

Imperium et Libertas: G.C. Henderson and 'Colonial Historical Research' at Adelaide

Tamson Pietsch

In 1907 J.M. Dent & Co, London, in partnership with E.P. Dutton & Co, New York, published a book by the Professor of History at the University of Adelaide: G.C. Henderson's *Sir George Grey: Pioneer of Empire in Southern Lands*. The volume was well received, both in Australia and in Britain. *The Academy* called it 'an able piece of work, clear, discriminating, judicial' and Frederick Watson, later to be editor of *Historical Records of Australia*, sung its praises.¹ 'Nearly all the London papers & reviews [spoke] very favourably of the work', reported Henderson in December 1908 to the Australian Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin, who had written with his own compliments.² An 'Oxford scholar, holding a chair in an Australian university', Henderson possessed an outlook that, according to *The Academy*, was 'Imperial rather than Colonial'.³ His position in a colonial university did not – or so the reviewer believed – set him apart from his metropolitan colleagues: 'he delivers himself of no shibboleths', concluded the article.⁴

This chapter argues that Henderson's book, and the outlook and experiences that informed both it and his work at the University of Adelaide, need to be understood in terms of the social and institutional contexts that linked Australia and Britain at the turn of the century. Moving within the networks of the British academic world, Henderson's travels and the landscapes of affection and connection born of them, not only shaped the way he approached his work, but his experience of undertaking it in turn also shaped his vision for 'colonial historical research' at Adelaide.⁵

I

Born in 1870 near Newcastle in New South Wales, Henderson was the eighth child of an illiterate Methodist coalminer. Educated at state schools, he served as a pupil-teacher before winning a scholarship to the Fort Street Training School in Sydney. Enrolling in a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Sydney

in 1890, he continued to teach at Fort Street, graduating from his degree three years later with the University Medal and the Frazer Scholarship in History. Awarded a travelling scholarship in 1894, with a recommendation from G.A. Wood, Sydney's foundation Professor of History, Henderson went to Oxford where he read History at Balliol, forming a close bond with the Master, A.L. Smith, who was also Wood's old tutor. 'Perhaps I may venture to confess', Smith would later write, 'that, in nearly thirty years' experience, I have never myself had a pupil who interested me more': 'He was my pupil, and has become our intimate friend'.⁶ In 1899 Henderson married May Gertrude Sturge, a Quaker, local historian and woman of letters, and that same year they travelled together to Sydney where Henderson served for a year as acting Professor of History, and then a second year as acting Professor of Philosophy. When this appointment ended in 1901, the couple returned to England, where Henderson resumed his work delivering lectures for the University of Oxford Extension Delegacy.⁷

It was during this time of precarious employment that Henderson was invited by Rev. Dugald MacFadyen to write the book on George Grey for Dent & Co. As part of a series on the great men of the nineteenth century MacFadyen wanted a volume which he hoped would focus on the 'part which religion played in determining the character of their influence in history'. Henderson accepted the challenge.⁸ His appointment as Professor of History and English Language at the University of Adelaide in 1902 did not interrupt his work on the project. It did, however, interrupt his marriage. While Henderson relocated, his wife remained in England and they were divorced in 1911.

In 1902 George Grey was a controversial figure: Army officer in Ireland, explorer in Australia, and successively Governor of South Australia (1841–1845), New Zealand – twice – 1845–1853 and 1861–1868), and the Cape Colony (1854–1861). According to James Belich, author of Grey's entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, colonial governance 'became a sacred mission in Grey's mind'. He 'sought, first, to transform "wild natives" into something English-like, converted to Christianity, commerce, civilisation, and subordination, and second, to transform wild nature through settlement into flourishing young neo-Britains'.⁹ Presiding over the fiscal recovery of South Australia in the 1840s, he supervised the cessation of hostilities between Maori and European settlers in New Zealand and drafted the colony's constitution, before being appointed to the Cape where he exploited the famine that followed the Xhosa cattle slaughtering of 1856–1857 to take control of their lands. Recalled from the Cape for advocating South African federation, a change of ministry in Britain led to his re-appointment soon after as Governor of New Zealand. There he sought to appropriate Maori land for pakeha farmers.

