THE CONVICT REBELLION OF 1804
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I

On the evening of Sunday, 4th March 1804, just about sunset, a fire broke out in one of the small huts occupied by convicts at the agricultural settlement of Castle Hill, about five miles to the north of Parramatta. As excited crowds of convicts gathered, and the local officials busied themselves in controlling the fire, a group of convicts who had planned the incident raised the cry of rebellion. Rallying others to their support, they seized and overpowered all the officials on the scene. Thus began the convict rebellion of 1804, the greatest upheaval in the history of transportation to Australia and one of the very few irruptions of the unprivileged into the public life of early New South Wales.

The rebellion has received less careful attention from historians than its due. Most general writings dealing with New South Wales in the time of King, it is true, do touch on it, with more or less imprecision; but the published discussions of it which go into any detail are few, and those are so riddled with inaccuracies that the interpretations advanced are highly suspect. The rebellion is an episode of sufficient importance to warrant an examination of its place in early Australian history. Before this can be attempted the narrative of events must be straightened out.

The rising of 4th March was far from being the spontaneous outbreak it has sometimes been painted. It had been carefully planned and prepared for at least a month before. The plans appear to have been formulated by a small group of convicts at the Castle Hill settlement itself. Attempts were made to communicate them to convicts in the other settlements; but to prevent the rising being nipped in the bud (as a planned rising in 1800 had been), knowledge of the plans had to be kept within a small circle of leaders until the time of the rising. The convicts' security was good: but it may have been too good, for liaison between Castle Hill and the other settlements turned out to be ineffective and the convicts in Castle Hill were the only ones to come out.

The rising took place on the evening of a Sunday, a day on which the convicts were not employed at their usual tasks. During the short time between the outbreak of the fire and the final establishment of control over Castle Hill, the rebel leaders, under Philip Cunningham, an Irish convict who was the moving spirit in the whole affair, roused their fellow-convicts into action and organised them sufficiently well to overpower the local overseers and constables, and to seize the arms and ammunition in the settlement. For a short time the mob got out of hand: a group of convicts seized and severely beat the local executioner, and others threatened other officials, while one of the constables was able to make his escape and take word of the rising to Parramatta. But the leaders soon asserted themselves and moved the main body of convicts, carrying the arms they had collected, to a hill outside the settlement. Here Cunningham made a speech publicly revealing his plan for the conquest of the colony and giving assurances that they would be supported by risings in the other settlements. His leadership appears to have been accepted without demur. The rebels — at this stage probably about two hundred strong — were then divided up into a number of parties to scour the crescent of agricultural settlements around the
north of Parramatta for arms and recruits. The parties were to rendezvous at a point not far outside Parramatta township.

The manoeuvre was a calculated risk. The rewards, if it worked, would be a large haul of the muskets, pistols and swords which were kept by scores of householders in these districts, and the adherence of convicts who had been assigned to private settlers. The dangers were that the delay would permit news of the rising to reach Parramatta and a defence to be prepared; the parties of convicts might be intercepted and defeated in detail by the military force of sixty or seventy men then at Parramatta; they might lose their way in the dark or melt away as their original élan faded. The operation turned out a qualified success. Each of the parties appears to have obeyed a single leader, and the rebels' opponents later bore witness to the efficiency with which they collected the weapons from the farming districts. But they did not gain recruits in the numbers necessary to swamp Parramatta, as their numbers appear to have increased by only fifty to one hundred men. Furthermore, two of the parties did lose their way and failed to turn up at the rendezvous.

Definite information of the planned rising had reached the colonial authorities in Parramatta on the Saturday, and evidence confirming it reached them and the resident magistrate at the Hawkesbury settlement on the Sunday. But the opportunity to crush it was not taken, and this seems to have been the result of an error of judgment about the seriousness of the plans on the part of the chief officials in Parramatta. Their state of mind was suggested rather defensively by Governor King in a letter to his superiors in England: "The many circumstances of the same kind having so often occurred prevented any other than the common precautions being used." A retrospective account in the Sydney Gazette, the colony's weekly official newspaper, stated that a report of the information received had been sent to Governor King by Abbott and Marsden, the senior military and civil officers at Parramatta. Even if this is true, it appears that the message would not have been an urgent one, as Marsden himself did not take the warnings seriously: when news of the actual rising arrived, he was found at home taking tea with his wife and Mrs Macarthur.

