

# Ship of fate



AUCKLAND INSTITUTE AND MUSEUM

Captain and his ship ...  
What was on the mind  
of John McIntosh (left)  
the night his ship, SS  
Wairarapa (below),  
struck the cliffs of  
Great Barrier Island?





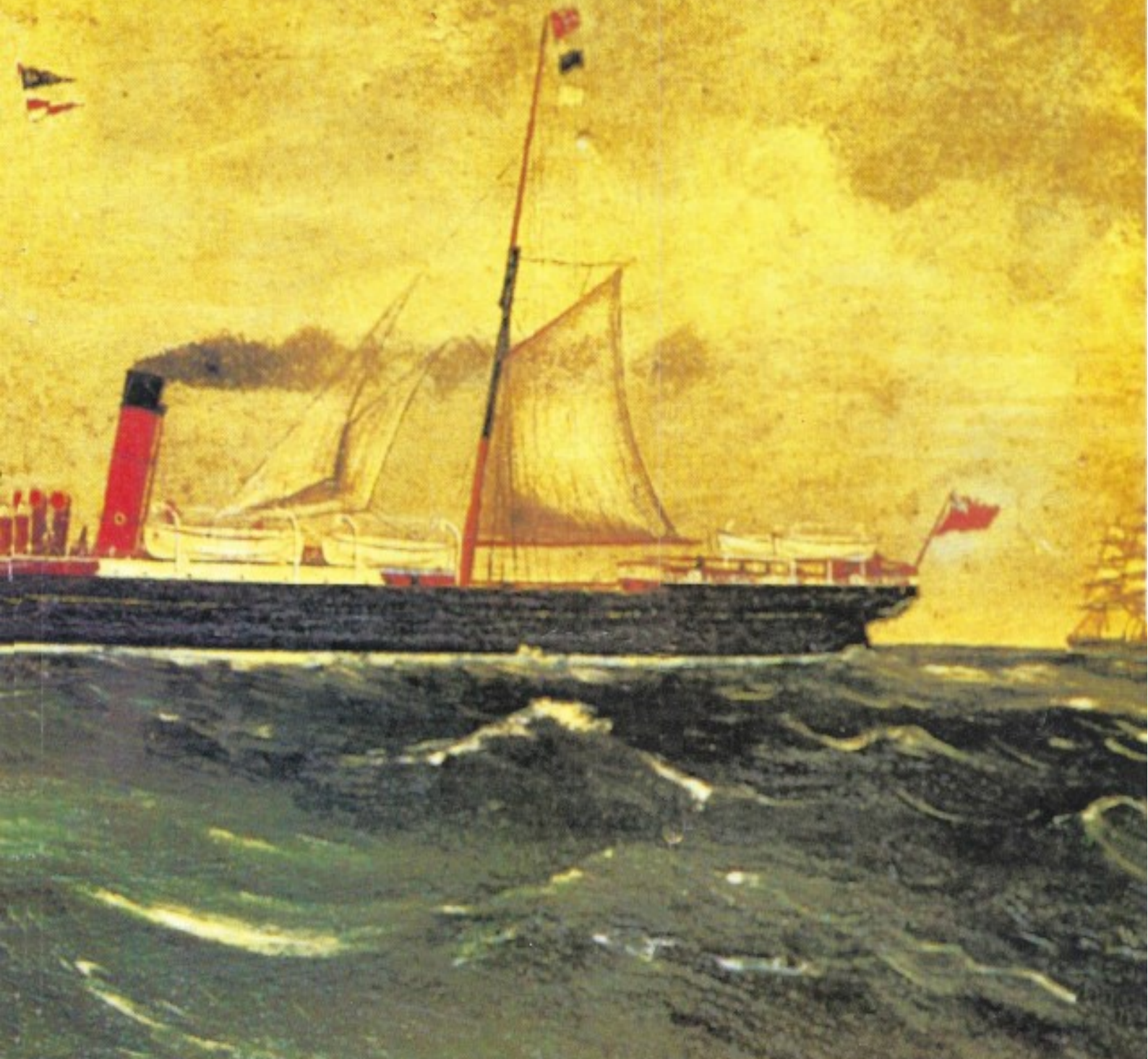
WHEN DESCENDANTS of those involved in the tragic sinking of the SS Wairarapa gather at Great Barrier Island on October 29, at least one treasure from the wreck will be the object of great curiosity ... the captain's toilet seat.

