson’s defence. Armstrong’s hard work was not without reward. In 1883, he wrote to Wilson, his former manager, excitedly reporting that, ‘I have at last got a committee and everyone here is indignant with past proceedings’. In a subsequent letter, Armstrong again positioned himself at the centre of the case’s developments, implying that his agency was the catalyst for progress. He wrote, ‘I have now a Select Committee sitting as to any re-imbursement and hope to get at least 3000 or 4000 – but even then my work will not be finished.’ In fact, his ‘work’ was not finished until 1887 when Parliament finally granted him compensation. The Daily Telegraph was surely correct, if pre-emptive, in announcing that the ‘desired consummation’ of Armstrong’s case was due, ‘to his own indomitable pluck and persistency, and a few staunch friends’.

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24 Ibid, 150.


26 Armstrong to Wilson, 1884.

27 Daily Telegraph, 7 May 1883.
'The hand of death was upon him'

In February 1883, a parliamentary select committee was appointed to inquire into Armstrong’s removal from office. Two months later, the committee reported that ‘Captain Armstrong did nothing to justify his dismissal, and recommended his case to the favourable consideration of the Government.’ There was one major flaw in its proceedings. While Wilson’s inquiry had been criticised for only examining witnesses hostile to Armstrong, the select committee’s report became hotly contested for similar reasons, having heard evidence predominantly from Armstrong's supporters.28 This was not intentional; the chief witness against Armstrong was unavailable. The report stated that, ‘every means to obtain Dr Wilson’s evidence has been resorted to, but he has submitted medical certificates stating that through illness he was not in a fit state to be examined.’29 As it happened, the resulting imbalance could never be rectified because, precisely a week after the committee published its report, John Bowie Wilson died.

It might be expected that Wilson’s sudden death would facilitate a speedy resolution: most objections to Armstrong's reinstatement would surely have died with him. Instead, Wilson’s death became the point at which the case transmuted into a full-blown scandal. Wilson’s exit shrouded the case in mystery for, as the Queenslander observed, Wilson’s 'version of events' would remain forever untold; if he had not died ‘explanations would perhaps have been forthcoming which can now never be obtained’.30 The case reached its dramatic climax a week after Wilson’s passing, told and re-told by the press and


30 Queenslander, 12 May 1883, 736.
parliamentarians alike.\textsuperscript{31} On 11 May 1883, Sir John Robertson wrote to the \textit{Herald} defending his ‘late and much lamented’ friend against Armstrong's aspersions and publishing a letter ostensibly written by Wilson hours before his death. In the letter, Wilson condemned the select committee’s report as based ‘entirely on evidence given by Captain Armstrong himself which, to use a mild term, is a gross tissue of misrepresentations’.\textsuperscript{32} Robertson later read the letter in Parliament, channelling the drama of recent events when he declared it to be ‘like a voice from the grave’.\textsuperscript{33} The letter captured the imagination of the press and public, framing a less titillating tale of unjust dismissal within a compelling narrative. The drama of Wilson's deathbed letter whipped Press commentary to a fever pitch in May 1883. A \textit{Queenslander} article typically emphasised the intrigue of recent events, divulging that Wilson ‘wrote to the Government’ after the release of the report, ‘defending his opinion and stating that his verdict was correct and this is the last thing he did, for his death followed immediately afterwards’.\textsuperscript{34}

Armstrong’s response made matters more mysterious. In the \textit{Herald} on 30 October, Armstrong obliquely questioned the legitimacy of the letter ‘allegedly’ received by Robertson on the day of Wilson's death. He emphasised that it bore no signature other than Robertson’s, appended to a footnote in which he confessed to have ‘altered certain

\begin{footnotes}
\item[31] See, for example: “The Late Honourable J B Wilson,” \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald}, 2 May 1883;


