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Council granted slave

Dodgy doctor had evil history

WHAT HAPPENED?

BY TOM O'CALLAGHAN

BENDIGO'S council awarded a bonus to a man who allegedly massacred 70 people on the high seas.

Councillors also gave James Patrick Murray a glowing job reference 150 years ago this month.

"The Mayor thought the Council was bound, as a matter of duty, to grant a testimonial to the doctor, who had worked very hard and earnestly at a time when a public calamity was apprehended," the *Bendigo Advertiser* reported at the time.

Then the council gave him a £50 bonus - or more than \$10,000 in today's money, by one estimate.

So, what does an alleged mass murderer need to do to get into the Bendigo council's good books?

Danger on high seas

This story begins with a malignant shape appearing on the horizon of a vast, endless sea. The shape was that of a brig called the *Carl*, and it was crisscrossing the small outcrops jutting out of the Pacific Ocean, offering an exciting opportunity to spend a few years working Fiji's cotton plantations.

Not everyone being enlisted had actually agreed to go, so the sailors thought it prudent to tie them up, below deck.

The boat's unlikely



'A YOUNG MAN OF NEAT, RATHER DANDIFIED APPEARANCE': An artist's impression of James Patrick Murray in an 1872 edition of the *Weekly Times* and, below, a *Bendigo Advertiser* editorial from 1872. Image: COURTESY OF TROVE

SANDHURST, TUESDAY, AUG. 27, 1872.

THE MURDERS ON BOARD THE CARL.

Those who were acquainted with Dr. James Patrick Murray during the time that he was in charge of the small-pox patients in the South-east Sanatorium, must have been astounded on reading the evidence given by him in the Sydney Water Police Court, with regard to the murders said to have been

owner - James Murray - was a well-to-do Melbourne doctor who had left his wife and children at home. He had charmed a number of Victorian investors into coming with him on a trip to Fiji. They would loan him money and he would land them with a bunch of islanders happy to transform virgin land into boundless cottonfields.

Murray was "a young man of neat, rather dandified appearance, good-looking and with any amount of assurance and self confidence, suave and ingratiating in a

manner which 'went down' particularly well with the ladies," according to one New Zealand paper that covered the well-travelled man in the early 1860s.

But a polished manner could hide a multitude of sins, an 1875 writer would say as he blamed Murray entirely for events about to erupt in the Pacific. The doctor was "cruel, treacherous, mean in money matters, a liar in word and a traitor in action".

Murray had an extremely violent side, going by some accounts. When a group

of enslaved islanders caused trouble below deck one night, Murray unleashed hell.

He and crew members spent hours firing indiscriminately into the hold. When that did not work, they drilled new holes into the wooden deck so they could fire more easily, according to one account.

Thirty-five dead islanders were thrown overboard. Another 35 injured South Sea islanders were weighed down with pig iron and dropped into the sea. Murray appears to have made no attempt to see if injured prisoners could be treated. "Probably, as a speculation in labor, he thought their cure would cost too much," the *Advertiser* remarked in an editorial written in late August 1871.

The crew shipped 59 islanders to Fiji and pocketed a hefty £561 finders' fee, or roughly \$1.16 million in today's money.

Modern-day readers should perhaps be a little cautious about some of the tales of Murray's cruelty. Multiple witnesses were themselves on board the *Carl* and later faced the death penalty. They may have wanted to minimise or fabricate their own roles in the violence.

They might have also wanted revenge. You see, Murray had not just employed them. He had also betrayed them.

The doctor had snatched them out and cut a deal for immunity from prosecution.

The doctor was becoming increasingly paranoid, one person aboard the *Carl* said. "After tea the Doctor made a rush on deck, tomahawk in hand and threw himself into the sea ... and tried to swim away from the ship."

Murray insisted he had good reason to jump overboard.

"My life was attempted," he would tell a court as the

star witness in the trial of the captain he employed, crew members he paid and voyages he spearheaded.

Fiji beckons

Murray's life had not always seemed destined to end in ignominy.

Born in Ireland and educated at Trinity College, Dublin, the son of a merchant had travelled south in the heyday of the gold rushes and eventually set up a medical practice in Melbourne. But that romanticism had soured by the late 1860s, historian Ronald Elmslie would later write in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Surgery*.

"The more venturesome of young men now looked for wealth and fame to the South Seas, and particularly to the Fiji Islands," he wrote in 1979.

This attraction had its ominous side. "For years American and British discards from society had used the islands to escape either the law or the tedium of more established society and to plunder with few restraints," Elmslie observed. Many of these dregs of society were fugitives.

That might have appealed to something deep within Murray.

Still, things were looking up for the doctor by July, 1872.

He had returned to Victoria from his Fiji adventure. Few in the colony knew he was connected to sketchy reports from Fiji of an apparent slave boat that had been caught roaming the region.

As far as anyone seemed to know, Dr Murray was still an upstanding, respectable Melbourne doctor anxious to use his skills to help people out.