The First Books

Henry Fyshe Gisborne and the beginning of the Melbourne Athenaeum library

The first books that resided on these shelves belonged to a young man named Henry Fyshe Gisborne. Henry's father was an MP back in England and after attending Cambridge University he had arrived in Sydney in 1834 at the age of 21 to take up a government post. Henry arrived in Melbourne in August 1839, and almost immediately became involved in the foundation of the Institution. He was acting secretary in the week following its inception on 12th November 1839 and was one of the initial vice presidents. Most significantly, at a meeting on 16th May 1840, Henry offered the use of his personal library until he returned from an anticipated trip back to England. Among these books were five volumes of the Mechanics' Magazine, a popular English publication. These he must either have acquired soon after becoming involved in the foundation of the Institution, or, as seems more likely, he was already in possession of them and they indicate an interest that explains his involvement.

Henry's arrival in Melbourne followed a precarious overland journey from Sydney, related in his letters, during which he had received a good dunking in the Murray when fording on horseback. He had been appointed the first Commissioner for Crown Lands for the Port Phillip District by Governor George Gipps. In this capacity Henry ranged widely north and west of Melbourne with his small band of police troopers. The role led to a number of adventures including the 'battle of Yering', during which he captured the Wurundjeri chief Jaga Jaga, only to allow him to escape when distracted by the clan's diversionary tactics.[1] Among the cavalcade that accompanied Henry from Sydney was his personal library (which clearly survived the crossing of the Murray) and a string of horses that he intended to sell on arrival in Melbourne. Books and horses were major preoccupations in Henry's life. His letters make frequent mention of books received from friends and relatives and what he thought about those he had recently read. He also received saddles and bridles from his parents back in England, even rarer commodities and vital in a time when the horse was the main means of transport. Both these interests would mark Henry's lasting contributions to Melbourne society. In March, 1840, he founded the Flemington Racecourse and the loan of his books to the Mechanics' Institute became a bequest in his will.

Henry' interests were wide and varied, reflected in his reading and in the activities he occupied himself with. As well as horse racing and the Mechanics Institution he was involved in the founding of the Pastoral and Agricultural Society, was an honorary member of the Melbourne Club and drafted the first petition for the separation of Port

[1] The site of the battle is commemorated with a memorial unveiled Jan 13th 2007 on the anniversary of the engagement.

Phillip District from New South Wales, which he presented to Governor Gipps when he returned to Sydney.[2] However Gipps did not take kindly to Henry's sociability. On seeing Henry's name in the newspapers as the steward at the races and attending balls, Gipps asked Superintendant Charles La Trobe to urge him towards other pursuits. This never seems to have been passed. It is clear from Henry's letters that he had a higher regard, and a better working relationship, with his immediate superior La Trobe than he did with the Governor.

The arrival of Henry's personal library to Melbourne was initially to the benefit of a neighbouring institution on Collins Street, the Melbourne Club, where he appears to have first kept his books. Not all club members, however, were to be trusted and theft by 'some rascal', as he related to a friend, was to be to the Mechanics' Institution's advantage. It was shortly after this that he offered his books on loan to the Institution before he returned to England.

It is not clear why Henry set off back to Britain in late 1840, but his letters tell of periodic ill health and the very reason for his returning home may have been in the knowledge that he had not long to live. He never made it home. Henry died during the voyage on 30th April 1841 at the age of only 27. He had made his will in India en route in which the loan of books to the Melbourne Mechanics' Institute was made permanent, other books he left to his friends. Although he had not lived long he had certainly made good use of the time he had.

Henry's books

Henry's reading material shows that the tastes of young men have changed markedly in the last two centuries. The books that he left to the Mechanics' Institution did not constitute his whole library, but the list clearly reflects his taste for history and philosophy, as well as an interest that could stretch to a wide variety of subject material. At first glance, the list of books looks like an eclectic selection, a curious collection with which to endow a nascent library. However closer inspection reveals a careful selection of reference material and eighteenth century classics which might have graced the core of any Mechanics' Institute library. The collection was anything but accidental in its composition.

The reference works included an *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (20 volumes and 6 supplements), Dionysius Lardner's *Cabinet Cyclopaedia* (2 volumes), William Blackstone's *Commentaries of the Laws of England* and William Guthrie's popular and comprehensive *Geography* all of which clearly fell within the Institution's remit as a

[2] Gisborne Street, behind Parliament House, commemorates Henry's involvement in Victorian separation and the town of Gisborne was named for his role as Commissioner for Crown Lands.

source of information and learning. Of other useful volumes there was Leonhard Euler's *Elements of Algebra*, Hugh Blair's *Lectures of Rhetoric*, Robert Dawson's *The Present* State of Australia and five volumes of the Mechanics Magazine.

Representing Henry's interest in philosophy and history were: Adam Smith's classic *The Wealth of Nations*, David Hume's *History of England* (in 20 volumes), biographies of William Pitt by John Gifford and Philip II by Robert Watson, William Robinson's *History of Charles V*, *History of America* and *The Knowledge which the Ancients had of India*. The only representative of another interest, theology, was Butler's *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed*. The Institution's committee had early on decreed that works that 'contain polemical, divinity, or other matters which they deem objectionable' should be excluded from the library, which may explain the single theological treatise; we know from Henry's letters that he had several others.

Perhaps more intriguing is the single novel on the list, Ann Radcliffe's gothic novel *Gaston de Blondeville* (1826). Fiction was not as widely read in the early eighteenth century as it is today, but it is nonetheless welcome evidence of lighter entertainment to add to the educational tomes to be found on the library's shelves, albeit only a single volume.

Extract from: Gisborne, Matthew, "The First books"
in The Melbourne Athenaeum : A Journal of the history of a Melbourne institution, 2009.