In the inevitable conflicts which followed Grey earned the support of settlers and disapproval of the imperial government; he was recalled a second time by the Colonial Office for his over-energetic use of British troops and finances. Following a brief retirement, he entered local elected politics in New Zealand, serving as Premier from 1877–79 and then continuing in parliament before his return to London in 1894, where ideas of imperial federation were more in vogue than they had been thirty years earlier.

At the time of his death in 1898 Grey was hailed on the one hand as an enlightened democrat and public benefactor who had rescued South Australia, New Zealand and even India from the brink of destruction – a friend of white and black alike – and on the other was condemned as an autocratic ruler and ruthless conqueror.¹⁰ This last view was advanced by his detractors both in Britain – particularly the Colonial Office – and in the various colonies where he served. The most vociferous critic was perhaps Sir William Fox, Prime Minister of New Zealand three times between 1856 and 1872.

These opposing views found expression in a series of publications published in the decade after Grey's death.¹¹ The first of these was an authorised 'biography' aimed at correcting what Grey deemed to be the perversion of his life story. Falling seriously ill in 1891 (so ill, in fact, that a eulogy was preemptively read out in the New Zealand Parliament), Grey had engaged his political ally, William Rees, and his daughter Lily Rees, to produce a book published the following year as *The life and times of George Grey*.¹² Writing 15 years later, James Collier, attempting to bolster the authority of the Reeses' text, characterised the relationship between authors and subject as 'of the most intimate character': 'Residing now in the same city [Auckland] with the old Governor, Mr Rees enjoyed unequalled opportunities of hearing the whole story of his career, at least as it appeared to Grey. Through many a Sunday afternoon Grey used the privilege of old age and talked over the narrative of his life, as he had done to dozens of others'.¹³ The Reeses sought to rehabilitate Grey's reputation, going so far as to claim that, while Governor of the Cape Colony in 1857, Grey had, on his own initiative, diverted an expedition of British troops bound for China to Bombay (to suppress the Indian rebellion), and thereby 'saved India.' The year after Grey's death, another celebratory text claiming to be based on interviews with Grey appeared: James Milne's *Sir George Grey: the Romance of a Proconsul*.¹⁴ But these positive accounts of Grey's career were not universally endorsed, at least partly because it was widely felt that Grey himself could not be relied upon to give a truthful account of events, and in 1901 *The English Historical Review* published a note by Richard Garnett which took issue with the claims made by the Reeses.¹⁵

Henderson was well aware of the controversy surrounding the sources for the Rees and Milne books. 'It is high time', he declared in his own volume, 'that the reputations of sincere and honest men at the Colonial Office were vindicated against the unjustifiable censures passed on them by an author who has assumed the *rôle* of an advocate'.¹⁶ His book was a conscious attempt to depart from what was perceived to be the 'compromised' accounts of previous authors who had relied on Grey's own accounts. Instead, Henderson sought to 'set the life of Sir George Grey in its historical setting and soberly to estimate his place in a great historical development' by appealing to another kind of authority: 'original documents in South Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Western Australia'.¹⁷ 'I trust that the record may prove to be authentic', he wrote, 'even though the conclusions arrived at are in many cases diametrically opposed to the views which have been expressed by other writers.'¹⁸

Unlike the Reeses and Milne, Henderson was very critical of Grey. He censured the Governor for his repression of the 1858 'Kaffir Rising', for his push in 1859 to federate South Africa against metropolitan plans, and for his actions in 1867–8 in New Zealand when he again defied the imperial government and pursued a military seizure of Maori land in South Taranaki. Henderson condemned Grey for his autocratic temperament and declared that the 'defects in Sir George Grey's character', so 'unsparingly dealt with' by his critics, were not done so 'more severely than is justified by an impartial study of the most reliable evidence'. Yet at the same time Henderson also felt that the events of the turn of the century – closer imperial union and colonial nationalism – vindicated what he perceived to be Grey's vision of a federated empire based on colonial self-government. Grey was 'no faultless hero, no saint,' concluded Henderson, but he was 'a strong, brave, sincere man, who strove earnestly and faithfully to fulfil a great purpose; and, notwithstanding the *dénouement* of 1867, he carried it through to a finish.'¹⁹