The news reached Parramatta towards nine o'clock in the evening. The alarm was sounded when the drums at the military barracks beat to arms. During the evening, as the news spread through the town, numbers of civilians gathered armed at the barracks to aid the military in defence. Abbott had no cavalry, so sent out on reconnaissance Joyce, a settler who had ridden in bringing news: Joyce returned to say that the rebels were close to Parramatta. As this can scarcely have been after eleven o'clock, the time given in a letter of Mrs Marsden, Joyce had probably met one of the bodies of convicts seizing arms in a nearby district or moving towards the rendezvous, rather than the main body. On hearing of their advance, a party of the leading ladies of Parramatta took counsel of their fears and fled from the town with their children in a boat. They were accompanied, according to his wife's story, by the Reverend Mr Marsden. The official records are silent about that.

At two stages in the evening Abbott sent word of the rising to Governor King in Sydney, the administrative headquarters and major settlement of the colony. The first messenger from Parramatta probably arrived in Sydney about half past eleven, though it may have been a little later. The distance between the two towns was about fifteen miles by the road then in use, and it is reasonable to expect that the bearer of such news would travel fast. This means that he was despatched by Abbott at least an hour after the receipt of definite information that the convicts had risen. The reason for the delay is not at all clear. If he
had simply been wanting more definite information, Abbott did not wait for it, for a Lieutenant bringing news which seems to have been the information collected by Joyce's reconnaissance arrived in Sydney a little after midnight.

Until the arrival of Lieutenant Hobby with this information, King can have had little idea what the rebels were going to do, apart from the hint in the information he had previously received (if it is true that he had received it) that the Castle Hill convicts were in contact with the Hawkesbury. He had alerted the garrison at Sydney, roused the inhabitants, and called ashore the men of a naval vessel in the harbour — showing at least that he did not fear an attack on Sydney across the water. Now that he knew, however vaguely, that the rebels were moving towards Parramatta, King decided to send reinforcements there and to take command himself. He sent a trooper to wake Major George Johnston, the second-in-command of the New South Wales Corps, at his country home near the Parramatta road, left instructions for a detachment of troops to be marched to Parramatta, and set off on horseback, stopping on the way to brief Johnston. The troops from Sydney met Johnston at half past one in the morning and marched on to Parramatta. This is consistent with King's having given orders to collect and despatch them at about half past twelve, shortly after Hobby's arrival; but it is inconsistent with the statement in the Sydney Gazette that King arrived in Parramatta "without interruption" at four in the morning. Three to three and a half hours is an extraordinarily long time for a small party of well-mounted men who knew the road to take in getting from Sydney to Parramatta on a mission of utmost urgency. Either the times given by several persons for events in Sydney are too early, or the Gazette is wrong here (it is grossly wrong on other points) and King arrived at Parramatta between two and three in the morning. The detachment which followed under Johnston's command was only 56 men strong: King had left the greater part of the Corps behind under Lieutenant-Governor Paterson, probably suspecting disaffection among the convicts and ex-convicts in and around Sydney itself.

The activities of the rebels during the night can be reconstructed only in outline. Parties of them had gone to farms in the districts from the Field of Mars in the east (near present-day Ryde) to Prospect in the west. The seizing of arms was made easy by the pattern of settlement in these areas, which were made up of farms typically run by a single family or a few men living together in an isolated shack on the property — the rebels could bring an overwhelming superiority to bear at every farm they visited. Two of the parties seem to have lost themselves or been unduly delayed: one probably to the north-east of Parramatta, as it appeared in that area the next day; the other probably in the west towards Toongabbie, as its leader, William Johnston, had rejoined the main band by the time it was brought to battle. During the night the bulk of the rebels assembled, with what reinforcements they had collected by force or persuasion, at the Park Gate outside Parramatta.

It appears that the rebels had a definite plan for the capture of Parramatta, and from its boldness and similarity to the plan for the capture of Castle Hill we may infer that it was devised by Cunningham, who, if a rumour reported by the settler George Suttor is to be believed, had once been a soldier. The plan depended on action by confederates within the town, who were to set fire to part of the Macarthur homestead at Elizabeth Farm. This diversion was to draw the Parramatta garrison out of the town towards the east, thus leaving the town unprotected and preventing the rebels being caught on two fronts if reinforcements should arrive from Sydney. Another fire was to be lit in Parramatta itself to
summon the rebel force, who would join hands with rebels in the town in sufficient numbers to overwhelm any opposition.

