

# AN AUSTRALIAN CAPTAIN FLINT

## John Edwards

**John Edwards discovers the life and artistic works of Ransome's maternal grandfather, Edward Baker Boulton**

This article is essentially a reproduction from *Mixed Moss*, Summer 1998 with some minor updates to reflect John's subsequent research.



**'Rushcutter's Bay' by Edward Baker Boulton**

# AN AUSTRALIAN CAPTAIN FLINT

## John Edwards discovers the life and artistic works of Ransome's maternal grandfather, Edward Baker Boulton

WHAT WAS *that story the friendliest of all natives used to tell about the blackfellows in the Australian bush who found water by magic in the year of the great drought when the sheep were dying by the thousands on the sheep stations?*

So muses Titty in *Pigeon Post*, Chapter 16. Like many another Australian child, I first read these words some forty years ago, never dreaming that the man who wrote them had any more tangible links with Australia than Dickens when he wrote of Magwitch and Miss Havesham (possibly based on Sydney's jilted Eliza Donnithorne).

It is, however, dangerous to take anything for granted where AR is concerned. His parents' marriage certificate at the end of *Ransome at Home* and an all too brief mention in Brogan's *The Life of Arthur Ransome* aroused my curiosity about his sheep-farming grandfather. Perhaps it was possible to find out more, but my initial local enquiries were not encouraging. It was Margaret Ratcliffe (through Ted Alexander) who broke the drought! Armed with the knowledge that Edith Ransome's father was no mere casual squatter but an artist of some renown,

I was enabled, like Roger in the mine (also in PP), to discover a long-forgotten vein of 'gold'.

Edward Baker Boulton was the son of draper Thomas Boulton of Shropshire. What led him to emigrate to New South Wales in 1836 is, I am sure, the same sense of adventure that led his grandson to cross military lines in revolutionary Russia and to travel to such far-flung places as China, Syria and Egypt.

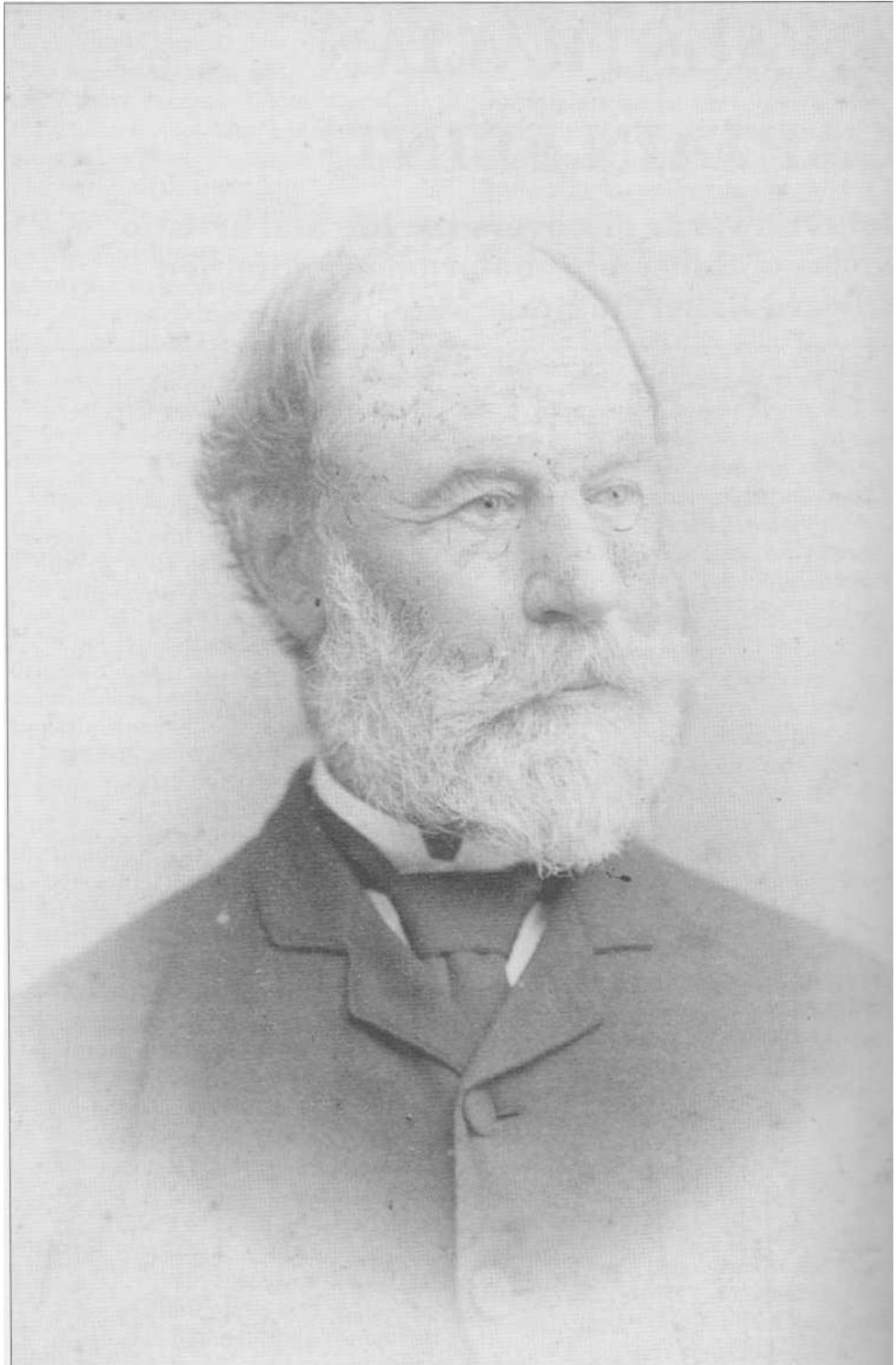
*I wonder whether the real Queen Elizabeth knew much about ships,' said Titty.*

