

Suva Times: 21 May 1884

Letter from Alex Cockburn
(General Manager for James McEwan and Co., the Agent of
Indenture ship Syria based in Suva)
to
The Acting Colonial Secretary Dr. William McGregor,
21 May 1884

[This is a transcription of a hand written letter from the GM for the agent for Syria, and extracts from the Suva Times on the Wreck of Syria. The documents are from CSO m.p. 1065/1884, National Archives of Fiji]

Dear Sir,

Agreeably to your wish that I should furnish you with an account of our visit to the wreck of the "Syria", I beg to enclose an extract from the Suva Times of today to which I would add the incidents that transpired re we as Agents started on Monday evening for the wreck. Captain Knight at half past eight called at the Office here, & reported his arrival with the SS "Thistle" from Levuka, also that a large ship was on the Nasalai Reef. He stated that Captain Hedstrom on the Thistle's arrival in port came on board and informed him that the Administrator had in the afternoon seen the wreck from Government House. This satisfied us that the Government were in full possession of all the information to hand at that time. When starting we were uncertain as to whether it was the wreck of the 'Syria' on the reef, or another vessel, but concluded from the date that ship sailed from Calcutta that with a good run to Fiji, she might be in that position.

I have the honor to be
Dear Sir
Yours faithfully
Alex Cockburn

... power as to the wreck of the Syria, it was stated that Mr. Cockburn, Manager of Messrs James McEwan and Co., the agents of the ship was the first to make a start for the scene of the disaster. Of this fact, and great assistance rendered by Mr. Cockburn, he having rescued no fewer than thirty drowning people, sight has been altogether lost in the official dispatch. As an act of the merest justice, we no draw attention to the fact that Mr. Cockburn hailed the Clyde in Suva harbour at about half-past nine on Monday night, when those on board stated that their instructions were to be ready at six o'clock next morning. He then started at once, and although every means were employed to urge on the Fijians in their puling, a strong head wind and choppy seas made progress slow, and for a short time the boat had to wait on the incoming tide er it got sufficient depth of water. Fortunately the moon favoured the party and with the break of day they came into sight of the wreck, about eleven or twelve miles ahead. The Fijians were now getting played out and Mr. Cockburn himself and Mr. Perry also settled down to the oars. On a nearer view, they could see the roll of the reef flinging the spray above the vessels fore-mast, and sheets of water pouring down her sloping decks. When within half a mile, and at about eight o'clock, an enormous roll of water struck the wreck twisting her half around and breaking her in two; the foremast also going by the board at the same time. And now the black sports on the water about the wreck becoming visible, the exhausted Fijians again warmed to the work until from the boiling water one and another was lifted into the boat, while here and there a head would disappear. A canoe manned by natives came up at that time and did good work in saving those which the boat could not take. With thirty saved, making thirty-seven in the boat, Mr. Cockburn was compelled to proceed to the shore having first trimmed his human freight and hoisted the jib. The choppy nature of the water at this time frequently threatened to swamp the boat, but all were landed safety. At about half-past seven o'clock night, the boat having been detained awaiting the tide, the party got into the village at Nasalai, the fact of what the boat had done in the morning having been previously reported to a sergeant of police, so that any responsibility in landing the thirty men, at another point of the coast might lie with the authorities. In the house at

Nasalai a report of what had been done was made to Dr. McGregor, Mr. Anson, Captain Hedstrom, and Lieut. Mallan. The whale boat at this time was wanted to bring in the remaining police boat, which was causing some anxiety as it was known to be crowded. Perry at once started and took on board between thirty and forty, who were clinging around that already overladen. Mr. Cockburn then started for Suva, taking despatches from Dr. McGregor along with his instructions regarding them, and arrive at about half-past four next morning. It appears very strange that no mention of this shall have been made by officials.

**Extract of Letter/Report
from
Dr. William McGregor
to
Arthur Gordon, 11 June 1884**

[Extract; from Dr. William McGregor to Arthur Gordon, 11 June 1884' *Stanmore papers* [microform] : [M1628-1637]]

You will doubtless have heard of the dreadful disaster we had here in the wreck of the "Syria". I hardly like to mention the matter because the press and people have spoken of myself in connection therewith in a way that makes me ashamed, & that I tell you honestly hurts me very keenly. In all 56 Indians were drowned, or killed in the wreck.