\item[34] \textit{The Queenslander}, 12 May 1883.
\end{footnotes}
expressions of Mr Wilson's and substituted his own. Armstrong's 1885 pamphlet, devoted exclusively to the matter, was even more damning. Armstrong repudiated Robertson's 'scandalous use' of the letter which he claimed 'aroused grave suspicion as to whether its emanation was from Mr. Wilson's pen'. He drew attention to inconsistencies, especially that the letter was dated after Wilson's death because, so Robertson claimed, he would not date the letter on Sunday – particularly suspicious because Wilson was staunchly secular. After marshalling various sources of evidence, Armstrong stated his case:

One part of this extraordinary letter was written by Mrs [J.B.] Wilson, and another part by her Daughter ... a third part is written by Sir John's son, and the letter is finished off by Sir John himself ... thus concocted it was sent to the S.M.Herald and Daily Telegraph and published on the 11th of May, 1883.

Again, the drama of Armstrong's claims attracted the attention of the press. The Illustrated Sydney News reported that Armstrong declared Wilson's letter 'to be a fabrication ... there appears to be a good deal of mystery in the matter.' Turner's term 'social drama' is insightful, highlighting the 'dynamic relation' between scandal and drama, where 'brute facts' are woven into 'expressive cultural genres' and key players are cast and re-cast as 'symbolic types'. The unfolding drama of the Armstrong affair was a primary reason it attracted sustained press attention. Robertson and Armstrong

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36 Armstrong, ed., Captain Armstrong and Sir John Robertson, 3.

37 Ibid, 11.


39 Turner, 'Social Dramas,' 154.
presented the public with opposing though equally dramatic narratives, each vying to be recognised as the case's symbolic hero and casting the other in the role of villain. If Wilson's death initially attracted widespread sympathy for Robertson's cause, the Upper Hunter Standard's unwavering faith in Armstrong foreshadowed its long-term impact, a crisis point where public opinion was fiercely divided. The writer avowed that 'regret for the death of a public man cannot prevent us from still further blaming Mr Wilson for in his very last moments vilifying Captain Armstrong ... It was a malicious, unjustifiable act, and more reprehensible because the hand of death was upon him.'

'A political giant'

It was the identity of the man who replaced Wilson as Armstrong's chief antagonist, however, that wrought the greatest changes in the Armstrong case. Sir John Robertson, five-time Premier and architect of the Land Selection Acts, was one of the most prominent politicians in nineteenth-century NSW. In his 1885 letter to the Legislative Assembly, Armstrong admitted feeling daunted by his high-profile opponent. He wrote, 'our positions are in such extreme opposition. I am, comparatively speaking, unknown. [Robertson] carries with him the reputation and credit of a life devoted to public affairs.' He wondered what chance he might have 'against a political giant such as this' and supposed that 'the very fact he opposes me will carry conviction as to some imaginary wrong-doing of mine to thousands who will never take the trouble to read my defence.' Despite this lament, Robertson's 'name, fame and services' to the colony did not work entirely to Armstrong's disadvantage. Instead, Robertson's fierce opposition to any

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40 Upper Hunter Standard, 6 June 1883.


42 Armstrong, Letter to the Honourable Members of the Legislative Assembly, 18 September 1885.
parliamentary motion in Armstrong's favour not only served to prolong the case but also to raise its profile.

As Robertson passionately defended Wilson’s conduct – in parliament and the press – the public’s attention was inevitably drawn to Armstrong’s dismissal. A report on Armstrong’s 1885 pamphlet concluded that ‘some serious charges [are made against Robertson], which on the face of them seem to require answers.’ Robertson’s high-profile persona transformed the case into a weighty matter requiring answers: if Armstrong’s dismissal could be sidelined as an insignificant dispute between two minor public figures, Robertson’s involvement made the case far more controversial. As the *Bulletin* concluded in 1884, ‘Sir John’s own reputation is of much concern to our people’ and it was his, rather than Armstrong’s ‘reputation as that of an honourable and manly individual, which is at present in the worst plight.’ Robertson’s entry drew attention to the case and also gave the public an interest in its resolution – his reputation was a community concern.

