

## **“An Axe to Grind” - The *Papua Times* as Colonial Opposition**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Australian colonial rule in Papua was derived from two very distinct strands, which existed simultaneously and dictated the future trajectory of development in the colony. Australian legislative authority, derived from the Crown, was ultimately the major determinant of law within Papua. However, the day-to-day administration of these colonies was delegated by legislation to be exercised by the Lieutenant Governor of Papua.

The Lieutenant-Governorship of Papua by Sir John Hubert Plunkett Murray is significant due to its longevity (1905-1940) as well as its unfailing commitment to a turn-of-the-century variation of equality. However, many of his decisions and opinions were not popular among the white colonialist population of the territory. This opposition was formally voiced by the *Papuan Times*, who led campaigns against every facet of Australian rule in the territory. By examining the writings of the *Times*, we are provided a snapshot of white colonial society in the period leading up to 1915. This paper aims to examine the main points of contention between Murray and the *Times* readership as it pertains to the enfranchisement of colonists and early colonial administration. While colonial opposition is often studied as the relationship between coloniser and Indigenous peoples, in this instance, opposition to Australian colonial rule stemmed from the colonists themselves, an area which has received minimal scholarly attention.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

John Hubert Plunkett (Hubert) Murray was Australia's first directly appointed Lieutenant Governor of Papua. For 35 years, he exercised significant power under the direction of successive Australian federal governments, a record of longevity for any governor in the British empire. Constitutionally, the Lieutenant Governor was invested with significant authority to maintain day to day order within the Colony without the need for any consultative requirement. This was necessary due to the relatively primitive communicative and transportation technologies of the time. An issue arising from such a concentration of power into one office is the development of opposition to what could be regarded as an undemocratic system; in the case of Murray, it would soon become apparent that the Territory's own newspaper, *The Papuan Times*, would fill the void left by the lack of a formal political opposition. This sort of opposition, as highlighted by the work of Ann Laura Stoler, aimed to reinforce the cultural identity and social superiority of the coloniser, while pushing back at steps to allow and integration of the Indigenous populations of Papua into this perceived elite.<sup>1</sup> Alongside a lack of representation at a local level is the issue that colonists of Papua also had no representation in the Federal government.

## **SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF AUSTRALIAN PAPUA**

The 'imperial adventure' that is Australian colonial control in Papua New Guinea stretches back beyond the official transition of power from Britain in 1905. In fact, initial interventions into Papua by the British Empire occurred in the latter parts of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> These were unauthorised forays by the Governor of the Colony of Queensland, Sir Thomas McIlwraith, to annex the entirety of non-Dutch New Guinea to establish a *cordon sanitaire* against German expansion into unclaimed New Guinea. McIlwraith's gambit of sending Henry Marjoribanks Chester to claim the territory led to Britain formally claiming the

territory of Papua, establishing its own colonial officials, but financially supported by the colonies of Australasia as per the agreement at the annexation of Fiji in 1875.<sup>3</sup>

Queensland's intentions for annexation were not an act of benevolence by a young power to help develop those social and economic structures of a 'lesser friend in Empire'.

Queensland's powerful agricultural sector had, for decades, been engaging in blackbirding throughout the region, capturing peoples for indentured service not unlike slavery.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, a thirst for 'virgin' land by pastoralists and plantation owners, coupled with ample cheap labour, meant that Queensland's colonial ambitions could only be satisfied by expansion northwards.<sup>5</sup> To the probable benefit of the Papuans, the ambitions of Queensland, and later Australia, were kept in check until 1905, when Papua was formally granted to the Commonwealth of Australia.<sup>6</sup>

## **MURRAY'S PAPUA BEFORE WORLD WAR ONE**

In 1904, Hubert Murray was appointed as a judge for the British administration of Papua.

There had been a succession of temporary actors within this role since the departure of Sir

William McGregor in 1898.<sup>7</sup> Murray's promotion by the Australian Government in 1907 to

Administrator, and in 1908 to the role of Lieutenant Governor, sets the scene for the exercise

of civilian power in Papua in the period encompassing both World War One and the start of

