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### *Another view of the 'Novara' expedition.*

- from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 January 1860

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Alan Mason

## ALLEGED OUTRAGE BY THE AUSTRIAN FRIGATE NOVARA.

A report has reached us of an outrage on the inhabitants of Stewart's Island, perpetrated by the Novara, Austrian vessel, which we hope, for the credit of science and for the honour of humanity, will be found to be incorrect. The statement, which has come to hand from a person who has been on the spot, amounts to this: that parties were despatched from the Novara to one of the islands, where they commenced a battue, sweeping away the pigs and poultry of the natives. When application was made for payment, the demand was treated with derision. So exasperated were the natives at these aggressions, that their first impulse was to form an ambush and destroy any boat's crew that might renew their attack. They were, however, warned that this would entail upon them a fierce revenge, and thus, in their conscious weakness, they were compelled to submit to a violence which is only aggravated by the relative position of the parties.

The inhabitants of this island (under 200) are in a higher state of civilization than most of the Polynesians. Generally, they are able to make themselves understood in English. Each family has its own dwelling, and the deportment of the people is highly decorous and inoffensive. It is difficult, indeed, to give credit to all the reports which

have reached us of their high state of civilization, in all its finer and more important characteristics. Their intercourse with the English, from time to time, has informed them of many subjects upon which they express themselves with considerable clearness and fluency.

The reputation of the Austrian Government is not such as to assure redress. It will be more easy to deny the fact than to make the reparation. We have specimens in the late war of the style in which Austrian commanders deal with parties who happen to fall under their power. The shocking slaughter of Lombard peasants, which filled Europe with such disgust, was not only admitted but defended.

It could not have been out of the power of the Novara to have made compensation for the provisions they preferred to steal. The treatment of the natives could only arise from the wanton contempt of native rights which has so often dishonored the ships of civilized nations.

Thank God, there is a public opinion which even the Austrian Government cannot altogether defy. A British officer would be covered with indelible disgrace if such offences could be brought home to him. The English flag would disown him. How deep, then, would be the dishonour that would fall upon any British expedition, sent out in the service of science - claiming the protection of the world on account of the sanctity and universal benevolence of its mission, and yet which should mark its progress with pillage, and leave behind it an intense hatred and resentment for unprovoked injustice.

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"Stewarts Island" mentioned in this newspaper report is obviously not our Stewart Island - Auckland was the only New Zealand port of call for the Novara. It is Stewart Island, the easternmost of the Solomons group which was visited in October 1858, prior to the Novara arriving in Auckland. Scherzer (1862, vol. 2\*) in his narrative of the Novara Expedition makes no specific mention of a visit to Stewart Island but that it was visited is shown by the following statement made in reference to the natives of nearby Malaita -

Although distant in a direct line N.W. only sixty miles from Stewart's Island and its inhabitants, they spoke an entirely different idiom, and were likewise distinguished widely from any of the latter in colour, make, and physiognomy. (page 598)  
Scherzer went on to say ,

That the inhabitants of Malaita were the wildest, most uncivilised race of men we had as yet encountered in our voyaging to and fro round the globe. (page 599).

This contrasted markedly with the *Sydney Morning Herald's* comment (paragraph 2 above) on the natives of nearby Stewart Island. So, who was correct? Scherzer's failure to make direct mention of a visit to Stewart Island and his remarks on the character of the Malaitans may be indicative of some unsavoury episode.

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#### *Reference*

Scherzer, K., 1862. *Narrative of the Circumnavigation of the Globe by the Austrian Frigate Novara*, 3 vols., 1861-3