II

In researching his book on Grey, Henderson had examined an astounding collection of archives. He had travelled to London, Cape Town, Perth, Adelaide and Wellington, plumbed the records of government houses, trawled through state libraries, uncovered Grey's private correspondence, and written to and interviewed numerous individuals.²⁰ This concern with primary sources was very much a product of his historical education in Sydney under Wood and in Oxford under Smith.²¹ In both universities Stubbs's *Select Charters and other Illustrations of English Constitutional History* (a collection of documents relating to English constitutional history before 1485), assumed a central place in the

curriculum. Its principal virtues were summarised by Wood himself in 1901:

With infinite industry constitutional documents are collected, examined, arranged, and when possible, explained. With infinite care the worth of evidence is tested, and distinction made between what is certain, what is probable, what is possible, what is impossible. So step by step some sort of path is made, over ground, the uncertain character of which becomes more and more evident. Bit by bit we gain some notion of the little that is knowable and of the much that is unknowable about the early history of English institutions. That is the invaluable work that has been done by Stubbs, and the School of Stubbs.²²

However, although influenced by Stubbs, both Henderson and Wood were not uncritical of the way his book was taught at Oxford. Stubbs, held Wood, was dry as a 'valley of bones'.²³ He believed students should also show knowledge of and engagement with 'the great masterpieces of Literature'.²⁴ At Balliol, A.L. Smith had brought Stubbs to life with his vision of English history as an unfolding story 'which combined order with enlargement of liberty'.²⁵ In England, Henderson (not unlike Hancock, who would later talk about the importance of the historian's boots) sought to awaken this historical past through direct engagement with its remnants in the present. In 1898 he undertook a pilgrimage across England in which he traced the route of the Roman conquest, and he sought a better understanding of nineteenth-century liberalism by reading documents held at St Deiniol's Library in Hawarden. These experiences had brought the past alive to him and solidified his commitment to original research.

Yet if Sydney and Balliol influenced his method, Henderson's own embodied experiences of mobility shaped his interpretation of Grey. Unlike earlier works, Henderson's study, as his reviewer in *The Academy* noted, placed Grey in an imperial context.²⁶ This perspective was, as Henderson himself admitted, fashioned by the author's own movement across the spaces of empire. 'Nothing impresses the Australian, on his first visit to England, more', wrote Henderson, inserting himself into his text, 'than the change of political atmosphere':

In the Colonies he has been concerned with the development of his own country, and his interests are centred in domestic legislation. The necessity for maintaining peace by being prepared for war startles him ... It requires some time before he is able to adjust himself mentally to a condition of affairs in which neighbouring nations are really preparing to blow each other to the moon in case of a conflict that is always imminent.²⁷

Transposing his own experience onto his subject, Henderson described Grey as 'situated between Imperial and Colonial ministers'.²⁸

This personal insight led Henderson to conclude that, in his support for colonial self-government Grey was seeking to 'keep out [from the new world] many of the Old World traditions', so enabling 'nations [to] rise in the Southern Hemisphere for whom war was something afar off and forgotten'.²⁹ Yet although this made Grey a radical, it did not necessarily make him anti-imperial.³⁰ His early experience in Ireland during the early 1830s, Henderson judged, had shown Grey that while local affairs were best administered by a national government, 'there would still be left over certain matters of general interest for the consideration of an Imperial Council'.³¹ Writing at the turn of the century, Henderson – who would later join the Round Table, the British Empire Club and the Royal Empire Society, as well as helping to found the Australian Imperial Association – saw in Grey a mirror of his own commitment to both imperial federation and colonial nationalism.³² In assessing Grey, he employed a phrase which another Australian-born Balliol man would later make his own: 'neither *Imperium* nor *Libertas*; but *Imperium et Libertas*, with the emphasis on *Libertas*.'³³

