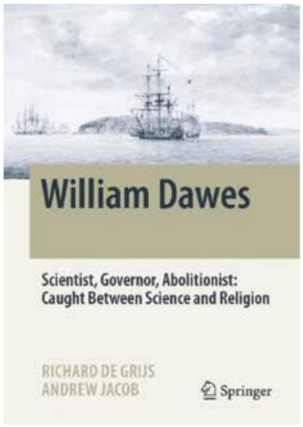
Shared skies, different worlds

The global career of William Dawes



William Dawes: Scientist, Governor, Abolitionist: Caught Between Science and Religion

By Richard de Grijs and Andrew Jacob, published by Springer, 2023. Hardcover, 272 pages, illustrations, endnotes, index. ISBN 9783031387739, RRP $119.00 VEL 994.4020924 DEG

STANDING BENEATH the Sydney Harbour Bridge today, the night sky is often dim and indistinct. The lights and haze of Australia's largest metropolis obscure all but the brightest stars. But in 1788, this was another world – and another sky. The heavens were afire with celestial bodies, from the pearlescent clouds of the Milky Way to the bright constellation that Europeans named the Southern Cross. The new British arrivals in Warrane – Sydney Cove – had spent eight months reaching this novel land, guided by their observations of the sun and stars.

Among them was a 25-year-old Marine officer, Lieutenant William Dawes. He was not only the astronomer for the First Fleet; Dawes also served as an engineer, surveyor, artillery officer and unofficial linguist. As astrophysicist Richard de Grijs and astronomy curator Andrew Jacob detail in this first full biography of Dawes, such diverse roles were typical of his global career.

Born in 1762, Dawes witnessed profound changes in the reach of the British Empire. After serving in the fruitless campaign to retain the North American colonies, a posting to Barbados exposed this deeply religious man to the iniquities of slavery. Driven both by financial necessity and a venturer's spirit, he volunteered to join the First Fleet arrayed to establish a penal colony in New South Wales.

Apparently well-trained in mathematics, Dawes was appointed the expedition's astronomer on the imprimatur of the Astronomer Royal, Dr Nevil Maskelyne. According to de Grijs and Jacob, 'Dawes appears to have been a careful and thorough observer' who soon oversaw the erection of the colony's first observatory. Here, Dawes charted stars, discovered nebulae, measured gravity and recorded weather and tides, while seeking in vain for a comet that Maskelyne had predicted. Although only fragments of these historic records have survived, his name is imprinted upon Sydney's landscape as Dawes Point.

Despite forming harmonious relations with local Aboriginal people – particularly a young woman named Patyegarang, whose Gadigal language he transcribed – the 'self-absorbed and self-righteous' Dawes irked fellow officers and he departed Sydney aboard HMS *Gorgon* in December 1791. An aptitude for languages, including Arabic and Persian, contributed to his subsequent but equally problematic appointments as governor of the commercial colony of Sierra Leone and then – while based on the Caribbean island of Antigua – general superintendent of Church Missionary Society operations in Africa.

This carefully researched and well-illustrated biography accessibly encompasses Dawes' many careers, from maritime navigation to the complex politics of slavery in the era of abolition. The authors surmise that while their subject's aspirations were often heavenly, he regularly overlooked his own shortcomings and their down-to-earth consequences.

Reviewer Dr Peter Hobbins is the museum's Head of Knowledge.

Professor Richard de Grijs is a museum volunteer who demonstrates winding the replica H1 marine timekeeper.