*'That Queen Elizabeth was not brought up close to Sydney Harbour,' said mother.*

*Swallows and Amazons Ch 2*

Arriving in the colony as a wealthy young man of 24, Edward immediately set about making his mark. He had already begun a series of sketches as the ship passed Van Diemen's Land, calling at Hobart Town on the way to Sydney Town. Sydney Harbour made its immediate impression, as it does on all who come here, and Edward made many sketches and paintings featuring the Harbour throughout his life. Of equal interest to the young Boulton were the mansions which had sprung

*Edward Baker Boulton*



up on each headland of the south-eastern shore. These villas were occupied by some of the most successful and influential families in the colony, and Boulton soon came to mix with them socially, to marry into one of the families and to actually live in one of the mansions he had sketched some thirteen years earlier.

Sydney in the 1830s was in a building boom. Convict transportation was drawing towards a close, and there was little to indicate the bank crash of the 1840s around the corner. Boulton seems to have survived this depression easily as he had taken up land at Walcha (rhymes with 'polka') in northern New South Wales. The property bore the curious name of Bergen-op-Zoom, after the Dutch town, not far from Vlissingen (Flushing in WD). He was to occupy and add to this property for 40 years, until his death in 1895, when Bergen-op-Zoom was inherited by six of his many children as tenants-in-common. In one of his rare mistakes about Australian matters, AR describes it as 'not far from Sydney', a proposition which can only be supported by those who believe that the Lake District is not far from Portsmouth — a mere 300 miles. The sheep station still operates today though sadly the farmhouse depicted in Edward's water-colours has long gone.

In 1838 Edward had joined the illustrious ranks of the Australian Club, the colony's first attempt to mimic the gentlemen's clubs of Piccadilly. Its luminaries read like a *Who's Who* of power and influence, including the Governor, Sir George Gipps, the explorer Captain Sturt, and James and William Macarthur from whom Edward bought merino sheep in 1846.