Contemporary commentators recognised the serious implications of Robertson’s involvement and especially Armstrong’s repeated and daring refutations of Robertson’s claims. There were, however, a variety of press responses as Robertson took up Wilson’s dubious case against Armstrong, staking his hefty reputation on what looked increasingly like precarious ground. Some weighed into the debate not quite to defend Robertson’s character but at least to express concern that it had been challenged. An 1885 article thought it ‘highly desirable’ that the matter was ‘cleared up’ for Armstrong

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had not only challenged the ‘authenticity of the letter’ but had also impugned ‘the honour of one of [the] members of parliament’. Others delighted in the opportunity to launch attacks on the politician, protected within the ramparts of Armstrong’s cause. An 1883 *Western Advocate* article was almost gleeful in its assertion that ‘some very ugly features were exposed during the investigation, none being worse than the animus displayed by Sir John Robertson’. Another gravely prophesied that, ‘old Jack will not… come out with clean hands’.

Rather than being exclusively a response to the specifics of the Armstrong case, this widespread outcry against Robertson’s involvement was probably a symptom of his rising unpopularity. If Robertson’s revolutionary approach to land policy had once earned him a reputation as ‘the most popular man in the House’, by the 1880s the situation was reversed. Robertson remained preoccupied with the land question throughout his career, dogmatically championing his original approach despite mounting criticism. His introduction of a new Crown Lands Bill in October 1882 led to the downfall of the Robertson-Parkes Coalition Government in January 1883 and when Robertson was appointed Premier in October 1885 he barely managed to recruit a ministerial team. Throughout 1882, the *Bulletin* sharply criticised Robertson’s staid land policy, describing him as a ‘blockhead’ who had ‘arrived at a stage in life when his

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47 *The Western Advocate*, 9 June 1883.

48 “Captain Armstrong’s Case,” *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner’s Advocate*, 28 July 1883.

49 Buchanan, *Political Portraits*.


51 Ibid, 96-97
ideas are incapable of enlargement or modification.\textsuperscript{52} He was deemed ‘the prince of humbugs’ for purporting to be ‘the poor man’s friend’ while implementing policies that worked in favour of squatters.\textsuperscript{53} The \textit{Bulletin}’s coverage of the Armstrong case was part of an ongoing tirade against Robertson that continued until his retirement in 1886.\textsuperscript{54} The weekly magazine objected to the ‘taunts and innuendoes’ Robertson heaped on Armstrong, which were ‘sly digs’ dealt from ‘behind bales of privilege’ that gave ‘his victim no chance of parrying.’\textsuperscript{55} In December 1883, it ridiculed his claim that only a man with ‘marks against him’ would have been sent to Lord Howe, highlighting Robertson’s central role in confirming Armstrong’s appointment and concluding that ‘Sir John’s action today – unless, indeed, the poor old political deadbeat’s inconsistency has reached its climacteric – in reality tells largely in Armstrong’s favour.’\textsuperscript{56} The notoriety of the Armstrong affair was due in no small measure to Robertson’s involvement. However, it was Robertson’s growing unpopularity that gave his shaky position in the case particular pertinence: the \textit{Bulletin}, and likely other commentators too, rallied to Armstrong’s cause to flog a ‘poor old political deadbeat’.

\textsuperscript{52} “Robertson’s Land Law,” \textit{Bulletin}, 22 April 1882, 2.


\textsuperscript{55} “Two Reputations,” \textit{Bulletin}, 5 January 1884.

