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Philip Gidley King

(28 September 1800 – 12 August 1806)

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As the last of the First Fleet Governors, Philip Gidley King was a generation younger than his predecessors and the first to have his family live with him at Government House. Treated like a son by Arthur Phillip, King devoted the best years of his career to New South Wales as he too struggled to contain the influence of the NSW Corps.

A most promising young man

Arthur Phillip and John Hunter were already on active service when Philip Gidley King was born in Launceston, Cornwall on 23 April 1758. King's mother, Utricia Gidley, was a lawyer's daughter from nearby Exeter, while his father Philip was a draper, as was his father before him. Until he turned seven, young King lived above his family's shop, in a town further away from the coast than almost anywhere else in Cornwall. However, in 1765, following a downturn in his father's business, the boy was sent to Mr Bailey's Naval School on the Isle of Wight.¹

At the age of 12, King was assigned to HMS *Swallow*, as a servant to Captain Shirley. After five years' service in the East Indies, Shirley rated him a Midshipman. Another senior officer described him as "one of the most promising young men I have ever met". King's promotion coincided with the beginning of the American Revolution and he was soon aboard HMS *Liverpool* patrolling American waters. In July 1778, the *Liverpool* was sunk in action, King being one of those lucky enough to escape.²

Later that year, King was promoted to Lieutenant and patrolled the English Channel in the *Renown*. In 1779, he appointed an agent to sell a captured ship's cargo without first consulting his own Captain. As a result, King was court martialled and dismissed from his ship. His error was viewed as an exercise of overzealous initiative rather than corruption and he was soon assigned to the cutter *Kite*. This posting was cut short by the death of his father in January 1782, whereupon King took leave.³

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very ill. Gout in every part but his stomach”; another, two months later: “His mouth was dreadful – his head swelled to a great size – he was not able to speak for more than a week nor did he swallow any food for the space of nine days”. When the Kings finally arrived back in England on 8 November 1807, the former Governor, still just 49, was a dying man.⁶⁰

Taking up lodgings in Norton Street, London, the Kings reacquainted themselves with their older children, King himself taking particular interest in his three sons’ Naval careers. During his absence, they had kept up their acquaintance with Arthur Phillip. Norfolk, for example, wrote from Lymington on 17 January 1801 to his half-brother Phillip: “I am with Admiral Phillip and have had the Measles but am now well”. On 29 May 1808, King himself was well enough to visit the Admiral at Bath. King later wrote to his son Phillip:

I was with Admiral Phillip a week; he is very much altered, having lost the entire use of his whole right side, arm and leg; his intellect and spirits are as good as ever. He may linger on some years under his present infirmity, but, from his age, a great reprieve cannot be expected.

In fact, it was King who died first, on 3 September 1808, predeceasing Phillip and Hunter by some years.⁶¹

Norfolk and Sydney King both went on to have solid careers as officers in the Royal Navy. Their half-brother Phillip became a distinguished hydrographer, a Fellow of the Royal Society and a Rear Admiral. Charles Darwin, who had been on an expedition with King, described him as “my beau ideal of a captain”. Phillip, his mother Anna and his sisters Mary and Anna-Maria all returned to live in New South Wales at one time or another. Anna-Maria even married Hannibal Hawkins Macarthur, nephew of “the perturbator”. Philip Gidley King was the first Governor to have children, the first to have children born in the colony and the first to have descendants still living in Australia. In that sense, the Kings were the first Viceregal family to call Australia home.⁶²

Notes

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- 4 Mackaness, G, *Admiral Arthur Phillip*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1937, pp 21, 23, 25, 26; PG King’s appointment to HMS *Europe*, Mitchell Library, CY 3735; Mackaness, pp 27-34.
- 5 PG King’s appointment to HMS *Sirius*, Mitchell Library, CY 3735; Shaw, pp 55-61.

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- 7 Fidlton and Ryan, *The Journal of Philip Gidley King*, pp 9, 15, 20, 24.
- 8 Fidlton and Ryan, *The Journal of Philip Gidley King*, pp 32, 35.
- 9 *Historical Records of NSW (HRNSW)*, vol 1, pt 2, Government Printer, Sydney, 1892, p 89; Beaglehole, JC, (ed), *The Journals of Captain James Cook*, vol 2, Hakluyt Society, Cambridge, 1961, pp 565-8; Fidlton and Ryan, *The Journal of Philip Gidley King*, pp 36, 37, 38.
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- 15 *HRNSW*, vol 1, pt 2, pp 179, 186, 187; Nobbs, R (ed), *Norfolk Island and its First Settlement 1788-1814*, Library of Australian History, Sydney, 1988, p 5; Fidlton and Ryan, *The Journal of Philip Gidley King*, pp 174, 177; undated petition from Norfolk King to Earl Bathurst, Mitchell Library, CY982.
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- 17 *HRNSW*, vol 1, pt 2, pp 285-7, 314-15, 325.
- 18 *HRNSW*, vol 1, pt 2, pp 325-8, 346.
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- 20 Dawson and McClymont, p 29; *HRNSW*, vol 1, pt 2, pp 454-6, 458; Mackaness, pp 234, 306, 309.
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- 23 Nobbs, p 5, 61; *HRNSW*, vol 1, pt 2, pp 562, 577, 655, 658; Dawson and McClymont, p 34.
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