Stirling, Sir James (1791–1865)

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Sir James Stirling (1791-1865), governor, was the fifth son and the eighth of the fifteen children of Andrew Stirling of Drumpellier, Lanarkshire, Scotland. His mother, Anne, was his father's first cousin, being the daughter of Admiral Sir Walter Stirling and the sister of Sir Walter Stirling, first baronet, of Faskine.

At 12 Stirling entered the navy as a first-class volunteer, embarking on the storeship *Cameil* for the West Indies. He was fortunate at first in having the patronage of his uncle, Rear Admiral Charles Stirling. Soon after arriving in the West Indies, young James was transferred to the *Hercules*, and in 1805 he went to serve in his uncle's flagship *Glovry*. He saw action off Cape Finisterre against the French and Spanish fleets, and later served in the *Sampson* and the *Diadem* in the operations on the Rio de la Plata. After watching the fall of Montevideo and being incorrectly reported as killed in action, he served for a time on the Home Station, and on 12 August 1809 was promoted lieutenant in the *Waradilla*. In 1811 he was flag lieutenant to his uncle, who was then in command at Jamaica, and on 27 February 1812 received his first command, the sloop *Moselle*, and soon afterwards the larger sloop *Bravo*, in which he was employed during the American war in harrowing forts and shipping near the Mississippi. Later Stirling was sent to Hudson Bay, the North Sea, the Gulf of Mexico and the West Indies. Meanwhile his uncle had been court-martialled on a charge of corrupt practices and was prematurely retired from the service. However, it was not the loss of his uncle's patronage but the final defeat of Bonaparte which dimmed Stirling's prospects. On 7 December 1818 he was promoted to post rank and placed on half-pay.

In 1818 Stirling had no qualifications for shore employment although he had a tidy sum from prize money and a small but secure income from the Treasury. For a while he travelled in Europe and moved in London and county society. At Woodbridge, Surrey, he became acquainted with the Mangels family, whose wealthy head had extensive interests in the East Indies, had been high sheriff for Surrey in 1808, was a director of the East India Co., and in 1832-37 represented Guildford in parliament. His third daughter, Ellen, attracted Stirling's attention. The couple were married at Stoke Church, Guildford, on 3 September 1823 on Ellen's sixteenth birthday; they had five sons and six daughters.

The Stirlings toured the Continent, and after their return lived at Woodbridge until renewed naval activity by the French brought a welcome change in Stirling's prospects. The politicians at Westminster and the administrators in New South Wales had already been alerted to the possibility of French colonization in the Pacific, and had taken steps to forestall any such move by posting garrisons at several places in the north and south of Australia. One of these, on Melville Island, had been badly sited and it was decided to move the garrison to a better place. In April 1826 Stirling was given command of the new Success with instructions to take a supply of currency to Sydney and then to move the Melville Island garrison. On arrival at Sydney he joined an inland expedition and received a grant of 2500 acres (1012 ha) from Governor (Sir) Ralph Darling. Darling had already sent a garrison to King George Sound, but Stirling persuaded him that, as the monsoons prevented immediate transfer of the northern garrison, and as a French expedition was already acting suspiciously in Australian waters, he should be allowed to examine the west coast of Australia to see whether it provided a suitable site for a garrison or for another settlement to open trade with the East Indies. Stirling sailed in 1827 and during a fortnight's visit was much impressed with the land in the vicinity of the Swan River. So also was the New South Wales government botanist, Charles Frazer, whose report added weight to Stirling's political and commercial arguments in favour of its immediate acquisition and Stirling's appointment to establish a new colony there. Both opinions were supported by Darling, though not by the colonial administrators in London, who were loth to assume a further territorial burden and who, in Stirling's words, 'trembled at the thought of the expenditure involved'.

Stirling completed his assignment in the Success and then joined the East India Squadron for a tour of duty. However, a severe stomach ailment caused him to be invalided home on half-pay, thus giving him a good chance to press for a new settlement in Western Australia. In London his persistent arguments attracted the attention of investors and speculators, who joined him in badgering the Colonial Office to grant them government sanctioned and land concessions. Stirling himself was not committed to any particular form of colonization, having a 'bounty of ideas' on the subject, many of them no doubt inspired by conversations with the Mangels family at Woodbridge. At one time he favoured floating a syndicate like the Australian Agricultural Co., and at another the formation of an association such as had founded Georgia and Pennsylvania, but he was always insistent that no convicts should be sent out with the settlers. In May 1828 a change in the British government brought Sir George Murray, a friend of the Stirling family, into charge of the Colonial Office; his parliamentary assistant, Horace Twiss, was also a friend of the Stirlings. After some delay it was decided to establish a colony in New Holland under the direct control of the British government, and superintended initially by Stirling: a bill would soon be brought before parliament to provide for its government; private capitalists and syndicates would be allotted land in the proposed settlement according to the amount of capital and the money they spent on fares and equipment; priority of choice would be given only to those who arrived before the end of 1830, and no syndicate or company would be the exclusive patron and proprietor of the settlement.