\textsuperscript{56} “The Case of Captain Armstrong,” \textit{Bulletin}, 29 December 1883.
Robertson’s involvement also raised a final, far more scandalous question: what exactly was Robertson’s interest in the case? A number of newspapers sniffed a conspiracy and implied that he was not merely honouring a friend’s memory. The Cumberland Times declared that “no reasonable person perusing the evidence can come to any other conclusion than that the charges against Captain Armstrong were trumped up for the purpose of getting rid of him.”\footnote{Cumberland Times, 12 May 1883.} The Newcastle Morning Herald claimed that ‘the late Hon. J. Bowie Wilson advised a gentleman to put in his application for the billet as Resident Magistrate of LHI long before he began to investigate the charges made against Armstrong as the captain, he said, “was to be sacked”.’\footnote{“Captain Armstrong’s Case,” Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner’s Advocate, 28 July 1883.} The Orange Independent asserted that Robertson and Parkes were to blame for the mysterious dismissal, proposing that ‘through some cause or another the Captain was “evidently in the way” and Sir John Robertson and Sir Henry Parkes are not men to hesitate long about removing an obstacle, when such can be done “officially.”’\footnote{Orange Independent, 21 November 1883.} Armstrong fed these rumours in an 1884 pamphlet, publishing testimonies that his dismissal was predetermined by Wilson and Robertson.\footnote{Armstrong, ed., re: Lord Howe Island, 15.} Only in his autobiography did Armstrong reveal the full extent of his suspicions. He was convinced that the dismissal was engineered to facilitate a speculative land venture on Lord Howe and claimed to have seen a company prospectus for a sanatorium in which both Wilson and Robertson were listed as directors.\footnote{Muir and Armstrong, eds., Book of Adventures, 335-36.} The previous year, Armstrong had himself recommended the establishment of a sanatorium on the Island and, responding to his advice, the government had
reserved a portion of land.\textsuperscript{62} It seems that a group of officials had purveyed the idea, as Wilson’s report on Lord Howe also recommended ‘the advisability of reserving this island – this gem of the sea – for an Australian sanatorium: it is invaluable for such a purpose’.\textsuperscript{63} Armstrong’s claim presents a third possible answer to the mystery of his dismissal. However, no sanatorium was established and it is difficult to assess the veracity of the claim. Nevertheless, then as now, the suggestion of high-profile corruption imbued the case with drama and intrigue, fuel to the fire of scandal.

‘A burlesque of justice’

‘A one-sided affair, and a burlesque of justice’ was the description used by a group of Islanders who wrote a counter-petition to the Legislative Council in November 1882, protesting against Armstrong’s dismissal.\textsuperscript{64} Five years later, as politicians bickered over the final details of Armstrong’s compensation, the notion of justice remained at the fore. After proposing a motion to grant Armstrong compensation, Trickett declared that, ‘Captain Armstrong had been treated in a very unfair and un-English manner and there was every reason he should be given the compensation.’ After further debate over whether Armstrong’s situation merited\textit{ any} compensation, it was agreed that a committee should be appointed to decide the precise amount. When Trickett protested at the delay, Parkes assured him that as ‘the most essential part of justice was

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{62} New South Wales Department of Lands, \textit{Land Tenure on Lord Howe Island}, 8 December 1948, Lord Howe Island Museum Collection.
\bibitem{63} J. Bowie Wilson, \textit{Lord Howe Island 1882}, 2nd ed. (Sydney: D. West, Government Printer, 1981), 16.
\bibitem{64} Armstrong, ed., \textit{re: Lord Howe Island}, 5.
\end{thebibliography}
expedition’ when ‘the Government had made up their minds there would be no delay’.\textsuperscript{65} If the Armstrong affair came to symbolise one particular issue, it was that of justice.

The manner of Armstrong’s dismissal was, firstly, an individual example of manifest injustice, evoking sympathy and moral indignation from colonial commentators. Nearly every press report on the case repeated the first select committee’s finding that Wilson’s inquiry ‘had been conducted in a most irregular manner’. In elucidating this finding, Buchanan pronounced that, ‘an Inquiry such as [Wilson’s] degraded and trampled underfoot justice’.\textsuperscript{66} Others disagreed. Robertson and Abbott asserted that the structure of the inquiry was a side issue because the evidence was conclusively against Armstrong and a fair trial, though desirable, would not have changed the verdict.\textsuperscript{67} The newspapers, however, overwhelmingly maintained that the sham inquiry was at the heart of the matter. They cloaked Armstrong’s situation with emotive expressions of victimhood; he was a ‘gentleman’ who had been ‘cruelly wronged’ and ‘a victim of as gross an injustice as any man ever had to bear’.\textsuperscript{68}

Commentators may have been indignant at the inquiry’s tangible effects on Armstrong, but they were deeply alarmed at what it symbolised about colonial governance. It was not only that Wilson, an individual, had conducted a trial ‘with a strange absence alike of discretion and common fairness’ but that he represented the government and, worse, that the government had endorsed his findings.\textsuperscript{69} The \textit{Echo} bemoaned that ‘the

\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 2 April 1887.

