



Arrest of Governor Bligh,
January 26, 1808.
National Library of Australia

Don Bank Museum
Photos: Freya Purnell



Folk-art diorama depicting Governor William Bligh's
arrest during the Rum Rebellion of 1808.
Photo: Dragi Markovic

BLIGH, THE RUM REBELLION AND A FOLK-ART DIORAMA

A peculiar piece with a murky past portraying a dramatic period in Australia's history can be found quite innocently residing in the National Museum's *Snapshots of History*. Surreal, kitsch, and slightly macabre, this captivating creation is a folk-art diorama depicting Governor William Bligh's arrest during the Rum Rebellion of 1808.

According to Sotheby's, the glazed cedar case with tooth-carved cornice and shaped apron encloses the front of a Colonial house. There is a garden with flowers and birds in the foreground, and the figures of Bligh and two soldiers are visible in the front windows of the house.

The term 'diorama' was coined by Louis Daguerre in 1822 and stems from the Greek *dia* (through) and *horama* (to see). This eighteenth-century innovation started with a similar aim to its relative the panorama – to provide an all-encompassing view – as a pre-cinematic form of entertainment and education.

Large-scale dioramas as three-dimensional depictions exist today, most notably as museum exhibits such as the Australian War Memorial's life-size studies of soldiers *in situ*. The miniature version is reminiscent of the doll's house, being generally naïve in its execution, but differing in its recreation of views of significant places, nature scenes and historical events.



First Government House as captured by this watercolour of William Westall in 1802. *National Library of Australia*. Courtesy of the Department of Environment and Heritage.



The watercolour view of the Governor's house at Sydney in Port Jackson, New South Wales, January 1791, painted by William Bradley. *National Library of Australia*. Courtesy of the Department of Environment and Heritage.

Dolls' houses, model railways and nativity scenes are passions which, for many, continue far beyond childhood. Perhaps the urge to create small worlds is primordial? Maybe humans are biologically geared to want to simulate the terrain of life, capture the world in miniature and attempt to preserve time? Susan Stewart in *On Longing* notes that in a diorama the viewer is given the extraordinary opportunity of stepping outside his or her time and place to view life.¹

Why a diorama recreating Bligh's entrapment in his own house should be created is difficult to answer, as much of the piece's provenance remains a mystery. Bought at auction in 1998 as part of 'The Murphy Collection', it is thought it was earlier sold by a farmer from around Ballarat.

While listed as mid-nineteenth century in origin by the vendor, curatorial staff at the National Museum suspect that as some of the flowers appear to be plastic it is more likely to be from the twentieth century. This would also make sense in the light of the wave of patriotism which followed Federation in 1901. The diorama may be an example of Australians of British origin revisiting their heritage and reassessing their role in the new world of nationhood.

Bligh's diorama is a marvel of production. In the Australian folk-art tradition of 'making do', a variety of materials have been enlisted in its construction. Seemingly fashioned originally from a picture frame, the house is constructed very much along the lines of the original Government House erected by Governor Phillip in the early settlement of Sydney: 'a two-storied structure with a central front door set between two small windows and a verandah that ran round the ground floor'.²

The garden, however, is a unique vision of distorted reality. Mannered pathways sweep past gargantuan birds, a wide-winged butterfly rests on a beaded arch and a monstrous python lurks coiled round a tree. It is difficult to establish whether this curious arrangement is merely a result of making do, or whether there is a deeper symbolism at play.

This deceptively humble creation belies further secrets and a more sophisticated design. It is in fact a working, moving mechanism. A lever on the side of the casement causes the front door to open, the soldiers to appear at the front door, and Governor Bligh to disappear from his window lookout, presumably to hide under his bed.

This brings us to the Rum Rebellion and some of the mythology which surrounds it. Containing the addictive ingredients of

alcohol and alliteration, the so called 'Rum Rebellion' played a somewhat quizzical part in Australia's colonial history. The scene which the diorama attempts to capture is the moment of Bligh's arrest by Major George Johnston of the NSW Corps which remarkably – and coincidentally – occurred on a date that was to become Australia Day, 26 January 1808.

A bitter stand-off between Governor William Bligh and the wealthy traders of Sydney, including John Macarthur, escalated into intervention by the NSW Corps and Bligh's deposition. The popular belief – that at the time of his arrest Bligh hid in terror under a bed in order to save his skin – appears to have had a more rational motivation than that of pure cowardice. H V Evatt maintains Bligh's concealment was an unsuccessful attempt to escape primary detection in the hope of later reaching his sworn allies, the Hawkesbury district settlers.³ It seems William Bligh's greatest crime, despite proving his mettle in braving mutiny on the *Bounty* and surviving the high seas in an epic journey in an open boat to Timor, was his failure to flee successfully.

After internment in Government House and a year holed up aboard the *Porpoise* on the River Derwent, Bligh's tenure as Governor of New South Wales was eventually made redundant by the arrival of Lachlan Macquarie and the disbanding of the NSW Corps.

Government House, despite its cramped and poor conditions, fared better than Bligh and endured as a symbol of colonial power for another four governors' terms. Demolished in 1845, the remains of the first Government House were uncovered in an archaeological excavation in 1983. Now incorporated into and interpreted by the Museum of Sydney, the 217-year-old site has recently received recognition by being added to the National Heritage List.

Whether appealing to an innate desire to capture and control; the mechanical mind; the hunt for the historical; the allure of the architectural, or just a penchant for weird and whacky, this kookie little box has a wealth of insights to offer. 🗨️

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References:

¹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Duke University Press: London, 1993, pg 65

² Richard Butler, *A Tide of Rum*, CC H Australia Ltd: Australia, 1979, pg 10

³ H V Evatt, *Rum Rebellion: A Study of the Overthrow of Governor Bligh by John Macarthur and the New South Wales Corps*, Times House Publishing: Kensington, NSW, 1984, pg 228