

1841

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1792–1842

Naval officer, colonial governor

This biography, written by K. A. Simpson, was first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, vol 1, 1990.

William Hobson was born in Waterford, Ireland, on 26 September 1792, the third of five sons of Samuel Hobson, a barrister, and his wife, Martha Jones. William joined the Royal Navy before his 10th birthday, signing on as a second class volunteer, at Deptford, London, on 25 August 1803.

His first service was on *La Virginie*, under Sir John Beresford, on North Sea blockade and convoy duty, during the Napoleonic wars. He became a midshipman in April 1806, while serving in the West Indies. Back in home waters, he saw action against a French squadron in 1809. As lieutenant on the sloop *Peruvian* he took part in the war with the United States in 1812–14. The *Peruvian* was part of the squadron which took Napoleon to exile on St Helena in 1815.

After 18 months without a post he returned to service, and was involved chiefly in the suppression of piracy in the West Indies, commanding the sloop *Whim*. He and his crew were captured by pirates in 1821, but released after a week of ill treatment. He was captured again in July 1823 while commanding a small flotilla attacking pirate strongholds. He made a daring escape and continued with his operations; the pirate chief who had captured him in 1821 was routed and driven to his death. During his West Indian service Hobson was afflicted by yellow fever three times, and suffered recurrent headaches for the rest of his life.

Hobson was promoted commander in March 1824 on the recommendation of Sir Edward Owen, who referred to him as 'an officer of great merit and intelligence'. After a time in England he returned to the West Indies, again taking action against pirates and slaveships, and capturing the Spanish ship *Diana*. While visiting Nassau, in the Bahamas, he met Eliza Elliott, only daughter of a Scots West Indian merchant, Robert Wear Elliott. They were married at Nassau probably on 17 December 1827, and went to England with Eliza's mother in mid 1828 when Hobson's ship, the *Scylla*, was paid off. They were to have four daughters and one son.

Lacking patronage, Hobson was for six years without a command. He and his wife visited relatives in Ireland, then lived at Plymouth. His request for a command went unheeded until Lord Auckland became first lord commissioner of the Admiralty. In December 1834 Hobson was appointed commander of the frigate *Rattlesnake*, leaving Portsmouth in March 1835 to serve in the East Indies. In 1836 the *Rattlesnake* was dispatched to the Australia station. It acted as a transport ship, helped with the founding of Williamstown (Melbourne) and surveyed Port Phillip.

Early in 1837 the British Resident in New Zealand, James Busby, sent word that tribal war was endangering British subjects. Hobson left in the *Rattlesnake*, arriving at the Bay of Islands on 26 May. He met Busby, spoke with missionaries, prominent settlers and Maori leaders. With Samuel Marsden and Busby he interviewed the warring chiefs, Pomare II and Titore, attempting to reconcile them, and warned against violence to British subjects. He visited other parts of the North Island, returning to the Bay of Islands on 30 June. Marsden sailed with him to Port Jackson (Sydney); there the ship was refitted and arrived in England in early 1838.

Hobson submitted a report on New Zealand, in which he proposed a system of trading 'factories' similar to those in India, and a treaty with the Maori to secure the necessary land. In a letter to his wife he entertained the idea of an official appointment to New Zealand. On 12 December 1838 Lord Glenelg, secretary of state for the colonies, requested the Foreign Office to consider appointing a British consul to New Zealand. Hobson was chosen, and accepted in February 1839; his appointment as consul was confirmed on 13 August 1839. His appointment as lieutenant governor was ratified on 30 July. Lengthy instructions, partly an apology for intervention, partly directions for establishing a British colony, were issued by Lord Normanby, Glenelg's successor, on 14 August. The sovereignty of the Maori people, ratified by Busby's Declaration of the Independence of New Zealand of October 1835, was reaffirmed. Hobson was to obtain land from Maori 'by fair and equal contracts', reselling to settlers at a profit to fund future operations.

The *Druid* sailed from Plymouth on 25 August with Hobson and his family on board, arriving at Port Jackson on 24 December. Hobson spent three weeks there, became acquainted with his immediate superior, George Gipps, the governor of New South Wales, and selected his staff. Leaving his family in Port Jackson, Hobson sailed on the *Herald* on 19 January 1840, arriving at the Bay of Islands on 29 January. During the voyage he had heated arguments with the captain, Joseph Nias, who was obstructive of Hobson, apparently out of envy.

