

Sir Evan Nepean

1752 - 1822

Mumbai Legacy Project
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In the words of Admiral Sir John Jervis, 1st Earl of St Vincent, Evan Nepean is a name that stands as a testament to 'superior talent for business, unremitting diligence, and integrity'. Evan Nepean was one of the most successful civil servants of his day (Thorne 1986, 653). Born in 1752, he pursued a career as a naval officer, public servant, and parliamentarian, spanning nearly five decades. Yet, in the heart of Mumbai, a city pulsating with life and history, he remains lost in the chaotic charm of the metropolis. The Nepean Sea Road in Malabar Hill bears his name, a memoir of the story of a man who once served as the Governor of the Bombay Presidency (1812 – 1819).



Evan Nepean was born in Saltash (South Cornwall, England) to Nicholas Nepean and his Welsh second wife, Margaret Jones. Evan was the second of three sons the couple had. Nicholas who served as Mayor of Saltash in 1791 (referred to as General Nepean in Porter's 1905 'Around and About Saltash') was landlord of the Green Dragon Hotel in Fore Street which was where his sons were born. (Lister 2023) In the fabric of the Nepean lineage, destiny seemed etched in the very fibres of their being. The narrative of their family unfolded with a dramatic stroke of fate as both sons, Evan and Nicholas, were beckoned by the call of duty that resonated through their bloodline. In 1773, Evan Nepean set his foot in the Royal Navy as a civilian clerk to Captain Hartwell aboard the HMS Boyne at Devonport. Meanwhile, in 1776, the younger sibling Nicholas, began his military career as second lieutenant in the Royal Marines. (Morgan 1987) Nepean served in the American War of Independence, during which he was promoted to purser in 1775. In April 1776, Nepean joined Admiral Molyneux Shuldham serving as his secretary first in Bristol and then at Plymouth. His last navy posting was to HMS Foudroyant, as secretary to Captain John Jervis (later Earl St Vincent).

In 1782, at the age of 29, Nepean's career took a meteoric advance as he went from serving as purser on a navy ship to being appointed Permanent Under Secretary of State at the newly-formed Home Department (now the Home Office) by the Prime Minister, the Earl of Shelburne. The Prime Minister certainly acted on the recommendation of Jervis, a close friend of his. Jervis's patronage and judgement were to prove well (Joyce 2016).

The year 1788 was a luminous beacon. As the Under-Secretary to the Home Secretary, Lord Sydney, in the Cabinet of the Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, Nepean showed great foresight and vision. Robert Hughes, who described Nepean in his seminal work *The Fatal Shore*, said that Evan was far more able and practical than Lord Sydney himself (Hughes 1988, 66). In the corridors of power, it was Evan's pen that inscribed the fateful proposals, the "Hheads of a Plan for effectually disposing of convicts", birthing a scheme to colonise a distant, uncharted land that would echo through the ages as Australia. With meticulous detail and unwavering determination, Nepean became the conduit, the liaison with Captain Arthur Phillip, the stalwart commander of the First Fleet, destined to carve civilization's footprint upon the uncharted shores of Sydney Cove in Port Jackson. The Union Jack ascended to Australia on 26th January 1788, a date etched forever in memory and commemorated as Australia Day. Nepean's vision resonates in the names that adorn the land, the majesty of Point Nepean in Victoria, the serenity of the Nepean River in New South Wales, and the embrace of Nepean Bay on Kangaroo Island in South Australia.





In 1794, his seventh successive senior, Henry Dundas, took a new office as Secretary for War, and Nepean's 12 years of under-secretary ended as he became the first to hold the office of Under-Secretary for War. William Huskisson was appointed in 1793 to assist the Under-Secretary in dealing with emigres from the Revolution in France since Nepean himself could not speak French. He admired Nepean as "no less remarkable for his indefatigable attention to business than for his upright and honourable conduct".

Nepean left the War Office to become Secretary of the Admiralty in 1795, and Huskisson succeeded him. In September 1804, he was a Lord Commissioner of the Admiralty, with a seat on the Board of Admiralty. However, the sudden death of Pitt in 1806 effectively ended Sir Evan's active career at the centre of British public life. From that year until 1812, after restoring a more stable government, he held no office in national affairs (J and Sydenham 1990).

In 1812, at the age of 60, he became Governor of the State of Bombay, a position he held until 1819. Within the vibrant embrace of India, he found solace in the splendour of its flora and fauna. Copies of letters written in 1814, still in the possession of the Nepean family, give detailed descriptions of the specimens he had collected and sent to his friends in England. Long before it began housing chief ministers, Malabar Hill was home to tigers, hyenas, 108 species of plants and trees and 35 species of butterflies. One of the four bungalows of present-day Raj Bhawan, Jal Laxan, was initially built as a small room, probably a hunting cottage, by Nepean and was later developed by his successor, Lord Mountstuart Elphinstone (Ram 2021).

According to Sadashiv Gorakshkar, historian and author of Raj Bhavans in Maharashtra, Governor Jonathan Duncan and Evan Nepean were the only exceptions to all the governors who resided at Parel House between 1771 and 1885, and interestingly, Nepean was the last Governor to live at the Fort House and the first to build a bungalow for himself at Malabar Point (Mirror 2023).

Sir Evan Nepean was also the Vice President of the British and Foreign Bible Society and had heard John Wesley preach when he was a boy. Thus, he offered the American Board's missionaries his house when they arrived in India. The missionaries were Judson, Nott, Hall, Newell, and Rice (Wise 1884, 24). Around the same time, the Charter Act of the British Parliament received royal assent on 21st July 1813, which recognized the duty of the people of Great Britain to promote Christianity in India (Tracy 1840, 48). Some American missionaries visited them. Many gentlemen extended their sympathies to them. The missionaries found solace in Sir Evan Nepean's aid. Despite their hardships, they lacked nothing essential and soon secured passage to Ceylon. Nepean's heartfelt letters to Lord Molesworth in Galle, Ceylon, ensured a warm welcome for these tireless emissaries in Bombay (Wise 1884, 167-168).

Towards the end of the year, the missionaries learned, with gratitude, that they were to be permitted to remain in India. In a letter dated 29th November, His Excellency Sir Nepean said, "I can now assure you that you have my entire permission to remain here, so long as you conduct yourselves in a manner agreeable to your office. I shall feel no difficulty in allowing you to go to any part of this Presidency, and I heartily wish you success in your work" (Tracy 1840, 55). This pivotal moment, when fate hung in the balance, found its resolution through Nepean's benevolent actions. He granted the missionaries not just a sanctuary, but also support weighted with authority and compassion.

In the quiet solitude of his Dorset home, Sir Evan Nepean drew his final breath in October 1822. His passing marked a turning point in British governance. But across continents, in the vibrant heart of Mumbai, the essence of Sir Evan Nepean's work lives on as the city pulses with stories untold. A winding road bears his name, a humble homage to the enigmatic Governor who once graced the shores of Bombay. Nepean Sea Road is not just a mere street but a poignant reminder of a Governor who transcends the boundaries of time and place.



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