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 21 April 1886.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 25 September 1886.

\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Licensed Victualler's Gazette}, 17 November 1883 and “A Curious Case,” \textit{Illustrated Sydney News}, 4 July 1885.

\textsuperscript{69} “Captain Armstrong R.N.,” \textit{Bulletin}, 7 July 1883, 4.
Government, knowing how [the inquiry] was conducted, instead of throwing Mr. Special Commissioner Wilson's report into the fire... adopted it, and so endorsed what was really a gross outrage upon justice'. Armstrong’s supporters frequently argued that his dismissal was essentially an abuse of power by the whole government, not merely an aberrant act perpetrated by one of its officials. In an 1886 parliamentary debate, Daniel O’Connor contended that ‘if there was ever a case of cruelty on the part of the government in persecuting a man ... [this] was such a case... evidence had been taken behind a man’s back... a kind of Star Chamber practice had been resorted to’. When Robertson, an icon of NSW politics, weighed into the debate to defend Wilson – apparently on the side of injustice – it implied that Wilson’s inquiry was the tip of an iceberg. Injustice and possibly corruption, it seemed, deeply pervaded the government. Although many discussions of the case expressed anxiety that the government was to blame, the press generally eschewed analysing what was revealed about its character. The Bulletin was bolder, declaring that the ‘action of the Legislative Assembly’ proved a ‘whole lot of things’, particularly that ‘no fellow should expect to get justice from a body the majority of which is composed of lawyers and commission agents’.

The most significant cause for alarm, however, was that the inquiry signalled a departure from British standards of justice. ‘Received ideas of British justice and fair-play,’ the Herald argued, were not being enacted. George Day told the Legislative Assembly he ‘did not think he had ever heard of anything more un-English than to call a man up for trial and not allow him to open his mouth in self-defence’. The Echo was

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70 Echo, 1 May 1883.
71 Sydney Morning Herald, 25 September 1886.
74 Sydney Morning Herald, 21 December 1883, 4-5.
incensed that such a ‘monstrous’ injustice could possibly take place ‘anywhere in the British dominions, even on a rock in the Pacific’. Commentators were both direct and dire in their message: a British colony should rightly uphold enlightened British standards of justice and failing to do so would have serious consequences. The press warned that ‘the affair’ would ‘serve to bring Legislative institutions into contempt’ and humiliate ‘the people’ as they watched ‘a persecuted employee of the crown struggling almost vainly for redress’. Lurking behind all the appeals to British standards of justice was an awareness of what McKenzie has termed the ‘censorious metropolitan gaze’. McKenzie argues that collective reputation was an ongoing preoccupation in the colonies, enduring beyond the campaign for independent self-government into the late nineteenth century. Press engagement with the Armstrong affair often dwelt, both explicitly and implicitly, on the issue of reputation and framed the case compellingly as one that jeopardised the status of the entire colony. As the Western Advocate baldly asserted in 1883, 'until justice is done in this case, the reputation of the colony suffers.'

Conclusion:

On 18 June 1886, Sir John Robertson announced his retirement from politics. A year later, a third select committee made a judgement on Armstrong’s right to compensation, the contentious issue that had stalled the resolution of the case since 1884, deciding in his favour. Consequently, £1500 was placed on the budget estimates, half the amount for

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75 *Echo*, 1 May 1883.

76 *Upper Hunter Standard*, 6 June 1883 and *Orange Independent*, 21 November 1883.

77 McKenzie, *Scandal in the Colonies*, 181.

78 *The Western Advocate*, 9 June 1883.

