

A Diminutive Enigma

New perspectives on Arthur Phillip, first Governor of New South Wales

By Michael Flynn

The bicentenary of Arthur Phillip's death fell on 31 August 2014.¹ A sardonic and private man, Phillip has always been an enigma, the Cheshire cat of Australian history. His private papers were mostly dispersed and lost. Though his baptism record was known, his origins were covered in obscurity and misinformation. Until 1897 his grave lay forgotten under matting on a church floor outside Bath.

When Phillip died at the age of 75 the founding governor of New South Wales had been recently promoted to Admiral of the Blue (the third highest rank for an admiral).² Just over three months before his death in 1814 he signed his will with shaky difficulty and fixed his seal to a dab of red wax. The original copy of the document is in the National Archives, Kew, London. Still barely visible on the cracked wax impression of the seal is Phillip's motto '*esperance sans peur*', French for 'hope without fear'.³

Few personal descriptions of Phillip have survived. In 1866 John Dell, a drummer in the New South Wales Corps who arrived in Sydney as a youth in 1790, recalled he had 'a finely-shaped head set on a most diminutive body'.⁴ George Landmann (1779–1854), whose German-born father Isaac was an old friend of Phillip's, remembered a vulnerable man, seasick on a short coastal voyage off Plymouth in 1796 when Phillip was nearly 60 years old and a veteran of many voyages:

Well, I remember his little figure, smothered up in his brown camlet cloak lined with green baize, his face shrivelled, and thin aquiline nose, under a large cocked hat, gathered up in a heap, his chin between his knees, sitting under the lee of the mainmast, his sharp and powerful voice exclaiming, 'I cannot bear this, I am as sick as a dog!'⁵

In April 1829 the emancipist surgeon Thomas Parmeter claimed to have encountered Phillip in England in about 1813 at the Bath Assembly Rooms in company with a gentleman who was possibly the First Fleet Commissary, John Palmer:

I remember Governor Phillip at the upper rooms at Bath, saying to a gentleman now resident in the Colony (it was sixteen years since), 'I never thought that dependency would have been so promising and so flourishing to the Mother Country,' as it is such a metamorphosis; could he now rise from the grave, he would think the tales of the genii were revived. I fancy I see him walking with a quick step, between the gaol and the Honorable Robert Campbell's house, where the camp was erected, marshalling the poor exiles, and commanding James Bloodsworth to lay the first brick of Government-house. O, little do the rising generation know of the hopes and fears that pervaded the chieftain's breast.⁶

In another newspaper article published two years later, Parmeter again reminisced about Phillip in terms that suggest he may have been personally familiar with Phillip's diminutive figure:

From Phillip's sway it is just turned of forty years since this Battery was begun. Little did this diminutive Governor contemplate such another Tyre, almost finished in a few years. When I say finished, let me be understood, mapped out upon a more magnificent scale than any of our mighty maritime sea-port towns – not as to dimensions, but design. Methinks I see him climbing the rude hill, along where stands Mr. Campbell's residence (one of our Members of Council), at length reaching the spot where the battery now is erected, and, in regular form, fixing the British standard.

Peace to thy ashes thou first great ruler in the southern world!⁷

Phillip's wives

Phillip's two marriages have their own mysteries and enigmas. He married for the first time in London on 19 July 1763 at the age of 24. His first wife, Margaret Charlotte Denison née Tibbott (known as Charlott) was a rich childless widow aged 42, seventeen years his senior. Her first husband John Denison was a London merchant whose death four years earlier had been noticed in a London newspaper:

On Monday evening died at Lambeth, Mr Denison, of King Street, Cheapside, brother to Sir Thomas Denison, one of the judges of the Court of King's Bench.⁸

Successive biographers wrongly stated that Charlott's fortune totalled £120,000. This was based on a misreading of a document that states that at the time of her marriage she held:

...the right &c £58 p annum interest & share in an annuity of £120,000 for 98 years from 8th June 1763 transferable at the Bank of England and dividends now due and hereafter to grow due for the same.⁹

This document indicates that her financial and property holdings included a share in a long-term investment fund providing her with an annuity of £58 per annum and did not possess in any way ownership of the whole fund. She was simply one of a number of investors who had 'shares' in a long-term investment fund that paid

the annuity. The text is not in her will itself but in a probate act document that is in another file and not with the main probate copy of her will. There was initially only a partial grant of probate on her estate for technical legal reasons relating to this and several other features of the estate. She was certainly wealthy enough but her fortune comprised only a fraction of the sum of £120,000.

The couple's decision to end their marriage in 1769 after six years was confirmed by legal deeds of separation. No personal correspondence hinting at the causes of the separation have survived. We can only infer that it seems to have been pragmatic and businesslike. In 1777 Charlott advertised a rural residence for sale on London's southern outskirts that she may have shared with both her husbands:

Mrs Charlotte Phillip. Her household furniture and farm stock was offered for auction at her house, Walcot Place opposite Walnut Tree Walk, Lambeth.¹⁰

She went on to live successively in Westminster, Hampton Court, Gloucester and for the last few years of her life in north-west Wales with her female companion, Mrs Anna Maria Cane. Her final home was in Llanycil, Merionethshire (Gwynedd) on the picturesque shores of Lake Bala. The town is about 28km from her birthplace, Llanbryn-mair, where she had been baptised as Margaret Tybbotts, the daughter of William and Elizabeth Tybbotts, on 23 June 1721.

