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# Sir Thomas Brisbane

(1 December 1821 – 1 December 1825)

*Carol Liston*

Major-General Sir Thomas Brisbane arrived in Sydney in December 1821 as the sixth Governor of New South Wales. For this soldier-scientist it was an appointment long anticipated; for the colony, his arrival meant change, not only because of the departure of the long serving Governor Lachlan Macquarie but because of the recommendations that would follow from the findings of Commissioner JT Bigge's inquiry into the colony in 1819-20.<sup>1</sup>

### **Gentleman, soldier, scientist, family man**

Thomas Brisbane was born on 23 July 1773 at Brisbane House near Largs, Ayrshire, a rural area on the south-western coast of Scotland. The Brisbane family was neither rich nor noble but it was ancient and respectable. An Anglo-French family from Shropshire, the Brisbanes had arrived in Scotland in the early 12th century. William Brisbane was Chancellor of Scotland in 1332 and the Brisbane arms symbolically perpetuated the office of Chancellor with three woofsacks or cushions of office, while the derivation of the name "to bruise the bone" was depicted in the stork and snake on the crest.

The Brisbane family lands were principally west of Glasgow in Renfrewshire and Ayrshire. They had been landowners in the parish of Largs since 1400 and, in the late 17th century, John Brisbane, great grandfather of Sir Thomas Brisbane, sold the ancient family castle of Bishoptoun and concentrated the family estates at Largs. John Brisbane and his wife Margaret had two sons, James and Thomas, and four daughters. Perhaps one incentive to move to the more isolated area at Largs was the unhappy condition of their eldest son and heir. Described by the family as an "idiot" since birth, James was severely handicapped and retarded, and

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## After New South Wales

The Duke of Wellington's comment on Brisbane's Government was that "there are many brave men not fit to be Governors of colonies".<sup>30</sup> The Duke of York sympathised with Brisbane's anger and bitterness at his recall and in December 1826 made Brisbane Colonel of the 34th Regiment. The duties of a regimental colonel were ceremonial and provided the officer with a comfortable income for life. This was the second regiment to become vacant since his return and thus was a sufficiently prompt and public gesture to emphasise that Brisbane's recall had not been due to misconduct or dereliction of duty. He was appointed GCH in 1831 and GCB in 1837.

Under the terms of his father-in-law's settlement, Brisbane adopted the additional name of Makdougall in 1826 and lived at Makerstoun, the Makdougall home in Roxburghshire, where he built his third observatory. An active patron of astronomy, he was president of the Royal Society of Edinburgh from 1833 until his death. Brisbane's health deteriorated in 1859 and he died at Brisbane House on 27 January 1860, aged 87. His children had died earlier and Lady Brisbane survived her husband by only a few years, dying in 1862.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter is drawn from Liston, C, "New South Wales under Governor Brisbane 1821-1825", PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1980 and research for an unpublished biography. Many of the primary sources are held in overseas archives. The locations were correct in 1980, but may have subsequently changed. The main collection of Brisbane family papers is held in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow. Related family collections include the Ardgowan and Crawford Collections, in the Glasgow Archives now at the Mitchell Library, Glasgow. For footnotes to overseas manuscript collections, see the thesis which is available through the University of Sydney library.
- 2 Tasker, W (ed), *Reminiscences of General Sir Thomas Makdougall Brisbane*, Edinburgh, 1860, pp 8-22.
- 3 Tasker, pp 22-30.
- 4 Wellington to Bathurst, 30.10.1814, quoted in Historic Manuscripts Commission, *Report on the Manuscripts of Earl Bathurst*, London, 1923, p 302.
- 5 Tasker, pp 33, 43; Bryson, A, "Memorial of General Sir Thomas Makdougall Brisbane", in *Transactions of the Edinburgh Royal Society*, 22 (1861), pp 595-8; Bruce, I, *Lavallette Bruce*, Hamilton, London, 1953, p 155.
- 6 Brisbane to HRH (the Duke of York?), 8.6.1815, Brisbane Papers Mitchell Library Sydney (ML) UCMSS 419, pt 1; Brisbane to Calvert, 6.9.1815, Brisbane Papers ML MSS 1191/1; Bathurst to Brisbane, 24.11.1815, Brisbane Papers ML FM4/1626, Section 4.
- 7 Wilberforce to Marsden, 22.3.1822, Marsden Papers ML A1992; Pratt to Marsden, 11 March (?), A1994; J Macarthur jr to J Macarthur, 1.6.1821, Macarthur Papers ML A2911.
- 8 *Sydney Gazette (SG)*, 10.11.1821.

