

# Documents

## 'Defactualization': A Brief Note on the Making of *Syria* Wreck Rescue Record

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### Introduction

On the evening of 11 May 1884 the ship, *Syria*, a passenger carrier, ran onto the Nasilai Reef, got wrecked, and gradually broke apart.<sup>1</sup> The ship chartered by the Crown Agents for Colonies to take 'Coolies from Calcutta to Fiji', was carrying a cargo of 497 Indian indentured workers and their children, and a crew of 43 of which some were Indians (called *lascars*). A number of those on Board - the actual number still uncertain 133 years after the event, but ranging from 55 to 59 - were unaccounted for, many of them presumed dead. In terms of numbers missing/dead, this remains the worst maritime disaster in Fiji to date.

The 'operation' to rescue those on board comprises an interesting component of the history of the disaster. How the rescue efforts were recorded provides a remarkable glimpse on how facts for 'history' are made available.

This Brief Note introduces three documents relating to the rescue of passengers from the ship, showing quite separate, even different, versions of the same historical fact of the rescue of passengers and crew. There are a number of other documents on the same historical event - the rescue of the passengers and crew - which are available for scrutiny but not analysed here.<sup>2</sup>

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I. *Syria* was a 1,010 ton, iron sailing ship built in 1868 for the primary purpose of transporting indentured workers from India to Colonies. Prior to coming to Fiji in 1884, it had made 4 trips to Trinidad (1872, 1873, 1877 and 1878), and one trip to Nevis (1874). See 'Syria (ship)' in Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria\\_\(ship\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria_(ship)).

<sup>2</sup> See Chand (forthcoming) for details on these.

## The Official Annual Report

The official report on the *Syria* ship wreck disaster is contained in the Annual Reports of the Colony. Annual reports on Immigration were made by the Agent General for Immigration - the equivalent of the modern day Minister for Immigration - for the Colonial Secretary. The Colonial Secretary presented these reports to the Colonial Legislature as part of his reports on the Colony.

The 1884 Report of the Agent General, referred to as *Indian Immigration (Report for 1884)*, contained as *'Proceedings of the Revenue and Agricultural Department, September 1886: Fiji Report on Indian Immigration for 1884, [Pros No. 14]'* provides the 'annual report' of all matters relating to Indian immigration to Fiji for the year. The 9-page report contained the following on the disaster of the ship *Syria*:

4. The voyage of the "Syria" was so unfortunate as to terminate, within sight of her port, in a calamitous shipwreck. After a prosperous voyage of unusual celebrity the vessel struck the outer edge of the reef opposite Nasilai, during a dark night in boisterous weather, and speedily went to pieces. It was only with the utmost difficulty, and by the help of energetic assistance from Suva (14 miles distant) that most of the immigrants were ultimately rescued. But after every possible exertion, carried on during no less than 58 hours, 439 out of the 494 on board, together with all the crew, were safely landed, though a few were in so exhausted a condition that they had to be conveyed at once to hospital. At the muster, 55 were found to have been lost in the wreck. There had been but 4 deaths during the voyage, all infants, of whom 3 had died from bronchitis and pneumonia and 1 from general debility and malnutrition.

5. The wreck of the "Syria" occurred on the 11th of May; and this vessel was followed by the "Howra", which arrived on the 26th June after a voyage of 79 days.

The annual report was presented to the Colonial Secretary on 7 May 1886, almost 2 years to the date of the ship wreck.

However, much earlier, within days of the disaster - on 16 May 1884 - the 'Colonial Secretary's Office' had written a report, in the form of a letter, to the 'Officer Administering the Colony'. The 30-page hand-written report, is under the signature of Dr. William M. McGregor.<sup>3</sup> The document, contained as the official inward correspondence of the Colonial Office (CSO 84/1068), was filed on 23 March 1884 also under the signature of William McGregor.

This document, reproduced in full in this issue as *'The McGregor Report'*, provides interesting take on how the colonial government recorded the rescue of the ship's passengers and crew.

## The McGregor Report

The McGregor report provides extensive record of how McGregor learnt of the wreck of the ship, and of his actions subsequent to that. In short, after learning of the disaster on the evening of Monday 13 May, he organised a rescue party and led the rescue operation. The rescue party contained 8 vessels and a number of government officials. The 8 vessels were divided into three lots, each following different routes to the wreck. The first lot reached the wreck at noon on Tuesday 14 May, about 40 hours from the time of the wreck.

In all, the report is focused on documenting what the rescuers did in rescuing the passengers and crew. Reading the report, one would be satisfied that the rescue of passengers began around mid-day of Tuesday 14 May, and that other than a few private Europeans mentioned, the entire rescue was carried out by the official party led by McGregor.

The non-officials mentioned in the report include the General Manager of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company, James Robertson (and his staff Adolph Joske) who provided a vessel and people to man the vessel; Captain Humburgh of the ship *Rewa* who pro-

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<sup>3</sup> Two clearly distinct hands are found to have penned the letter, taken here as the norm in penning long documents by hand. Dr. William McGregor signed documents in Fiji under the name 'McGregor'. His biographer, R. B. Joyce (1971), titled the biography 'Sir William MacGregor'. Here the original 'McGregor' is used.

vided a vessel; Captain Gomarty of the *SS Penguin* who provided a life boat; Captain Barrack, President of the Marine Board; a 'Mr. Davis' of Nasoata islet who placed one of his employees in the team; Rev Langham, who saved 'not without risk in the darkness, no fewer than forty-eight Indians', and Rev. Lindsay who with his boat 'rendered every assistance he could'.

