

## **ROBERT CARTER/ALOMES** **ca. 1770 - 1853**

If Robert Alomes had kept a journal during his lifetime or written an autobiography, it would have made fascinating reading. His life spanned some very significant years of British history and included almost the first half-century of colonial life in Tasmania. However, for Robert and his contemporaries, there would have been little time for leisure, nor for reflection, as it would have been far more important in those early years to focus on establishing productive farms to provide for their growing families as well as the increasing numbers of convicts and free settlers who arrived during this period. Apart from the convicts, very few of the founding fathers – and mothers - who came to the colony ‘free’, (including the Governor and the Chaplain and, particularly, those who elected to remain in Tasmania) led unblemished lives and many were probably grateful for the opportunity to forge new identities and start life afresh with a relatively clean slate.

For literally hundreds of Robert’s descendants, there are still many unanswered questions and inconsistencies that he took with him to his grave just over 150 years ago and I suspect that there was a tacit agreement, in those early years, not to probe too deeply into each other’s pasts as they, and their children, also frequently inter-married with those of convict and indigenous origin. Although it was not uncommon for emancipated convicts to alter or change their names once their sentences expired, Robert Alomes, who came to Van Diemen’s Land as a ‘free’ Royal Marine, had begun to change his identity and, perhaps also his age, at least at the time of his enlistment. According to the Royal Marine records, Robert’s age in 1800 was 20 but when he died in 1853, his stated age was 83. The name he gave, then, was ‘Robert Alomes’, however, when he arrived at Port Phillip in the ‘Calcutta’, his name was ‘Frenchified’ to Sergeant ‘Gorbert Allomes’ but reverted to Robert Allomes (sic) when he arrived in Van Diemen’s Land on the ‘Ocean’ in 1804. The following details were taken when he enlisted as a marine:

ADM 158/94 Description Book, Portsmouth Division, Royal Marines.<sup>1</sup>

Company	53
Date of attestation	11 May, 1800
Name	Alomes, Robert
Age	20
Height	5’ 5½”
Where born	St Johns, Worcester
Hair	Light
Eyes	Hazel
Complexion	Fair
By whom enlisted	Capt. Patton
Where enlisted	Bath
Trade	Dentist

Several versions of Robert’s early history have been passed down, orally, through his descendants. The first is that he was born in Dublin, Ireland but no trace of his birth can be found. Another story is that he was the son of a British soldier, Colonel Carter, educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and that he subsequently quarrelled with his father, ran away and joined the marines. A third version is that his father wanted him to study medicine, sent him to university in Dublin but that Robert ran away to sea. A fourth version is that he was a captain in the English Navy and another is that he killed someone in a duel and was on the run. Yet another story that has been passed down relates that Robert ‘was a son of a Colonel Carter who had married a Miss Alomes. He received a

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<sup>1</sup> Extract taken from *Sorell Excursion*, 28 September, 1996. Conducted by the Historical Society of Sorell Municipality for the Hobart Town (1804) First Settlers Association and VDL Norfolk Island Interest Group, 91. ADM 157/140 Attestation Forms, Portsmouth Division, Royal Marines.

good education in Dublin, becoming a medical student, but in consequence of a family quarrel he enlisted under his mother's name and, after service at Gibraltar, became a sergeant in the Royal Marines and arrived in Van Diemen's Land on the 'Ocean' in 1804'.<sup>2</sup> According to his enlistment form, it states that he was born in St Johns, Worcester but, while no-one has been able to confirm his birth-place, it could be true. Itinerancy was characteristic of British Army life, especially at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and his father could well have served in Ireland and, similarly, Robert may have actually grown up there. Nevertheless, whatever the reason for Robert's enlistment in the Royal Marines, however, it is probable that, for some reason or other, he was attempting to permanently cut his ties with the old country – and, perhaps also his family – and begin a totally new life.