Charlott died on 3 August 1792, aged 71, four months before Phillip left New South Wales to return to England. She was buried at Llanycil and Anna was buried with her. The inscription on their tomb states that Charlott was the wife of 'Governor Phillip of Botany Bay' adding:

Here also lieth the Remains of Mrs Cane her Companion¹¹

Charlott's will signed at Gloucester on 21 December 1785 provided that £2000 was to be invested to provide a life income to 'Mrs Anna Maria Cane widow now living with me'. The will also indicates that Anna Maria's connection to Charlott predated her second marriage more than two decades earlier. A week before he married Charlott in 1763, Phillip signed a bond agreeing to pay Anna Maria Cane a £20 life annuity which incurred a £500 penalty if he failed to pay it. The 1785 will directed Cane to return the bond to Phillip and release him from the obligation but warned him against mounting any legal challenge to the will. Any such challenge would automatically cancel a £100 bequest to him. Charlott's siblings, nephews and nieces were to be her residuary heirs after Cane's death. The close tripartite relationship between Phillip and the two women before, during and after the marriage is another enigma.

Herbert Rumsey, President of the Society of Australian Genealogists, discovered Charlott's tomb in 1938. His interest was undoubtedly stimulated by the recent

publication of George Mackaness' biography *Admiral Arthur Phillip* in 1937.¹² Rumsey published two items on it in *The Australian Genealogist* (the predecessor to *Descent*) in 1938 and 1939. Interest in Phillip fell away and more than four decades passed before another detailed biography was published. Rumsey's valuable discovery (though briefly noticed in contemporary newspapers) lay forgotten on library shelves and was overlooked by all Phillip's subsequent biographers.¹³

The glove under the floorboards

A year after his return from New South Wales in 1793, Phillip was resident in the prosperous West End parish of Marylebone when he married Isabella Whitehead of Bath in St Marylebone Church of England on 8 May 1794. Descended from an armigerous Lancashire family of gentry and baptised in Blackburn in January 1751, Isabella was marrying for the first time at the age of 43. She was the daughter of Richard Whitehead, a prosperous cloth merchant who later moved to Preston. Like many wealthy people of the time, Whitehead retired to Bath, a famous health spa, and was buried in the village of Weston just outside the city on 25 September 1794, about four months after his daughter's wedding.¹⁴ A newspaper reported that he had died at Bath 'greatly and deservedly lamented', having served as sheriff for Lancashire in 1759 'and for many years as an active, able, and upright magistrate'.¹⁵

From 1793 Phillip served as captain of several warships. In August 1795 Arthur and Isabella Phillip were announced as arriving at Bath.¹⁶ From 1798 he held various posts, managing Britain's naval militia invasion defences. Isabella probably continued to reside in Bath for much of the time. In September 1796 he was working in London while she was at their rented Bath lodgings at No 62 Great Pulteney Street, one of Bath's grandest streets.¹⁷

In 1998 workmen renovating No 68 Great Pulteney Street found the remains of a woman's chamois glove containing three folded letters and the handwritten words of a song from Charles Dibden's comic opera *The Islanders* (1780) about a Spanish governor going to found a colony who is shipwrecked with his colonists among indigenous people in America. In the song, *Poor Orro tink of Yanko dear*, a native American sings to her lover in pidgin English. Two of the letters were from Phillip to his wife, sent in 1801 and 1803, and unmistakably in his handwriting. The petite glove appears to have been either accidentally dropped or deliberately hidden in a gap between the floorboards where it remained for nearly two centuries. The third letter dated 19 April 1803 is from Phillipa Shawe, the stepmother of Isabella's nephew, expressing effusive thanks for Phillip's gift of a pony to her son.

The two letters reveal Phillip in a highly personal and human light, suggesting a degree of marital bickering but also deep affection on Phillip's part. He wrote from Plymouth on 4 October 1801 that he was:

...truly sorry indeed to find that you persist in groundless ideas, that your husband and all your friends are plotting against your happiness, ideas which make you miserable as well as myself...your letters are painful to read, and I no longer press you to write them to me, unless you can write in a different language.... [your letters are] filled with charges which only exist in your own imagination, or which is nearly the same thing, from words made use of by your friends, to which no meaning was annexed. Your friends still love you, & respect you, but you drive them from you, by your unjust suspicions. God bless you, my dear Bel, & make you think more justly of your affectionate husband.

A Phillip¹⁸

The letter was addressed to Isabella at their home in Lymington, a small port town in Hampshire about 14km south of the Lyndhurst area where Phillip had lived with his first wife. In the second letter, dated 24 April 1803, he writes from Bath to Isabella (still at Lymington) about their imminent move to Bath, sending her a list of properties he had inspected. They were planning to rent for a year before buying a house:

Let your letter explain your wishes, as to the situation in which you will best be pleased, and for godsake let me hear no more of doubts for which there is no reason...I see no reason for...the word afflicted at the conclusion of your letter & if that is repeated, I shall think I have too good reason to conclude myself an afflicted husband. Think more justly my Dear Bel'.¹⁹

Possibly their next move was to No 68 Great Pulteney Street where the glove was found in 1998.²⁰

Retirement in Bath

Horatio Nelson had a high regard for Phillip, describing him as 'a good man'. In 1798 he had recommended to his wife Fanny that she visit Phillip and his wife in London. Fanny began a friendship with the couple that lasted beyond the breakdown of her marriage to Nelson by 1800. In October 1805, while Nelson's body lay in state in London before his funeral, Fanny was staying with the Phillips in Bath.²¹

Around 1804–05 the Phillips lived in Bathampton House, a comfortable semi-rural gentleman's residence just outside Bath on the edge of the village of Bathampton. Possibly another property rented while they hunted for a house to buy, it was described as set in six acres (2.4 hectares) featuring a coach house and stable, garden, lawn, shrubberies, rookery and fine pasture. By October 1806 the couple had decided to buy a terrace house in an urban setting in Bath proper. As part of the move, they advertised what seems to be a substantial proportion of the contents of Bathampton House, including paintings and furniture, much of it 'almost new'. Why they would sell much of their furniture at this point is unclear. The town house

may have been too small to accommodate the contents of a larger house in the country or else they may have decided to redecorate and refurnish the newly acquired property. The sale advertisement reflects the couple's opulent, high Georgian lifestyle and musical interests:

