

## BOOK REVIEW

by Michael Roe

***A Tale of Ambition and Unrealised Hope: John Montagu and Sir John Franklin*  
by Craig Joel**Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2011: 475 pp.  
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The clash between Sir John Franklin, Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land 1837–1843, and his ranking bureaucrat, Colonial Secretary John Montagu, has a long and distinguished historiography. Franklin himself began this story as, on his return to Britain, he wrote his *Narrative and Unrealised Hope. John Montagu and Sir John Franklin*. John West (*The History of Tasmania* 1852) was the most interesting of the nineteenth-century commentators, and concern deepened from the 1930s. Sir Ernest Clark, Governor 1933–1945, included this episode in his enthusiastic study of Tasmanian history. Meanwhile, the distinguished local scholar Joyce Eyre (Phillips) wrote a master's thesis at the University of Tasmania on the controversy. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, like Eyre in talent and style, could not but address the issue at length in *Sir John Franklin and Tasmania* (1949), her sympathies strong with Franklin. Near-simultaneously Edmund Morris Miller wrote a pertinent essay, duly published in *Pressmen and Governors* (1952); informed and balanced, it is surely the one significant omission from Joel's bibliography. Recent decades have seen such important historians as A.G.L. Shaw and Lloyd Robson write of the subject.

All that record is surpassed by *A Tale of Ambition and Unrealised Hope: John Montagu and Sir John Franklin*. This unusually long monograph is based on close reading of the voluminous primary sources. The story has enough drama to keep the reader's attention. Readers will be left in no doubt as to Joel's determination to get to the root of things; while there occasionally might have been more rigorous sub-editing, his prose is generally adequate. Footnotes are abundant, and (with appendices) often add yet more data. The downside of this situation is that the sheer detailed complexity of the story threatens to overwhelm analysis and clarity. True, there were many intricacies and puzzles entailed, but the historian's task is to transcend such problems. Joel strives mightily in this task and for the most part with success.

While the front cover of the books depicts Sir John, Montagu precedes him in the sub-title and is the dynamic element in the saga; both men had ambitions and unrealised hopes, but Montagu's were the stronger. A key and ultra-efficient figure in the regime of George Arthur (to whom he was related), he no doubt was wary of the new incumbent from the outset. However, the early months saw no great friction, even some amity. Tensions arose in early 1838, apropos one Clapperton, a clever convict cook, but also a miscreant; on consequent dismissal by his current employer and further sentence, Montagu intervened in hope of

getting the man onto his own domestic staff. Franklin sent Clapperton up-country. The issue was made much of in the local press: Hobart had a remarkable variety of newspapers, strident in their antagonisms, the anti-Arthur/Montagu voice being loudest in this instance. While clearly in the wrong and suffering no overt rebuke from Franklin, the Secretary now wrote to Arthur as to his desire to leave VDL: "it is painful beyond description to act under a Governor who has no firmness of character, and is the tool of any rogue who will flatter his wife, for she in fact governs".

Yet civil relations continued between the two men, up to Montagu's sailing for Britain (on leave) soon afterwards. Holding that view of Franklin, he surely should have striven to get another posting. Instead, he established himself at the Colonial Office as adviser on Vandemonian affairs. The Office was all the readier to listen as governmental policy, following the "Molesworth" Report (from a high-powered Parliamentary committee), declared assignment of convict labour to individual employers to be akin to slavery, and so demanding of abolition. Montagu blew with these winds of change. He affirmed that the Tasman Peninsula was capable of accommodating "any number" of convicts, there to undergo penal severity before going forth as labourers, first in the island's "unsettled" districts. He gave no hint of foreseeing difficulties likely to ensue from this "probation" system.

In March 1841 Montagu returned to Hobart. Economic times were relatively buoyant, and dominant opinion saw it as more boon than obliquity that the island should receive virtually all Britain's transported convicts, with their associated imperial spending. Franklin himself made no hard-headed analysis of troubles that "probation" might cause. Soon, however, as much-increased convict numbers arrived while the general economy worsened, those troubles became inexorable. Now, too, sharpened tensions between Montagu and the Franklins developed, in terms proposed by the former's letter to Arthur in early 1838. That Jane Franklin allegedly had an undue part in her husband's decisions took an ever-larger part in this grim business. One result was for a local newspaper, the *VDL Chronicle*, to abuse Sir John and his Lady. Montagu was close to the *Chronicle's* editor, and Franklin charged him with complicity in the affair. Montagu subsequently alleged the Governor's power of mind and memory to be deficient.

Indeed, Franklin was vague and variable in discharging his role, while Jane had a sizeable role in governmental affairs.

One can well understand Montagu becoming frustrated. Yet these situations do not appear to have been extreme, and the task of subordinates is to obey. Montagu failed this test: his ambition prevailed. Conversely, an instance of the Governor's style was his having depended much on Montagu, but at the end turned abruptly upon him. On 25 January 1842 the Colonial Secretary was suspended from office.

He returned to London, determined to redeem himself and conceivably to win appointment as Franklin's successor. His situation was dangerous, George Arthur himself warning of need for care. Montagu continued to insist that VDL could receive loads of convicts. The Colonial Office was happy to hear that, but its treatment of Montagu was equivocal. He was not reinstated as Colonial Secretary, let alone considered as Franklin's successor, but did receive a post as Colonial Secretary at Cape Town. Moreover, Britain's Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Stanley, told Franklin that his suspension of Montagu was "not ... sufficiently vindicated".

That despatch arrived in Hobart in January 1843, much distressing its recipient. Through the months ahead Franklin expected notice of peremptory recall, and he and Jane dwelt on the "foul conspiracy" against them. However, a despatch signifying recall was not written until February 1843, arriving six months later, and instead of any further censure merely remarked that the normal gubernatorial term

of six years had arrived. Joel makes the important point that several Australian governors received more severe treatment than this. That was to become desperately true of the next incumbent in VDL, Sir John Eardley Eardley-Wilmot. On him, as the final chapters of the book relate, fell the full, impossible task of managing "probation".

While not recalled in disgrace, the Franklins continued their outrage at Montagu and his works. Sir John first wrote the *Narrative and Unrealised Hope. John Montagu and Sir John Franklin*, and then resumed his (doomed) career as explorer. Joel suggests that silent dignity might have been a happier stance. This is an instance of his sensible judgment, his overall and well-argued sympathy for the Franklins having appropriate moderation. In a commendation of Joel's work, here quoted, the late Professor Shaw wrote that it is "not as unfair to Montagu as I think some of his critics have been in the past". "Who can tell where the truth lies?", Jane Franklin herself once wrote of the affair; "the same rectitude of sentiment is professed by both [sides]." She herself failed to maintain that insight, but Craig Joel does.

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