It would appear that the 'Alomes' name probably originated from Robert's mother, as a common version of the family story that has been passed down suggests that she was of French origin. Indeed, the anglicised version of the name seems to have been initiated by Robert. In the UK today, all people with the 'Alomes'/'Allomes' name are of antipodean origin. The spelling of 'Allomes' using double 'l' was perpetuated by his son (also named Robert), and spread to New Zealand in the 1890s via his son, Joseph Ernest's family, many of whom (according to the family historian of the NZ 'Allomes' branch) have since migrated back across the Tasman and now live mostly in NSW and Queensland. The name is possibly a variant of 'Allom' (which is common in the UK) and it is also possible that it is an anglicised version of the French name, 'Alhaume(s)' that is very common in NE France, particularly from Normandy to Paris, and it would seem to confirm the story that Robert's mother was probably of French origin.

While none of the stories concerning Robert's pre-colonial life can be verified, his ambivalence towards his identity continued for twenty years after his arrival in Van Diemen's Land. He married Elizabeth Bellett in 1809 as Robert *Carter* but a month later they, apparently, were married again as *Alomes*. Robert and Elizabeth had eleven children and the first five (Emmaline, Eliza, William, Jacob, and Mary) were baptised as *Carter*, the sixth (Robert) as *Alomes*, the next two (John and Edward) as *Carter* and then the final three (George, Amelia and Elizabeth) as *Alomes*.<sup>3</sup> It is quite likely that the authorities were aware of aspects of Robert's past because the well-known colonial Chaplain, Reverend Robert Knopwood, officiated at each of his weddings and, at least, eight of the eleven baptisms. With one exception, all of Robert and Elizabeth's children had adopted the *Alomes* name by the time they were married.<sup>4</sup>

Award-winning family historian and Bellette descendant, Thais Mason, was told when researching her bicentennial books on the Bellette family, that when Robert and Elizabeth married in 1809, they were given 'a sumptuous wedding at Government House and that Governor Collins gave the couple 50 sheep and several lambs as a wedding gift and a large grant of land'. Of course, in those days, Government House would have been a relatively humble sort of abode but, after spending six months on the 'Calcutta' in such confined quarters, followed by several difficult months at Port Phillip, then five even more arduous years at the early settlement in Hobart, (including officiating at two court martials in which Robert was demoted in rank as a marine) Collins must have been quite familiar with Robert's personal character and, possibly, was also privy to the reason(s) why Robert could not decide which surname to adopt. It is probably safe, however, to assume that he left Britain for personal reasons.

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<sup>2</sup> Information collected by Alomes descendant, Maurice Potter from the 'Alomes Family' file in the Hobart Archives and from Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania*, Vol 1. If there is any truth in this story, that Robert spent several years as a student followed by several more serving at Gibraltar, possibly in the army, then he may actually have been 30 when he enlisted in the Royal Marines, rather than 20, as stated in the records. His previous service record could also have ensured his entry rank of sergeant and his recorded age at death in 1853 of 83 years would probably then be correct.

<sup>3</sup> Alomes file, Archives of Tasmania.

<sup>4</sup> T. Mason, *From Chains to Freedom: The Bellett Linkage plus the Kidner Family 1788-1988*, Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide, 1988, 183. The third Alomes child, William Frederick, did not marry and possibly died as a young man. See also, J. Given, *The Royal Marines at Port Phillip, New South Wales and at Hobart Town, Van Diemen's Land 1803-1812*, Hobart Town (1804) First Settlers Association, 1997(?), 35.