...real Nanquin Table-China, curious old ditto, fine cut and plain Glass, Forte-Piano, two fine-toned Violins, large Convex Mirror, brilliant lustrous capital Register stove grate 3 feet 7 wide, excellent large sized Smoke-Jack, quantity of Wine bottles, and other valuable effects... The Furniture comprehends drawing-room suit of three pair of blue satin pale-red window-curtains and cornices, with chairs and sofa to correspond, very tasteful gilt and Japanned chairs; extra large dome and various other bedsteads and hangings; good bedding; sound mahogany articles modern side-board, with brass rod, pedestals and vases; claw, dinner, loo, card, and Pembroke tables; secretary, wardrobe, drawers, parlour chairs, &c. pier and dressing glasses, Brussels and Scotch carpets, kitchen utensils.²²

In November 1806 the Phillips purchased a fashionable terrace house at No 19 Bennett Street Bath (a few doors from the Assembly Rooms) for £2,200, 29 years into a 99-year lease.²³ The house was to be Phillip's home until his death there eight years later in 1814. Isabella died there on 4 March 1823, described as aged 70 (but actually 72), eight years after her husband. She was buried with him at St Nicholas' Church at Bathampton a week later. Their choice of the village as their place of burial was probably linked to their former residence there.

Isabella's personal estate included £4,800 in bank funds bequeathed to her siblings, nephews, nieces and their children. In her will, dated 4 October 1822, she asked to be buried with her husband in a simple inexpensive manner, adding an unusually meticulous request:

It is my particular wish and request that I may not have a shroud put on me or be more moved than what may be necessary to put me on [ie put on me] a clean night cap then to be wra[p]ped in the sheet I die in and so put into my coffin but first I would have clean linen or towels put at the bottom of my coffin and the same put over me when my body is placed in my coffin.²⁴

She bequeathed to her nephew, Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Whitehead,

...the silver teapot which has the Cole and Whitehead arms engraved on the side...this teapot having been upwards of a hundred years in my late Father's family I hope my late husband's residuary legatees will not object to receiving the valuation in money in lieu of the teapot.

She left a large sum to her brother Richard Whitehead to be controlled by her executor with the proviso that '...if my brother should get into debt or leave his family for any other than laudable and honourable motives' he would forfeit the legacy. The Whiteheads seem to have been a fractious family and the will ended with a warning that

...if any of my legatees express themselves not satisfied with the legacies I have left them it is my will and desire that they forfeit their legacy to Mrs Mary Neate and Miss Chapman now of Edgar Buildings and Miss Hill now of 16 Great Pultney Street.

Mrs Neate and Miss Chapman were family friends. William Neate Chapman was a protégé of Phillip who served as secretary to Governor Philip Gidley King in New South Wales. The family papers, particularly the diary of Miss Fanny Chapman for 1807–1812, provide a rare glimpses of the Phillips' social life in Bath, although they do not cover the later period when Arthur Phillip and his wife died.²⁵ She was almost certainly the Miss Chapman mentioned in the will. She had been an important support to Phillip after his stroke and while recovering in April 1808 he was 'extremely affected' when she came to visit and burst into tears ('He cried violently and kissed my hand two or three times'). Fanny reported that he cheered up at dinner and:

would make me have some of his pudding and a glass of Madeira that I might hob and nob with him²⁶

Phillip's residuary legatees were quick to act after his death. In the timeless language of the real estate business, newspaper advertisements offering the Bath house and its contents for sale by auction appeared within a month of Isabella's death:

THAT Commodious and Gentlemanly DWELLING-HOUSE, centrally and fashionably situate near the Upper Assembly Rooms, Bath, and being 19, BENNET-STREET...Comprising, the ground floor, good entrance-hall, dining-parlour 18 feet 17, breakfast-room feet 18 feet by 15 feet 6, water-closet, stone staircase, and Garden. A suite of 3 drawing-rooms communicating, 23 feet by 18, 15 feet 8 by 14 feet, and 15 feet 8 by 8 feet 6. Two best chambers, and dressing rooms, on the attic story; and four good Servants' rooms above. The offices in the basement are well arranged, and consist a large kitchen, scullery adjoining, housekeeper's room, butler's pantry, wine and beer cellars, coal-vaults, and all necessary offices.— The premises are most substantially built, and excellent repair; are held for the remainder of term of 99 years from 1777, subject to a small ground-rent.²⁷

The contents of the house included 30 dozen bottles of choice sherry, madeira and port aged from 15 to 35 years, a small library of books, paintings and prints, furniture 'of Botany-Bay Cabinet Manufacture' and a laundaulet vehicle. Litigation arising from the sale was to consume the value of Phillip's house over the coming decades as his memory faded from public consciousness in England and Australia.

The discovery of Phillip's grave

From the 1870s the historian James Bonwick was based in England transcribing manuscripts and writing books on early Australian history. He was also adept at using newspapers and magazines to popularise Australian history. For years he had been trying without success to locate Phillip's grave.