On 2 May 1829 Captain C. H. Fremantle of the *Challenger* took possession, at the mouth of the Swan River, of the whole of Australia which was not then included within the boundaries of New South Wales. Stirling, who arrived later with his family and civil officials in the storeship *Parmelle*, proclaimed the foundation of the colony on 18 June. No other arrangements had been made to establish the settlement, apart from the dispatch of Captain Frederick Irwin with a detachment of the 63rd Regiment in H.M.S. *Sulphur*. None of the country had been explored and surveyed and the coastal waters were virtually uncharted. It was left to the ingenuity of the settlers and the unrivalled administrative capacity of Stirling to surmount all difficulties.

Stirling administered the Swan River settlement from June 1829 until August 1832, when he left on an extended visit to England where he was knighted, and again from August 1834 until December 1838. His first official designation of lieutenant-governor was superseded by that of governor in November 1831, after the tardy arrival of the official documents constituting his office and appointing him to it, as well as establishing the permanent organs of government and justice. He was therefore not only the founder of the colony but for almost a decade its ruler and patriarch. At no time were his powers to govern the colony seriously impaired either...

by instructions from London or by obstruction from officials or settlers in the colony itself. In February 1832 an Executive and a Legislative Council met for the first time, with identical membership, but the governor presided over both bodies and other colonists had no say in government.

In his early administration Stirling took a leading part in exploring the coastal districts near the Swan, Murray, Collie, Preston, Blackwood and Vessey Rivers, and the first settlements were sited there in preference to the areas east of the Darling Range. It was some time before his chief aides, Peter Broun, the colonial secretary and keeper of the accounts, and Lieutenant John Roe, R.N., the surveyor-general, were able to set up proper departments in Perth, and most routine decisions were made by the governor. On legal matters he sought the advice of William Mackie, the advocate-general. Stirling personally welcomed the early settlers, made it easy for any of them to obtain an audience with him and acted as a polite rubbing-post for their multitude of petty grievances. He was also attentive to the complaints of the lower orders.

The main problem in the colony's early days was to get enough food to prevent starvation, and this largely depended on finding good soil in the right position. Clearing the virgin bush and building weather-proof homes called for much effort, adaptation and improvisation. While the settlers were establishing themselves, Stirling had to buy emergency supplies from the Cape and Van Diemen's Land. The burdensome economic troubles of this ill-planned little colony and the recurrent hairbreadth escapes from famine were not permitted to interfere with the due observance of British law and justice. Honorary magistrates were appointed to see that the lower orders kept their places and fulfilled their obligations: pioneering anxieties were not to interrupt the genteel style of living of the middle and upper orders in this colony of transplanted Britons. The governor expected his guests to dress formally for dinner, even if meals were taken under canvas in oppressive summer heat, or at his country seat of Woodbridge, near the little town of Guildford. The musical evenings and the outdoor recreations of hunting and picnicking were designed to make any new settler from the English counties feel almost at home. Public worship was officially recognized by the appointment of colonial chaplains; the colony was predominantly English and Anglican. Stirling was not deeply religious but he realized the value of the churches in helping to maintain moral standards and public order.

The small Aboriginal population in the vicinity of the first settlements was sometimes troublesome. In company with his settlers, Stirling patronized those who succumbed to the ways of the white man and became persistent beggars, but he ordered summary punishments for those who became persistent thieves. Several natives responsible for killing white settlers were captured, tried and executed. In October 1834 the governor personally led a posse of twenty-five police, soldiers and settlers to punish some seventy natives of the Murray River tribe in retaliation for several murders and 'the pertinacious endeavours of these savages to commit depredations of property'. This one-sided encounter between bullets and spears became known as the 'Battle of Pinjarra'. Fourteen Aborigines and one police superintendent were killed.