World War Two, until his death on Samarai in 1940. At the start of his Governorship, there

were only 64 Europeans in the colony; by 1914, over a thousand white colonists had

immigrated to establish plantations or engage in the multiple gold rushes of the time.<sup>8</sup> Any

actions undertaken for the betterment of approximately 300,000 Papuans were, in effect,

catering for the largest constituency in the colony; something which was seen by colonists as

of little benefit to themselves, but essential to the Australian government.<sup>9</sup> It also meant that

an economic elite, comprising of white colonists, organically established itself through the

owning of plantations and mines; while economically powerful, politically they were almost powerless and limited in their ability to influence policy.<sup>10</sup> According to Mohammed Adhikari, this was a consequence of the settler-colonial system in place in Papua, based on his research in South Africa and other settler-colonialist states of the Southern Hemisphere. Settlers, leaving the metropole, longed to replicate the conditions for which they left. In this case, familiar conditions included the wholesale destruction of Papuan culture and virtual enslavement under the Mission and Protection systems as established in Australia.<sup>11</sup>

Murray was unusual among colonial Australian administrators, as his attitudes towards his indigenous subjects suggests an appreciation and respect of their autonomy and a respect for their culture. However, this is not to suggest that he was not a radical interventionist who aimed to reform and modernise society. Murray was, for the time, incredibly progressive; in his own words, his stated purpose as Lieutenant Governor was to help raise the standard of the peoples of Papua through education, modern healthcare, and the elimination of barbarous practices which would allow Papuans to rise and control their own destiny.<sup>12</sup> Biographer Lewis Lett reinforced this claim, enthusing about how ‘enlightened’ Murray’s rule had been in the territory.<sup>13</sup> As a result, Murray’s administration prior to World War One could be considered – at least from his perspective - a benignly paternalist affair. His edicts and directions to modern observers seem patronising, but this is an era of European primacy; European science and culture was considered paramount above all else, and the purpose of establishing any form of colony was to create profits for the metropole. The beliefs, culture and existence of any local peoples was subordinate to the needs of the colonial power. Murray, however, demanded that Papuans have their property rights respected, were vaccinated against disease and able to live in peace and harmony.<sup>14</sup> This contradicts traditional colonialist thought, as it bestows significant protections on the property and social rights of Indigenous Papuans.<sup>15</sup> However, the Murray administration still regarded it as

necessary to eliminate unsavoury cultural practices as “cannibalism, head-hunting and polygamy”.<sup>16</sup> The opportunities afforded to colonial officials, however, did not reflect this benign colonialism.<sup>17</sup> This philosophy of governance saw, generally, more trust and respect in government officials by Indigenous Papuans than in commercial traders.<sup>18</sup>

## **SETTLER OPPOSITION TO MURRAY**

Murray’s exercise of power was, however, not as popular among the settler population of the colony. The transition from British control to that of Australia saw no real changes in the structure of Papuan governance and control. Murray, as Lieutenant Governor, was charged with virtually unlimited discretionary authority to control the day-to-day affairs of the territory. A Legislative Council was also established, comprising of key judicial and bureaucratic figures within the colony, as well as appointed members whose positions were relative to the white population in the colony. This was a consultative body; it had no real power within the colony but provided an opportunity for views to be heard via the three nominated members. These three members reflected the agricultural, commercial, and mining interests of the Colony, and were considered elder statesmen of the colony.<sup>19</sup> This body, however, had no obligation to consult with everyday members of society. Agitation for greater democratic reforms appear almost immediately after Australia’s assumption of sovereignty in 1906. The *Melbourne Argus*, for example, declared Papua a ‘Misgoverned Territory’ where standards had fallen, and incompetence reigned in 1908.<sup>20</sup> This perception was not helped by the local Papuan media at the time. The *Papuan Times* was the only major English language newspaper in production during this period. It was published largely by former government officials, commercial interests, and planters, three groups who could be considered hostile to the Murray administration due primarily to his reluctance to cede to their vision of Papua.<sup>21</sup>

An article run on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1911, demonstrates the levels of contempt shown towards the Murray administration. The article, first published in the right of centre *Brisbane Courier*, came to blame the lack of surveyors, labour shortages and disorganisation of government at the feet of the colonial administration. Local colonial populations agitated for change. They argued the need for reform to force Indigenous people to work on plantations; cheap labour, they argued, meant that their exports would be more competitive than Australian domestically produced products; by forcing the Indigenous peoples to pay a tax, they argued, it would force them to accept the work of the colonists at any wage point.<sup>22</sup> They also argued for the need to import Asian labour, in contravention of the White Australia policy, but not dissimilar to what was occurring in German New Guinea.<sup>23</sup> Indigenous Papuans, refused to work for employers who treated them poorly or underpaid them, a position supported by Murray.<sup>24</sup> When the Commonwealth Government and the Murray administration disagreed with the views of the colonists, white settlers began a sustained campaign against the administration. It was alleged that Murray refused to advocate for representation for Papua in Federal Parliament; he refused to allow opportunities for the colony to grow and thrive and, indeed, held back the opportunities by overtaxing the white population while refusing to tax Indigenous people. It was also claimed that he wasted money on a personal yacht, instead of building railway lines or developing water schemes, which were regarded as unnecessary for the existing population.<sup>25</sup>