The centenary of the First Fleet in 1888 had increased interest in Phillip as a historical figure and New South Wales Premier Sir Henry Parkes had a statue of him commissioned in 1889, just before the end of the land boom. It was completed eight years later at vast expense in a time of economic depression and government austerity and unveiled in Sydney's Botanic Gardens on 22 June 1897 by the New South Wales governor, Viscount Hampden.²⁸ The grandiose statue was very much in keeping with the imperial spirit of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations that year. On the day the statue was unveiled the librarian and historian Frank Bladen (editor of *Historical Records of New South Wales*) wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Phillip's place of burial was completely unknown.²⁹

Bonwick had asked Bath's local government to help find Phillip's grave but a search of parish registers in the City of Bath found nothing. Bath Alderman T[homas] Sturge Cotterell (1865–1950) wrote an item about the search for the local newspaper in September 1897 and a circular was sent to parishes in the immediate vicinity of Bath asking them to look for the grave. During November the grave was discovered at Bathampton, a village just outside the city, by a young woman cleaning the church who had spotted the name when she lifted matting from the floor.³⁰ General Frederick Deshon, Bathampton's octogenarian churchwarden and a veteran of the First Afghan War of the 1840s, reported the discovery to the mayor and aldermen of Bath.³¹ The nameless woman remained in the background as various men pushed forward to claim credit for the discovery, which was announced in the *Bath Chronicle* on 18 November.³²

Phillip was buried with Isabella on 7 September 1814 at St Nicholas's Church of England, Bathampton. The local parish now displays their grave to visiting Australians with an accompanying exhibition.³³ One of Phillip's executors, Thomas Sutton of No 16 Great Pulteney Street Bath, buried his wife Ann next to the couple when she died in 1823 and was himself buried there when he died in 1837, aged 86.³⁴ The graves were originally just outside the church door but were incorporated within the interior of the church when it was extended later in the nineteenth century.³⁵ A tablet in Phillip's memory was placed in Bath Abbey in 1937.³⁶

The reason for Phillip's burial out of town remains unclear. Their brief residence in the parish during 1805–1806 may have influenced the choice. He made no mention in his will of a wish to be buried in any particular place. One possible explanation is overcrowding in Bath's city cemeteries in the late Georgian/Regency period (and we have seen that his father-in-law, Richard Whitehead, was buried out of Bath at

Weston in 1794). Thomas Sutton may have reserved Bathampton graves for both couples. Isabella appointed Sutton as her own executor and described him as 'my much esteemed friend' in her will.³⁷

A ghost story

On hearing the news of the grave's discovery, Bonwick rushed from his home in Hampshire to Bath to see it and was driven out to Bathampton in company with Alderman Cotterell, Mayor Charles Simpson and Churchwarden Deshon. Bonwick also visited Phillip's old home at No 19 Bennett Street and was amazed to discover that its 60-year-old occupant, Miss Louisa Bowie (1837–1914), had lived in the house all her life, having inherited it from her parents, who had related anecdotes about Phillip.

Twenty-first century internet resources allow the Bowie family's story to be reconstructed. The 1841–1861 censuses record Miss Bowie as the youngest child of William Bowie, a Scottish physician (c1792–1864) and his wife Anna at 19 Bennett Street.³⁸ William had studied medicine at Edinburgh and married Mrs Anna McNicoll there on 1 November 1815. Anna had been born as Anna Frislen in about 1795 at Demerara, British Guiana, a former Dutch colony in South America now known as Guyana. She was the widow of Captain Donald McNicoll (4th Battalion, Royal Scots Regiment) who had been killed in 1814 fighting the French at Bergen-op-zoom, Holland.³⁹ Anna Bowie was resident at No 19 when she made her will, probated in 1874.⁴⁰

The Bowies had a large family and had moved to the house opposite the Phillips at No 4 Bennett Street by 1816. No baptisms of their children are recorded in Scotland.⁴¹ Dr Bowie bought 19 Bennett Street from the estate within about a month of Mrs Phillip's death in 1823 and moved in immediately.⁴²

Miss Bowie told Bonwick a story about the house being haunted by Phillip's ghost. Bonwick relayed it to the London correspondent for Melbourne *Argus* who published the story in January 1898 under the lurid headline 'AUSTRALIA'S FIRST GOVERNOR, DOES HIS GHOST WALK?'

Mr Bonwick went over the house in Bennett Street, and saw the room where the Admiral expired. He also heard from a lady, who has occupied the house for 70 [ie 60] years, that there is a tradition that the Admiral haunts the house. He first appeared, so runs the story, to a servant girl in the top of the house, with all the usual concomitants attending such visitations. She fled in terror to her mistress so soon as the Admiral in Blue vanished, and later on, when shown some pictures identified that of Admiral Phillip as the ghostly original. Successive generations of servant girls have seen the uneasy spirit and heard the noises by which it manifests its approach but none of the other occupants of the house appear to have confessed to knowledge at first sight.⁴³

When Phillip's grave was discovered in 1897, Louis Becke was in England researching a biography of Phillip he was co-writing with Walter Jeffery.⁴⁴ Both were journalists and competitors snapping at Bonwick's heels as writers of popular history. Suddenly, there was an explosion of national media interest in Australia and in the 'discovery' of Phillip's grave. One JW Fawcett claimed to have found it in 1890 but Bladen's ignorance of the burial site in 1897 casts doubt on the claim.⁴⁵ In May 1898 Bonwick wrote to the *Town and Country Journal* (of which Jeffery was editor) giving a clear account of the discovery and debunking Fawcett's claim.⁴⁶ Becke corresponded with the vicar of Bathampton, the Rev Lancelot Fish, and managed to locate the Rev Arthur Phillip Lancefield (1866–1942), the grandson of one of Phillip's beneficiaries, Anglican curate of Tabley Over, Knutsford, Cheshire, from 1895 and later rector of St Mary Arches, Exeter.⁴⁷

Phillip's alleged suicide

Louisa Bowie lived on in 19 Bennett Street until her death in 1914. A certain amount of myth and journalistic exaggeration seems to have grown around her account between 1898 and 1911. In the latter year John Francis Meehan published an article about 19 Bennett Street in *The Beacon*, which stated:

The Bowie family of Bath, and the present owners and occupiers of Admiral Phillip's house have some strange traditional records of him. The present actual occupant of the house is a much-respected lady, Miss Bowie. Miss Bowie's father, Dr Bowie, formerly of No 4 Bennett Street, and later of the Admiral's house, lived in the street at the same time as the admiral, and it has been handed down in the Bowie family that the latter died by suicide. In an interview the writer had with Miss Bowie some years ago, she was most positive on this point...Miss Bowie declares, as far as she can say, her father Dr Bowie was not Admiral Phillip's physician. But there would be nothing remarkable in supposing that, if the admiral did commit suicide, one of the first to be called in would be a physician in the same street. Numbers 4 and 19 practically face one another.⁴⁸

The *Bath Chronicle* was sceptical about Meehan's piece, commenting: '...in these days people do not pay serious attention to legends about people revisiting the earth after they have once left it, either suicide or in a natural manner'.