Another club member was the artist Conrad Martens, who had also arrived in 1835 (he had been an unofficial artist for Charles Darwin on the *Beagle* but had changed ships). Martens became a professional artist and the darling of the society set, and his reputation is still high. Boulton's status was seen to be that of an amateur and has gradually slipped into obscurity. Yet their work was astonishingly similar in subject, style and quality. As at 2022, my research has uncovered no fewer than 81 extant works (including 16 sketches in a sketchbook), most of which are in Sydney in public libraries and private collections, with a few in the UK and New Zealand. From such sources as nineteenth century exhibition catalogues and reviews, there are another 35 works whose whereabouts are at present unknown.

With his marriage to Mary Atkinson in 1850, Edward began his 'Australian' family — 4 girls and 3 boys in rapid succession so that when the SS *Camperdown* left Sydney on May 18 1859, it carried the Boulton family whose oldest child was 8.

*The three days before she started we were on the vessel helping her to get her cabin into some sort of order. When the vessel sailed she was in great distress, disliking the vessel, captain, mate and men. And well she might for the vessel was an old leaky thing, all down on one side, her cabins small and low, the cuddy*

### ***Edward Baker Boulton***

*uncomfortable, with the steward's pantry just under the poop stairs, so dangerous for the children!...*

*Rumours, too, were afloat that the pumps would not work and that she was an old leaky tub. With all these annoyances Mrs. B was to put up with. There were also twenty-six children on board...Poor Mrs. B we left crying on the bed."*

*Blanche Mitchell's diary of 1858-61*

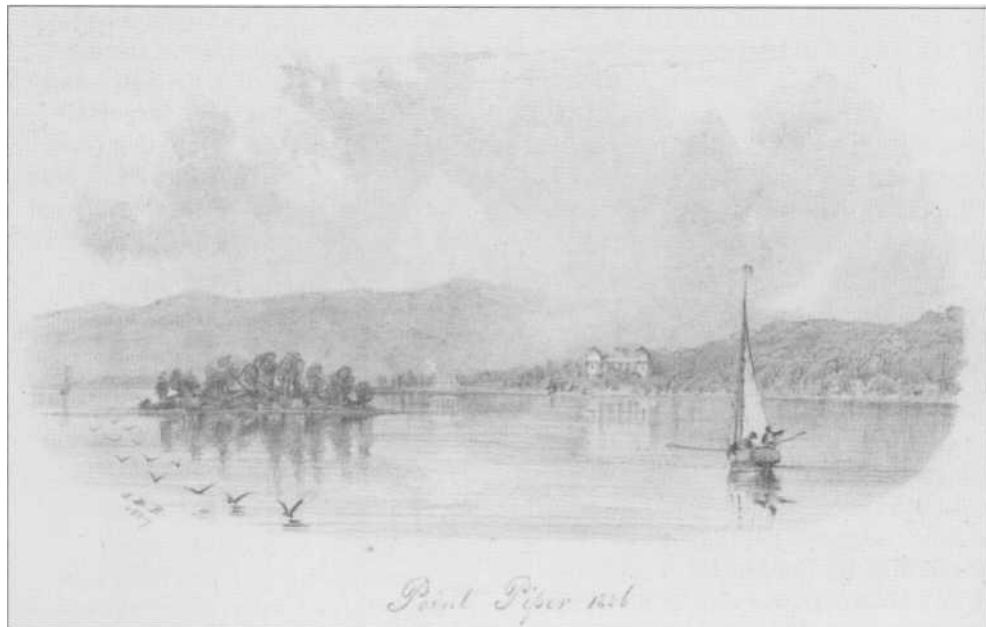
No wonder!

Somehow, they got to England but the wretched voyage must have affected Mary Boulton's health for she was dead within a year. Despite his obvious ability to pay for any number of servants, the pressure must have been on Edward to remarry and to provide his very young family with a new mother. This he did without undue delay as he married Rachel Emma

Gwynn on 6 June 1861 at Shrewsbury. The first of their ten children was Edith, AR's mother.

Eventually, the grown 'Australian' family all moved back to Sydney and then to Bergen-op-Zoom, while the 'English' family grew up in England. However, there was a considerable amount of crossover between the two families: three of the 'Australians' had been born in England, and at least two of the 'English' went to Australia.

