

GRUNDY John William – ‘Captain Extraordinaire’ and ‘The Man’

18 March 1819 – 19 August 1883

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(Also see biography **GRUNDY John William and COOPER Eliza**)

Geraldine Brooks wrote: ‘When all who knew you in life are but bleached bone and dust, your descendants, your people, will crave to understand what manner of man you were when you did these deeds, first and last. Not the deeds. The man.’¹



During the 34 years that **John William Grundy** was one of New Zealand’s most respected ship’s masters, he left many traces of ‘*The Man*’.

We get an indication of his character from some of the more epic voyages, as recorded in the *Auckland-Waikato Historical Journal* (September 1988: No 53). In 1867, the miners of Otago needed vegetables, and in collaboration with Captain Davies on the cutter ‘Māori’ Grundy sailed south loaded with cabbages, cauliflowers, carrots, silverbeet and other vegetables. Grundy arrived after sunset, expecting to sell the cargo the next day. The desperate miners lit flares on the beach, ‘boats were quickly loaded with the long-desired cargo, and, standing on a box, Captain Grundy conducted a quick auction of fresh vegetables.’² He ‘squared things’ with the owner of the ‘Māori’ afterwards, both parties delighted with their profitable venture.

There was the so-called ‘potato-onion’ fleet of 1880 - eight vessels of various sizes that sailed with ‘bounteous harvests’³ of potatoes, onions, parsnips and carrots to alleviate potato famine caused by poor weather in the southern parts of the North Island. While the rest of the fleet sheltered until morning, Captain Grundy in the ‘*Torea*’ sailed early and arrived in Wellington, where he sold the vegetables at the dockside at great profit. By the time the other ships arrived the prices had dropped considerably.

It should be noted that in 1875, in command of the ‘*Torea*’, Grundy set and holds to this day the record time for a passage from the Kaipara Heads to Wellington Heads, in a sailing schooner of 50 tons.

Grundy, captaining the ‘*Torea*’, transported the renowned zoologist Andreas Reischek around New Zealand on some of his artefact-collecting trips, and is mentioned in Reischek’s book ‘*Yesterdays in Māoriland*’, published prior to Reischek’s death in 1902.

In 1874, while master of the ‘*Fiery Cross*’, sailing from Napier to Auckland, the ship encountered a storm, and was driven 700 miles eastward. The ship had been given up for lost when she limped into Auckland with a very tired and very hungry crew after 26 days at sea, creating ‘a sensation among shipping men in Auckland.’ Eliza is quoted: ‘as having never once lost hope for her husband’s safety, believing most earnestly that God was as near at sea as on land, and that her husband’s seamanship and dauntless spirit would bring him safely home.’⁴ Eliza was right.

In addition to his considerable professional and commercial skills, Grundy was a keen competitor, participating in the Auckland Regatta regularly for some 29 years. The regatta races were a chance to show off the capabilities of both master and ship, and were fiercely contested. Newspaper reports of regattas in Lyttleton, Wellington and Auckland were of huge interest to the public.

In 1879, after coming second in the regatta in Lyttleton, Grundy was instructed by the owner of the *'Torea'* to challenge the schooner *'Alert'* to a re-race, 'on the conditions that the course should be the same as that sailed over on regatta day, and the race sailed under the same rules and regulations'⁵ for a prize of £100. That race did not take place; however the same scenario played out in the Auckland regatta just weeks later. The champion's prize was awarded to a little ketch *'Adah'*, who won on handicap; the owners of the *'Torea'* and *'Transit'* agreed to a re-match, for a staggering £300 stake (equivalent to \$72,000 in today's dollars). 'The race was unique in the annals of New Zealand maritime history. It represented the peak of friendly rivalry between the local schooners, their proud owners and their builders. These were commercial vessels and publicity from such a race would have undoubtedly paid dividends.'⁶ *'Transit'* won.

Reporting on the 1882 Auckland regatta: 'This is expected to be a grand race. Mr Mitchelson (the owner) brought the *'Torea'* round from the Kaipara solely from a true spirit of sport. Captain Grundy chanced the bar at the Kaipara, leaving several vessels behind awaiting a slant.'⁷ Fun, but serious fun.

Captain Grundy was very much the professional sailor, and in the fledgling colony of New Zealand, conditions were treacherous. He campaigned for lights at the bar of the Manukau and Kaipara harbours, and did not mince his words: 'Every nautical man acquainted with this, the western harbour of Auckland [the Manukau], has recorded his conviction that buoys, beacons and an energetically and intelligently conducted pilot station, is all that is necessary to render it safe and easy of ingress and egress. But how is it with respect to the fine buoys that now lie corroding and have done so for months past, on the beach at Onehunga until, instead of beacons for the South Channel, they have as we are told, become targets for the Onehunga Rifle Volunteers?'⁸

The pilot responded: 'Again, I do assert that Captain Grundy, as a rule, never takes the proper channel ... and it is only a short time ago that the owners of the said vessel [*'Kate'*] were made acquainted with the improper navigation of their vessel when about Manukau Heads.'⁹

Newspapers reported in 1880 about the sighting of 'an old octopus,' now recognisable as a giant squid. Because the report came from 'such a high authority, none will dispute it's veracity.' The descriptive text is reminiscent of *'Moby Dick'*: 'Captain Grundy is well known as a skilful, intrepid old navigator, who knows no sentiment of unjustified fear. He has had sharks snapping at his legs and swimming for hours round him waiting for a chance. He has had leviathans of the deep threatening him as they raised their ponderous whalebone frames and blubber carcasses out of the mighty depths, slapping the ocean viciously with their tail and snapping the air with their terrible jaws as they rose sulkily out of the sea, as much to say 'Captain Grundy, you're not exactly the boss of the ocean, though you can boss it over those Auckland skippers.'¹⁰

A little snippet of news from January 1878 gives another glimpse of the man behind the reputation: 'The *Torea* schooner went out for a cruise on Saturday, when Captain Grundy kindly gave a number of the children from the orphanage a sail round the harbour, a treat which was greatly enjoyed by the juveniles.'¹¹

Grundy died suddenly of a heart attack. He was at Te Kopuru, an inlet of the Kaipara Harbour, on board his vessel *'Annie Wilson'* which was being loaded with timber.

When Grundy died, glowing obituaries were published in all the main newspapers of the day. Such was 'The Man'.

Endnotes:

¹ *The Secret Chord*, Geraldine Brooks, Hachette Australia, 2015. Page 17.

² *Auckland-Waikato Historical Journal*, September 1988. No 53. First published in the *Manukau Progress*, 20 July 1960, based on information supplied by Alfred Grundy, son of Captain J W Grundy, p.18.

³ *Ibid*, pp.17-18.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.20.

⁵ *Evening Post*, 4 Jan 1879

⁶ *A Maritime Heritage*, C W Hawkins. William Collins, Auckland, 1960, p.85.

⁷ *NZ Herald*, 28 Jan 1882.

⁸ *The New Zealander*, 8 Sept 1863.

⁹ *Daily Southern Cross*, 16 Sept 1863.

¹⁰ *Nelson Evening Mail*, 15 Oct 1880.

¹¹ *Lyttleton Times*, 7 Jan 1878.