And its present owner, Conan Flinn, will no doubt be begged time and again to tell the store of its discovery.

By VANYA SHAW

At eight minutes past midnight on October 29, 1894, the steamer Wairarapa, on a routine voyage from Sydney to Auckland and in heavy fog and high seas, ploughed into almost vertical 250m-high cliffs on the inhospitable north-western face of Great Barrier Island.

And just after midnight this October 29, at that same spot near Miners Head, descendants of the 120 people who died, and of those who survived, will join islanders whose ancestors







Conan Flinn with the toilet seat and silver teapot from the wrecked ship.

helped with the rescue, to float wreaths on the water above the illuminated wreck as part of a weekend of commemoration.

In a cosy eyrie just above his private beach, where everything is as shipshape as a captain's cabin, Flinn, an ex-merchant sailor, tells his story: "My family is one of the original settlers on the Barrier. Nineteen of us are buried on Grave Island (in Port FitzRoy Harbour).

Grandad, Peter Flinn, was one of the rescue party and was presented with a silver teapot by the Union Steamship Company, the owners of the ship.

On the family farm he had his own out-house. There was one for the women of the family and another for the children.

Dad sold the farm to the Stellins in 1956. When it burned down in 1960, they were clearing the site and just happened to turn over Grandad's old toilet seat and found it was labelled 'Wairarapa, Caption, W.C.' "

Other islanders also have mementoes.

Pat Cooper and her brother Garth, for instance, have books and a lounge chair presented to their grandparents by the Union Steamship Company. In their Okiwi garden, a 100-year-old orange tree has grown from the pip of fruit washed ashore from the wreck.

The Ngawaka family has the brass plaque with details of the ship's manufacture.

The ship's compass is on permanent loan to the Department of Conservation headquarters in Port FitzRoy. The wreck has been a favourite diving spot





ABOVE: Eileen Ngawaka and her uncle Harry with the brass nameplate off the Wairarapa.

LEFT: Pat Cooper with fruit from the 100-year-old tree which grew from pips from oranges being transported aboard the Wairarapa.

over the years and the compass was recovered by Len Subritsky in 1969.

Another memento - this time a contemporary one - is being provided by Diane and Iain Newton, who operate the Great Barrier Pigeon Gram Company and are issuing a special stamp to commemorate the centenary. They will also fly a special Pigeon Post flight from the site of the wreck following the commemoration service.

News of the tragedy took three days to reach Auckland because at that time the only communication with the mainland was via a week steamer.

This led to the introduction of a pigeon post service, with the pigeons carrying up to five messages written on special paper called 'flimsies'.

The idea for the commemoration weekend originated with Don Woodcock, Department of

Conservation field centre manager, who started placing newspaper advertisements canvassing interest four years ago.

Woodcock and the other members of the organising committee see the centenary as an opportunity to honour the dead and to give the Barrier, New Zealand's fourth largest island, a chance to showcase its natural beauty.

Great Barrier Island is almost a DOC regional park. The department administers 60-70 per cent of the island's 28,000 hectares.

Because of the absence of most mainland predators and the supportive attitude of locals, the Whangapoua estuary is home to the world's largest flock of pateke, the brown teal. At 1200, its numbers rival the permanent human population.

Financial help for the weekend has come from Auckland City and DOC. The department is also



repairing the fences and replacing signs at the two mass grave sites at Katherine Bay and Whangapoua, and providing plaques which will be unveiled at ceremonies on Saturday, October 29.

Both sites are in need of some TLS. The mass grave at Whangapoua Beach lies beneath a picture postcard pohutukawa tree near Tapuwai Pt. It needs new pickets and some of distinctive acorn-topped posts needs replacing.

