

## **Canny Scot Found Inn Dry Going**

*By Celia and Cecil Mason*

*It's Not in the History Books. Dominion. Friday April 26, 1957, p8.*

*William Murray was a Scot, but apparently not dour. On the contrary, he was imbued with a desire to brighten the lives of his fellows.*

*If thereby he could improve his own fortunes, so much the better. And in the first two years of Nelson's settlement few of the settlers' lives could be said to be bright, and fortunes were not easily come by.*

*One day then, in 1842, William stepped ashore from the schooner which had brought him from Wellington, with his wife and family, barrels and taps and mugs and all the appurtenances of a public house, and "a good reputation as a publican." Within a short time he had established himself in a suitable building, named it (as one would expect) the "Caledonian Inn" and only awaited the issue of his licence to open its doors to the thirst settlers of the new city-to-be.*

*William's notions of what an inn should be did not stop at selling beer and "ardent spirits." His house, he felt, should be a centre of social life, a place where, in continental style, his patrons might not only enjoy their refreshment and conversation, but might also have their thoughts taken away from their daily worries (which were many) by listening to music or watching a theatrical performance. For this purpose he planned to build at the back of the Caledonian Inn, a theatre.*

### **Fearsome Rages**

*But unaccountably to those who eagerly awaited the opening, the doors remained shut, day after day and week after week. William Murray had not reckoned with Nelson's peppery magistrate, Augustus Thompson.*

*Thompson, a barrister of the Inner Temple, was not a man to cross, and for some reason unknown, William had succeeded in upsetting the English lawyer, whose temper was so violent that he was known on occasion to tear handfuls of hair from his head when in a rage.*

*Whether Thompson could refuse the licence or not, he certainly did not issue it. Murray pleaded for it over and over again, and still Thompson did nothing. So William Murray, in desperation, took the law into his own hands and opened his inn.*

*He conducted the place well, it was said, and there were no complaints until one night when he had arranged for a fiddler to provide a cheerful atmosphere. The atmosphere became, in the end, rather too cheerful, and some rowdies started a fight. The dauntless Scot did all he could to stop the trouble, throwing the men out into the road and suffering some damage himself in the process. But he slept uneasily that night, for he knew, as did Thompson (to whom the brawl was reported) that this would give the vindictive magistrate his chance.*

*Next day, sure enough, he was arrested on a charge of selling liquor without a licence. Magistrate Thompson, with considerable satisfaction, fined the humble publican the (then) staggering sum of £30 – say £130 today. But in doing so he stated that the fine was for keeping a rowdy house, which was not the charge on which Murray had been arrested.*

*The good citizens of Nelson rose in wrath. Led by the lively young William Curling Young, a cousin of Alfred Domett, they marched to an indignant meeting of protest. Murray apparently came out of the affair quite well, for it was during the subsequent months that he built his theatre. But in 1844 he was in the news again.*

*The Murrays, feeling the need for a holiday, closed the inn for the day and went of to “the Waimeas.” While they were there, some thieves entered and ransacked the inn; every box was prised open, everything of any value taken – except (and William laughed) a large sum of money which the canny Scot had hidden in an old battered cup. But the loss of the rest must have been the final straw and only a few months later the Caledonian Inn was advertised for “competition by public auction, together with the spacious and commodious theatre, with the whole of the scenery, decorations, dresses and properties.”*

*So William Murray disappears from the news sheets. But strangely enough he had already outlived both his benefactor William Curling Young, and his enemy Augustus Thompson. The one had been drowned crossing a river, the other had been tomahawked at the Wairau, and had been found with tufts of his own hair clenched in his stiffened fingers.*