

## Cultural Advice

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this website contains names, images, and voices of deceased persons.

In addition, some articles contain terms or views that were acceptable within mainstream Australian culture in the period in which they were written, but may no longer be considered appropriate.

These articles do not necessarily reflect the views of The Australian National University.

Older articles are being reviewed with a view to bringing them into line with contemporary values but the original text will remain available for historical context.

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## Bull, John Edward (1806–1901)

by **Donald Grant**

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John Edward Newell **Bull** (1806–1901), military officer and public servant, was born on 11 October 1806 at Athlone, Ireland, the second son of Lieutenant-Colonel Robert **Bull**, C.B., K.H. (1778–1835) and his wife Harriet, née Newell. **Bull** and his two brothers were educated by Rev. Dr W. Barker in England, where the family moved in 1809. They spent their summer holidays after 1815 in France, where their father had distinguished himself as a captain in the Royal Horse Artillery at Waterloo and was serving with the army of occupation. In 1820 **Bull** entered the Military College at Sandhurst and was commissioned ensign in the 78th Regiment in April 1825. Next year he became lieutenant by purchase soon after the regiment was transferred to Ceylon. There he married Mary (1810–1906), daughter of Captain Gunn, paymaster of the regiment, and there two of their nine children were born.

In 1838 the regiment returned to Britain and **Bull** was promoted captain. Two years later, through the influence of Sir Charles Napier who had known his father, **Bull** was appointed deputy judge advocate of the northern district of England, although still remaining attached to his regiment. In 1842 he transferred to the 99th and in June sailed with his regiment in charge of Irish convicts bound for Hobart Town. According to family tradition, he was so moved by the hardships endured by the prisoners that he had their irons removed. In November **Bull** and his family arrived in Sydney, where he was sworn in as a magistrate. Almost immediately he was appointed assistant engineer and superintendent of road-gangs on the Western Road from Emu Plains to Bathurst. In command of about sixty men of his regiment he established his headquarters first at the convict camp near Woodford and later at Blackheath in the Blue Mountains. For the next six years **Bull** remained in this post, 'a colossus of roads in his way'. Unlike some of his predecessors **Bull** seems to have treated his prisoners with much humanity. However, the sensitivity of the public towards convict labour after transportation to New South Wales ended in 1840 may have affected his attitude. In 1849 when road-gangs were finally abolished he transferred to civil employment and was engaged for some time in work on the breakwater at Newcastle.

He was appointed commissioner of crown lands in Victoria and commenced duty as resident commissioner on the Bendigo goldfields in October 1852. When **William Wright**, chief commissioner of the goldfields, transferred his headquarters to Melbourne in March 1853, **Bull** assumed control at Mount Alexander, for a while exercising general supervision over the Bendigo fields as well. He arrived in time to supervise the establishment of Castlemaine, a town to which he contributed much in the next forty-four years. As resident commissioner at Castlemaine he had a heavy responsibility. His district was large, including the goldfields at Mount Franklin, Yandoit, the Loddon, Fryer's Creek, Tarrengower, and at times Avoca, Dunolly and Maryborough. The miners on these fields were perhaps more law-abiding than those in any other district, but no small part of the credit for this must go to **Bull**, whose 'tact and sense of justice' won him the respect of diggers and townspeople alike. After the riots at Ballarat in 1854 the *Mount Alexander Mail*, a paper far from sympathetic towards the government or the goldfields commission, suggested that had the local diggers been subjected to the same goadings as at Ballarat they would have acted similarly. However, 'the orderly agitation that has been going on amongst the diggers of this locality, and the entire absence of unkind allusion on their parts to the local authorities, show that the latter have tempered their administration of the law with wholesome prudence and that they have wisely refrained from executing too rigidly the enactments of an ignorant and impolitic Government'.

**Bull** himself attended and was actually cheered at meetings of the local branch of the Gold Fields Reform League. On one occasion his reference to the gold licence system as 'this unfortunate tax –unfortunate it is for all of us' met with a particularly warm response from the diggers. When the goldfields administration was reorganized in 1855, he was appointed warden of the Castlemaine district, a position he held until his retirement in 1869.

The warmth of the local feeling for **Bull** can partly be explained by his interest in local affairs outside his administrative duties. He played some part in establishing the Castlemaine Hospital, Mechanics' Institute and first National school. He was an active member of the Anglican Church, a trustee of the Savings Bank from its establishment in 1855 to 1895 and first president of the Benevolent Asylum. At various times he was also president of the Castlemaine and Muckleford Agricultural Association, the Campbell's Creek Road Board, the local branch of the Anti-transportation League and the Castlemaine Philharmonic Society. He was the first commanding officer of the Castlemaine Volunteer Rifles, and in 1863 was promoted lieutenant-colonel in charge of the corps in the north-western district.

**Bull**'s later years were spent with his wife at their home near Castlemaine. They celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary in 1890, but suffered a severe blow when their house and all their possessions were destroyed by fire. **Bull** died at his daughter's home in Goulburn, New South Wales, on 25 May 1901.

### Select Bibliography

- A. Sutherland et al, *Victoria and its Metropolis*, vol 2 (Melb, 1888)
- Journal of the Pioneers and Old Residents' Association*, June 1890, Apr 1891, June 1893
- Mount Alexander Mail*, Sept 1854–June 1855
- Colonial Secretary's letters, FB v 3, 52/7, 53/135 (Public Record Office Victoria)
- police and goldfields, 54/3639, K54/14237, 54/14167 (Public Record Office Victoria).

### Related Thematic Essay

- Ken James, *The Surveying Career of William Swan Urquhart, 1845-1864*

### Related Entries in NCB Sites

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- Bull, John Edward**
- Raymond, Samuel (son-in-law)
- Rede, Robert William (work colleague)

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### Life Summary [\[details\]](#)

#### Birth

11 October, 1806  
Athlone, Westmeath, Ireland

#### Death

25 May, 1901 (aged 94)  
Goulburn, New South Wales, Australia

#### Cultural Heritage

- English
- Irish

#### Religious Influence

- Anglican

#### Occupation

- anti-transportationist
- civil engineer
- colonial militia (Australia)
- convict administrator
- defence forces personnel (British)
- goldfields commissioner
- goldfields official
- magistrate
- public servant

#### Military Service

- 99th Regiment
- Castlemaine Volunteer Rifles (Vic)

#### Key Organisations

- Castlemaine Benevolent Asylum (Vic)
- Castlemaine Hospital (Vic)
- Castlemaine Mechanics' Institute (Vic)
- Castlemaine Philharmonic Society (Vic)
- Castlemaine Savings Bank (Vic)

#### Political Activism

- anti-transportationist

#### Workplaces

- Bendigo goldfields (Vic)
- Castlemaine goldfields (Vic)