According to Meehan, Miss Bowie now claimed to have seen the ghost herself, even though her account as reported in 1898 suggested that she and her parents and siblings had not seen the ghost themselves. Sightings were then attributed only to credulous servant girls. The story of the suicide is a new element that does not seem to have been published with the 1898 ghost story. The Rev Lancelot Fish made no mention of a suicide in a letter describing the discovery of Phillip's grave published in the *Bath Chronicle* on 9 December 1897.⁴⁹ Did the suicide story really come from Louisa Bowie, or was Meehan embroidering her account, tabloid style? John Francis

Meehan is listed in the 1911 census as a Welsh-born second hand bookseller aged 55 living at Bath with his family. His 25-year-old daughter Edith was a journalist.⁵⁰

No contemporary evidence to substantiate the suicide story has ever emerged but George Mackaness took it seriously enough to call for more information in British newspapers while researching Phillip's biography in the 1930s.⁵¹ In 1937 the Rev Arthur Phillip Lancefield (then an elderly retired rector) responded to Mackaness's enquiries, writing that at the time of the 1897 discovery the Rev Lancelot Fish, vicar of Bathampton, had told him of the rumour that the Admiral had committed suicide by jumping from a window at 19 Bennett Street but knew of nothing to verify it. Lancefield added:

My father never seems to have heard of it [a suicide] from his mother, although he heard much about his Governorship in New South Wales and the Chancery troubles after the will.⁵²

The absence of family oral history of a suicide does not preclude it from having occurred. Families often suppressed the passing on of information about events considered shameful at that time.

Alderman Sturge Cotterell, who was chair of Bath Council's historical committee, published two monographs on Phillip's Bath connection in the 1930s. In 1937 he wrote testily to *The Sydney Morning Herald*:

This impression arose some 40 years ago, when I discovered the resting-place of the remains of the illustrious first Governor of New South Wales, and it was in consequence of a ghostly apparition appearing at intervals, presumed to be the Admiral, in the house in which he died. I was able lawfully to go into these details, and obtained all the information from people then living who saw the apparition. Hence the idea arose in some people's minds that Admiral Phillip committed suicide. So that this matter may be set at rest, I have had the records of the court of inquests examined carefully for the year 1814, and there is no record whatever relating to Phillip. Further. It does not seem to have occurred to some people that, according to the rites of the Church of England, no suicide is buried in consecrated ground.⁵³

Fish and Cotterell were enthusiastic boosters of the Bath tourism industry. Cotterell's tone in his 1937 letter to *The Sydney Morning Herald* is abrasive and bombastic. He was probably angered by the recent publication of George Mackaness's biography, *Admiral Arthur Phillip*, which had freely discussed the possibility that Phillip had committed suicide.⁵⁴ In his book Mackaness wrote that he had examined Bath's inquest records for 1814 and found that, while they survived for the first half of the year, they were missing for most of the second half which covered the period of Phillip's death. There is no hint of anything untoward about Phillip's death in the formulaic newspaper reports of his passing. Mackaness' refusal to back away from airing the suicide story almost seems to hint that he

suspected that the 1814 inquest volume had been tampered with because it contained embarrassing details of an inquest (but he does not state this directly).

The evidence of a suicide remains a cold case resting entirely on the veracity of Miss Louisa Bowie and her embroidered ghost story. That Alderman Cotterell, or some other Bath luminary, would destroy an official record to protect the reputation of a local and imperial hero is possible, but seems far-fetched. A much more likely explanation would be that the story arose because ghosts were often believed to be the restless spirits of persons guilty of a heinous crime, or who had been murdered or committed suicide. It all could have started with a maid having a bad dream after Dr or Mrs Bowie told her the late governor had died in the house. Or perhaps they or their older children told stories of this kind to Louisa Bowie, the youngest child.

As Dr Bowie was a recent graduate of Edinburgh University, resident in St Andrew's and married in Edinburgh in 1815, a year after Phillip's death, it seems highly unlikely that he was in Bath in 1814. So that part of the Bowie tradition seems to have been wrong. However, the *Bath Guide* for 1816 confirms that Miss Bowie was right about her parents living at No 4 Bennett Street, placing their arrival extremely close to the time Phillip died and providing some support for her veracity.⁵⁵ The Bowies may well have become acquainted with Mrs Phillip as near neighbours and William Bowie might have become her doctor.

From its sunken front basement area to the attic rooms, Phillip's terrace house was five storeys high. In February 1808 he suffered a serious stroke and was partly paralysed on one side of his body, though he seems to have made at least a partial recovery. If, in a fit of pain or depression, he threw himself from an upper storey, he would have risked a spectacular impaling on the spiked iron front fence on a busy street. It would hardly be something to be easily hushed up, though a defenestration from an upper story at the rear of the house would have been much more discreet.

Was it suicide?

A cover-up or conspiracy seems to be the less likely scenario. Cotterell pointed out that it was against canon law to bury a suicide in consecrated ground. A sympathetic doctor wanting to protect a deceased patient's reputation might have given an opinion at an inquest that a suspicious-looking death was accidental. The property of suicides had once been forfeit to the Crown but by the eighteenth century coronial juries routinely made findings of temporary insanity (*non compos mentis*) or accidental death to protect the inheritance of the deceased's family. With such a finding a minister would not be in a position to prevent a burial in consecrated ground.