Henderson's vindication of Grey's 'great purpose' was also a product of the powerful influences exerted by his teachers. G.A. Wood's practical idealism had made a strong impression on the young Henderson. Wood's aim was to make of his students good men and good citizens by teaching 'the *English* ideal' – a belief in liberty and a willingness to promote it for the benefit of others.³⁴ According to Wood's son, the future historian Fred Wood, Henderson absorbed this 'faith alike in the possibility of moral progress and in the unique importance of the individual – a faith that was further reinforced during Henderson's own time at a Balliol steeped in the British Idealism of T.H. Green.'³⁵ Like G.A. Wood, in Oxford Henderson developed a profound interest in St Francis of Assisi, visiting Italy in 1901 and making extensive notes of the frescoes and their impact on him. He put these ideas into practice, working at the Mansfield College Settlement in the East End of London and lecturing – as he had in Sydney – for University Extension. 'What will carry him furthest,' wrote A.L. Smith, 'are the high ideals which he has constantly in view, and the high principles which he holds, and, what is more, acts upon.'³⁶

In the book on Grey, Henderson's idealism is clearly evident. Not only did he categorise Grey as 'an idealist of the strenuous type' with a mind 'cast in a heroic mould, and each stroke of pain was made the occasion for more spirited endeavour', but in a manner reminiscent of Wood, he also presented his own ideals of justice, liberty, moral feeling, public service and education as the

foundation on which the British Empire – and Grey's career within it – was based.³⁷ Although Grey may have been personally flawed, it was ultimately his dedication to these ideals that led Henderson to praise him. In Dugald MacFadyen's opinion, Henderson had achieved something that 'has hardly yet been seriously undertaken.'³⁸ He showed 'how ideal forces operate in the field of statesmanship in building up new nations'.³⁹ In this, the influence of Smith and Wood is clearly evident. Indeed, Henderson himself acknowledged these debts, dedicating – from Adelaide – his book '[t]o [his] Tutor and Friend, Mr A.L. Smith, M.A., Balliol College, Oxford'.⁴⁰

III

The experience of undertaking his study of Grey had a significant influence on the way Henderson sought to establish the discipline of History at Adelaide. According to Elizabeth Kwan, as early as 1902 he had expressed his desire to 'found a school of original research into the history of those parts of the empire that lie south of the equator'.⁴¹ In the midst of his own research on Grey, encouraged by the establishment at Oxford in 1905 of the Beit Chair of Colonial History, and inspired by the expansion of the holdings of the Bodleian Library that Beit's donation facilitated, in 1906 Henderson wrote to Adelaide's Vice-Chancellor, George Murray, arguing that the Dominions ought similarly to encourage students.⁴² He began agitating for the foundation at the University of Adelaide of a student scholarship that would enable him to 'form a good honours class'.⁴³ At that time universities in Australia followed the English practice of awarding honours for special examinations undertaken during a three-year degree. As Kwan points out, the terms of the scholarship that was first conferred in Adelaide in 1908, 'indicate that Henderson was foreshadowing what some decades later became established across Australia as the separate fourth year of the honours degree largely concerned with thesis work'.⁴⁴ Named the Tinline – after Murray's mother's maiden name – the grant was awarded on the results of a BA degree and was tenable for two years. Tinline Scholars were required to produce a thesis based on original research on South Australian history. Henderson thought that after the first students wrote about the political history of the Colony, later ones would develop a thematic approach, before they too were succeeded by a generation who would move beyond South Australia, but remain south of the equator. In Henderson's mind this commitment to Australian history was intimately tied up with his politics. As he would later argue in the speech with which he launched the Australian Imperial Association:

loyalty to this country [Australia] as a whole, and loyalty to the Empire of which we form a part, are not incompatible, but should go hand in hand. I believe that can be justified by a study of the history of Australia from the beginning [.]⁴⁵

