

**JAMES THOMAS MORISSET (1780?-1852)**

**BY**

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MORISSET, JAMES THOMAS (1780?-1852), military commandant, entered the army as an ensign in the 80th Regiment in February 1798. He became a lieutenant in November 1800, saw service in Egypt and India, and in December 1805 purchased a captaincy in the 48th Regiment. He fought in the Peninsular war and was wounded at Albuera. In 1817 he accompanied his regiment to New South Wales, and was promoted major in August 1819. On 24 December 1818 he had been appointed to relieve Captain Wallis [q.v.] as commandant at Newcastle, and made a magistrate. While at Newcastle he earned praise for his continuation of Wallis's work by improving the break-water and building roads and barracks. In 1821 Governor Macquarie visited Newcastle, admired Morisset's work and named Morisset's Lagoon in his honour. Commissioner Bigge [q.v.] praised Morisset's attention to the prisoners, his attempt to adapt punishments to individual convicts, his superintendence of public works and his attention to their durability rather than their ornamentation. In November 1823 he was appointed commandant at Bathurst to relieve William Lawsan [q.v.], and was commended by Governor Brisbane for restoring order after clashes with the natives had led to martial law being declared west of Mourit York in 1824. He was relieved in January 1825 and next month returned to England on leave.

While in England Morisset reported to the Colonial Office on convict control in New South Wales and applied for the post of commandant at Norfolk Island which was about to be re-established as a penal settlement. Bathurst recommended Morisset to Governor Darling for the position, unless he preferred to retain Morisset in Sydney as superintendent of police. But Morisset remained in England and in August 1826 Bathurst told Darling that since Captain Rossi [q.v.] had been appointed superintendent of police, Morisset was to be made commandant of Norfolk Island at a salary of £600. He was promoted lieutenant-colonel on 19 December 1826 and placed on army half-pay.

On 2 May 1826 at New Church, Ryde, Isle of Wight, Morisset married Emily, the daughter of John and Louisa Vaux of Ryde. He arrived in Sydney in the *Harmony* in September 1827 with his wife and child. Darling objected to a married man being stationed at Norfolk Island and felt that Morisset's salary would cause jealousy among the other commandants who were not so highly paid; he argued that Morisset would be more advantageously employed as inspector of penal settlements and until some better arrangement could be made appointed him to act as superintendent of police in place of Rossi, whom he had made collector of customs. Morisset bitterly resented this arrangement, but the Colonial Office did not confirm Rossi's customs appointment, so Darling was forced to reinstate him as

superintendent of police, and in February 1829 to appoint Morisset commandant of Norfolk Island, as originally planned.

He arrived there on 26 May, but the appointment did not come up to his expectations. He was dogged by ill health. He was refused a grant of 2560 acres, and the British government refused his claim for military allowances in addition to his salary. During his tenure on Norfolk Island the convicts made several attempts at mutiny, and Morisset later acquired a reputation for being a stern disciplinarian. He recommended importing a treadmill to Norfolk Island, but the British government objected on grounds of expense; this was a normal form of punishment at time and Morisset does not appear to have been considered unnecessarily harsh by his contemporaries. Both Macquarie and Bigge approved his methods, as did later governors, and the *Sydney Gazette*, 28 November 1827, praised him for being upright and conscientious, and not frightened by daring offenders, while ironically lauding him as an opponent of capital punishment.

In August 1831 Morisset asked for a civil position in the colony, but no office was available. Early in 1834 he sold his Commission in the army, declared his intention to resign and settle in New South Wales, and again sought appointment to any available civil office. Because of a violent nervous disorder he was given a year's leave in Sydney on half-pay.

When his leave expired he resigned his post and bought a farm at Winburndale Brook near Bathurst. There in May 1838 he was appointed police magistrate at a salary of £300, and in January 1841 commissioner of the Court of Requests. He lost heavily in the Bank of Australia's crash in 1842 and was forced to sell his property and devote part of his salary to paying off his debts. On 28 August 1841 the *Australian* described him as too ill and advanced in years to conduct the Bathurst bench properly, yet he continued in his post until his death on 17 August 1852, aged 72. He was buried in the old Kelso churchyard. Emily Morisset died at North Sydney on 7 March 1892, aged 89, and was buried at St Thomas's. They had four sons and six daughters, and in 1825 Morisset also had a son by Joanna Deasey. One son, Edric Norfolk Vaux Morisset, became commandant of native police in Queensland and superintendent of police at Bathurst, Maitland and Goulburn.

References : HRA (1), 10-17, 19; B. W. Champion, 'James T. Morisset', *JRAHS*, 20 (1934); *National Advocate* (Bathurst), 29 Jan 1929; MS cat under J. Morisset (ML); Newspaper indexes under Morisset (ML).

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