Other than these 8 Europeans, and the chief of Nasilai village, the report makes no references to anyone else who was actively involved or involved on his own initiative, in the rescue of the passengers and crew. There are references to natives being part of the official rescue party (including native prisoners and native police constabulary) and the Langham rescue team, as well as to the chief of Nasilai village (who rendered 'all available aid' and who also 'lost one of his best canoes'). The report also makes more than one reference to looting and pilferage by 'natives'.

The McGregor report found its way into the newspaper, the *Suva Times*, which relied on it extensively in its reports on 17 May. The paper later wrote:

The *Suva Times* of Saturday last [17 May 1884] published an extra devoted to the official report of the Syria disaster, supplied by the hon. The Colonial Secretary to his Honor the Administrator' (*Suva Times*, 21 May 1884).

The McGregor report, therefore, had become the first official report which the public read. For the public, it established the available narrative around the disaster and the rescue operations.

Four days after its original report, however, on 21 May the newspaper issued a long article condemning the absence in the official reports of the role played by another party - the agents for the wrecked ship - in rescuing the passengers.

The role played by the agent's Manager was officially given as a report by the Manager to the Acting Colonial Secretary Dr. William McGregor.

### **Suva Times and Alexander Cockburn**

Alexander Cockburn was the Manager of James McEwan and Co., the Suva agent for *Syria*. According to a letter he wrote to McGregor, he was advised of the wreck by Monday evening. He then immediately set sail to the wreck, becoming the first of the par-

ties to reach the wreck in the morning of Tuesday 14th May. His team rescued 30 passengers immediately, landing them on the shore. After this, one of his men helped rescue another group of between thirty and forty who were clinging to another rescue boat.

Cockburn states that he had given a report of the passengers he had saved and where he had dropped them, to McGregor on the night of 14th May, and that McGregor knew fully of the rescue mission by Cockburn.

The absence of any reference to Cockburn's efforts in the official report filed by McGregor on 16 May was the 'very strange' fact of omission that the newspaper *The Suva Times* took issue on.

There was no response to the Cockburn letter. Nor did McGregor or any colonial administrator comment on the lengthy *Times* article criticising the officials in quite strong terms for ignoring the efforts of Cockburn.

Cockburn's letter and the *Suva Times* article are reproduced in this issue as '*Letter from Alexander Cockburn*'.

The Colonial Government's 1886 report on Indian Immigration for the year 1884, quoted above seems to have accepted the fact of people other than colonial officials carrying out the rescue operations; the report refers to 'help of energetic assistance from Suva' rather than 'help of energetic assistance *by officials* from Suva'.

The official reports of the colonial government, as well as the reports of any other party - the ship agents, the CSR, the newspaper - make reference to anyone else other than the Europeans from Suva being involved in the rescue operation.

McGregor, on the other hand, did not relent; he continued to ignore the roles of every other person or group in rescuing passengers and crew. He also ignored from the records any initiative which the passengers may have had taken on their own towards their survival. From the official records, the impression one gets is that the passengers were mere passive beings waiting for someone to come and rescue them from their impending deaths.

In a subsequent report he sent to Arthur Gordon, dated 11 June 1884, he provided further details of his own role in the rescue operations, with not a word on anyone else who was not part of his crew. The extract of his correspondence to Arthur Gordon relating to *Syria* wreck is produced in this issue as '*From Dr. William McGregor to Arthur Gordon, 11 June 1884*'.

### Concluding Remarks: Preparing 'History'

The wreck of the Indenture ship *Syria* generated considerable quantity of materials, ranging from official reports of the authorities, investigation reports, testimonies of ship crew, statements by people involved in some aspect of the Syria episode, and the media. Three notable historians have written on one or more aspects relating to the disaster (Gillion, 1958, 1962; Joyce, 1971, and Lal 1979).

The accepted view of the disaster is that after the ship was wrecked, a team, organised and led by Dr. William McGregor, the Colonial Medical Officer and then Acting Colonial Secretary, rescued all but 56 Indian passengers under trying circumstances. That is the 'history' as it could have stayed.

In writing history, a researcher, very much like a pure scientist, would have a field of 'data'. It is in analysing the data at hand that narratives are developed.

There, however are two critical matters that need consideration. First, what if the entire field of data is not considered and the narrative is developed on the basis of a subset of the dataset? Second, what if the entire field is hidden, deliberately or otherwise, from view by those who had responsibility for the field?

Like data in scientific research, facts of the past, and particularly facts of the distant past, can be dealt with in many ways: they can be utilised fully or partly, or they could just be acknowledged but not included as relevant data. Or they could be denied, ignored, thrust aside, bent, twisted, challenged, defactualised, and worse still, hidden or even out-rightly eliminated from records.

But somewhat like minerals, the mine of history can never be said to become exhausted. Granted that the first to arrive at the mine may get the most valuable of the minerals there, or better still get the chance to hoist his own flag on the territory. But unlike a mineral mine, the mine of history does not normally entertain exclusionary flags being hoisted on the field of data, thereby ensuring that there will almost always be more to explore therein.

For the *Syria* ship wreck, documents presented in this paper show that the colonial government and its officials, at best, excluded from recording as an official report, the critical roles played by any individual or group in rescuing the ship-wrecked passengers other than the colonial officials and official-led party. Historians and other

producers of narratives bound by the weight of official records, risk making into the *Syria* history not all that which ought to have been a part of history thereof.

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