The plan failed, as the confederates in Parramatta failed to light the fires. The reasons are obscure, as it is not known who these men were: it may be that they were overawed by the gathering of armed loyalists at the barracks, it may be that they had lost contact or never made contact with the rebels outside the town and were not confident of support. Their failure was the turning-point of the revolt: Parramatta was still in loyalist hands when Governor King arrived and when Major Johnston brought reinforcements, and the initiative then passed to King. From this point on, the actions of the rebels under Cunningham appear improvised and uncertain in contrast to the decisiveness of their first moves. There were now probably between 250 and 300 assembled, about half of them with firearms, and this may not have seemed enough to storm Parramatta in the teeth of a well-prepared defence and without any assistance from within the town. At some point before dawn the rebels abandoned their position before Parramatta and moved westwards up the Parramatta River valley towards Toongabbie. At some stage here they linked up with all or part of the party under William Johnston who had lost their way or been too slow in collecting arms. They appear to have halted for some time on the top of a hill outside the settlement of Toongabbie. It was now about dawn. The hope of taking Parramatta had gone, and all likely support from the inner agricultural settlements was now exhausted. It was probably now that the decision was made to head for the traditionally turbulent settlement on the Hawkesbury River to raise the support which Cunningham had previously tried to arrange. So the rebels moved off along the road to the north-west. They were now probably both discouraged and tired, having been on the move, and from many indications in a high state of excitement, most of the night. Their march towards the Hawkesbury was slow and stragglers dropped out along the way.

On arriving in Parramatta, King had not stayed at the military barracks but had gone to Government House, which is a vantage-point for watching any movement towards Parramatta from the north or north-west. Major Johnston arrived with the troops from Sydney about dawn; they halted for breakfast and then marched up to Government House for orders. King had used the interval for drawing up a proclamation establishing martial law in all the districts from Parramatta to the Hawkesbury inclusive, and a written plan of campaign which he handed to Major Johnston on his arrival. King might have known better—his handwriting is notoriously difficult to read, and Johnston was unable to construe it. King had to explain verbally. He seems to have known now that the rebels had withdrawn from Parramatta, but not to have known accurately how many there were or where they had gone. He proposed to divide the force from Sydney: half under Lieutenant Davis to advance along the northern track to Castle Hill; half under Major Johnston to march west towards Toongabbie and, if it had not made contact with the rebels, to swing right and join the other force at Castle Hill, there to wait for further orders. The detachment at Parramatta was to remain to guard the town. King was a naval, not a military officer, which may explain the peculiarities of this plan; but he did give the army officers orders to fire on anyone who should run away, and that, explained Johnston later to a friend, was sufficient authorisation for him to conduct his own campaign. When he had arrived at Toongabbie with his force of about twenty-eight soldiers and a dozen or so armed civilians from Parramatta, Major Johnston was given the now stale information that the rebels were in force on a nearby hill. He immediately launched a two-pronged attack up the hill,
and swept over the top only to find the enemy gone. He soon learned that the rebels were moving ahead of him towards the Hawkesbury, and ordered his troops to advance in pursuit. Through the hot morning rebels and loyalists tramped along the Hawkesbury road, with the pursuers gradually making up the leeway. At about half past ten Major Johnston, who by now was on horseback, got word that the rebel force was only a mile away.

What happened next has been the subject of very considerable confusion in historical writing. The fullest and most intelligible account is in a private letter from Major Johnston to his fellow-officer Piper at Norfolk Island, written a month later, which includes several incidents that were suppressed in the official accounts. But even this has to be supplemented from other sources.

Johnston had with him a little over forty men in all. Estimates of the rebel numbers vary for this stage as they do for all others, but it does appear that they had fallen away, through desertion and straggling, to less than 250—and this may well indicate declining morale.

