

A frontier of chaos?

Page 4 – The *Boyd* incident

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In December 1809 the sailing ship *Boyd* was anchored in Whangaroa Harbour, where it was to pick up a cargo of timber spars. It was attacked by a group of Māori who killed most of the crew and passengers in retaliation for the captain's mistreatment of a young local chief, Te Ara, who had sailed from Sydney on the *Boyd*.

This was the most violent clash between Māori and Europeans since the attack on Marion du Fresne and his crew in 1772. The incident had far-reaching effects. It delayed the establishment of the first Christian mission in New Zealand, cemented a view of New Zealand as the 'Cannibal Isles' and challenged the notion that Māori were 'noble savages'.

European whalers avenged the attack, killing many Māori and sparking intertribal warfare in the region. The incident also provoked vigorous debate among officials in New South Wales about how to maintain order in New Zealand.

Why was the *Boyd* attacked?

Often referred to as the '*Boyd* Massacre' or the 'Burning of the *Boyd*', the incident was dismissed as an act of Māori barbarism. From this perspective, there was little need to examine Māori motives. The event was etched into New Zealand folklore by European artists several generations after the actual attack. Their romanticised and often inaccurate portrayals embedded the incident in a frontier context resembling North America's Wild West.

Under the command of Captain John Thompson, the *Boyd* left Port Jackson (Sydney) in October 1809 and arrived in Whangaroa Harbour in the far north to load a cargo of kauri spars. It was probably only the third European ship to visit Whangaroa. A year earlier, the crew of the *Commerce* had caused an outbreak of disease that killed a number of Māori. Ngāti Uru believed that a curse had been placed on them and viewed the next European visitors, those on the *Boyd*, with apprehension and suspicion. For his part, this was to be Captain Thompson's first – and last – encounter with Māori.

Utu is taken

Among the 70 people on board the *Boyd* was Te Ara, the son of a Whangaroa chief. Te Ara had been expected to work his passage as a seaman, but he ignored orders. He may have been ill, or, as the son of a chief, he may have believed that such work was beneath him. Whatever his reasons, he was flogged and denied food. When he arrived home and reported this mistreatment, his kin demanded utu.

Unaware of local feelings, Thompson and several crew members left the ship with a group of Māori to check out a stand of kauri further up the harbour. Once ashore they were killed and eaten. At dusk some Māori disguised themselves as the returning shore party while other warriors waited in canoes for the signal to attack. The assault was swift and decisive. Most of the Europeans were killed that evening, although a number escaped by climbing up into the ship's rigging.

Te Pahi arrives

The next morning a large canoe entered the harbour carrying Te Pahi, a prominent chief from Rangihoua in the Bay of Islands who supported trade with Europeans and had visited Sydney in 1805. Shocked by what he found, he tried to rescue the frightened Europeans still clinging to the ship's rigging. However, Te Ara's relatives thought the matter none of Te Pahi's business and killed most of the survivors. In a classic case of mistaken identity, Europeans would later blame Te Pahi for the tragedy.

The *Boyd* was then towed up the harbour towards Te Ara's village and grounded on mudflats near Motu Wai (Red Island). The ship was pillaged of its cargo, with muskets and gunpowder being especially prized booty.

During the pillaging a musket flint ignited the gunpowder on board, causing a massive explosion that killed a number of Māori, including Te Ara's father. Fire soon spread to casks of inflammable whale oil, and the *Boyd* burned down to the waterline.

Survivors

Several Europeans survived both the initial attack and its immediate aftermath. They included Thom Davis (the ship's cabin boy), Ann Morley and her baby, and two-year-old Betsey Broughton, who was taken by a local chief. Thom was spared because he had tended to Te Ara after his flogging and had smuggled food to him. The second mate was put to work making fish-hooks from barrel hoops, but when he proved incompetent at this task he was killed and eaten.

European utu

Rumours of the incident reached the Bay of Islands, and three weeks later the *City of Edinburgh* and other vessels to investigate. A Māori chief from the Bay of Islands who accompanied the European force negotiated the return of Ann Morley, her baby and Thom Davis. The taking of hostages secured the release of Betsey Broughton after a short delay.

Asked why they had attacked the ship, some of those involved said that the captain was a 'bad man'. The whalers present blamed Te Pahi for the incident, even though the real perpetrators declared his innocence. Te Pahi's pā, Te Puna, was destroyed by the European sailors, with considerable loss of Māori life.

This action resulted in civil war breaking out in the region, and in a final cruel irony, Te Pahi died of wounds received in battle in 1810. When Samuel Marsden arrived in 1814 to establish his Church Missionary Society mission, tensions still simmered. He invited chiefs from Whangaroa and the Bay of Islands aboard his ship, the *Active*, gave them gifts and asked them to ensure peace between their people.

'Each chief saluted the other,' Marsden wrote, 'and then went around to each one pressing their noses together.' They also assured him that they would never harm another European.

Travel advisory

For some Europeans the *Boyd* incident put New Zealand in the 'avoid if at all possible' category. A pamphlet circulating in Europe warned sailors off the 'Cannibal Isles' – 'touch not that cursed shore lest you these Cannibals pursue'.

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