The credit rightfully accorded to Stirling for his part in founding the colony of Western Australia and for his vision, tenacity and enterprise in guiding its early development must be balanced by the colony's obvious failure to make much material progress. At no time during his ten year term did the settlers number more than 3000 men, women and children. When he left in 1839 the flag had been well and truly planted to warn off ambitious French naval officers or other marauders, but little else had been achieved. The land near the Swan was very poor and on the south-western coast was heavily timbered and very difficult to clear. Good land was more scarce than even Stirling was prepared to admit in unguarded comments to friends and relatives in England. Because of the poor quality very little land was bought after sales were introduced in 1832; no grain was effectively harvested until 1835, and experience proved the sandy soils of the inland more suited to grazing sheep than to intensive agriculture. Viewed as a strategic operation, Swan River was probably of some significance; in any event, the British government was always most reluctant to abandon any land which it had added to its empire. But as a commercial and agricultural enterprise, it was a failure.

A Mangles-inspired scheme to plant a settlement of Anglo-Indians near Albany on the south coast and to develop trade with India collapsed when the first vessel was lost in 1833 with all hands.

As governor and general administrative factotum, Stirling's personal responsibilities were heavy, and the constant anxiety borne by this colonial Solon, prompted by the uncertain future of the colony, must have outweighed the occasional excitement of finding new country or of launching the colony on some new venture. He had knowingly embarked on an undertaking with only slight support from the British government, the protection of a distant navy, and the salaries of a few officials. Stirling himself received a grant of 100,000 acres (40,469 ha) of land in the colony and repayment of his expenses, but the government was always reluctant to accept the slightest financial responsibility for his or the colony's success.

Stirling's repeated requests for succour were fruitless. So also was his visit to England in 1833-34, which had originally been inspired by the need for 'an agreeable leave of absence' but was at the last moment sanctioned by the consensus of opinion among settlers that a personal deputation was likely to do them more good than any more letters or petitions. Captain Irwin was left to administer the colony in his absence. However, the British government was not well pleased at seeing this truant governor on its doorstep, and Stirling was lucky to escape censure for leaving his post without permission. He was saved mainly by his obvious sincerity on behalf of a group of settlers who had long since ceased to welcome new shiploads of either capitalists or workmen. For nearly two years Stirling doggedly explained to officials and politicians in London the necessitous circumstances of the colonists, but to no avail. He returned to the colony more than ever apprehensive about its future, and in the next four years was able to effect few improvements. He had, however, to combat the persistent opposition of legislative councillors to his proposal for financing a mounted constabulary from local funds, and their objection to the British government's proposal to add several nominated, not elected representatives to the Legislative Council.

The whining of frustrated speculators grew loud in 1837-38, the colonists inconsistently demanding both increased public expenditure and decreased taxation. Stirling had also to cope with the deliberate falsifications in the British press by the Wakefieldians, who cited the Swan River as the best example of the worst type of colonization, in order to blacken their propaganda for the founding of a new type of colony in the south of Australia. They eagerly seized on the failure of the grandiose land settlement scheme of Thomas Peel, which they misguidedly identified with the whole colony, and whose failure they wrongly and maliciously attributed to faults in government policy rather than to the calibre of its promoter or to the deficiencies of nature. Stirling gave Peel no priority in the choice of his land and he was not responsible for Peel's financial difficulties.

At various times Stirling was strongly criticized for his inept administration, for his aloofness or dominating attitude towards his civil officers, for his lack of humour, for his occasional acts of nepotism in the public service, and for his erratic and blundering land policies. In the voluminous public correspondence, in the columns of the colonial press, in the surviving papers of private settlers, and even in the governor's own matter-of-fact dispatches, there is ample evidence that Stirling tried to do too much, and much of what he did was badly done. Some historians have thought his governorship merely a congenital and profitable diversion from his naval career. It is true that many early settlers had been misled by the enthusiastic reports of Stirling and Frazer, and that during the first eighteen months much land was unwisely distributed, either in very large blocks, which tied up its development, or to speculators with no intention of cultivating it, Stirling also allowed his robust and somewhat irrational enthusiasm, which flowed strongly after his discovery of each new piece of attractive countryside, to influence his official judgment. He could never distinguish clearly between his personal profit and the public advantage, and he constantly changed the location of the various portions of land which were to form his own grant of 100,000 acres (40,469 ha). Finally he never fully realized the inevitable consequences of the settlement's three most obvious deficiencies: an
exposed anchorage in Gage Roads and Cockburn Sound, an un navigable river between port and capital, and an extreme shortage of good farming land. He recognized their existence but grossly underrated their influence in aggravating the privations which plagued the settlement for the first twenty years. Indeed, Albany on the south coast, which had been settled as a convict garrison in December 1826 and became part of the new colony in March 1831, was the colony’s chief port for seventy years.

