

William Dawes. Scientist, Governor, Abolitionist: Caught between Science and Religion, by R. de Grijjs & A. Jacob (Springer), 2024. Pp. 272, 23.5 × 15.5 cm. Price £64.99 (hardbound; ISBN 978 3 031 38776 0).

On 1787 May 11, a fleet of 11 ships left Portsmouth, with some 1420 souls on board. This was the first of a planned series of voyages to take those who had been given sentences of banishment from the courts to the newly founded colony in Australia at Botany Bay. The journey took over eight months. Now known as The First Fleet it contained, in addition to those guilty of serious crimes, a new governor for the colony and a number of specialist midshipmen, one of whom, William Dawes, is the subject of the present volume.

Nevil Maskelyne, the Astronomer Royal, had commanded the Board of Longitude to set up an observatory ostensibly to observe the return of a comet which he predicted would re-appear in 1788 or 1789. Dawes had shown a promising command of navigation which he acquired at the Royal Naval Academy in Portsmouth and was also a good linguist, so he was sent to Greenwich to undertake further training under Maskelyne. Dawes had joined the Marines and had seen action in the West Indies against the French. He was regarded as amiable, kind, and truly religious, and what he saw of the slave trade there repelled him.

When The First Fleet reached Australia Dawes set up the first observatory in Sydney Harbour. He had been equipped with instruments from Maskelyne including a clock by Kendall (K1), a quadrant by Bird, and a sextant by Hadley, along with various meteorological instruments. On arrival, Dawes set up an observatory where he made regular measures of gravity, temperature, and atmospheric pressure, but also when the sky was clear at night (and he wasn't particularly impressed with the number of clear nights) he discovered several new nebulae and took observations of the Moon's parallax and the satellites of Jupiter. He was never able to find Maskelyne's comet.

When he left Australia in 1791 that essentially saw the end of his scientific work. He then went to Sierra Leone and in all spent four lengthy periods of time there. His moral and religious beliefs often saw him in conflict with authority. The pressure to ban slavery was being orchestrated by William Wilberforce and others. It had been decided that Sierra Leone would become a private colony incorporated by its own Act of Parliament, supported but not controlled by the British Government. It would be populated by freed slaves from the Americas. This appealed to Dawes who considered slavery to be an abomination. Enough evidence survives to give a good picture of a man who experienced Australia, West Africa, and the West Indies during particularly turbulent times to produce this excellent account which has been meticulously researched, particularly that part relating to his work on behalf of the Church Missionary Society in the West Indies which ultimately saw him at odds with senior members of the Anglican clergy.

The authors summarize him thus: "A genius or a polymath, a theorist par excellence yet lacking enough doses of savvy and pragmatism, his politically woefully inept worldview, combined with an abrasive personality, unmovable, alienating stances and religious convictions set in stone, rendered him a mere footnote in history, fading away from almost all opportunities to make a tangible real-world impact."

His last post took him to Antigua in 1813 where he remained until his death in 1836. This is a most welcome addition to the astronomical literature. His son, William Rutter Dawes, who suffered from ill-health during his youth and remained in England, barely seeing his father, but who rose to prominence in Victorian astronomy deserves similar consideration. — ROBERT ARGYLE.