At Onepoto, in Katherine Bay, lies one large grave with a small one nearby, almost hidden by coastal scrub. It is said to contain the body of a young mother washed up on shore with her baby tied to her belt.



Don Woodcock with one of the distinctive gravesite posts.

The Wairarapa wrecking is New Zealand's third worst maritime disaster. It put the young colony into a state of mourning and started a debate which still continues about the mental state of the captain.

Why did Captain John McIntosh, known for his caution, temperance and competence refuse to listen to the fears of his officers, and imperil the lives of 250 people by a series of rash judgements which resulted in the deaths of at least 120?

Was it true that the Union Steamship Company secretly pressured him to shorten the voyage time?

Did he have a secret wager to be in time for the Christchurch races?

Was he still recovering from a severe illness which affected his nerves and his judgement? If so, wouldn't that have made him more cautious, not less?

A single man, in his mid-50s, was he suffering from unrequited love? Or from the Titanic disease: supreme over-confidence?

His personal steward told an inquiry of being amazed to see

and superior accommodation". It commented on the "bulkheads of sycamore and American walnut, the paneling relieved by figurative lacquer-ware and the white marble paneling in the smoking room"

Wairarapa left Sydney on her last voyage on October 24, on a routine course around North Cape and down the eastern coast of the North Island to Auckland.

It's not known exactly how many passengers she carried; sometimes on the trans-Tasman run travelers boarded on the off-chance of a passage. But there were at least 95 in luxury class, 90 in steerage, and 65 crew.

Captain McIntosh was regarded as "one of the

smartest mariners on the coast" and a careful and perfectly reliable man".

Among the cargo of sewing machines, timber, tea, sugar and drapery, was a consignment of 16 horses.

The voyage was expected to take 4 days. But by October 29, the *Auckland Star* noted that the ship was overdue. By then 120 people were dead.



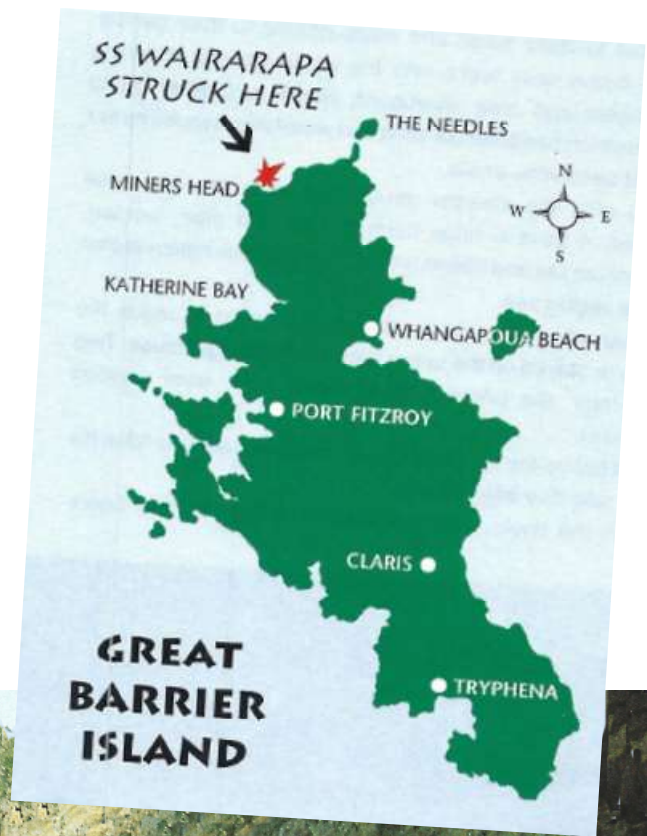
The mass graveyard at Whangapoua Beach



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is New Zealand's third  
worst maritime disaster.  
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SS Wairarapa a few days after the tragedy, claimed by the rocks near Miners Head, Great Barrier Island (below)



In their book *Eight Minutes Past Midnight* divers Steve Lockyer-Lampson and Ian Francis describe the apprehension some passengers and crew felt as the ship hurtled on through the pitch-dark night, thick fog and heavy seas.