During the months at Sorrento, in Port Phillip Bay and before the settlement was relocated to Sullivan's Bay in present-day Hobart, Robert was, apparently, involved in an 'incident' with another marine, named Richard Sergeant. It seems that they fancied the same convict girl named Stanfield, fought over her and consequently both were demoted for this misdemeanour, from the rank of sergeant to that of 'private'.<sup>5</sup> Robert, however, was appointed Corporal soon after arriving at Sullivan's Cove and by August 1804 he became Quarter Master Sergeant. In January 1805 he was 'restored to the duty of Sergeant' but by June 1805, he was, once again, 'reduced to the pay and duty of a private'.<sup>6</sup> There is no supporting documentation to explain the circumstances of his demotions and reinstatement of rank in this period. In spite of his court martial at Port Phillip, a story that is familiar to most Alomes families and later frequently mentioned in the press over the years, is that Robert was given the important task of raising the British flag when Collins moved the settlement from Risdon to Sullivan's Cove on 20 February 1804.<sup>7</sup>

According to another story passed down through the Potter line, Robert was the father of the first white baby girl born in Tasmania. As we have already noted, he did not marry until 1809 but, considering the behaviour of the marines – and others – at Port Phillip after the six-month voyage out from Britain, and the proximity of convict women, there could be some truth in this tale. If an illegitimate child had been born, this fact may not have been recorded in Knopwood's journals and most of the official records were burnt immediately following Governor Collins's unexpected and suspicious death in 1810.<sup>8</sup> Many children just did not survive those first few difficult years of the colony and one of the things we do know, with certainty, is that his marriage certificate described Robert as a 'single man'.<sup>9</sup>

The Royal Marine enlistment form stated that Robert was a 'dentist' by trade and this could suggest that he was quite well educated.<sup>10</sup> But, as John Given pointed out, 'in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, 'a dentist relied more on manual strength and dexterity than formal education' and the practice of dentistry was completely unregulated.<sup>11</sup> Even so, (although it is not mentioned in the records) if it is true that Robert had a background in dentistry, however basic, it would have been a very useful skill to have and one cannot help but wonder if he was ever called upon to perform emergency extractions of painful, decayed teeth during those early colonial years.

Elizabeth Bellett, Robert's wife, was born on Norfolk Island in January 1792. Her father was First Fleet convict, Jacob Bellett, who was transported to Australia on the 'Scarborough' and her mother, also a convict, arrived in the Second Fleet in 1790 on the 'Lady Juliana'. She was the eldest of nine children. Jacob and Ann were granted adjoining land grants on Norfolk Island, married in 1791 and produced eight children at regular, two-yearly intervals until the settlement was officially abandoned after 20 years because it was deemed unprofitable. When Jacob's seven-year sentence expired in 1792, he was appointed constable, which would suggest that it was Ann who managed their combined farm of over 50 acres, situated just east of the town of Kingston and overlooking Nepean

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<sup>5</sup> Mason, 45. Also M. Tipping, *Convicts Unbound*, Viking O'Neil, Ringwood, 1988, 328.

<sup>6</sup> Colonial Secretary's Correspondence 1789-1856, Archives of NSW. General and Garrison Orders, 51, 97, 134 and 157.

<sup>7</sup> Personal notes of Maurice Potter. 'According to a 1944 *Mercury* cutting of an obituary to Mr Walter Alomes of Forcett, his grandfather, Robert Alomes, was the first to hoist the Union Jack'.

<sup>8</sup> Tipping, 144.

<sup>9</sup> Jim Potter, a descendant of Robert Alomes has a scrapbook with press clippings collected by his mother in the late 1920s – early 1930s. One article is undated but reports the graveyard at Rokeby and two of the famous people buried there, including Reverend Robert Knopwood and 'Sergeant Alomes...father of the first baby girl born in the colony'.

<sup>10</sup> Mason, 45. According to information given to Thais Mason, the Bellette family 'claim that he was well-educated'.

<sup>11</sup> Given, 34. According to a web source, there were several grades of practitioners who practised dentistry as a specialty, named 'surgeon-dentists' but the vast majority, which included chemists and druggists, were mechanically trained. There were also many 'blatant charlatans'. Dental practitioners could be found in the back of general stores or even in people's front parlours. 'Operators for Teeth' as they were known, offered patients artificial teeth, which were usually taken from the poor or deceased. The treatment was very expensive and only for the wealthy.

