

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07073-8 - Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the British Colonial Order

Kirsten McKenzie

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## Imperial Underworld

During a major overhaul of British imperial policy following the Napoleonic Wars, an escaped convict reinvented himself as an improbable activist, renowned for his exposés of government misconduct and corruption in the Cape Colony and New South Wales. Charting scandals unleashed by the man known variously as Alexander Loe Kaye and William Edwards, *Imperial Underworld* offers a radical new account of the legal, constitutional and administrative transformations that unfolded during the British colonial order of the 1820s. In a narrative rife with daring jail breaks, infamous agent provocateurs, and allegations of sexual deviance, Professor Kirsten McKenzie argues that such colourful and salacious aspects of colonial administrations cannot be separated from the real business of political and social change. The book instead highlights the importance of taking gossip, paranoia, factional infighting and political spin seriously to show the extent to which ostensibly marginal figures and events influenced the transformation of the nineteenth-century British empire.

KIRSTEN MCKENZIE is Associate Professor of History at the Department of History, University of Sydney.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07073-8 - Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the British Colonial Order

Kirsten McKenzie

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*Critical Perspectives on Empire*

Editors

Professor Catherine Hall  
*University College London*

Professor Mrinalini Sinha  
*University of Michigan*

Professor Kathleen Wilson  
*State University of New York, Stony Brook*

*Critical Perspectives on Empire* is a major series of ambitious, cross-disciplinary works in the emerging field of critical imperial studies. Books in the series explore the connections, exchanges and mediations at the heart of national and global histories, the contributions of local as well as metropolitan knowledge, and the flows of people, ideas and identities facilitated by colonial contact. To that end, the series not only offers a space for outstanding scholars working at the intersection of several disciplines to bring to wider attention the impact of their work; it also takes a leading role in reconfiguring contemporary historical and critical knowledge, of the past and of ourselves.

A full list of titles published in the series can be found at:  
[www.cambridge.org/cpempire](http://www.cambridge.org/cpempire)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07073-8 - Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the  
British Colonial Order

Kirsten McKenzie

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

# Imperial Underworld

*An Escaped Convict and the Transformation  
of the British Colonial Order*

---

Kirsten McKenzie

*University of Sydney*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07073-8 - Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the British Colonial Order

Kirsten McKenzie

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107070738](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107070738)

© Kirsten McKenzie 2016

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2016

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-1-107-07073-8 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-68679-3 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07073-8 - Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the British Colonial Order

Kirsten McKenzie

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Contents

---

<i>List of illustrations and map</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Cast of main characters</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Map</i>	xii
Introduction: ‘A soul reared in the lap of liberty’	1
1 ‘Plausible and audacious frauds’: The theatre of imperial politics and reform	25
2 ‘A Daemon behind the Curtain’: Reputation, parliamentary politics and political spin	60
3 Green-bag-makers and blood-hunters: Information management and espionage	83
4 ‘In return for services rendered’: Liberated Africans or prize(d) slaves?	103
5 ‘The dishonorable Court of Gothamites’: Corrupting abolition	130
6 ‘Under the cloak of liberty’: Seditious libel, state security and the rights of ‘free-born Englishmen’	159
7 ‘Unruly subjects’: Political removal and the problem of colonial constitutions	191
8 ‘A conspiracy of the darkest and foulest nature’: The placard affair	213
9 Bring up the body: The many escapes of ‘Alexander Edwards’	245
Epilogue: An infamous end	276
<i>Bibliography</i>	285
<i>Index</i>	301

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07073-8 - Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the British Colonial Order

Kirsten McKenzie

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Illustrations and map

---

### ILLUSTRATIONS

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| 1 John Thomas Bigge, 1819. Thomas Uwins. State Library of New South Wales   | <i>page 7</i> |
| 2 'A View of Somerset', Robert Dighton, 1811. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London   | 40            |
| 3 Portrait of Ralph Darling, governor of New South Wales, 1825. John Linnell. National Library of Australia                                       | 56            |
| 4 Henry Bathurst, third Earl Bathurst. William Salter, 1834. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London                                    | 65            |
| 5 George Cruikshank, 'Conspirators; or, delegates in council', 1817. US Library of Congress   | 90            |
| 6 'The Theatre, Cape Town', H.C. de Meillon. Courtesy of Sydney Living Museums  | 218           |
| 7 Copy of evidence from the Cape fiscal's enquiry into the placard scandal, 1824. Western Cape Archives Depot, Cape Town, Council of Justice 3352 | 220           |
| 8 Portrait of James Barry, in youth, bust; anon., no date. The RAMC Muniment Collection in the care of the Wellcome Library                       | 222           |
| 9 Convict Barracks, Sydney, New South Wales c. 1820. State Library of New South Wales   | 257           |
| 10 Settlement, Norfolk Island, 1838. State Library of New South Wales   | 283           |