On hearing of the rebels’ position, Major Johnston sent his only cavalryman forward to slow them down by telling them the Governor was coming. The trooper, who was later publicly thanked by King for his bravery, rode forward but was not given a hearing by the rebels. Knowing that many of the rebel convicts were Irishmen, Johnston had thoughtfully brought with him from Parramatta James Dixon, the only licensed Catholic priest in the colony. He now sent Dixon forward on horseback to try to persuade the rebels to surrender. This failed, too. The rebels continued towards the Hawkesbury, but the military were now close behind. Major Johnston learnt from a straggler that the rebels were only half a mile away. At this, he rode forward himself with the trooper, leaving the detachment under the command of his quartermaster, Laycock. When they reached the convicts, Johnston called out for their leaders to speak with him, and with some difficulty persuaded them to leave the main body of convicts. Cunningham and William Johnston came forward. Major Johnston attempted to convince them that their position was hopeless and that they should surrender to him. The two rebels refused. Major Johnston then told them that he would get the priest to talk to them again, and returned to the detachment, where he picked up Dixon and ordered Laycock to hurry forward with the troops. Major Johnston, the trooper, and the priest returned to the convicts, who appear to have waited for them; though now, realising that armed forces were at hand, they formed a rough line on top of a ridge across the road. Major Johnston again called for the leaders, and the same two came some yards forward from their supporters. Apparently at the second parley Major Johnston again urged the two men to surrender, promising to mention them favourably to the Governor if they did. Cunningham, by now probably realising that all the overtures were ruses designed to allow the troops to catch up, rejected the proposals and repeated the rebels’ slogan that they wanted death or liberty. But the realisation came too late, for while the two rebel leaders were still isolated in conversation, Laycock and the troops arrived on the scene. Major Johnston drew his pistol and presented it at the head of one of the rebels; the trooper immediately followed suit with the other. Taken by surprise and armed only with swords, the two were easily captured and forced into the ranks of the troops.

Major Johnston immediately ordered his men to advance and fire (the military muskets of the day had a low effective range) and then charge against the rebel line. Their fortune was not put to the test of an uphill charge against superior numbers, for the rebels, demoralised, leaderless and disorganised, soon broke
under the soldiers’ fire. As they fled from the ridge the soldiers and loyal civilians ran in pursuit.

The soldiers, hot and tired, were in no mood to be gentle, and their pursuit of the rebels began the terror which was to follow the revolt. Governor King later praised their “active perseverance and zeal”; Johnston wrote more frankly that they were too fond of blood, and that he had only just stopped some from murdering their prisoners in cold blood. That Johnston could not be everywhere on the field at once may explain the curious fate of Philip Cunningham, who was captured before the engagement, yet was reported in two places as having been left wounded and apparently dead on the field. Joseph Holt, who is tendentious and unreliable, later recorded that he had been struck down by Laycock, and there may be a germ of truth in this. In dealing with convict rebels, the gloves were off.

Johnston marched his troops on to the Hawkesbury settlement, picking up prisoners and arms as they went. He was probably induced not to scatter his troops in pursuit through the surrounding bush by their fatigue and a rumour that more rebels were on their way from Castle Hill. It was Lieutenant Davis, however, who turned up in the evening with the troops who had marched via Castle Hill, some reinforcements, and some more prisoners. Either the same night or the next morning Philip Cunningham was found alive among the wounded prisoners. Johnston and his officers conferred and decided to hang him publicly on top of the hill in the middle of the Hawkesbury settlement. For the next few days troops and bands of armed civilians from Parramatta and the Hawkesbury were engaged in mopping up the rebels who had dispersed from the Hawkesbury road or had failed to rejoin the main body; they were assisted by a half-amnesty proclaimed by King which appears to have brought rebels to surrender in large numbers. By the end of the week the main job was finished, though stray rebels were still being captured up to the end of the month. On Saturday, 10th March, martial law was revoked. The troops had already returned to their quarters.

The legal terror began on the Thursday when ten rebels selected from all those who had surrendered or been captured were put on trial for armed rebellion. The court was an army court-martial (martial law still being in force) presided over by Captain Abbott and including three officers who had been on active service against the rebels. The ten were convicted in short order and sentenced to death; William Johnston and Samuel Humes (allegedly the leader of the rebel group which was lost in the eastern district) to be hanged in chains. Governor King gave his approval of the sentences on the same day and three were hanged that evening at Parramatta. The next day three more were executed at Castle Hill and on the Saturday two were hanged at Sydney. The other two, who from the evidence had not appeared definitely as leaders, were reprieved. On the Thursday and Friday nine men were tried before the magistrates and sentenced to severe flogging, between 200 and 500 lashes each. Another group of about thirty were selected and held by magisterial order incomunicado in chain gangs until the end of the month, when they were shipped off to start a new penal settlement mining coal at the mouth of the Hunter River.

