In May 1813, Blaxland, Wentworth, and Lawson crossed the Blue Mountains with servants and dogs, guided by an emancipist whose name sounded like “James Byrne”. A year later the same man gave initial assistance to Cox in the development of the road across the Blue Mountains. From the accounts and documents associated with these two expeditions, we know that the guide was resident in the Nepean area and had spent time in the Blue Mountains, hunting kangaroos and building relationships with the Dharug people, from whom he learnt the route through the difficult terrain. He was rewarded for his part in the 1813 expedition with a total of £15 and 100 acres, and is revealed to be illiterate by signing receipt of his £10 reward with an X.

Who was this man?

As readers can imagine, the guide’s surname appears in many spellings, with y, u, or ou, with and without final e, and sometimes with final s. I will use the initials JB to cover all possible variations.

Eight convicts of this name are known to have arrived in New South Wales before 1813. Five of them are either dead by 1813 or are untraceable. The three contenders for the guide are the two men listed as James Byrne who arrived on Ann (also Anne) in 1801 (JB1 and JB2) and the James Bourn who arrived on Hercules in 1802 (JB3). All three were Irish and the ships on which they arrived both had uprisings while at sea. JB1 and JB3 were rebels sentenced to seven years, while JB2 was a non-political offender on a life sentence.

Many of the rebels on Ann had been tried in courts martial in Wicklow, an area of great opposition to British rule, where “Judges could not go, and Juries could not be found”, to quote Freemen’s Journal (23 February 1799). These summary courts did not record proceedings well, so Ann did not carry a record of the convicts’ offences or the dates of their trials. Some later documents assign places and dates to the trials of JB1 (usually Wicklow 1800) and of JB2 (usually Carlow 1800), but the exact dates of their trials and offences remain unconfirmed. JB3 was convicted in Antrim in 1801.
Each of these three convicts has been identified as the guide on the 1813 expedition. Most scholars assert that the guide was one of the convicts from *Ann*, some of them selecting either JB1 or JB2. The family historian for JB1’s family, Joe Fulton, in contrast, is sceptical about the quality of the evidence. I argue that neither of the convicts from *Ann* (JB1 and JB2) could have been the Blue Mountains guide but that there is strong evidence to show that the convict from *Hercules* (JB3) was the guide.

*The guide was free in May 1813.* JB3 became free in 1808 and JB1 became free, after a delay caused by lack of documentation from *Ann*, in 1810, but JB2 only received his conditional pardon in June 1813 and an Absolute Pardon in 1814.

*The guide was illiterate.* JB2 and JB3 both signed their marriage registrations with an X, but, JB1 was fully literate. On 23 June 1804, he settled an account at Hassalls with the enormous sum of £81 12s 2½d and signed as “James Byrne”, and in old age he corresponded regularly with his scattered children.

JB3 already looks like the best candidate for the guide, as he was free in 1813 and was illiterate, but there is stronger evidence.

*The guide was resident in the Nepean in 1813.* All three convicts were in the area in 1806, with the 1806 Muster showing JB1 and JB2 assigned to “Mr Hobby” and “Mr Blaxall”
Anthea Fraser Gupta, James Byrne the Blue Mountains Guide

 (= Blaxcell), though we cannot tell which of them was assigned to which landholder. JB3 was not assigned. But only JB3 was still in the Nepean area in 1813.

JB2 was in Norfolk Island from 1809 until the evacuation of Norfolk Island in 1814, sometimes documented under the first name “John”. In 1809, he stowed away on a ship going from Port Jackson to New Zealand, with five others. They were discovered at sea and were landed on Norfolk Island. He was in the last party of residents of Norfolk Island, who closed the settlement down in 1814. Along with others in the clearing party, he was awarded a pardon and then evacuated on Kangaroo. Like most of the Norfolk Island residents, he was relocated to Van Diemen’s Land, remaining there, and marrying in Hobart in 1822. JB2, the non-political convict from Ann, could not be the Blue Mountains guide.

JB1, whose father was a carpenter, continued to work as a sawyer and married in Liverpool in 1812, where his first two children were born in 1813 and 1814. Only JB3 is still in the Nepean in 1813 -- he married in Windsor in March 1813.

Figure 2: In 1811, The National Archives of the UK.

JB3 – illiterate and in the Nepean – looks like the most likely candidate to be the guide.
But then we come to the strongest evidence of all, which allows us to decide which of the two Irish rebels was the guide – was it JB1, who arrived on Ann and became a sawyer in Liverpool after freedom? or JB3, who arrived on Hercules and remained in the Nepean?
The guide was granted 100 acres as a reward in December 1814. The land grants of 1814-16 and the musters of the 1820s enable us to see who really was the guide across the Blue Mountains. JB1 was granted 40 acres in Appin on 16 January 1816, just three months before the Massacre there. This 40 acres was still all that he had ever been granted when he petitioned successfully for more land in 1823. However, JB3 was granted 100 acres at Evan on 12 December 1814, corresponding with the 100 acres awarded for guiding across the Blue Mountains. He remained on this land for the rest of his life.

The James Byrne who guided the party that crossed the Blue Mountains in 1813 did not arrive on Ann in 1801. The guide was James Bourn (JB3), who arrived on Hercules in 1802, who was James Burne granted 100 acres in 1814, and who died, as James Byrnes, in Cobbitty in 1852, less than 40 km from the starting point for the 1813 expedition.

But don’t just trust me -- you can see most of the evidence for yourself in my special tree on Ancestry.com: Blue Mountains Guide 1813.
Figure 4: Land grants for the surname B: 1814-16,
State Records Authority of New South Wales

Biographical Note

Anthea Fraser Gupta is an Australian born in England. Since retiring from work as a university teacher, she has done serious work on family history and has almost completed the University of Tasmania Diploma of Family History. JB1 is related to her grandchildren.