### MAP

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| 1 The imperial world of William Edwards | xii |
|---|-----|

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07073-8 - Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the British Colonial Order

Kirsten McKenzie

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## Cast of main characters

---

- Edwards, William: Cape Town notary. Formerly convict Alexander Loe Kaye.
- Barry, James: Army medical officer and inspector-general of hospitals at the Cape.
- Bathurst, Henry, third Earl Bathurst: Secretary of state for war and the colonies between 1812 and 1827.
- Bigge, John Thomas: Commissioner of inquiry in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, and (with William Colebrooke) Commissioner of Eastern Inquiry at the Cape of Good Hope.
- Bird, William Wilberforce: Comptroller of Customs at the Cape and, along with Charles Blair, responsible for the assignment of prize slaves.
- Blair, Charles: Collector of Customs at the Cape and, along with William Wilberforce Bird, responsible for the assignment of prize slaves.
- Brougham, Henry: Radical Whig member of Parliament (MP) and parliamentary ally of Cape reformers.
- Burnett, Bishop: British settler at the Cape, involved in frequent disputes with authorities, ally of William Edwards.
- Cooke, Lancelot: Cape Town merchant and employer of the prize slave Jean Ellé.
- Darling, Ralph: Governor of New South Wales, 1825–1831.
- Denysen, Daniel: Cape fiscal (a combination of chief of police and public prosecutor).
- Donkin, Sir Rufane: Acting governor at the Cape, 1820–1821, during Somerset's leave. Subsequently embroiled in a prolonged feud with Somerset and his supporters.
- Edwards, Elizabeth (née Rens): Wife of William Edwards.
- Ellé, Jean: Mauritian cook 'liberated' as a prize slave and forcibly apprenticed at the Cape.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07073-8 - Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the British Colonial Order

Kirsten McKenzie

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii Cast of main characters

Fairbairn, John: Co-editor with Thomas Pringle of the *South African Commercial Advertiser*, the colony's first independent newspaper.

Later Cape politician.

Forbes, Francis: Chief justice of New South Wales, 1824–1837.

Greig, George: Printer and proprietor of the *Advertiser*.

Hall, Edward Smith: Political reformer and editor of the *Sydney Monitor* newspaper.

Hudson, Samuel: Cape Town diarist.

Hume, Joseph: Radical MP and ally of Cape reformers.

Jones, William Oliver, aka W. J. Richards, styled 'Oliver the Spy':

Government spy and alleged agent provocateur.

Lee, Daniel: Irish indentured servant employed by William Edwards.

Meurant, Louis: Printer's apprentice to George Greig. Later journalist and member of the Cape Parliament.

Philip, John: Missionary and political ally of Pringle and Fairbairn.

Pringle, Thomas: Poet, journalist and philanthropist. Co-editor with John Fairbairn of the *Advertiser* at the Cape. Later secretary of the British Anti-Slavery Society.

Somerset, Lord Charles Henry: Governor of the Cape between 1814 and 1826.

Somerset, Lord Granville: Tory MP for Monmouthshire, nephew to Lord Charles Somerset.

Stephen, James (the younger): Legal advisor and later permanent undersecretary at the Colonial Office.

Truter, Johannes (John) Andreas: President of the Council of Justice, Cape Colony.

Wardell, Robert: Sydney barrister, colonial reformer and co-editor of the *Australian* newspaper.

Wentworth, William Charles: Sydney barrister, colonial reformer and co-editor of the *Australian* newspaper.

Wilmot-Horton, Robert: Parliamentary secretary, Colonial Office.



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07073-8 - Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the British Colonial Order

Kirsten McKenzie

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Acknowledgements

---

The debts for this book go back many years, for its origins can be traced across several previous projects. Rhiannon Davis first alerted me to the fact that William Edwards's story extended beyond South Africa. In one of his many inspiring conversations, Robert Ross made me realise that the topic deserved a book in its own right. The research was financed by Australian Research Council grant DP110103718, 'Personal Liberty, British Identity and Surveillance in the Antipodes, 1780–1830' and by grants from the Faculty of Arts and Social Science at the University of Sydney. During the course of the project, earlier versions of the findings appeared in *The South African Historical Journal*, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* and the *Australian and New Zealand Law & History E-Journal*.