On Saturday, 10th March, Maurice Margarot, a convict at Sydney, wrote in his diary: “King came back from Parramatta — two Irishmen were hanged at Sydney — and I suppose that concludes the tragedy.”
Margaret was mistaken, and was himself to suffer for it. To understand why, and to understand the impact of the revolt on colonial society, it is necessary to go back to examine its origins.11

The rebellion took place in the fourth year of King's administration, a period which had seen the arrival in the colony of hundreds of convicts transported from Ireland in the aftermath of the United Irish rebellion. The presence of these convicts had aroused intermittent uneasiness among the small group of officers and their wives who administered the colony and left the correspondence which is our major source of information about it. On one occasion, in late 1800, there had been a severe scare over a planned convict rising which was suppressed with some brutality by Hunter and his officers; Irish convicts figure in King's official correspondence through much of this period as among the most difficult to handle.

In mid-1801 King had founded a new settlement at Castle Hill in furtherance of a long-standing plan to revive government agriculture in order to reduce the burden of payments to private producers. As a place where many convicts were concentrated with only a small admixture of free men, and as a place to which the more unruly of the convicts gravitated or were sent, Castle Hill was cut out to be a trouble-spot, even had there not been a high proportion of Irish convicts there. Between its foundation and the rising of 1804 there was a series of attempted escapes; but despite this indication of trouble the small garrison which had originally been stationed at Castle Hill was withdrawn in late 1803 or early 1804, leaving only a small number of civilian officials to keep order among the convicts.

This was the general setting of the rebellion. But to understand better the reasons for the outbreak it is necessary to know rather more precisely who the rebels were. For this the simple description "Irish convicts" is inadequate—particularly since Joseph Holt, who on his own admission knew of the plans before the outbreak, has left on record his opinion that "The English were as much involved in the business as the Irish."12 There is nothing like a list of all the convicts who escaped. The nearest to this is a list of nine convicts who were executed as leaders, two who were condemned to death but not executed, and nine who were ordered to be flogged for participation or complicity. By examining the surviving records of the convict ships for the years 1788 to 1803 and some other sources of information, it is possible to trace many of these men; though the identification of names in the convict indents with several names mentioned in connection with the revolt is far from being certain.

The nine who were hanged are of special interest. John Brannon, Philip Cunningham, Samuel Humes and Timothy Hogan can confidently be identified as Irish convicts, the first three sent out for life and the last for seven years. George Harrington and John Place can confidently be identified as English convicts, the former transported for seven years. William Johnston and John Neale are probably to be identified with Irish convicts of those names sent out for life during the troubles in Ireland. Charles Hill may have been from England, but cannot definitely be identified. Between them these nine had quite a record. Cunningham was transported for "Fomenting Rebellion" and, according to the tendentious Sydney Gazette, was involved in the abortive mutiny on the convict transport Anne. Harrington's name in the convict indents is recorded with an alias. Hill had been examined on suspicion of two robberies in December 1803 and "owing to his general character"12 was bound over to good behaviour for twelve months. He was a free man at the time of the rebellion. Johnston may
be the "William Johnson" who is mentioned as having made an attempt to escape in the Sydney Gazette of 19th February 1804. Place had made one attempt to escape from the colony in mid-1803 and had been lucky to return from the mountains alive; in December 1803 he was again before the magistrates for a supposed attempt to escape which was suspected to be a cover-story, and was sentenced to receive 500 lashes.

Of the eleven convicts reprieved or flogged, less is known. Eight can fairly definitely be identified as Irish convicts, four transported for life, two for seven years, and two for unknown terms. John Burke may be the man of that name transported for life for being an "Idle and Disorderly Person"; John Griffin may be the man transported for life on the same ship for being a "United Irishman," but there is an English convict of the same name sent out about the same time. Cornelius Lyons was flogged at Castle Hill in February 1804 for an attempt to escape by stowing away on a ship in the harbour. None of the three, Dwyer, Griffin and Morrison, who cannot definitely be identified as Irish convicts, can be identified as coming from other places.

