

# Debates

**'My dear lads ...':**

**G.A. Henty, Author of Empire, and the New South Africa**

**Damian Clarke**

'My dear lads'—with these words George Alfred Henty (1832 - 1902) would introduce yet another tale of derring-do in which a young courageous British public school lad would triumph over incredible odds, meet the important historical personalities of the day and return safely to England to enjoy the fruits of his labour. It was of no consequence that his heroes were almost always identical. Henty never addressed the 'fairer sex', non Anglo-Saxons and certainly not the people of colour who comprised the majority of the multitudes making up the British Empire. He was addressing the future rulers, administrators and police officers of the British Empire, and they may have lisped and had receding chins, but they were also white, male, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant.

G.A. Henty was, by all accounts, a remarkable man who may have stepped from the pages of his own stories. He was a pioneer war reporter, who witnessed at first hand the wars of Italian and German unification in the late 19th century. He drew on his experiences in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 for one of his earliest novels, *The Young Franc Tireurs*, and covered campaigns in West Africa and Central Asia. After a friend encouraged him to commit his stories to paper, he became both an extremely popular and prolific author. He wrote over eighty novels, which were sold all over the British Empire and America. (Elleke Boehmer, in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, notes that in the 1890s, his 'militaristic boys' adventure tales' were being consumed by the British 'in their tens of thousands a year'; 31). His modus operandi was to write to the British Library for information about the historical period he intended to cover and then to closet himself with a scribe for the next few weeks and to dictate the next adventure. He covered almost every period of history from Ancient Egypt (*The Cat of the Babustes*) to the Punic Wars (*The Young Carthaginians*), the Hundred Years War (*Saint George for England*), to the wars of Empire (*With Clive in India*, *With Wolfe at Quebec*, *By Sheer Pluck: A Tale of the Ashanti Wars*). He remained current, completing two books about the Boer War (*With Buller in Natal* and *With Roberts to Pretoria*) shortly prior to his death in 1902.

Reading Henty now, his work seems formulaic and quaintly dated. He is the epitome of the racist, sexist, jingoistic imperialists who carved up Africa in their pith helmets and knee length shorts whilst swilling gin and tonics on the banks of the Zambezi. What are we to make of titles such as *By Right of Conquest* about Cortes and his Conquistadors or *Winning his Spurs* about the Crusades or *Redskin and Cowboys* about the American West? And is he a suitable author for literary study in the new South Africa?

Henty glamorised war, as did many Victorian poets (Newbolt, Tennyson) and artists (Canton Woodville and Lady Elizabeth Butler). The Victorian association between war, masculinity and Christianity would remain a matter of faith for many years. It would take years of guerrilla war and farm burning in South Africa (1899-1902), the dismembered broken bodies of the Somme (1916) and finally the holocaust of Auschwitz and Nagasaki (1945) to convince much of humanity that war is indeed hell. Henty's work adopts numerous Victorian conventions such as the association of physiognomy with moral characteristics. Take his description, in *With Roberts to Pretoria*, of Cecil Rhodes whom the hero, Yorke, meets after bringing a despatch into besieged Mafeking:

Yorke looked with interest at the man who is the Napoleon of South Africa, a square-built man, with a smoothly shaven face except for a thick moustache, with hair waving back from a broad forehead, strong and determined chin and mouth, somewhat broad in the cheeks, giving his face the appearance of squareness, light eyes, keen but kindly; altogether a strong and pleasant face.

We find, in this narrative, no comment about the Jameson Raid, the colonisation of the Rhodesias and the destruction of Lobengula. By way of contrast, Olive Schreiner's *Trooper Peter Halkett of Mashonaland* (1897) was far less complimentary of Rhodes. 'He's death to the niggers', Halkett explains to the Christ figure he meets around his little fire in the Rhodesian bush, prior to his own conversion.

Henty was, to say the least, one sided in the apportionment of blame. In his comments in the introduction to *With Roberts to Pretoria* (1902) he had this to say about the guerrilla war: 'The obstinacy of the Boers had only the effect of bringing ruin upon their own countrymen and women; it could by no possibility alter the final result'. His failure to mention the ruinous effects of Kitchener's scorched earth policy or the activities of Breaker Morant and the Bushveld Carbineers indicates extreme bias.

He was also patronising towards people of colour. Take the conversation, in the same novel, between Yorke and his faithful African servant, Peter:

Whisky a bad thing, baas, but very nice.