Louisa Bowie's parents or some other person might have heard Mrs Phillip make a statement about her late husband's demise that led them to think he had committed suicide. But this is all speculation and we have no evidence at all for this scenario.

He may well have died peacefully in his bed. An elderly person's recollections of what her parents told her can be distorted by age and time, though there is often a germ of truth in the memories. All we can say is that series of clues suggest that Isabella Phillip was probably a volatile individual:

The letters from Phillip to Isabella discovered under the floorboards in Great Pulteney Street suggest she could at times vent feelings of paranoia and suspicion about her husband, family and friends which might have been linked to bouts of anxiety or depression.

When visiting soon after Phillip had suffered his stroke in 1808 Fanny Chapman wrote 'Found Mrs Phillip as mad as a March hare but very glad to see us'.⁵⁶

Isabella's will contains the passage about being wrapped in a sheet which, though pragmatic, is unusual and perhaps a little obsessive; the will also contains the testy warning to her fractious relatives against complaining about their legacies.

If Isabella was not the source of the account of Phillip's death, Mrs Bowie might have heard gossip from servants. Perhaps Phillip had been found dead at the bottom of the stairs inside, or in the external basement area in front of the house. An accidental fall common among the frail elderly could have been misinterpreted, or perhaps not. The mystery remains and Phillip, like the Cheshire cat, fades from view.

Proposals for the relocation of Phillip's grave

In 1907 the Rev Francis Bertie Boyce, Canon of St Andrew's Anglican Cathedral in Sydney and a leading figure in the Australian Historical Society (AHS) and the British Empire League, asked the AHS to support his proposal for Phillip's remains to be reinterred under his memorial in Sydney's Botanic Gardens. In a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* he wrote that 'The neglect appeared in the sense that one so identified with the early history of Australia, as having led the first fleet to its shores, should be in so obscure a position' [at Bathampton] and argued that precedents could be found in the recent reinterment of John Paul Jones (founder of the American navy in the War of Independence) in the United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, after his grave was discovered in Paris, and of the despatch of the body of William Charles Wentworth to Sydney for burial after he died in England in 1872. A flurry of public comment followed, but no action was taken.

In 1937 similar proposals emerged to mark the sesquicentenary of the First Fleet's arrival in 1788. The *Courier-Mail* reported that the vicar of Bathampton and NSW Deputy Premier Michael Bruxner supported a proposal to reinter Phillip's remains in Sydney, either at his Botanic Gardens Memorial, the site of First Government House or the spot where he 'proclaimed British sovereignty' in 1788. Precedents

existed in the removal of the remains of Christopher Columbus from Seville in Spain to Santo Domingo and Havana in the Caribbean. Australia's conservative Prime Minister JA Lyons raised the issue with British Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, who said the British government approved of the proposal but intimated that legislation might be required to effect it.⁵⁷ Claude Swain, 'a colourful Perth aspiring legislator' revived the proposal in 1951.

In 1988 Governor Philip Gidley King's tombstone was removed from the churchyard of St Nicholas's Church of England, Tooting Graveney (Church Lane, Tooting, London SW17) to St Mary Magdalene Church of England, St Marys, NSW, and re-erected near the grave of his wife who had been buried there in 1844 as the matriarch of a growing family of Australian descendants. By agreement a replacement memorial with the same inscription was erected in Tooting. King's remains were not located.⁵⁸

In May 2013 the barrister Geoffrey Robertson renewed a call for Phillip's remains to be relocated to Sydney. He won support for the idea from NSW Premier Bob Carr in 2001 and the Channel 9 TV program *60 Minutes* in 2007.⁵⁹ His bid was not successful. The bicentenary of Phillip's death was commemorated by the insertion of a stone memorial plaque in the floor of Westminster Abbey, inaugurated by Prince Phillip and NSW Governor Dame Marie Bashir in July 2014, which reads:

Arthur Phillip /Royal Navy 1738–1814 / First Governor of New South Wales and founder of modern Australia.

Whether his bones stay or go, some aspects of Phillip's life remain an enigma and the answers to questions raised remain buried with him under the church floor at Bathampton.

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Endnotes

¹ This article is an adapted version of two articles published in *Descent*, vol 43, no 2 (June 2013): 65–81 and vol 43, no 4 (December 2013): 193–211

² Phillip's appointment as Rear Admiral of the White, *London Gazette*, Issue 16906, 7 June 1814, 1187

³ Arthur Phillip, original will, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, TNA ref PROB10/4172–Oct 1814