Some pattern emerges from this: the men who were punished for being prominent in the revolt were mainly Irish, with a sprinkling of Englishmen; and the men punished specifically as leaders had had particularly turbulent careers as convicts. It makes a great deal of sense that men of this stamp should emerge as leaders of a rebellion of convicts, many of whom were Irish. But our information is not unbiased. The men whose names appear on this list were selected for punishment by the colonial authorities from a much larger number who were captured. It is highly probable that they were selected in part because the authorities were looking for Irishmen and would naturally light upon convicts known to them for insubordination beforehand. In a similar way in 1936-1938, the NKVD was able to build up an image of a vast plot against the USSR within the Bolshevik party by selecting for trial men who were both old Bolsheviks and were publicly known to have been in disagreement with the Stalinist leadership beforehand. These data can therefore be read as mainly an indication of the colonial officers' view of the rebellion, though they do provide some substance for the belief that the officers' view was not fantastically wrong. Only one of the prisoners tried at Parramatta on 8th March denied having taken part in the rebellion, though six claimed to have been forced to join it.

If these men are to some extent representative of the more prominent participants in the rebellion, they give us a clearer idea of why the convicts actually came out. Robson's statistical study has shown that Irish convicts over the whole period of transportation tended both to be older and to include more married men than English convicts. The ages of only four of the men punished after the rebellion (all flogged) can be established: their ages at transportation were 30, 31, 36, and 50, all clearly above the mean age of all convicts at transportation. This may be taken with a piece of information the Sydney Gazette provides about the small group in which John Place attempted to escape across the mountains: "being all married men (excepting one) they were anxious to return to their families." It may also be observed that Hill was an unsuccessful tenant-farmer; and that both Philip Cunningham and Samuel Humes were skilled workmen who had been acting respectively as overseer of stonemasons and overseer of carpenters at Castle Hill, and each had a house of his own. The men who led the rebellion, then, so far as can be gathered from this limited and unreliable evidence, were not the bottom dogs in the convict system, but tended to be men of some experience and responsibility, possibly of some education (as written messages appear to have been sent during the preliminary planning); men, in short, on whom the cruelties
incidental to transportation, degradation, uprooting, and separation from families, might have weighed more heavily than the direct burdens of forced labour.

The rebellion, this would suggest, was far from being a mass outburst against the rigours of the convict system or of the Protestant Ascendancy. As the Sydney Gazette daintily put it, "no single Individual who had surrendered themselves or was apprehended attempted to justify his breach of duty, and misconduct, upon a principle of oppression through the severity of his labour or from any kind of ill-treatment whatsoever ..." This is not wholly just: a rebel could have expected short shrift if he had attempted to justify himself by accusing the system managed by his interrogators; and there is strong indication of resentment on the occasion when a group of convicts at Castle Hill seized and beat the executioner, whose main job had been to administer floggings. Both Suttor and Holt in their memoirs attribute the revolt to the oppression of the convicts: but this is more probably the product of a retrospective attempt to make the rebellion intelligible than a reflection of real information about it. Apart from the one incident, as King himself testified, there was no violence or brutality on the convicts' side during the whole time they were in control of wide tracts of the countryside, and this is totally inconsistent with the idea that they were motivated by blind anger or a desire for revenge. Further, such motivation could not possibly be invoked to account for the careful preparation and planning that became evident as the revolt progressed. It would appear most likely, taking all this into account, that the rebellion was started and directed by men driven by a determination to get back to their homes or to die in the attempt. Two observations may support this inference. Most contemporary records gave the rebels' slogan as "Death or liberty," the slogan of the United Irishmen: only Suttor, in a private letter to Sir Joseph Banks, recorded the significant addition that "Their cry was death or liberty, and a ship to take them Home." Suttor's memoirs, Holt's memoirs, and the retrospective account by Mann all suggest that the cry of liberty was linked with a definite intention of escaping from the colony. It may also be observed that the rebels' first movement was directed, not towards the Hawkesbury, where they might have expected the greatest support, but against Parramatta, which would give them an outlet on the harbour and a supply of small boats.

But because the programme of escape was couched in terms of a slogan of liberty, and because any movement by convicts and particularly Irish convicts was likely to be interpreted as a murderous assault on the upper ranks of society, the reaction against the rebels was given a peculiar virulence. This could be largely independent of any connection with religion, and it seems that this was the case with the rebellion of 1804: there are really remarkably few contemporary indications of any sectarian feeling in connection with it.

