

Brassey, Thomas (1836–1918)

by **B. R. Penny**

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Thomas Brassey (1836-1918), governor, was born on 11 February 1836 at Stafford, England, eldest son of Thomas Brassey, railway contractor, and his wife Maria Farrington, née Harrison. He was educated at Rugby School and University College, Oxford (B.A., 1859; M.A., 1864; D.C.L., 1888) and was called to the Bar, Lincoln's Inn, in 1866. After several attempts between 1861 and 1866 to enter parliament as a Gladstonian Liberal, he won Hastings in 1868, holding the seat until 1886. He was civil lord of the Admiralty in 1880-84 and its parliamentary secretary in 1884-85.

Brassey's passionate love of the sea dated from boyhood and as often as he could he cruised in his yacht the *Sunbeam*. He was an enthusiastic publicist of naval and maritime affairs and labour conditions: in the House, in public lectures, letters to the press and in pamphlets and books, most notably *Work and Wages* (1872), *The British Navy* (1882-83) and the periodical *Brassey's Naval Annual* (from 1886).

For his work in establishing volunteer naval reserves he was appointed K.C.B. (1881) and was raised to the peerage as Baron Brassey of Bulkeley, Cheshire, in August 1886. In 1860 he had married Annie Allnutt, who wrote lively, popular accounts of their travels together; she died aboard the *Sunbeam* on 14 September 1887, seven days out of Port Darwin. On 8 September 1890 he married Sybil de Vere Capell, youngest daughter of Viscount Malden. Brassey was lord-in-waiting to Queen Victoria in 1893-95 and president of the Institute of Naval Architects in 1893-96. He had joined the Imperial Federation League soon after its foundation in 1884, serving as honorary treasurer and vice-president; in July 1892 he chaired the committee which recommended its dissolution.

In 1895 Brassey accepted the position of governor of Victoria, arriving in Melbourne in the *Sunbeam* on 25 October with his wife and little daughter. He travelled within Victoria, visited other Australian colonies including Western Australia where he owned land, and returned to England on leave from March to October 1898. In November 1899 Brassey refused Sir George Turner's request for a dissolution but, accepting his resignation, he adopted his suggestion that Allan McLean be sent for. A year later the McLean government was defeated at a general election and subsequently in the House, and Turner returned to office on McLean's recommendation. No one seriously disputed the governor's discretionary right to refuse the dissolution, although the *Age* considered it unnecessarily postponed the people's political judgment. Brassey had simply followed a well-defined procedure; he explained to the Colonial Office that the change of ministry would not affect either Australian Federation or Victorian support for the British government's action in South Africa.

Brassey's support for Federation was unwavering, and impulsive to a degree which embarrassed Imperial officials involved in negotiating the final form of constitution. He gave unqualified praise to Deakin's part in the movement. Brassey's insistent proposals for careful selection of the first Australian governor-general were dismissed as emanating from an impractical ass whom some officials suspected of hankering for Federation honours himself. His eager reports of premature Victorian volunteering for service in South Africa, and his promotion of Australian naval reserves, met with a cool reception although Chamberlain was readier than his colleagues to appreciate the loyal sentiments behind the dispatches.

Brassey's governorship marked the end of an era. He left Melbourne on the *Sunbeam* on 13



Thomas Brassey (1836-1918), by unknown photographer, 1895

La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, IAN01/11/95/2-4

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

Alternative Names

- Brassey, first Earl

Birth

11 February 1836
Stafford, Staffordshire, England

Death

23 February 1918
England

Cultural Heritage

- English

Occupation

- governor

January 1900, before his full term was completed and, after his return to England, pursued his creditable but undistinguished career. He continued to write and speak on Imperial and naval subjects, frequently making warm references to Victoria. Further honours were bestowed on him: G.C.B. in 1906, lord warden of the Cinque Ports in 1908, an earldom in 1911. Characteristically he sailed the *Sunbeam* to Gallipoli in 1915 and then handed her over to the Indian government for use as a hospital ship. He died in England on 23 February 1918, survived by his second wife and their daughter, three daughters of his first marriage, and briefly by his heir.

Select Bibliography

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