Stirling once wrote that it was a dangerous experiment to colonize an unknown land and that he was exceedingly apprehensive about its ultimate success. But his public policies belied the sincerity of his private correspondence, and in some official dispatches he unjustifiably slighted the calibre of men who quickly summed up the true situation, packed their belongings and left for other colonies. Nevertheless he was always as much a settler and investor as the settlers whom he governed, and this helped to soften the edge of carping criticism when despondency was widespread, especially in 1837-38. So also did the dignified bearing of his youthful and charming wife, whose gracious manner amidst her recurrent pregnancies, endeared her to wives in the settlement.

Stirling resigned in October 1837 when his relations with the leading settlers were severely strained, and when the Aborigines were once more troublesome. Glenelg’s acknowledgment of his dispatch reached Perth in December 1838. Stirling left Fremantle on 5 January 1839, a few days after welcoming his successor, John Hutt, a well-known Wakefieldian. A short time before Stirling sailed he had lamented that the colony advanced ‘steadily but somewhat slowly for want of a greater public expenditure’. In January 1839 the settlers still had only a tenuous hold. They had developed a sort of farm economy which provided most of their necessities, and they sent a few hundred bales of wool a year to England from their 20,000 sheep. In exchange for barrels of whale oil obtained by barter from passing American whalers in need of provisions, the colonists imported clothing, tobacco and spirits. Wheat and flour had still to be imported from Hobart Town. Flour-milling, boatbuilding and brewing were the only other important industries. The white population in 1839 was estimated at 1302 males and 852 females. A few hundred Aborigines lived on the outskirts of the towns of Fremantle, Perth and Albany, and around the camp sites of Guildford, Kelmscott, Bunbury, and York. The total government expenditure was £11,462.

Stirling had every cause to be despondent, and his resignation was probably motivated as much by his frustrations as by his desire to resume his naval career. His wife was also eager to go home, being tired of the restricted social round and apprehensive about the education of her elder children. The leading settlers were honestly pained to see Stirling leave. He had been their mentor and had shared their speculations in a great adventure. His tall and dignified bearing, his commanding presence, and his responsiveness to public esteem had enabled the settlers to face an uncertain future. Now, it seemed, they had been handed into the custody of their detractors.

After his return to England Stirling toyed with the idea of a further colonial appointment. He was only 48 and doubly qualified as naval commander and civil administrator. However, in October 1840 he was appointed to command the Indus on the Mediterranean Station, where he remained until June 1844. After another three years ashore he was appointed to the Howe, which he commanded in the Mediterranean from April 1847 to April 1850, when he was knighted by the King of Greece. At no time did he lose interest in his languishing little colony in the antipodes, always ready to join deputations to the Colonial Office or to add his signature to memorials seeking more favourable treatment from the British government. He was not only willing to help the colony as a whole, but also his erstwhile fellow colonists as individuals. He also campaigned with great zest for more land to be added to his grant in the colony because of his own capital investment in it. He was unsuccessful. His nephew, Andrew Stirling (d.1844), who had looked after his colonial interests, had much difficulty in putting his affairs in order. This difficulty, however, was trifling compared with the task which the Lands and Surveys Department had in disentangling the complexity of Stirling’s land grants. His main business deal in later years was the sale of most of his Australind grant to the Western Australian Co. in 1840-41, which was responsible for a short-lived Wakefieldian sub-colony near Bunbury.

In July 1851 Stirling was promoted rear admiral and next year served at the Admiralty. At exactly the same time the British government was arranging to export some thousands of convicts to Western Australia as the only feasible means of saving the little colony of 6000 people from perpetual bankruptcy and stagnation. From January 1854 to February 1856, Stirling was commander-in-chief of the naval forces in China and the East Indies, and he was promoted vice-admiral in August 1857, the year in which his youngest son, Walter, was killed at Cawnpore in the Indian mutiny. Stirling became an admiral in November 1862, and died in comfortable retirement at Guildford in Surrey on 22 April 1865. His wife survived him by nine years and lived to see her eldest son, Frederick, take command of the naval squadron in Australian waters.

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