At the court of inquiry, the chief officer described how late on the Sunday night, the captain refused to entertain suggestions to reduce speed, take soundings or blow the foghorn.

An hour later and with no warning, Wairarapa crashed its bows on to jagged rocks below unassailable cliffs near Miners Head, perforating its bottom.

If the ship had been left on the rocks, it is probable that everyone could have reached a narrow foreshore by clambering over the rocks.

But the chief engineer testified that the captain ordered engines astern immediately after the impact, taking the ship back out to deep water and many people to their deaths.

The heavy seas broke over the whole steamer, washing passengers and crew overboard. Some scrambled on to life rafts which had been cut adrift and were later rescued by the few still-seaworthy boats.

Just after the steamer struck and while the deck was crowded, it gave a huge lurch to port and men, women, children, horses and lifeboats slid down the deck helter-skelter into the raging sea.

Those who were still on the steamer tried to reach the rigging or stayed on the upper deck by the bridge house. Two hours later the bridge and



all those on it were washed overboard.

Just before the bridge fell, the captain was seen to raise his hands and dive into the sea.

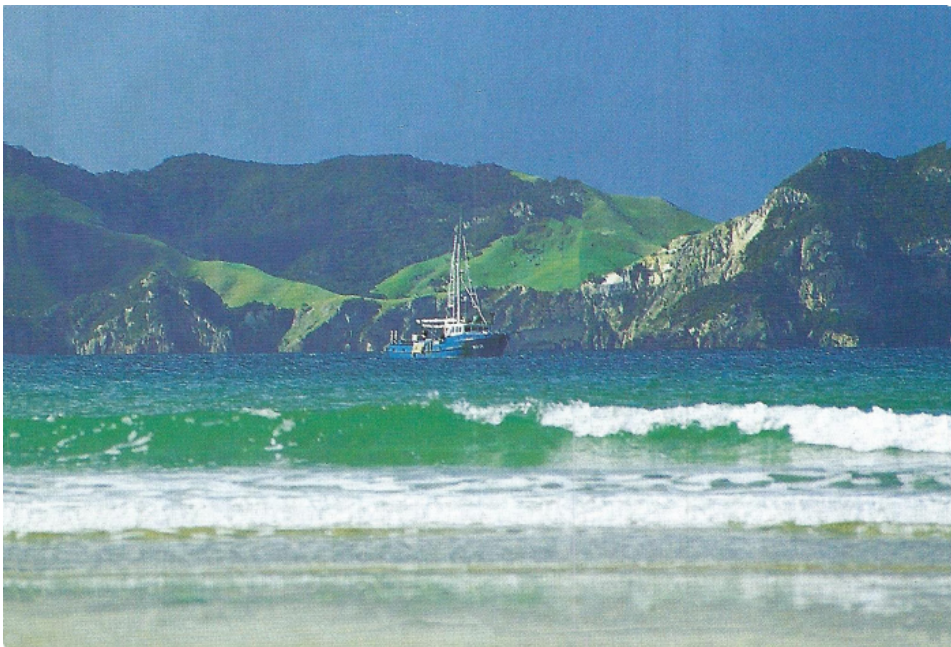
Says the book: "The scene is described as most heartbreaking, screams and cries of the drowning mingled with the roar of the breakers on the rocks and the shrill neighs of the struggling horses."

By morning all those in the water had died, bar one. Some had been kicked under by the terrified horses, who screamed, said one witness, like women.

The sea was a hideous sight, the bodies of the dead, humans and animals, bobbing between wreckage and oranges which had burst from their cartons.

Survivors recalled the ordeal with unconscious heroism.

Arthur Chamberlain clung to the rails of the ship



Whangapoua Beach where some of the shipwreck victims' bodies were washed up.

all night. He said: "After a little, a very old friend of mine, Mr William Whale, came along. When I saw him I said: 'Hullo, Whaley'. He replied: 'Hullo, old man. I'm afraid it is a go with us this time'.