The scene was simply indescribable, and pictures of it haunt me still like a horrid dream that one is glad to escape from by making. People falling, fainting, drowning all around one; the cries for instant help, uttered in an unknown tongue, but emphasized by looks of agony and the horror of impending death, depicted on dark faces rendered ashy grey by terror; then again the thundering, irresistible wave breaking on the riven ship, still containing human beings, some crushed to death in the debris, & others wounded and imprisoned therein; and all to be saved then or never. Then again while on the one had a father, a other, a brother, a sister or a husband or wife, sacrificed or risked his or her life to save that of one near and dear; on the other hand only the sense of self preservation manifested itself in certain others. The lascar crew for example, of superior strength, thought only of themselves, & rushed into the boats surrounded by dying women and children. One of these lascar seamen I took out of the wreck paralyzed with terror; afterwards by brute force I threw him twice out of a boat to make room for drowning children and a third time ... by my order thrown out by a Fijian policemen.

In spite of everything that could be done the loss of life was fearful. At 2 pm I was almost faint with despair, and I did not then think that a hundred or so could be saved. As I had somehow got to have charge of the whole concern, you can imagine the crushing

weight of responsibility I felt, and you will, I am sure believe me when I tell you that I do not feel the same man since. I fear you may think it strange that 56 people should be killed & drowned and that I, whose duty it was to see that assistance was given in the worst cases, came off with only a few bruises and slight wounds that were healed in a week. I can only say that I did the best I could. I did not ask any of those with me to risk their lives in going into the wreck with myself, save the four Fijians, whom I have recommended for the medal of the Royal Humane Society: & I could not know each time, for I went many times, whether I could return alive, especially as I am no swimmer of any use - although in the breakers there swimming was not of much avail. I feel it almost ludicrous to offer, as it were, an apology for being alive; but I am sure you can understand the feeling that I entertain, half fearful lest you should think that because I am alive I did not do all that might have been done. I understand that Mr. Thurston has recommended that the medal be given to those four Fijians % each one has hopes they may get it. But I have first been seized by a horrid thought. What if they showed [word illegible] through medals? If you know any person that has any say in such matters I wish you would suggest Siwani had it **all**....

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

All articles in the journal are refereed. Articles should be sent either by post, or electronic-mail. In all cases, the author's name and affiliation should be on a separate page, and not be repeated in headers or footers.

Hard Copies: Articles (including abstracts) must be printed, double-spaced, on white A4 paper. Send four hard copies to: The Editor, Fijian Studies, Fiji Institute of Applied Studies, P O Box 7580, Lautoka, Fiji.

Electronic submission: please ensure that the paper meets the journal's style guidelines, and is in the MS-Word format. Email the article to: fias@connect.com.fj

Length of Articles: The articles should normally be between 8,000-10,000 words. Shorter or longer submissions will be considered on their merit. As the journal aims for a wide readership, authors should write in accessible language of intelligent communication. Unless absolutely necessary, complex and lengthy models should be confined to the appendix. Minimize the use of endnotes. When unavoidable, use footnotes.

Abstracts: Each article should include an abstract of 100-200 words.

Titles: Titles of articles should be *brief* and *accurate*. Headings and sub-headings within the text should be short and clear.

Spelling: Use British and 'z' spellings (e.g. labour, organize).

Quotations, Numbers, Dates and Tables/Figures: Use single quotation marks. For quotations within quotations, use double marks. Indent longer quotations. Omit points in USA, Ms, Dr and other such abbreviations. Use the smallest possible number of numerals when referring to pagination and dates (e.g. 10-19, 42-5, 1961-4, 1961-75, 2000-2). In the text, spell out numbers from one to ninety-nine; use numerals for 100 and over. Always use numerals for percentages (75 per cent) and units of measurement (13 km, US\$ 40,000). Spell out 'per cent' in the text; the symbol % is acceptable in tables. Dates should be in the form of 19 May 2000. Tables and figures should be kept to a minimum. Notes and sources should be placed under each table/figure. Column headings in tables should clearly define the data presented. Camera-ready artwork should be supplied for all figures.

Referencing: Use the Harvard system of referencing. Works cited in the text should read thus: (Rao, 2001: 41-4); Prasad (1998, 2002). For groups of citations, order alphabetically and not chronologically, using a semi-colon to separate names: (Chand and Naidu, 1997; Narayan, 2001; Robertson, 1998). Use 'et al.' when citing multi-authored works, but list all the authors in the references. To distinguish different works by the same author in the same year, use the letters a, b, c, etc., e.g. Rao (2001_a, 2001_b).

All works cited (including sources for tables/figures) should be listed alphabetically under 'References'. For multi-author works, invert the name of the first author only (eg. Chand, G. and V. Naidu). Use (ed.) for one editor, but (eds) for multiple editors. When listing two or more works by one author, repeat the author's name for each entry. Indicate (opening and closing) page numbers for articles in journals and chapters in books.