- ⁴ 'Recollections of a centenarian,' *Maitland Mercury*, 14 July 1866, 6
- ⁵ George Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections of Colonel Landmann*, 2 vols, 1852, quoted in GB Barton, *History of New South Wales from the Records* vol 1 (Sydney: Government Printer, 1889), 498; Louis Becke and Walter Jeffery, *Admiral Phillip: The Founding of New South Wales* (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1899)
- ⁶ *Sydney Gazette*, 23 April 1829, 2
- ⁷ 'Sydney in 1831 by De Quirosville,' *Sydney Gazette*, 27 January 1831, 3; Towards the end of his life Parmeter published an article as de Quirosville including a line punning on his surname and stating that he used the name of his farm as his pseudonym, *Sydney Gazette*, 28 November 1835, 3
- ⁸ *London Chronicle*, 10–12 June 1760
- ⁹ Margaret Phillip, Probate Act Books, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, UK National Archives PROB8/185; see also Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Manuscripts Section: MLMSS 4566 / Folder 1XMargar 'et Charlotte Phillip legal documents, 1792, being photocopies of two original documents held in the Records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, at the Public Record Office, London'; see also B 1143 Microfilm: CY 2057, frames 106–121 'Last will and testament of Margaret Charlotte Phillip, wife of Captain Arthur Phillip, RN, with probate, marriage settlements and separation agreement, 21 December 1785–6 October 1792'
- ¹⁰ *Daily Advertiser*, October 3, 1777
- ¹¹ Herbert J Rumsey, 'Governor Phillip's wife', *The Australian Genealogist* vol 2 part 12 (Oct 1938): 189–199; unfortunately Rumsey's important piece of research was missed by all Phillip's subsequent biographers; vol III part 1 (Jan 1939); 1763 marriage Guildhall, St Augustine Watling Street, Register of marriages and banns, 1754–1774, P69/AUG/A/01/Ms 8875/1; see Ancestry.com, London, England, Marriages and Banns, 1754–1921
- ¹² George Mackaness, *Admiral Arthur Phillip* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1937)
- ¹³ 'FAMILY HISTORIES Records Brought From England,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 December 1938, 12; *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate* (Parramatta), 5 January 1939, 12
- ¹⁴ Marriage, Arthur Phillip Esq and Isabella Whitehead 8 May 1794 St Marylebone, London Metropolitan Archives (ref P89/MRY1, Item 176), Ancestry.com.au, London, England, Marriages and Banns, 1754–1921; [Captain Phillip marries Isabella daughter of Richard Whitehead Esq of Preston], *Lloyd's Evening Post* 14–16 May, 1794; [On Thursday was married, Capt Phillip, the navy, and late governor of New South Wales, to Miss Whitehead, only daughter of Richard Whitehead, Esq, of Preston], *Leeds Intelligencer* 19 May 1794, 3; [Death of Richard Whitehead at Bath], *Morning Post and Fashionable World* (London), October 8, 1794; Richard Whitehead, burial 25 Sep 1794, All Saints Weston, transcribed by Somerset & Dorset Family History Society, National Burial Index, www.findmypast.co.uk
- ¹⁵ *Leeds Intelligencer*, 29 September 1794, 3
- ¹⁶ *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 13 August 1795, 3
- ¹⁷ 'Mrs Phillip remains in Bath at No 62 Great Pultney Street,' Phillip to Sir Joseph Banks, 7 September 1796, Banks Papers, Banks Papers Series 37: letters, with related papers and journal extract, received by Banks from Arthur Phillip, 1787–1792, 1794–1796, digitised in www.sl.nsw.gov.au ref a1901127
- ¹⁸ Lyn M Fergusson, *Arthur Phillip the Man 1738–1814* (Glen Waverley, Vic: Sid Harta, 2009), 186. The letters are now held by the Bath and North East Somerset Record Office, Bath
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*
- ²⁰ Quoted in Fergusson, *Arthur Phillip The Man*, 187
- ²¹ 'The amiable viscountess Nelson is at Bath, surrounded by her friends. Her Ladyship is [on] a visit to Admiral Phillips [sic] and his Lady,' *Derby Mercury*, 14 November 1805, 2; Letter Nelson to Fanny, 7 April 1798 quoted in Alan Frost, *Arthur Phillip 1738–1814, His Voyaging* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1987), 260. See also Roger Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory: The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson* (London; New York, NY: Allen Lane, 2005), 263 recording a dinner hosted by Evan Nepean, First Secretary of the Board of Admiralty, in March 1798 attended by, inter alia, Phillip, Nelson, Admiral Lord Keith and Sir Andrew Snape Hamond, Comptroller of the Navy.

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- ²² 'For sale of items belonging to Admiral Phillip removing from Bathampton House,' *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 23 October 1806, 3; for sale advertisement of Bathampton House, *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette* 16 September 1824, 3
- ²³ Assignment of 19 Bennett Street 20 Nov 1806, Bath and North East Somerset Record Office, Bath (ref: BC153/2453/5)
- ²⁴ Death notice, *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 13 March 1823, 3; Isabella Phillip PCC will TNA PROB11/1668/173 (owing to a clerical error the TNA catalogue entry for her will wrongly gives her address as John Street Pentonville, Middlesex); burial, St Nicholas' Bathampton, transcribed by Somerset & Dorset Family History Society, National Burial Index, www.findmypast.co.uk; Isabella Phillip Bank of England will extract www.findmypast.co.uk
- ²⁵ Sir Frederick Chapman, 'Governor Phillip in retirement', in George Mackaness, ed, *Australian Historical Monographs* vol XL, new series, (Dubbo, NSW: Review Publications, 1962). Mackaness had been granted access to the letters and diaries of members of the Chapman family, which had been preserved by the grandson of Henry Chapman (1770–1863), half-brother of William Neate Chapman (1773–1837). Mackaness wrote to the *Bath Chronicle* listing persons mentioned in the Chapman papers as socialising with the Phillips at Bath, hoping, in vain, that their descendants might come forward with family papers mentioning Phillip and his wife.
- ²⁶ Sir Frederick Chapman, 'Governor Phillip In Retirement' in Mackaness, *Australian Historical Monographs*, 34
- ²⁷ *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 3 April 1823, 3
- ²⁸ 'Unveiling Governor Phillip's statue,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 June 1897, 6; 'The Governor Phillip memorial,' *Goulburn Herald*, Monday 20 May 1895, 4; Noel S Hutchison, 'Simonetti, Achille (1838–1900),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/simonetti-achille-4580/text7521>, viewed 5 May 2013
- ²⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 June 1897, 3
- ³⁰ Governor Phillip / Grave discovered at Bath,' *Argus*, 1 December 1897, 5; 'The Last Resting Place of Phillip,' *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 29 January 1898, 14; 'Governor Phillip. His Last Resting Place. How the Grave Was Discovered,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 September 1924, 13
- ³¹ 'Death of General Deshon,' *Evening Telegraph*, 3 April 1913
- ³² *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 18 November 1897, 4
- ³³ Arthur Phillip, burial, St Nicholas' Bathampton, transcribed by Somerset & Dorset Family History Society, National Burial Index, www.findmypast.co.uk
- ³⁴ 'Governor Phillip / His last resting place,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 September 1924, 13
- ³⁵ *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 10 June 1916, 3
- ³⁶ *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 5 June 1937, 5
- ³⁷ Will of Isabella Phillip 1823, Prerogative Court of Canterbury TNA ref PROB11/1668/122
- ³⁸ See 1841, 1851 and 1861 census entries for the Bowie family at Walcot, Somerset on Ancestry.com.au (the surname is mistranscribed in 1841 as Bown); Louisa Bowie was still resident at No 19 Bennett Street at the time of her death on 21 March 1914; William Bowie lived the rest of his life in Bennett Street (see England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858–1966, Ancestry.com.au); *Bristol Mercury*, 9 July 1864, 8; William Bowie Esq MD died at Bath aged 72.
- ³⁹ Jane Helen Bowie daughter of William Bowie /Anna Frislen, baptised 9 December 1828, Argyle Independent Chapel, Bath, Somerset; William Bowie married Anna Fris[]en or Mcnicoll at Edinburgh, Scotland 17 November 1815 (Familysearch.org, Scotland, Marriages, 1561–1910, England Births and Christenings, 1538–1975, 1815 marriage certificate on Old Parish Registers, www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk); marriage notice *Scots Magazine*, 1 December 1815, 73 mentions that the late Captain McNicoll was of the Royal Scots; (death of Captain McNicol), *Chester Courant*, 22 March 1814, 4
- ⁴⁰ Ancestry.com, Anna Bowie, will 1874, Principal Probate Registry; Calendar of the Grants of Probate and Letters of Administration made in the Probate Registries of the High Court of Justice in England
- ⁴¹ Birth notice, Dr Bowie's daughter, *The Scots Magazine*, 1 January 1819, 93

