

Introduction—an unlikely leader

This book is about a shadowy figure in early Australian colonial history, John Hunter, the second governor of New South Wales. Not in any sinister sense, but rather because Hunter is largely unknown as a person. Very little has been written about him, and almost nothing of any substance. Even historians cast him as a bland performer, a supporting player who rarely appears as part of the main theme in early colonial times.

He is mainly remembered by those who have read or studied our first 20 years of European settlement, as one who lost the *Sirius* at Norfolk Island and who, as governor, was out-smarted by John Macarthur and the New South Wales Corps. Beyond this, one is usually regarded with blank looks and furrowed brows. The aim of this book is to bring John Hunter out of the shadows and into the light in order to cast him as a person deserving of more recognition and to discover what drove and motivated him, what influenced his character, actions, achievements and failures.

Hunter is styled an unlikely leader because after 20 years of naval service as a technically proficient non-commissioned officer and unused to strategic leadership, he was suddenly promoted to lieutenant, then commander and finally post captain in the short space of six years. Within a further nine years, he was the governor of a remote and complex colony, with limited leadership experience (especially over non-naval people), probably due more to the influence of his patron than to any proven leadership qualities.

He did, in fact, lack the experience needed to benignly rule the complicated system he inherited in Sydney, while his innate courtesy, trustfulness and kindness were exploited by his enemies to their advantage. His appointment as governor could well have been met with some surprise by those peers who knew him; certainly he was not Arthur Phillip's preference.

The following pages are a portrayal of the life and times of John Hunter (1737–1821), his decades of naval service, the negative and then positive influences that patronage had upon him, his fluctuating fortunes, his term as second governor of New South Wales and his later years spent in active retirement. It examines the peaks and troughs of his record as a seaman and the factors which caused his governorship to falter, but demonstrates that Hunter did in fact leave some legacies both as a maritime technician and during his term as governor.

The major events which shaped his career included:

- being the second governor of New South Wales between 1795 and 1800
- serving as a serving naval officer for 50 years from 1754 to 1804.

Hunter's principal maritime milestones included:

- the near wrecking of HMS *Carysfort* in 1770
- appointed second captain of HMS *Sirius* in 1787 to take the First Fleet to Botany Bay. This became a key turning point in his career as he was then associated with New South Wales in a variety of capacities (governor, critic, advisor and commentator) for the next 30 years
- the two near-losses of HMS *Sirius* under this command



Figure 1–2. Scale models of the *Sirius* and *Supply*. Formerly on display at the Powerhouse Museum (Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences), Sydney.

- the loss of the *Sirius* at Norfolk Island in 1790
- the recall from the New South Wales governorship in 1800 under something of a cloud and the subsequent reinstatement of his reputation
- the loss of HMS *Venerable* in 1804
- the ultimate promotion to rear admiral in 1807 and vice admiral in 1810.

Any biography of substance on John Hunter needs to address questions such as: how competent was Hunter as a seaman, navigator, leader, politician, diplomat, governor, communicator and journalist? What sort of a person was he and what early influences shaped his character and attitudes? What were his strengths and failings? Were his achievements solely based on experience, judgement and abilities or were there some external factors or patrons assisting him? Was he merely in the right place at the right time? Did he create the opportunities that came his way or did he just take advantage of any openings before him? What were his relations with his peers, colleagues, superiors and those under his command? How was he regarded by them—was he respected, liked or feared? Were there any hindrances or impediments that checked or retarded his promotional prospects? How important was patronage to Hunter's career? What about his private life? What do his letters and journal reveal of him? In short, was his competence sufficient to warrant the appointments and authority conferred upon him or was he promoted beyond his capabilities? Did he deserve the rank of Captain and then Governor and did he execute these roles satisfactorily?

In addition, it is intended to fill out the picture with an insight into the world in which John Hunter lived, both at sea and on land. For example, to fully appreciate the man, it is necessary to have some awareness of life in an 18th-century warship and the political and social pressures which applied in English society at that time. The

difficulties that Hunter faced were considerable and the ways in which he met these challenges can be better grasped with some understanding of how the world worked in those days.

It is difficult now to envisage just how harsh, unjust and unremitting life could be 200 years ago—the long separation from families, poor quality food and health care facilities, and the shortened life expectancy which then applied. Communications were drawn out, with transport then taking weeks or months in contrast to modern times of hours or days.

Hunter endured his share of setbacks, but ultimately became a respected retired Admiral. This book traces the see-saw of his ups and downs and hopefully will assist the reader to better appreciate Hunter's life and to more fully understand the world in which he lived.