A vital part of Henderson's programme for South Australian history entailed securing better research facilities for students. Quoting Grey, in the preface to his 1907 book Henderson lamented the 'injudicious arrangement regarding the place of great historical treasures.'⁴⁶ 'The time has come', he declared, 'when, in the interests of scientific research, a redistribution on the basis of general utility should be effected'. Henderson proposed an exchange of archival material between South Africa and Auckland and stated the Adelaide Public Library's preparedness to pay for any items it received.⁴⁷ By the time the Grey volume came out, Henderson had already made a good beginning on an archives project in South Australia. Additionally, in 1905 he had managed to secure from London the late S. William Silver's York Gate Library, 'one of the best Imperial libraries in the world.'⁴⁸ Since 1904 he had been serving on the Board of Governors of the Adelaide Library, Museum and Art Gallery, and in 1908 he celebrated the opening of the Library's Jervois Wing, built specially to house the new collection. During the second part of the decade he was engaged in repeated efforts to obtain the permission of the Secretary of State for the Colonies to release for research purposes correspondence between Government House Adelaide and the Colonial Office.⁴⁹ Henderson's vigorous campaigning secured state government support for the preservation of official records and resulted subsequently in the establishment in 1919 of the first State Archives in Australia. His successes in South Australia, informed by his own scholarship on Grey, in turn influenced the later efforts of Wood and Scott to achieve something similar at a national level.

Speaking in 1909 in Melbourne in a prelude to the paper he would give to the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science in 1911, Henderson outlined his vision for what he called 'Colonial Historical Research'. He argued that, rather than following British precedents, professors of history in Australia should encourage their students to use scholarships to direct research into the history of each state. He did not see such a project as one of purely local interest. Australian history, believed Henderson, when 'authoritatively made known', could offer the world new ideas.⁵⁰ In Sydney, Wood's response was initially hesitant – he thought there was more '*educational* advantage [to be] gained by the student ... [in] a rediscovery of the great facts about Francis or Cromwell, than by original discovery of facts about (as Scott used to put it) "Govr Phillip's

prize pig!"⁵¹ But Henderson eventually brought Wood around, and following Henderson's Melbourne speech Wood admitted that 'for the first time [he saw] some chance of work in this direction'.⁵² Wood's own volume *The Discovery of Australia*, published by Macmillan London in 1922, was itself testament to his conversion. Wood dedicated the book 'to the History students of Sydney University, 1891–1921, and especially to one of them.'⁵³

IV

In 1922 Henderson made a second marriage – one that would quickly prove as disastrous as his first. Annie Héloïse Abel was an English-born professor at Smith College, Massachusetts who was in Adelaide undertaking research into the Wakefield System when Henderson met her. A hint as to what might have initially brought them together is evident in the letter Annie wrote to the President of Smith College in July 1922, telling him of her new relationship: she was moving to Australia, she said, to 'marry a Professor of History, one who is a specialist ... in the History of British colonisation'.⁵⁴ They hoped, she went on, 'to do research together and to develop an interest in the subject in the University'.⁵⁵ Although soon after the marriage Henderson suffered a breakdown that led to his resignation and Annie's return to America, in this fragment of correspondence we can sense some of the hope both felt at the prospect of a project that examined the expansive world their own lives had helped tie together.

Henderson's book on Grey points to the importance of situating early twentieth-century academics like Henderson within the expansive personal networks that connected colonial universities like Adelaide with those in Britain. In doing so it also highlights the partial and particular worlds that cut up the vast reaches of the globe, linking people who knew each other and people who knew people who knew each other. The peculiarities of their intimate feelings, the reach of their personal ties, and the routes of their repeated migrations, created relative forms of proximity and distance that helped reshape the geographies of intellectual production and fashion the circumscribed spaces of lived global connection.⁵⁶ Henderson's vision of 'colonial historical research' was both a product of his own lived experience of empire, and a way he made sense of it. But it was also the means by which he sought to forge a life and a career within its structures. Indeed, with his simultaneous concern for the local and the imperial, Henderson's vision looks a lot like the kind of history that, in the context of new kinds of global connection, is developing in university departments in the early twenty-first century.⁵⁷