79 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 June 1886, 11.
which Armstrong had initially applied. These two events may have been causally linked; it was chiefly Robertson who had frustrated Armstrong's bid for compensation. From mid-1886 public commentary on the case receded. Perhaps Robertson's exit depoliticised the affair, enabling a quiet resolution. In any case, the quick succession of events evokes a powerful symbolic connection between Robertson's departure and the case's denouement. That connection is one of the main concerns of this chapter. I have argued that, while a number of tightly interwoven factors contributed, Robertson's involvement was the primary reason Armstrong's case was transformed into a prominent colonial scandal. In fact, most elements that heightened public awareness of the case to some extent stemmed from Robertson's involvement. The drama of the case was due, not just to Wilson's sudden death, but also to Robertson's publication of his apparently fabricated deathbed letter. Similarly, Robertson's obstruction of the case seemed to be one of its great injustices, pointing to the disturbing possibility of corruption within the ranks of NSW politicians. It was not just the entry of a well known personality that raised the profile of the case – the NSW public was scandalised by the symbolic meaning of Robertson's involvement. For this reason, the Armstrong case was gradually disconnected from its original concern, governance on Lord Howe, and increasingly embroiled in NSW politics.

Despite the case's resolution in 1887, many of the questions it raised about alcohol, governance, justice and Robertson's character remained unanswered. Still more elusive are the reasons for its many twists and turns. Had Armstrong's dismissal been decided before the inquiry as some contemporaries suggested? Why would Armstrong claim that Wilson and Robertson were part of a syndicate planning to invest in the Island? In the conclusion, I will draw together some of these loose threads, teasing out what can be known about the Armstrong case and what remains unknowable.

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80 Sydney Morning Herald, 13 July 1887.
Bringing Captain Armstrong’s case to a conclusion
t had begun with a suspicious death. A decade before Armstrong was appointed resident magistrate, Lord Howe Island’s first homicide marked it out as a disorderly community, a place requiring direct governance. Motivated by a vision for the Island’s improvement and the promise of financial reward, Armstrong embraced that task wholeheartedly, seeking to convey economic, social and moral order to the community. When he faced opposition from the Islanders, Armstrong explained the situation with a somewhat circular logic that would be endlessly repeated by his supporters. His role had been to safeguard order on Lord Howe and so the Islanders’ objections to him only highlighted their disorderliness.\(^1\) This argument muted the Islanders’ voices and stifled their grievances.

Nevertheless, a few can be discerned. The Islanders’ anxiety about Armstrong’s importation of a number of labourers, swelling the Island’s male population, was discussed in chapter one. Armstrong’s decision to shut down the Island’s stills likely angered Tom Nichols in particular for Nichols stopped socialising with Armstrong at around this time and threatened to make a formal complaint.\(^2\) Finally, the government’s grant of a 100-acre lease to Armstrong surely exacerbated tensions. The Islanders’ leases, between one and five acres, afforded little security of tenure – they were increasingly concerned to safeguard their Island against outside interests.\(^3\) These local issues were never seriously considered in contemporary debates. Indeed, as time went on, even the threatening image of unruly Islanders faded. The case became increasingly

\(^1\) Armstrong, ed., *re: Lord Howe Island*, 7.

\(^2\) ‘May 17th 1879’ in Wilson, *Journal*.

disconnected from its place of origin, as its central issues were re-interpreted in light of colonial politics.