⁴² *Law Journal Reports for the Year 1845 Comprising Reports of Cases in the Courts of Chancery...* vol 23, new series vol 14, Michaelmas Term 1844 (London: 1845), 17; *Reports of Cases in the Law of Real Property & Conveyancing: Argued and Determined in All the Courts of Law and Equity* vol 1–1843–1845 (London: J Crockford, 1846), 411–19

⁴³ 'Australia's First Governor, Does His Ghost Walk?' *The Argus*, 7 January 1898, 6

⁴⁴ Louis Becke and Walter Jeffery, *Admiral Phillip: The Founding of New South Wales* (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1899)

⁴⁵ Letter to the editor from Sydney Hobart, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 February 1898, 9; TSH Beecher, Letter to the editor, *Queenslander*, 19 March 1898, 538

⁴⁶ See Bonwick's letter to the editor, *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 7 May 1898, 9

⁴⁷ 'Letter from kinsman of Admiral Phillip,' *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 14 November 1936, 10; see also a useful manuscript collection titled 'Documents regarding Arthur Phillip collected by Sir William Dixon, 20 May 1814–1947', including original letters from Rev Fish of Bathampton and Rev Arthur Lancefield to Louis Becke, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, ref DLADD 267

⁴⁸ JF Beacon, *The Beacon*, (April 1911): 63–64; 'Admiral Arthur Phillip,' *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 27 April 1911, 4

⁴⁹ *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 9 December 1897, 6

⁵⁰ 1911 census of England on Ancestry.com.au

⁵¹ 'Concerning Admiral Phillip,' *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, Saturday, 11 July 1936, 14

⁵² Lancefield's reply with the story of Phillip's alleged suicide was published on 14 November 1936 in the *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*; see obituary of Rev LJ Fish, *Western Daily Press*, 30 September 1924

⁵³ 'Ald T Sturge Cotterell to resign,' *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, Saturday, 18 October 1947, 10; KR Cramp, 'Recognition of Governor Phillip in England,' *JRAHS*, vol 39, pt 4 (October 1953); letters to editor in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 October 1932 and 16 February 1937; T Sturge Cotterell, *Admiral Arthur Phillip RN, Founder and First Governor of Australia* (Bathampton, Somerset : sn, 1934), T Sturge Cotterell, *Governor Phillip at Bath, the English spa* ((Bathampton, Somerset : sn, 1938)

⁵⁴ Mackaness, *Admiral Arthur Phillip*, 24

⁵⁵ Director of the Victoria Art Gallery and Library, Bath to Mr AEG James, 9 June 1958, quoted in Fergusson, *Arthur Phillip The Man*, 225

⁵⁶ Sir Frederick Chapman, 'Governor Phillip in Retirement' in Mackaness, *Australian Historical Monographs*, 33

⁵⁷ *Courier-Mail*, 21 June 1937, 12; *Daily News*, 19 June 1937, 3

⁵⁸ London Metropolitan Archives, Saint Nicholas, Tooting Graveney, Register of burials, Jan 1803–Nov 1812, P95/NIC, Item 038 (Ancestry.com, London, England, Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538–1812); Tribute, *St Marys & District Historical Society Inc Quarterly Newsletter* (Spring 2006) <http://www.stmaryshistoricalsociety.org/tributesp2006>

⁵⁹ 'Lost the plot,' *Mirror* (Perth, WA), 5 May 1951, 5; *Sixty Minutes*, Channel 9 TV, Sunday, April 22, 2007, featuring Geoffrey Robertson; Charles Miranda, 'Move to return remains of Admiral Arthur Phillip to Australia for state funeral,' *The Daily Telegraph*, 18 May 2013; Evan Williams, 'Sir James Anthony Rowland' in David Clune, Ken Turner, eds, *The Governors of New South Wales 1788–2010* (2009)