



# HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

## From Athlone to Australia



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In this edition, we trace the history of John Bruce, whose long military career included postings in India, China and Australia.

Bruce was born in Athlone in July 1808. The Bruce family had, at least according to local tradition in Athlone, fled Scotland after the failed Jacobite Rising of the mid-1740s, later settling in the town. The young Bruce was educated privately and subsequently attended the Military Academy in Sandhurst, England. After his graduation in July 1828, he was stationed in northern India with the British army's 16th Regiment of Foot. Bruce was promoted to lieutenant in 1831. A year later, he married Johannah Jacoba Herklotz, daughter of a Dutch judge, in Tiruchirappalli, a city in southern India.

### Drug empire

Around 1841 Bruce transferred to the 18th Regiment of Foot (subsequently renamed The Royal Irish Regiment) which was then stationed in China. At that time, Britain was engaged in a particularly reprehensible act of imperial aggression, fighting what would later be called the First Opium War (1839-1842) against China. Since the late 1700s, traders (mostly British but also American and Chinese smugglers, among others) had been exporting opium from India to China despite the wishes of the Chinese authorities. The

drug trade was extremely lucrative for Britain but it caused widespread addiction and immense social and economic damage in China. In 1839, Chinese officials seized thousands of tonnes of opium from British traders as part of China's efforts to halt the drug trade. The next three years saw a sustained British military response that ended with China's defeat and the Treaty of Nanking in August 1842. The Treaty enabled the British to continue selling opium in China, much to that country's detriment. Also, Hong Kong was ceded to Britain, and a number of major ports, including Shanghai, were opened to international traders.

By the time Bruce reached China, seemingly sometime in summer 1842, the war was almost over but he remained in the country for the next five years as a senior officer on the staff of George Charles d'Aguilar. In 1847, Bruce and the 18th Regiment took part in a short campaign of reprisals against Chinese forces along the southern edge of China's Guangdong Province. Later that year, Bruce left China for England, where he was posted to the town of Tilbury. However, his attention soon turned to a new opportunity at the other side of the world. In 1850, the British War Office advertised the position of staff officer for a new police force in the Penal Colony of Western Australia. Bruce applied for the position and was selected.

### A new colony

As of 1850, the Penal Colony of Western Australia, the precursor of the modern Australian state, had a short and uninspiring history. Of course, long before there was any European colony

Australian Aborigines had been living in the landscape for tens of thousands of years. It was not until the Seventeenth Century that Europeans, in the form of Dutch sailors, began to explore and document the coast of Western Australia. Throughout the following century, the British and French navies both made voyages along the coast but the British moved first to claim the region, establishing a settlement in 1826 at King George Sound on the south-western tip of Australia. This was the first British settlement in the west of the continent, adding to those which Britain had already established in the east, such as New South Wales.

In 1828, the British Colonial Office assented to the creation of a 'free colony' in the west of Australia and the first permanent settlers arrived in 1829. By the end of that year, the towns of Fremantle and Perth had been established. Fremantle and its port was to be the colony's link with the rest of the world while Perth, about fifteen kilometres up the Swan River, was to be the seat of government. More settler ships sailed to Fremantle over the next three years but the difficulties in clearing and farming land in the often harsh local climate quickly diminished the enthusiasm of many of those original pioneers. By the 1840s, Western Australia was a settlement on the verge of failure but its legislature lobbied the British Government to send convicts from Britain and Ireland to the colony. Settlers in Western Australia, especially those who owned large tracts of land, hoped to use those convicts to clear forests and lay roads.

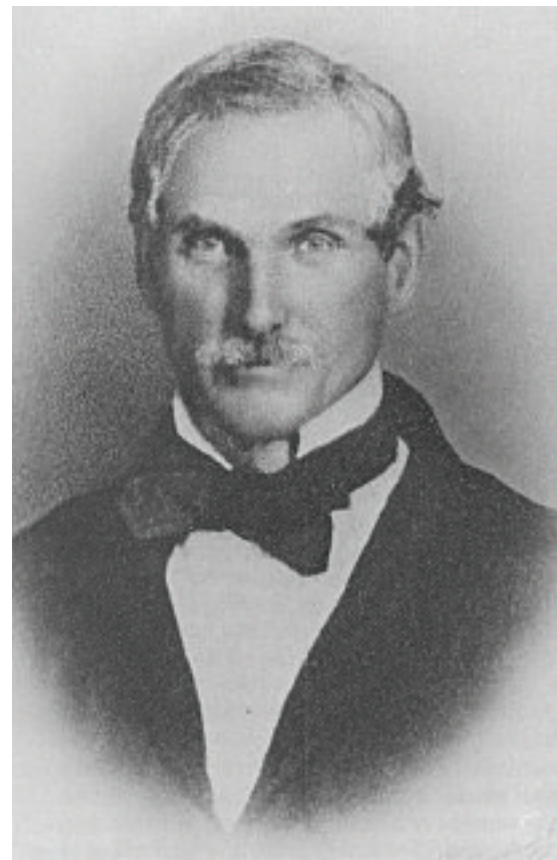
In seeking to turn itself

into a penal colony Western Australia was acting counter to the other Australian colonies. The system of transporting convicts to Australia began in 1788. At that time, the British government hoped that the continent would, in the words of one historian, 'swallow a whole class', that of criminals and the destitute in Britain and Ireland. By 1850, however, the majority of Australian colonies were less willing to accept convicts and had either stopped, or were in the process of stopping, transportation. As such, Western Australia's willingness to accept convicts was welcomed by the British government and, on 1 May 1849, it was legally established as a penal colony with an order signed by Queen Victoria. The muscle and sweat of convict labourers was to be the fuel that powered the future development of Western Australia.

### Pensioners and convicts

In October 1850, Bruce, along with his wife Johannah and their five daughters and infant son, arrived at Fremantle aboard the convict ship Hashemy. Bruce's new role was with the recently-founded Pensioner Force. The name derived from the fact that the force was comprised of ex-soldiers in the British army, individuals who were entitled to a military pension because of their good records and long service. The Pensioner Force was tasked with guarding the convicts who were then landing in Western Australia.

Bruce arrived to find that the force was stuck with inadequate accommodation and in generally poor condition, problems that he quickly rectified. Contemporaries credited Bruce with making the Pensioner Force a success



A sketch, probably made during the 1860s, which is reputed to show John Bruce ([fremantlestuff.info](http://fremantlestuff.info))

and, despite a reputation as a disciplinarian, he was known to take particular interest in the welfare of individual pension guards and their families, many of whom were Irish. According to Australian historians, of the approximately 1250 pension guards who travelled to Western Australia between 1850 and 1874, over 700 were born in Ireland. At least some of the guards were from the vicinity of Athlone. One who served under Bruce was Michael Shiel from Kiltoom in County Roscommon who arrived in Western Australia in 1853.

Bruce's achievements were noticed by the government of Western Australia who, in 1861, assigned him with the task of creating a citizens' volunteer force. Despite many difficulties, Bruce established and developed the volunteer force of which he was later made colonel. As we shall see in the next edition, Bruce would rise to the very top of Western Australian society. Yet the pinnacle of Bruce's career would coincide with the arrival in the penal colony of a young Irish convict, a man who would achieve legendary status in Australia, Ireland and the USA.