The contempt over control of labour soon turned to an argument over enfranchisement in the Australian electoral system; a campaign spearheaded by the *Papuan Times*. Countless column inches were dedicated to the cause of complaint of white colonists that they were unable to vote in Federal elections, long seen as a strength of the Federal Labour party, who aspired to expand the franchise.<sup>26</sup> This soon became a vocal anti-Murray campaign, looking to reform the system of governance in Papua and, in the extreme cases, remove him from the role of

Lieutenant Governor. Murray was criticised for participating in scientific patrols, for his views on elected representation, even for dismantling local custom. His long-time second in charge, Administrator Miles Stanforth Smith, seems to even become a champion of this discontent, repeatedly highlighted for his encouragement to democratic reform. Due to the anonymity of authorship of some of the ‘correspondent’ articles, it would not be difficult to imagine that Mr Stanforth Smith may have been involved or encouraged their creation.<sup>27</sup> The media campaign reached its apogee on the 11th of June 1913, with a full-page article outlining the failures of the Murray governorship and the grievances of the colonists against his control<sup>28</sup>. Murray, it seemed, was nothing short of a tyrant, an autocrat who refused to advocate for white Papuans to be able to vote and participate in democratic institutions.<sup>29</sup> Reporting in Australian media highlighted a somewhat different sentiment. The *Australasian*, a Victorian paper that was quoted by the *Papuan Times*, did in fact report about the moves toward establishing a democratic model in the colony. However, far from endorsing a democratic experiment, it instead issued caution and concern about the fractious nature of such a body and highlighted the issues arising from the needs of leaving farms and properties while assemblies sat.<sup>30</sup> The details surrounding the detrimental effects of the establishment of assemblies was omitted from the reporting of the *Papuan Times*, for obvious reasons. Even the declaration of World War One in August 1914 did little to improve relationships between the administration and the media; on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August, immediately preceding of the declaration of war in Europe, there was a lack of complaint within the newspaper. By the twelfth, the usual criticisms of unelected democratic institutions and leadership re-emerged.<sup>31</sup> It is, however, also important to note that this general opposition quietened, at least in the early stages of the war.<sup>32</sup> While congratulating the Labor Party for electoral victory, the *Times* immediately called upon the recently elected Minister of External Affairs to “appoint... someone with sympathy for the white settlers here.”<sup>33</sup> In short, the *Times* was

demanding a direct intervention into the governance of Papua by the Federal government. They wanted the dismissal of Murray and his replacement by someone more amenable to their way of thinking around the franchise; democratic reforms would lead to planter and miner interests around cheap labour becoming inscribed in the legal and economic frameworks of the colony.<sup>34</sup>

The opposition to Murray's authority in Papua gradually increased, under the provocation of the *Times*. Throughout the period prior to World War One, this opposition took the form of both demands for enfranchisement and for favouring the needs of white settlers over those Indigenous peoples of the colony. Given the radical overtones of this opposition, and the policies for which it advocates, it is understandable the Australian Government and JHP Murray's reluctance to grant any degree of franchise to the colonists. However, like most oppositions, the patience of the administration would soon be tested, and the culmination of these hostilities would see the end of the *Times* as a newspaper in the colony.



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<sup>1</sup> Ann Stoler, "Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusions in Colonial Southeast Asia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 3 (1992), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S001041750001793X>, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/article/sexual-affronts-and-racial-frontiers-european-identities-and-the-cultural-politics-of-exclusions-in-colonial-southeast-asia/1E271424D970440FC9EAD746BE3A3FAA>. While Stoler wrote about French Indochina, her analysis is appropriate in the Australian systems of Papua.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Overlack, "Queensland's annexation of Papua: a background to Anglo-German friction," *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland* 10, no. 4 (1979).

<sup>3</sup> Overlack, "Queensland's annexation of Papua: a background to Anglo-German friction."