"'Oh, I don't know, old chap,' I said, 'Keep your pecker up. You never know till the numbers are up'."

Whaley's body was washed ashore, naked and battered, on the far side of the island.

Jane Williams, whose sister Sarah drowned, spent all night in the water. "Many were drowned one after the other in my sight. Just imagine my feelings as I lay on two lifebuoys with dozens of dead bodies, wreckage and horses floating around me, and myself the only survivor."

Eleven-year-old Felix West, whose parents and

two brothers drowned, was one of only two children saved. The New Zealand Times reports that as he struggled in the water, a Mr French swam up and took hold of him and struck out for the rocks.

"Growing weary, he heard the little lad say: 'If you can't get me along, drop me.' The panting rescuer answered: 'No, my boy, if you go, I go' and swam to safety."

At daybreak, after several attempts, the crew members-still on the Ship got a line ashore. Those people still 'clinging to the rigging were pulled through the surging water to safety.

While the 1 00 survivors, most of them clad only in sleeping gear and fortified with oranges, spent the next 30 hours huddled together on the rocks at the foot of the unscalable cliff, a member of the crew picked his way around the coast to accessible land and crossed the island to Port

Fitzroy, where he arrived at dusk.

A rescue attempt was postponed till morning when the steamer Argyle was due to arrive at the port, but the wreck site was deserted: Maori from Katherine Bay had sailed out in their small boats, picked up the survivors and taken them to their marae, fed and clothed them and comforted them.

Argyle collected the survivors and continued on to Auckland.

Police from Auckland, Maori and local settlers and some of the survivors then began the gruesome task of recovering

bodies. Some of them had been swept round The Needles to the north of the island and beached on the eastern coast.

Those who could be identified were taken back to Auckland for burial, the rest were buried in mass graves at Whangapoua and Katherine Bay.

Sergeant Gamble reported that members of his team were constantly sick from "the terrible sights and smells", they stayed in a house owned by a local Maori and "the natives had been very kind", giving them meat and baking bread.

A New Zealand Times reporter at the recovery operation described how as each body was brought ashore, planks and tools were used to fashion a makeshift coffin.

Dead bodies were washed ashore by the dozen

for miles and miles along the rocky coast. One woman, in tattered clothing and still wearing her lifebelt, had been savaged by sharks.

"The men in the party had to turn away their heads to hide their emotions."

Of the 120 who died, about 80 were found. The court of inquiry answered many of the questions as to why the ship ran aground.

It found that the captain and first and second officers had failed to take the correct point of departure at the Three Kings, and failed to allow for the current.

The court blamed the captain entirely for the disaster, but criticised senior crew for putting their own lives before those of the passengers.

It raised the selflessness of the three dead stewardesses particularly Miss Annie McQuaid who was celebrated as a national hero for giving up her lifebelt to a child.

But the court could not explain the captain's behaviour. The mystery of the Wairarapa tragedy will be picked over again as descendants. Divers, and history-lovers sail to the bleak wreck site late

on Friday night, October 28. Or over drinks and dinner at the Port Fitzroy Boating Club the following night.

Wairarapa's skeleton lies in 45ft-90ft of water and will be lit with underwater flares by a police 'dive team for the wreath-laying service.

Five Australians plan to attend the commemoration. Inez Franzoni, Margaret Perry, Muriel Whitbourne, Edna Webster and Allan Day are grandchildren of one of the dead, Allan Maclean. A Melbourne man, he was working his passage as a steward in the hopes of finding work in New Zealand before sending for his wife, Mabel, pregnant with their third child.

Someone who will be there in spirit is Miss Nancy Morris, of Napier. The 85-year-old is the daughter of Felix West, the boy who was saved by Mr French."

"I don't think he forgot that experience for a minute," she said. "He suffered nervous ill health for a long time. He hardly talked of the wreck but kept an extensive scrapbook of clippings.

"At Kelly Tarlton's museum in the Bay of Islands

(The writer (Vanya Shaw) and photographer (Bruce Gabites) flew courtesy of Gt Barrier Airlines.)