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- 9 M Brisbane to T Brisbane, 15.5.1824, postscript, Brisbane Papers ML UCMSS 419, pt 1.
- 10 E Macarthur to E Kingdon, 4.9.1822, in Onslow, SM, *Some Early Records of the Macarthurs of Camden*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1973, p 374.
- 11 Oxley to Bigge, 3.9.1822, Oxley Papers ML A5322/1, no 44, p 38; (Jamison) to Brisbane, – July 1822, Miscellaneous Loose Papers 1802-1844, SRNSW 5/3822.6.
- 12 J Macarthur jr to E Macarthur, 30.5.1821, Macarthur Papers ML A2911; J Macarthur jr to J Macarthur, 1.6.1821, *ibid*.
- 13 Brisbane to (?), 13.12.1822, Brisbane Papers ML FM4/1626, Section 1; SG, 13.12.1822; Oxley to King, 20.4.1823, King Papers ML A1976.
- 14 SG, 22.12.1821.
- 15 Brisbane to Bathurst, 10.4.1822, *Historical Records of Australia (HRA)*, series i, vol X, pp 630-2; Brisbane to Bathurst, 29.11.1823, *HRA*, series i, vol XI, pp 179-84.
- 16 SG, 12.7.1822.
- 17 SG, 25.1.1822.
- 18 Brisbane to Bruce, 18.10.1823, Brisbane Papers ML UCMSS 329; Farewell Address of the Agricultural Society and Brisbane's reply, *Australian*, 17.11.1825.
- 19 Brisbane to Wilmot-Horton, 24.3.1825, *HRA*, series i, vol XI, p 553; Brisbane to Bathurst, 21.5.1825, *ibid*, p 604.
- 20 Report of the Commissioners of Enquiry, 7.9.1825, *HRA*, series i, vol XI, pp 814-31.
- 21 Farewell Address to Brisbane, 26.10.1825, *HRA*, series iv, vol I, p 628.
- 22 Forbes to Wilmot-Horton, 30.10.1825, *HRA*, series i, vol XI, pp 952-3; Shaw, AGL, *Convicts and the Colonies*, MUP, Melbourne, 1977, pp 193-4.
- 23 J Macarthur to J Macarthur Jr, 29.1.1823, Macarthur Papers ML A2962.
- 24 Farewell Address to Brisbane, 26.10.1825, *HRA*, series iv, vol I, pp 628-9.
- 25 Brisbane to Bathurst, 3.9.1823, 31.7.1825, *HRA*, series i, vol XI, pp 122, 697; Perry, TM, *Australia's First Frontier*, MUP, Melbourne, 1963, p 66.
- 26 *Australian*, 27.10.1825. The occasion was the meeting for a farewell address for Brisbane. The tickets of occupation were not included in the address and Mrs Brooks blamed this omission of public praise as a reason why Darling was able to abolish them. Mrs Brooks, Diary, 8.9.1826, National Library of Australia MS 1559/4.
- 27 SG, 19.8.1824; Brisbane to Bathurst, 3.11.1824, *HRA*, series i, vol XI, pp 409-11.
- 28 Brisbane to Bathurst, 23.5.1825, *HRA*, series i, vol XI, p 607.
- 29 *Australian*, 28.4.1825.
- 30 Wellington to Bathurst, 20.11.1824, in Historic Manuscripts Commission, *Report on the Manuscripts of Earl Bathurst*, London, 1923, p 576.