On 30 January, in the CMS church at Kororareka (Russell), Hobson read the Queen's commission appointing him lieutenant governor, omitting to read his consular commission, and cautiously calling himself only lieutenant governor of the British settlements in progress. Invitations were issued to Maori leaders to a meeting at Waitangi. In the meantime Busby and Hobson drafted the treaty. The meeting was held on 5 February in a large marquee in front of Busby's house, beginning at 12 noon. Henry Williams, CMS missionary, was interpreter, and Hobson was joined on the platform by Busby, Nias, and Catholic, Wesleyan and Church of England missionaries. The British flag was lowered and the treaty read out in English and Maori. Maori leaders then spoke: the first speakers were against the treaty, but the feeling of the meeting changed when Tamati Waka Nene, Hone Heke and Patuone, who had been counselled by the missionaries, commended it.

Next day Hobson received signatures from over 40 chiefs, 26 of whom had previously signed the 1835 Declaration of Independence; it would later become obvious that Henry Williams's translation of the treaty, and thus Maori understanding of it, was inadequate. A week later Hobson and his staff went to a meeting at Mangungu, Hokianga, attended by 2,000–3,000 Maori. There was concerted opposition to the treaty, but after Hobson had warned through his interpreter that Maori would lose their lands to the untrustworthy Europeans he had been sent to govern, and had given assurances that the Crown would protect their lands, 56 or more chiefs signed.

Hobson sailed on 21 February to the Waitemata Harbour, intending to survey it as the location of the future capital, and to get signatures from other North Island Maori. He had renewed quarrels with Nias over the use of men and boats, and on 1 March suffered a stroke which paralysed his right side and impaired his speech. He was taken back to the Bay of Islands and cared for at the CMS mission station at Waimate North. Nias returned to Port Jackson, reporting that Hobson was not expected to recover and that Willoughby Shortland was deputising for him. Better news about Hobson's condition was conveyed by Alexander Lane, surgeon of the *Herald*, who added that 'violent mental excitement' was

the cause of the disease. Meanwhile Hobson was recovering daily and by 15 March could begin a diary to his wife; his handwriting improved steadily over the following weeks.

Gipps sent Major Thomas Bunbury, with 80 soldiers, to assist Hobson and to take over government if he was incapacitated. Bunbury left on 5 April on the *Buffalo* with Eliza Hobson and family, reaching the Bay of Islands on 16 April. He found Hobson performing nearly all his duties. The two men became good friends. Shortland had begun to organise the collection of signatures on copies of the treaty in various parts of the country, and Bunbury sailed with some soldiers on the *Herald* to Coromandel, the Bay of Plenty, the East Coast, the South Island and Port Nicholson (Wellington) for the same purpose.

Hobson had been informed in February that New Zealand Company settlers had arrived at Port Nicholson, were laying out town sites, and flying the national flag of independent New Zealand. On 21 May, disregarding the fact that copies of the treaty were still circulating and responding to an act of high-handedness by the settlers' Council, Hobson hurriedly drafted proclamations asserting British sovereignty over the whole of New Zealand. Shortland and some soldiers were sent to Port Nicholson on 25 May; the Council was disbanded and the offending flags struck. The settlers' leader, William Wakefield, later went to the Bay of Islands with an address pledging their allegiance to the Crown and suggesting that Hobson make Port Nicholson the capital. This was declined, but Hobson was reassured by their gesture.

Another crisis faced Hobson when the French frigate *L'Aube* arrived on 11 July, en route for Banks Peninsula, where the Nanto-Bordelaise Company expedition was about to found a settlement. The ship's captain, C. F. Lavaud, met Hobson and courteously refused to acknowledge his status until he should hear from the French government. Hobson hastily dispatched two magistrates to Akaroa to hold courts as a sign of 'effective occupation' by British subjects. They were followed soon after by *L'Aube*, and on 17 August the Nanto-Bordelaise ship *Comte-de-Paris* arrived, carrying the immigrants.

On 18 September the British flag was raised on the shore of the Waitemata Harbour, land was bought and preparations made for establishing the capital there. The town was named after Hobson's patron, Lord Auckland. In October the first 40 immigrants arrived, from Australia. The official move came in February 1841, when the government officials, their families, and official records travelled from Kororareka in the brig *Victoria*. Compared with Port Nicholson, Auckland was sparsely populated, labour was in short supply, and food had to be imported from the north or from Sydney; prices, wages and rents were high.

