

ANOTHER FLAWED FOUNDING FIGURE

It is interesting how historical figures are often lionised by historians and biographers. Glaring personal inadequacies, moral failures and character flaws often get overlooked. It seems like the good that they might have achieved in their life requires them to be elevated to sainthood.

John Batman was for instance always portrayed as handsome and intrepid, which he certainly was, before catching syphilis in 1833. When he came to Port Phillip in 1835 he was disfigured by cancerous growths and wore a handkerchief over his face. He was even referred to by local Aboriginal people as '*No-nose Mr Batman*'.

Authors have however tried to shield Batman's reputation by claiming that that his syphilis was congenital and that he was '*utterly faithful to his wife*'. The plain fact is however, that it is medically quite impossible for Batman's syphilis to have been congenital. It could only have been a product of his legendary frequenting of Tasmanian brothels.

His involvement in a massacre of at least fifteen Aboriginal people during the 'Black War' in 1829 has also been downplayed. It is more likely double that number. Batman also cold bloodedly executed two wounded Aboriginal men who could not keep up the forced march to Launceston. This has however been portrayed as a humane act of 'mercy killing' despite it being he who wounded them and forced them to march.

By comparison John Pascoe Fawkner, Batman's competitor for the title of 'Founder of Melbourne', was far more saintly. Fawkner was just an aggravating, argumentative and abrasive character, who spent his adult life skirting around the edges of the law.

However, the person who takes the cake amongst Melbourne's flawed founding figures is John Helder Wedge, the surveyor in Batman's Port Phillip Syndicate. He was often referred to by authors as '*the gentlemanly John Wedge*' he was commonly seen as a paragon of virtue. Wedge is held out to have been a man of principle, a person who fearlessly exposed corruption and who had humane interest in the welfare of Aboriginal people.

Nothing could be further from the truth, and it only takes the unpicking of one story to demonstrate this.

In May 1828 the thirty-five year old bachelor Wedge, led a party on a government survey of northwest Tasmania. While on the coast, Wedge and his men saw an Aboriginal man watching them. When the man moved away they followed him and came across a nearby camp of sixteen men, women and children.

Wedge's men opened fire without any warning or provocation and as the group fled, one man was killed. So right there as starters, Wedge was as at least an accessory to murder.

What happened next was documented by several in the party, so is not in dispute. In the panic to get away, a boy named Wheete aged about ten, fled into a raging sea and was seemingly drowned. When his limp body was washed ashore, Wedge revived him.

However instead of allowing the exhausted and distressed boy to return to his parents, Wedge tethered Wheete's wrist to his own wrist and forced the boy to go with him.

At one stage Wheete got free and ran, but Wedge pursued and caught him. He then tied Wheete's hands behind his back and made the boy walk in front of them. Wedge kept the boy tied like this for the next three days until they were well away from Wheete's home country.

Wedge clearly showed not the slightest compassion or empathy for the distraught child. He instead treated him like a random wildlife specimen to be collected and put in a jar. It was a heartless act of child abduction.

But this is far from the end of the story. After keeping Wheete with the survey party for the next three weeks, Wedge took him back to his residence in Launceston, where he kept him as a curiosity and conversation piece for his house guests. Wheete never saw his parents again.

Two years later in September 1830 Wheete died from a chest infection, and Wedge wrote to a friend that he *'missed him very much'*. It should be noted that the completely self-focussed Wedge expressed no appreciation of the suffering that Wheete had endured before dying, just his own claimed feelings.

There was no sense of grief evident for Wheete. Wedge simply went and took **three** more Aboriginal boys into his custody. Wedge also had a female Aboriginal child with him in 1831, who kept running away.

My opinion of John Wedge is coloured by the fact that I worked for many years in the child protection service. There I specialised in substantiating child sexual abuse and in doing so developed a complex model of verification. I was ultimately in 2002 awarded a Doctorate for this work. Part of this model examined the typical personality traits of abusers, so my opinion carries some professional authority with it.

It is accordingly my firm and unequivocal professional opinion that John Helder Wedge was a paedophile.