The crushing of the revolt was followed by the brief terror of shooting, hanging, and flogging already described. Before this was over a second stage began: a witch-hunt for the men behind the revolt. Governor King had years before made a distinction between the mass of Irish convicts and their disaffected leaders, open or secret. He interpreted the rebellion in the same terms, and editorial comment in the Sydney Gazette followed suit. The belief in hidden machinators had the support of vague suggestions in the confession of William Johnston just before he was executed; though one may suspect that Marsden, who took the confession down in scrawling, hurried handwriting, obtained from Johnston very much what he wanted to hear. It may also have been fostered by other accounts of the rebels' plan for taking Parramatta and their expectations of support from other districts. These hints were probably accepted as the basis of a rationalisation of the revolt by men who were unwilling to blame the system, their own
administration of it, or the effects of transportation itself. In his first report on the rebellion to Lord Hobart, King stated that he was convinced that "some very artful designing wretches, above the common class of those deluded people, are deeply implicated." Events showed whom he had in mind. King expelled from the colony, on suspicion, two Frenchmen who had come out to cultivate vines for the government. On 21st March Joseph Holt, a former leader of rebellion in Ireland, was arrested and examined; nothing was proven except that some of the rebels had expected him to come out on their side, but Holt was sent to Norfolk Island as a precaution. The Sydney Gazette reported that when the papers of "a strongly suspected character" (probably meaning Holt) were searched a seditious letter from a convict was found; the convict was examined by the Governor and ordered a flogging. Another letter was found among Holt's papers from a convict then in Van Diemen's Land, upon which King sent a report of it to Lieutenant-Governor Collins there. Some time later the papers of Margarot, who had been transported from Scotland for agitation for constitutional reform, were seized and evidence of republican views was found. In August King transmitted his suspicions of Margarot, Muir (another of the "Scottish martyrs") and Hayes (an Irish baronet) to England. Apparently King did not find evidence enough to convict any of his suspects. He bided his time, without losing his suspicions; and in July 1805 took counsel of a meeting of magistrates who advised him to disperse Hayes, Margarot, and another convict among the outer settlements.

The dispersal of these suspects completed King's own revenge. But there was more than revenge in other reactions to the rebellion. From several indications it appears that the town of Sydney was thrown into a state bordering on panic during the night of 4th-5th March, and it is known that some of the inhabitants of Parramatta did panic. There appears to have been some fear of the breakdown of all social controls. It was probably this fear which led "a respectable Inhabitant" to have a member of the Sydney police dismissed on suspicion of disloyalty and the editor of the Sydney Gazette to applaud the action; which led Paterson, Suttor, and later King and Johnston, to recommend increases in the regular army establishment in the colony; and which led King to re-embody the earlier volunteer militias in Sydney and Parramatta immediately after the revolt.

For colonial society at this time could not tolerate any challenge, however slight or short-lived, to the principles of authority and subordination. The whole structure of this society had grown up in the shadow of the autocratic power of the governor; indeed, largely as a result of the exercise of this power. The civil administration was as hierarchically-organised as the military forces, and even more dependent on central direction. Formal authority was constantly employed in economic affairs, not only on the government farms at Castle Hill, but on the hundreds of farms throughout the colony worked with the aid of assigned convicts, in the regulation of prices and currency, in the very supply of labour. Hierarchical authority existed in the large households in the authority of the father over his family and over his servants; it existed in the direction of the large business concerns which were growing up in the early years of King's administration. The convict rebellion thus became more than a hitch in penal control: it presented a frontal challenge to the major principle on which colonial society was constructed.

This challenge left a mark which lasted longer than the short-lived convict organisation embodying it. In the later years of King's administration and the first year of Bligh's, the Governorship was seen more than ever as the keystone of an existing structure of authority, and the Governor's function as one of keeping all elements of that structure in place. At the same time, the fears of internal threats to authority brought to a frenzy in the weeks after the Castle Hill rising
continued to reverberate in the colony. There are some indications that it was a suspicion among the colonial officers and gentlemen that Bligh was not capable of carrying out this function, a suspicion rapidly becoming a certainty in the late months of 1807, which contributed to the breakdown of his authority over them in January 1808.