Island and the picturesque bay where the ships anchored.<sup>12</sup> They had to leave their home of 18 years, a ‘shingled and boarded two-storey house with brick fireplace, a barn and two thatch and log out buildings’ and they also had 22 acres of wheat and 16 pigs.<sup>13</sup> By this stage, Jacob and Anne’s sentences had long expired and they reluctantly left their beautiful island home and sailed south, in September 1808, to the much cooler, but larger, island of Van Diemen’s Land on the *City of Edinburgh*, arriving in Hobart as ‘Settlers of the Second Class’. Once again, they were forced to re-establish themselves, but in less familiar conditions. Jacob was granted 75 acres at Sandy Bay but reapplied for more suitable farming land in the Sorell area that was granted in 1810. Another child, their ninth, was born in 1812 and then, suddenly, in December 1813, Jacob collapsed and died, possibly of a heart attack, leaving Ann to support and raise seven of their nine children alone.<sup>14</sup>

Jacob, however, had witnessed the marriages of his two eldest daughters approximately a year after their arrival at Hobart. At the age of seventeen, Elizabeth married Robert Alomes, (who was more than twice her age, the same age as her mother, Ann, and only five years younger than Jacob) and just weeks later, her sister, Susannah, married (at the tender age of fifteen) John Birchall, an ex-convict and First Settler of 1804, who was her senior by almost twenty-six years. Both men, however, lived long and productive lives. Each wedding was officiated by Rev. Robert Knopwood at St David’s Church, in Hobart. It is evident that women must have been in great demand in those early days.

Robert had selected and been granted 130 acres of land at Sorell by Governor Macquarie in 1810 and when he was discharged from the Marines in 1812, he was, at last, free to become a full-time farmer. In the 1840s, by now well into his 70s, Robert and his family moved to ‘Muddy Plains’ near Lauderdale or Rokeby, where he continued farming for another decade.<sup>15</sup> He died there, at the age of 83, in September 1853, and was buried at St Matthews alongside many other prominent pioneers, including Rev. Robert Knopwood. Elizabeth was widowed for 13 years and it is possible that, before her death at the age of 75, she had moved in with one of her sons, George, who lived at ‘Rosemount’, South Arm. She was laid to rest in December 1866, at the St Barnabas Church cemetery at South Arm. Robert Alomes was survived by 10 children, 80 grandchildren, and countless other descendants, many of whom have contributed significantly to the fabric of life in Tasmania.<sup>16</sup>

## SOURCES:

J. Given, *The Royal Marines at Port Phillip, New South Wales and at Hobart Town, Van Diemen’s Land, 1803-1812*. Hobart Town (1804) First Settlers Association, 1997 (?)

T. Mason, *From Chains to Freedom*, Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide, 1988.

M. Tipping, *Convicts Unbound*, Viking O’Neil, Ringwood, 1988.

R. Wright, *The Forgotten Generation of Norfolk Island and Van Diemen’s Land*, Library of Australian History, Sydney, 1986.

[Many thanks, also, for various anecdotal references, newspaper clippings, unpublished family histories and photo-copies of official records that have been shared around over the years, in particular information regularly published in the quarterly Newsletter of Hobart Town (1804) First Settlers Association.]

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<sup>12</sup> R. Wright, *The Forgotten Generation of Norfolk Island and Van Diemen’s Land*, Library of Australian History, Sydney, 1986, 56, 68.

<sup>13</sup> Mason, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Mason, 38. Mason suggests that Jacob may have been attending a Masonic meeting at the time of his death and a copy of Jacob’s death notice is reproduced in this book.

<sup>15</sup> According to a census taken in 1842, Robert and Elizabeth were engaged in agriculture and living in a wood and brick house, near Lauderdale, with three daughters, three sons.

<sup>16</sup> John and Jacob died in the 1890s. Eliza died in 1902, Elizabeth Ann in 1915, Amelia in 1917 and George in 1922.

<sup>17</sup> The author is a descendant of Robert and Elizabeth Alomes’s youngest child, Elizabeth Ann, who married John Potter – but that’s another fascinating story!