Further strife with the New Zealand Company occurred late in 1840 when it offered for sale blocks of land at Wanganui and Taranaki. The Port Nicholson settlers sent a petition to the Queen complaining about Hobson's treatment of them and requesting his dismissal. Hobson dealt with their criticism in a dispatch of 26 May 1841 to the secretary of state.

New Zealand became a Crown colony separate from New South Wales when Hobson took the oath as governor and commander in chief on 3 May 1841; a royal charter had been signed by Queen Victoria the previous November. As governor, Hobson now dealt directly with the home government, but the answers to his dispatches took at least nine months to reach him. He was further handicapped by the inferior advice of his Executive and Legislative councils. Shortland, the colonial secretary, was brusque, tactless and incompetent. George Cooper, the colonial treasurer, was even more unsatisfactory. Francis Fisher, the attorney general, was competent but suffered ill health and soon retired. Hobson was undoubtedly misled in some of his decisions; for example, he purchased land at Kororareka for £15,000, a transaction of which the secretary of state later disapproved. Shortland and the venal Felton Mathew, the acting surveyor general, engaged in questionable appropriation of land in Auckland before the first town land sales.

In August 1841 Hobson was at last able to visit Wellington, travelling on the *Victoria*; he stayed at a waterfront hotel, received settlers and heard their complaints, and selected magistrates. The people of Wellington were reassured about their title to land. Provisions were made for court hearings, and customs duties were removed. Relations with Wellington were improved by this visit, but the company's founding of Nelson was to cause further discord. Hobson sailed to Akaroa, where settlement of French claims was still awaited.

After returning to Auckland, Hobson was joined by more able staff: William Swainson, attorney general from October 1841, and William Martin, judge of the Supreme Court from January 1842. After the murders of a European family, their servant and a Maori child in the Bay of Islands in November 1841, a Maori uprising was feared. However, the Supreme Court trial and subsequent execution of Maketu occurred without conflict, and was taken to emphasise the rule of law over both races. An outbreak of intertribal warfare and cannibalism at Thames was another challenge to Hobson's authority: the offending chief, Taraia, wrote to him, saying the fighting was a Maori affair only. At first Hobson intended to send soldiers, but finally his officials with the assistance of missionaries calmed the situation and admonished the participants. Throughout his administration Hobson had insufficient troops to deal with major conflict, and could only resort to moral suasion. He appointed George Clarke protector of aborigines; this was the beginning of the Native Department, but it was a position compromised by the requirement that Clarke should also act as government land purchaser.

Hobson's government was ridiculed and criticised by journalists in Wellington and Auckland. Over-protective of his authority, he took their words too seriously. The *New Zealand Herald and Auckland Gazette* under the editorship of Samuel Martin, who made swingeing attacks on land policy and government expenditure, was closed down.

The poor state of the government's funds, because of excessive official expenditure and diminishing income from land sales, became a pressing concern. Hobson appealed to the Colonial Office in January 1842. During the long delay before he received a reply, and on the advice of his Executive Council, he issued unauthorised bills on the British Treasury. High land prices and economic depression inevitably led to settler unrest, fomented in Auckland by the Senate clique, a group of radicals led by local merchants, who agitated for representative government. They petitioned the secretary of state, Lord Stanley, for Hobson's recall. When Hobson called a meeting to vote a congratulatory address to the Queen on the birth of a princess, the Senate held a rival meeting and sent a counter-address. As a naval officer accustomed to instant obedience, Hobson found their unruly behaviour intolerable.

In continuing ill health since his first stroke, Hobson suffered another stroke and died at 12.15 a.m. on 10 September 1842. After a military funeral on 13 September, he was interred in a brick vault in the new burial ground at Auckland, now known as Grafton cemetery. Eliza Hobson remained in New Zealand until June 1843, returning to England with her children and living at Stoke, Devonshire. She died in 1876.

William Hobson's intelligence and sound education, most of which was gained at sea, are reflected in his dispatches and letters. He was of medium height and slender build, appearing prematurely aged from years in the tropics and from the inroads of disease. His private conduct was irreproachable; he was a good husband, father and friend, a gracious host and an entertaining speaker. A firm Christian believer and member of the Church of England, he showed marked tolerance for other denominations. In his official duties he strove to be just, and saw protection of the Maori as a major reason for establishing British rule. He could be obstinate and lacking in diplomacy. He was capable of poor

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decisions, but the tragedy of his governorship arose mainly from his ill health and inept advisers, and unrealistic Colonial Office policy towards the new colony.

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