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# Sir George Gipps

(24 February 1838 – 11 July 1846)

*Alan Ventress*

### **Early life and career**

Sir George Gipps was born at Ringwould, Kent in 1791, the eldest son of the Reverend George Gipps.<sup>1</sup> He obtained his education at the King's School, Canterbury and the British Army's military academy in Woolwich. In January 1809 he became a Second Lieutenant in the Royal Engineers. His first posting was to Ireland where he spent time fortifying the defences of Cork Harbour against a possible French invasion. Gipps was posted to the Iberian Peninsula in 1811 and fought under the Duke of Wellington. He was wounded in the left arm at the siege of Badajoz and for his efforts was mentioned in despatches. After the Peninsular campaigns came to a close in 1814 Gipps returned to Britain and on 30 September 1814 was promoted to Captain. In November 1814 he was again with the Duke of Wellington in Flanders and France but did not see service at Waterloo because of his engineering duties in Ostend.

At the conclusion of the European war Gipps returned to the Royal Engineers' base at Chatham and was subsequently posted to the West Indies where he served from 1824 to 1829. During this time he impressed the British Government with his administrative abilities and on his return was appointed to two commissions looking at the boundaries of constituencies in England and Ireland. In 1834, Gipps was made private secretary to Lord Auckland, First Lord of the Admiralty. The following year he was knighted and appointed a commissioner with Sir Charles Grey and the Earl of Gosford to inquire into French Canadian dissatisfaction with British rule in Lower Canada. Primarily the work of Gipps, the Commission's findings were largely accepted by the British Government. 1837 was a significant year for Gipps: he gained the rank of Major and was appointed Governor of New South Wales. Gipps left England on the *Upton Castle* with his wife Elizabeth (née Ramsay) and only son and

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In short, he showed himself to be possessed of every quality necessary for a bad Governor, with scarcely any of the requisites of a good one, and his eight years of administration will be a sort of plague spot in our history.<sup>32</sup>

In stark contrast, F Watson in *Historical Records of Australia* observed:

A careful study of his despatches proves that he was a capable administrator, a brilliant statesman with a great breadth of vision, a strong Governor fearless of public opinion and a man with almost uncanny foresight.<sup>33</sup>

As usual, the truth lies in between, although the second appraisal is closer to reality. According to Peter Cochrane:

Sir George Gipps was a paradigm of gentlemanly virtue along the lines of Queen Victoria's Albert-the-Good. He was the epitome of moral earnestness with his devotion to temperance, his disapproval of gambling, his homebody inclinations and his insistence on daily prayers for the entire Government House retinue. He was a model of evangelical masculinity, and he was not a likeable man. He was too aloof and too brusque for that. Gipps was conscientious, prickly and unbending ...<sup>34</sup>

In poor health, Gipps left the colony on Saturday 11 July 1846 after a tumultuous and difficult term. On his return to the UK he seemed to be recovering his former vitality but died suddenly on 28 February 1847. Gipps had great difficulty balancing the requirements of the economy, the demands of the squatters for security of tenure and cheap convict labour, and the instructions of the Colonial Office. Throughout his term as Governor, Gipps had to contend with a constant barrage of criticism from the squatters and the press. At every turn they found him wanting. One of Gipps shortcomings was his "lack of political craft. High-minded, proud and honourable, he chose to fight hard but to fight alone, aloof from political factions".<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless he did serve the colony to the best of his abilities at a difficult time and certainly carried out the instructions of the UK Government to be as frugal as possible. Gipps remained true to his high moral principles of fairness, economy and duty to the British Crown during his term in office as the ninth Governor of New South Wales.

## Notes

- 1 This account of Gipps' early career is based on McCulloch, S, "Sir George Gipps", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol 1, MUP, Melbourne, 1966, pp 446-53 and Gipps, J, *Every Inch a Governor: Sir George Gipps Governor of NSW 1838-46*, Hobsons Bay Publishing, Melbourne, 1996.
- 2 Gipps, J, p 39.
- 3 Gipps, J, p 127.
- 4 Gipps, J, p 43.
- 5 Shaw, AGL (ed), *Gipps-La Trobe Correspondence 1839-1846*, MUP, Melbourne, 1989, p 8.
- 6 *Historical Records of Australia (HRA)*, series i, vol XXI, p 40.
- 7 McCulloch, p 450.

- 8 Jeans, DN, *An Historical Geography of NSW to 1901*, Reed Education, Sydney, 1972, p 154.
- 9 HRA, series i, vol XXI, p 127.
- 10 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10.9.1842.
- 11 HRA, series i, vol XXII, p 667.
- 12 *Weekly Register*, 13.4.1844, vol 11, p 528.
- 13 Clark, CMH, *A History of Australia*, vol 3, MUP, Melbourne, 1973, p 176. New Zealand was under Gipps' jurisdiction from 1839-41.
- 14 McCulloch, p 448.
- 15 HRA, series i, vol XXIII, pp 341-2.
- 16 Cochrane, P, *Colonial Ambition: foundations of Australian democracy*, MUP, Melbourne, 2006, pp 74-95; Jeans, p 155; McCulloch, pp 448-9.
- 17 HRA, series i, vol XXIII, p 546
- 18 HRA, series i, vol XXIV, p 218.
- 19 Windschuttle, K, "The Myths of Frontier Massacres in Australian History, Part I: The Invention of Massacre Stories", in *Quadrant*, October 2000, pp 12-17; Ryan, L, "Waterloo Creek, Northern New South Wales, 1838", in Attwood, B, and Foster, SG (eds), *Frontier Conflict: the Australian Experience*, Australian National Museum, Canberra, 2003, pp 36-42; Connor, J, *The Australian Frontier Wars, 1788-1838*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2002, pp 102-14; Milliss, R, *Waterloo Creek: the Australia Day massacre of 1838, George Gipps and the British conquest of NSW*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1992, pp 292-302; Clark, p 430.
- 20 Gipps, J, pp 68-73.
- 21 Cochrane, p 39.
- 22 Melbourne, ACV, *Early Constitutional Development in Australia*, OUP, London, 1934, pp 269-74.
- 23 McMartin, A *Public Servants and Patronage: the foundation and rise of the NSW Public Service, 1786-1859*, SUP, Sydney, 1983, pp 235-6; Melbourne, pp 290-5, 308-16; McCulloch, pp 446-53.
- 24 Gipps, J, p 128.
- 25 McMartin, pp 235-6.
- 26 McCulloch, p 447.
- 27 Gipps, J, p 84.
- 28 Gipps, J, p 85.
- 29 Gipps, J, p 89-91.
- 30 Gipps, J, pp 87-94.
- 31 Barcan, A, *Two centuries of education in NSW*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1988, pp 42-3; Gipps, J, p 109-14.
- 32 *The Atlas*, 11.7.1846.
- 33 HRA, series i, vol XIX, p 17.
- 34 Cochrane, p 39.
- 35 McCulloch, p 449.