At the University of Sydney, Dean Duncan Ivison, Head of School Barbara Caine and Heads of Department, Andrew Fitzmaurice and Penny Russell, all offered their personal support across every stage of the research. I particularly wish to acknowledge the warm friendship and encouragement provided by my fellow members of the Department of History.

Steering me through the very diverse fields touched by this investigation were countless people who were extremely generous with their specific areas of expertise. In many cases they also read sections of the manuscript. Bruce Baskerville guided me around the curious place that is Norfolk Island. Timothy Causer helped me with the island's records and provided me with copies of his detailed research on the same. Hamish Maxwell-Stewart and Helen MacDonald discussed practices of dissection. Patrick Harries, Christopher Saunders and Kerry Ward shared their knowledge of prize slaves. Antonia Malan helped me interpret household inventories. Lisa Ford's insights into the law, and indeed on countless other matters, were unfailingly sharp. Conversations with Alan Atkinson, Elizabeth Elbourne, Zoë Laidlaw and Alan Lester greatly enhanced my arguments. Hans Pols and Nigel Worden gave advice on translations. In all instances, of course, the remaining mistakes are my own.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07073-8 - Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the British Colonial Order

Kirsten McKenzie

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## x Acknowledgements

I would like to pay a special tribute to the unfailing generosity of Peter Burbidge, legal scholar and descendant of Alexander Loe Kaye. Without his family research, significant proportions of this book could never have been written. He saved me from many mistakes, legal and genealogical. I would also like to thank Judy Buxton for sharing her family history research into William Edwards. One of the outcomes of this project was the pleasure of introducing these two family historians to one another. Although my protagonist would undoubtedly have disapproved, it was satisfying to see his two lines of descent finally reconnect.

The archivists and librarians at the institutions listed in the references were unfailingly courteous and helpful. I would not have been able to get through the vast source base generated by the scandals of William Edwards without my research assistants Rhiannon Davis, James Drown, Chris Holdridge and Maureen Rall. Chris also generously shared his personal researches into Edwards's time at the Cape. Martin Thomas kindly photographed material in the National Library in Canberra. James Drown, editorial ventriloquist, worked his magic on the drafts. Maria DenBoer prepared the index.

Robert Aldrich, David Andrew Roberts, Robert Ross and Nigel Worden were all brave and generous enough to read complete drafts of the manuscript. Their editorial advice and specialist knowledge were absolutely invaluable. Frances Clarke inaugurated the 'shut up and write' sessions that kept revisions going even through the most chaotic periods of the academic year. The dedicated members of the Alchemists writing group led by Ann Curthoys and Penny Russell were subjected to some of the most tortuous early versions of the narrative. Base metal undoubtedly remains, but it would be untempered without your efforts. I thank you all.

Sarah Mee, Kezia Lange and Rob Pavey hosted me during repeated research trips to the United Kingdom. I began writing this book at the European University Institute, Florence. Dirk Moses arranged my visiting fellowship there, and he and Natasha Wheatley also lent me their apartment in the Piazza del Carmine. To them and to all at the 'Repubblica Palmerino' my heartfelt thanks for this golden time.

My parents again offered the most useful gifts that anyone can give a writer – an isolated retreat with a view of the sea and a golden Labrador for company. Amber once more provided advice on solitary walks. Sebastian napped on the drafts. To all my family and friends I offer my thanks for their generous support across the project and my apologies for grumpy responses to polite enquiries about progress.

My profound thanks go to Michael Watson for his enthusiasm and astute advice, to the series editors, Catherine Hall, Mrinalini Sinha and

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07073-8 - Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the  
British Colonial Order

Kirsten McKenzie

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Acknowledgements

xi

Kathleen Wilson, to Vicki Danahy for her meticulous copyediting and to all the production team at Cambridge University Press.

This book is dedicated to my teachers, students and mentors, whose work has connected three continents. Most especially it is for Nigel Worden, who first inspired me to explore the links between South Africa and Australia.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07073-8 - Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the British Colonial Order

Kirsten McKenzie

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Map 1 The imperial world of William Edwards