<sup>4</sup> John McLaren, "Nationalism and imperialism—Australia's ambivalent relationship to Papua New Guinea and the Pacific islands," (1999)., Graham Holton, "Sugar and blackbirding: Indentured labour in the colony of Queensland," *Journal Article, Guardian (Sydney)*, no. 2050 (2023), <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.017130979803727>  
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<sup>5</sup> Brian Jinks, Peter Biskup, and Hank Nelson, *Readings in New Guinea History* (Sydney, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1973). Pp 14-19

<sup>6</sup> This occurred due to the passing through British Parliament of the *Papua Act, 1905*, which established the role of Lieutenant Governor as subservient to the Governor-General of Australia.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, McGregor and his successor Le Hunte became governors of Queensland and South Australia post Federation. Robinson and Barton did not achieve such lofty heights.

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- <sup>8</sup> JHP Murray, "Papua: Report for the year ending 30th June 1912," *Albert J. Mulletts Government Printers, Victoria* (1912).
- <sup>9</sup> Mohamed Adhikari, "'We will utterly destroy them... and we will go in and possess the land': reflections on the role of civilian-driven violence in the making of settler genocides," *Acta Academica* 52 (2020), [http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S2415-04792020000100009&nrm=iso](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2415-04792020000100009&nrm=iso).
- <sup>10</sup> David Charles Lewis, *Planter Papua 1884-1942* (The Australian National University (Australia), 1989). Pg 185
- <sup>11</sup> Adhikari, "'We will utterly destroy them... and we will go in and possess the land': reflections on the role of civilian-driven violence in the making of settler genocides."
- <sup>12</sup> Within a greater British Empire. John Hubert Plunkett Murray, *Papua; Or, British New Guinea* (T. Fisher Unwin, 1912).
- <sup>13</sup> Lewis Lett, *The Papuan Achievement* (Melbourne University Press, 1944). Pg 105
- <sup>14</sup> Completely enlightened compared to the barbarity happening on the Australian mainland up to and including this time. John Hubert Plunkett Murray, *Native Administration in Papua* (Walter Alfred Bock, 1929).
- <sup>15</sup> Unlike what occurred in Australia under British control. Adhikari, "'We will utterly destroy them... and we will go in and possess the land': reflections on the role of civilian-driven violence in the making of settler genocides."
- <sup>16</sup> Murray, *Native Administration in Papua*.
- <sup>17</sup> See the example of Rafael Cilento, Medical officer and participant in massacre Alexander Cameron-Smith, *A Doctor Across Borders Raphael Cilento and public health from empire to the United Nations* (ANU Press, 2019). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvdjrrfp>. Patricia O'Brien, "Reactions to Australian colonial violence in New Guinea: The 1926 Nakanai Massacre in a global context," *Australian Historical Studies* 43, no. 2 (2012). Also Adhikari looks at the appropriateness of direct control of actions vis-à-vis those of 'independent operators'.
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- <sup>19</sup> Lewis, *Planter Papua 1884-1942*.
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- <sup>21</sup> "HANK NELSON looks at Papua New Guinea's early newspapers," *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier (Port Moresby : 1969 - 1981)* (Port Moresby), 19 December 1972 1972, PROGRESS IN PRINT SUPPLEMENT, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article250368546>.
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- <sup>23</sup> Germany had began importing Chinese labour from their Chinese concession in Tsingtao in the 1890's
- <sup>24</sup> "Labor Problem in Papua," *Papuan Times (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea : 1911 - 1916)* (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea), 16 August 1911 1911, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article251069752>.
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- <sup>27</sup> For example, the *Papua Times* manages to point out that only Mr Smith voted for the establishment of elected representation for white colonists "THE "AUSTRALASIAN."," *Papuan Times (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea : 1911 - 1916)* (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea), 08 October 1913 1913, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article251464574>.. Interestingly, there was different reporting in the *Australasian*. "Topics of the Week," *Australasian (Melbourne, Vic. : 1864 - 1946)* (Melbourne, Vic.), 30 August 1913 1913, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page15095236>.
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- <sup>29</sup> "Sidelights on Disfranchised Papua.."
- <sup>30</sup> "[No heading]."
- <sup>31</sup> "Correspondence," *Papuan Times (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea : 1911 - 1916)* (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea), 12 August 1914 1914, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article251466052>., "The Position in Papua," *Papuan Times (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea : 1911 - 1916)* (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea), 19 August 1914 1914, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article251466086>.
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<sup>33</sup> "Labor Party Victorious," *Papuan Times (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea : 1911 - 1916)* (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea), 09 September 1914 1914, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article251466186>.

<sup>34</sup> Adhikari, "'We will utterly destroy them... and we will go in and possess the land': reflections on the role of civilian-driven violence in the making of settler genocides."