Edward seems to have commuted between his two families and found time to travel in Europe as well. As a man of leisure, he continued to paint and to exhibit with some acclaim. Hugh Brogan is in error in describing Boulton as having '*retired to Clifton*'. Certainly Edward spent some time in Clifton but he was also clearly in Sydney and at the property in the 1870s and 80s,



The *Amazon* approaching Wild Cat Island? No. The lake is Sydney Harbour sketched in 1836 by Ransome's grandfather. The Island is Clarke Island and the villa is Henrietta Villa on Point Piper, the home of his future first wife Mary.

and by the 1890s had 'retired' to Bergen-op- Zoom, as his correspondence and death certificate clearly testify.

Even less sustainable is Brogan's assertion that AR's genetic inheritance was 'a disturbing heredity, and although we now know that Arthur would mint it into gold...his father, who was intensely ambitious in a conventional way, cannot really be blamed for fearing the worst.'

*The Life of Arthur Ransome.* Chapter 1

Really? This same conventional academic, Cyril Ransome, had the good fortune to marry into a wealthy family whose creative talents were at least as fine as those of the Collingwoods, who are conventionally supposed to have set the young Arthur on the road to the literary and artistic life.

Consider the following: Edward Baker Boulton has a long career in which he, like his grandson, chooses the artistic path rather than the conventional routine. He is genetically responsible for at least four talented children: George, William and Annie from the first family become artists in their own right, whereas the second family produces the writer Helen and the artist and writer Edith. In her turn, Edith produces no less than four artists and writers including AR. If this is 'disturbing heredity' then we should all be so cursed! It is obvious from the facts that the genetic and social predisposition towards a creative life came to Arthur from the Boultons, long before the Collingwoods appeared on the scene.

In the Lakeland books, the theme of the absent father is a constant. The children experience adult authority almost entirely through their two

natural mothers and sundry surrogate mothers such as Mrs. Tyson, Mrs. Dixon and, of course, Susan. The only surrogate father is Captain Flint who comes from that less threatening group of male relatives — uncles and grandfathers. Ransome lost his grandfather when he was 11 and his father when he was 13, so this exactly mirrors his own experience.

In 1885, the year after Arthur's birth, Cyril Ransome delivered a lecture series in Leeds and published them in book form as *Our Colonies and India: How we got them and why we keep them*. By 1895, the book had gone into its fourth edition.

As early as 1786, naval cartographer Alexander Dalrymple had challenged British territorial claims in Australia and also had ridiculed transportation as a punishment, thereby expressing an English dissenting view in the very moment of empire building.

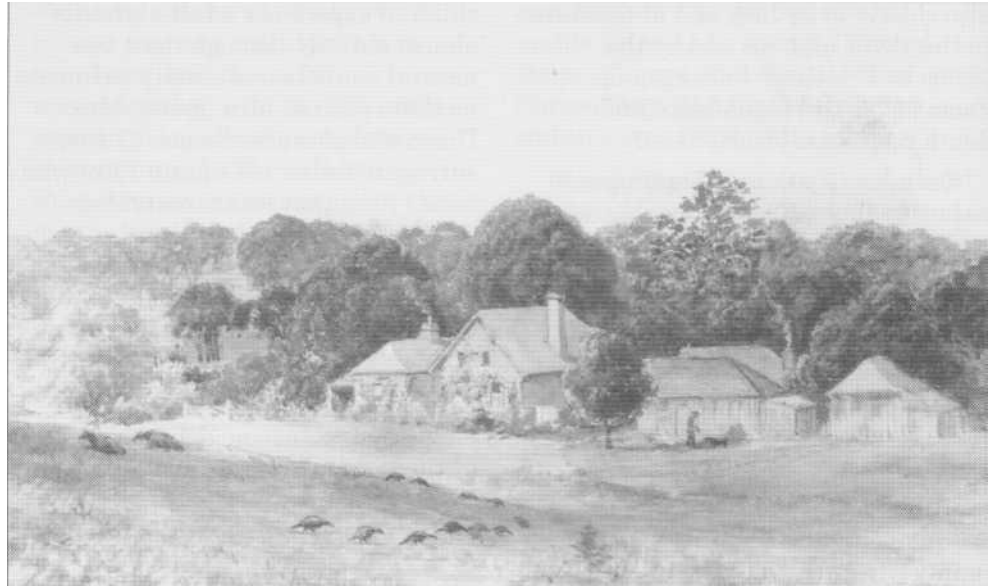
In his own time, AR was to report on the Russian Revolution with such candour as to shock the British establishment. His father, however, was not one to flout the conventional wisdom of his times.