It ended, nine years after Armstrong had arrived on the Island, with the government paying him £1500 compensation. It was a much-needed improvement to Armstrong’s financial circumstances, which he invested firstly farming in Tasmania and later trying to establish a sponge industry in Western Australia, where he eventually died in 1910.4 Most importantly, the payout officially vindicated Armstrong’s claim that he had done nothing to justify his dismissal, clearing his ‘thoroughly blighted’ character.5 Yet the government’s decision was as much a result of concern for its own reputation, and that of the colony, as for Armstrong. The case had not only revealed the irregular, perhaps corrupt, practice of a minor official, Bowie Wilson, but also cast doubt on the integrity of Sir John Robertson, an iconic figure in NSW politics. Injustice seemed to permeate every level of the case, from Wilson’s handling of the inquiry to parliament’s slowness in responding to the recommendations of its own select committees. As public outrage shifted from its initial focus on Armstrong’s alleged wrongdoing to government inaction and possibly corruption, it became necessary for the government to bring closure. Armstrong had long argued that the concept of ‘character’ was central to the case’s resolution, though it was not quite in the way he had envisaged. Armstrong drew on the ideals of manly character to present a compelling case but it was the possibility of the colony’s collective reputation being tainted that gave the wider public a stake in its outcome. The Armstrong affair demonstrates that colonial society remained preoccupied with meeting metropolitan standards and expectations, even after being granted self-government. Moreover, powerful concepts like reputation framed debates

4 ‘The Late Commander Armstrong, R.N.’, *West Australian*, 27 June 1910, 3
on multiple levels; its ideals were so pervasive that they applied to both individual and collective issues.

The middle stages of the case, and with them the reason for Armstrong's dismissal, remain more obscure. Nevertheless, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn. Wilson’s conduct during the inquiry – his substitution of more serious charges for the original ones, refusing to hear Armstrong’s defence and recommending Armstrong’s dismissal on the basis of one poorly proven charge – suggests that the removal was pre-conceived. It is difficult to determine if Wilson was merely prejudiced against Armstrong or involved in a plot to sack him. Robertson’s entry into the cast of main players does point intriguingly to the latter. It is unlikely that an eminent politician would risk his reputation over such a minor issue, unless he had an interest in its outcome. Two possibilities are apparent. First, since Robertson approved the inquiry into Armstrong’s conduct, he may have been privy to information which convinced him of the need for Armstrong’s dismissal. This was Robertson’s insinuation when he declared that only an official with ‘marks against him’ would take a position on Lord Howe. If such mitigating information existed, however, he would surely have disclosed it when his own integrity was questioned. Alternatively, Robertson and Wilson may have orchestrated Armstrong’s dismissal for private profit. Armstrong claimed to have seen a document proving that Robertson, Wilson and others were planning to invest in a sanatorium on Lord Howe. If so, they had seen Armstrong’s earlier recommendation to the government to reserve land on the Island for that purpose and seized on the idea. If so, it follows that Robertson’s vehement opposition to Armstrong was driven by fear that his own corrupt interest would be exposed. The only evidence confirming this scenario is Armstrong’s testimony which, given his need to discrediting Robertson and Wilson, is not necessarily reliable.

Given the frustrating lack of solid evidence we too must share the mystery, which piqued the interest of the press and contributed to the case’s renown. Untangling its many threads does, however, paint a vivid and detailed picture of colonial governance in late nineteenth-century NSW. The experience of minor officials in isolated areas has been neglected by Australian and imperial history, but are brought into sharp relief by the Armstrong affair. Armstrong’s precarious position in the Lord Howe community, epitomised in the Islanders’ mutiny, reveals the vulnerability of governance in remote corners of empire. Similarly, close attention to Armstrong’s enactment of his role reveals many of the contradictions that beset colonial governance, contradictions which could be at least superficially reconciled through the ideology of the civilising mission. When Armstrong’s actions were subjected to scrutiny by the NSW Government, the case was interpreted through, and overlaid with, pertinent political issues. Thus, the language and assumptions that circulated through press and parliamentary debates furnish insights into two pervasive yet underexplored contemporary issues, temperance and character. At the heart of both these issues, whether considered at a personal or collective level, was the concept of respectability. Respectability ultimately became the primary concern of the Armstrong case, which threatened to expose the unsavoury character of key players in the government and undermine the reputation of the entire colony. It was for this reason that the resolution of the case was so unsatisfying, vindicating Armstrong but failing to ‘sheet the blame’ to the ‘proper quarter’. That the case contains so many unanswered questions reveals as much as it obscures. Even in the established colony of New South Wales, governance was an anxious enterprise and truth could be buried in the interest of reputation.

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