Cyril's book contains little information specific to Australia and nothing whatsoever about the dispossession of the indigenous people. Arthur's information about Australia was not therefore to come from his father, whose knowledge was only theoretical. In his *Autobiography*, he has a clear remembrance of and affection for grandfather Boulton and his family

*...enhanced by that romantic shadowy Australia, from which they appeared now and then bringing strange gifts' including sharks' teeth, tropical shells and a boomerang.*

## *Edward Baker Boulton*

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Bergen-op-Zoom c1850

*He and my grandmother had endless stories of black fellows, bush rangers, kangaroos, laughing jackasses and such, and used to bring back with them emus eggs of vast size, the skins of snakes they had met and killed in their Australian garden...*

Furthermore, Edith and her father exchanged frequent letters, some of which are preserved in the Brotherton Library in Leeds. There is also at least one letter from her mother writing from Australia and evidence of many more signals to Mars between other members of this large family. Apart from her father, Edith's relatives in Australia included her brothers, Herbert and Tom, three half- brothers and four half-sisters all living at Bergen-op-Zoom until Herbert and Tom went to Canada and one of the half-sisters married and moved to her husband's property near Canberra. Edith also had three uncles in Australia as her father's brothers:

George, Philip and Thomas Baker Boulton had also been pastoralists in NSW since at least 1842. George Baker Boulton died at Camden, near Sydney in 1879. In fact, only the eldest of the five Boulton brothers failed to emigrate - the Rev William Baker Boulton remained in Shropshire as a vicar and schoolmaster, but there is evidence that he, too, had contemplated emigration in 1837. After Edward's death, correspondence would no doubt have continued with the remaining Boultons at Bergen-op- Zoom and elsewhere in the colony.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Ransome's descriptions of Australia, fragmentary as they are, have for an English writer of his time, an accuracy only attainable through intimate knowledge. In fact, these fragments completely mirror the very aspects of colonial life which so impressed his grandfather: Sydney Harbour and life in the country with its inevitable

*Edward Baker Boulton*

No.	Date and place of death	Name and occupation	Sex and age	Cause of death Duration of last illness; medical attendant; when he last saw deceased	Name and occupation of father Name and maiden surname of mother
1895	11. October	Edward Boulton	Male 55 years	(1) Sudden decay (2) 14 years & months (3) J. Stephens (4) 11. October 1875	Thomas Boulton Boulton Elizabeth Boulton
25	Bridgnorth, Shropshire	Elizabeth Boulton	Female 55 years		Thomas Boulton Boulton Elizabeth Boulton

Baker Boulton's death certificate showing—  
Above: he died at Bergen-op-Zoom on 11 October 1895 and giving cause of death and his parents' names.  
Below: his place of birth (Bridgnorth, England), details of marriage and listing all seventeen of his children.

Place of Birth	Name and Occupation	Sex and Age	Years	Notes
Bridgnorth, England	Edward Boulton	Male 55 years	44	By first wife
Bridgnorth, England	Mary Boulton	Female 55 years	43	
Bridgnorth, England	Elizabeth Boulton	Female 55 years	42	
Bridgnorth, England	George Boulton	Male 55 years	39	
Bridgnorth, England	Mary Boulton	Female 55 years	37	
Bridgnorth, England	Robert Boulton	Male 55 years	35	
Bridgnorth, England	Elizabeth Boulton	Female 55 years	33	
Bridgnorth, England	Arthur Boulton	Male 55 years	32	
Bridgnorth, England	George Boulton	Male 55 years	31	
Bridgnorth, England	Thomas Boulton	Male 55 years	30	
Bridgnorth, England	Maria Boulton	Female 55 years	28	
Bridgnorth, England	Thomas Boulton	Male 55 years	27	
Bridgnorth, England	Maria Boulton	Female 55 years	26	
Bridgnorth, England	Elizabeth Boulton	Female 55 years	24	
Bridgnorth, England	3 males deceased			

drought and bushfires. PP could easily be transposed to an Australian setting with very few changes, although it would take more than Colonel Jolys and his volunteers to put out one of our major bushfires! As for 'blackfellows', 'savages' and natives in general, Ransome's attitude is that of his generation (and his grandfather's) - patronising and Eurocentric. It is, however, not malicious. There is an aboriginal bora (initiation) ring at Walcha, and local tribal life would certainly have been observed by the white invaders, often without realising how intrusive their presence was.

*I can see my grandfather now, skipping nimbly out of the way of a boomerang flung by himself when it came spinning back to him with greater speed and accuracy than he had expected.*

*Autobiography*

Nor does Boulton's influence stop at fragments of colonial colour. The friendly uncle Jim Turner is, of course, rather like Ransome himself but is even more like the genial grandfather Boulton. Like Captain Flint, Boulton had travelled the world on sailing ships but not as a professional sailor like Captain Walker, RN, or Peter Duck.

Even if Boulton did not observe a corroboree, he certainly met those who had, and he would have described such activity to the friendliest of all natives. The Eel Dance in SW is a sort of melange of African, cannibal islander and Aboriginal ingredients, whipped together with a large dose of European fantasy. However the body painting in AR's illustration looks alarmingly authentic.



## ***Edward Baker Boulton***

He obviously loved children and fathered 17 of them. He was very sociable and loved a good party: he attended the Mayor of Sydney's Fancy Dress Ball of 1844 dressed as a gentleman of the 17th century. In fact AR laments that his maternal grandfather was '*unfortunately, not a bushranger*', but who can doubt that he would have easily adopted the pose of a pirate of the High Seas?

Apart from its egress to the Pacific Ocean, Sydney Harbour is like nothing so much as a big lake with a number of rivers (the Parramatta, Cook's or George's), any one of which could well be the Amazon. Boats and islands abound in both Edward's Harbour pictures and in Blanche Mitchell's account of her neighbours, the Boultons. Any reader of the Lakeland novels will recognise familiar territory as she describes the constant round of fishing excursions, picnics, parties and balls with 'Mr. B'.

*That grandfather counted for a lot in my childhood and indeed much later and long after he had gone back to Australia for the last time and was dead. I wonder whether any of his pictures are still remembered in Australia. He was very much more interested in his painting than his sheep.*

*Ransome to an Australian relative in 1962.*

Ransome's characters are of course amalgams of several real people. Edward Baker Boulton is at last revealed as the model for Captain Flint.

*Note: Like his daughter Edith, Boulton's favourite medium was watercolour. His early work was in pencil. Mention is made of some landscapes in oil, but I have yet to identify any of these. Ranging from 1836 to the 1890s, some 42 pictures have so far been found extant and a further 24 titles are 'whereabouts unknown'. Most of the pictures are in Sydney, but Boulton is not a well-known artist and his work is largely in gallery vaults.*

*Acknowledgements:*

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*Top bloke Ted Alexander for his encouragement. My wife Ruth Saunders for logistical support. The Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales for permission to reproduce the sketch of Point Piper; permission to quote from Blanche Mitchell's diary and for being a cornucopia of colonial connections.*

*John Ryrie (Boulton's great grandson) for the picture of Bergen-op-Zoom (Copy held by the Mitchell Library), permission to quote from AR's letter.*

*The Lupton family for Boulton's portrait.*

*The NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages has authorised the reproduction of the certified copy of Boulton's death certificate for publication in this article.*

*John Edwards*