It may be nice in small quantities for those who like it. I don't like it. I never touch it if I can help it. It is the ruin of half your people, and you know it is against the law to give it to you.

Against the law baas, but we can always find plenty of men ready to sell it for good money.

They are bad men Peter. The harm they do is very great. That is why so many of your people are in rags, though they can earn pay when they are willing to work. They will labour for three or four days and then spend pretty well all they have earned on spirits and be drunk for the next three.

In this account, the problem of alcohol abuse comes down to unscrupulous whites who exploit the weaknesses of the natives. The fact that colonialism had caused the destruction of tribal life, in part due to the imposition of the hut tax and the institution of the migrant labour system, is not mentioned. Nor is the (even more obviously relevant) widespread application of the tot system.

Henty was undoubtedly a product of his time. Perhaps it is unfair to judge him from the elevated moral high ground of the twenty first century. But is our own position as elevated as we may suppose? Ten years after the Cold War and the release of Nelson Mandela what do we have? Endemic war in Central Africa, ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe, oppression in Palestine (by a people who for centuries have themselves been the long suffering victims of discrimination and prejudice), starvation in the face of excess, infectious illnesses that compare with the devastation of the Black Death. In fact, we live in what Eric Hobsbawm, in *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914 - 1991* (1991), describes as an age of barbarism. We almost seem to be living in a giant computer game with no beginning and no end.

If one takes the trouble to read Henty today, one cannot but be impressed both by the volume of his output and the vast amount of dry historical facts which he crammed into his novels. He included campaign maps, royal family trees, complex discussions of the various claims to the throne, the intricacies of Salic law and even the theological niceties of the Protestant Reformation. These are simply part of the story. I am not sure whether the average Victorian schoolboy simply skipped these dry factual lectures and got to the action or really pondered on which exact route Hannibal took through the Alps. It would appear, though, that Henty's schoolboy readers had a deeper sense and knowledge of the broad facts of history than the schoolboy or girl of today. Even though it may have been a biased view, at least they had a concept of history. Youth culture today seems to be pervaded by a sense of a-historicalness. An oft-quoted statistic is that a large proportion of American school leavers don't know who won the Second World War. How accurate this is, is unclear, however there does seem to be a trend amongst South African youth to a hedonistic

forgetfulness about our own recent past. The collapse of Portuguese rule in Angola and Mozambique, the bitter wars in Zimbabwe/Rhodesia and SWA/Namibia, the murder of Steve Biko, the Soweto Uprising, the States of Emergency and our own democratic transition are rapidly disappearing from our youth's collective memory. And this amnesia is regrettable because we are not rootless individuals who simply find ourselves in the modern world. We are part of a great story, which is ongoing. Knowing about past conflict will not prevent present and future conflict. But not knowing certainly won't. Without an understanding of our past we cannot explain our present, and we cannot understand our past without a knowledge of it.

I would argue that Henty can be read on two levels. Supervised reading of Henty by school children with non-judgmental guidance in the form of comprehension and discussion would perhaps impart a love of reading and history to our young people. No less an author than J.M. Coetzee has admitted to reading authors such as P.C. Wren (who leant heavily on Henty for his stories of derring-do in the French Foreign Legion) avidly as a child. (See J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood*.) Children are not slaves of propaganda and understand more than we give them credit for. A frank discussion about Henty's attitudes will remind children who are growing up without any direct personal experience of discrimination what is wrong with past attitudes and hopefully make them value their current freedoms all the more. If the background of a novel is explained to a child he or she would be able to contextualise it. We cannot pretend that past prejudice and conflict did not happen. Our children will only appreciate the miracle of the new South Africa if they fully comprehend the horror of the past. Reading Henty might instil a love of history, which would inspire them to explore the past in an attempt to illuminate their present.

On a second level, Henty is long overdue for serious academic study. His books provide an amazing insight into the worldview of the Victorians. I admit that I have an endless fascination for these formidable yet incredibly fastidious people. People such as Livingstone, Burton, Speke, Gordon of Khartoum, Shepstone, Colenso, Darwin, Rhodes, Jameson, Nightingale, Hobhouse and countless others. It was Rhodes who felt he had been blessed by God because he had been born English at such a time in history. They had the audacity and bare-faced cheek to believe that they had a divine (and entirely reasonable) right to lord it over one third of the world; they would cross Africa in caravans and still change for dinner each night; risk malaria by venturing into tropical jungles to collect exotic plants for Kew Gardens or insects for their museums. They used euphemisms such as 'in the family way' for pregnancy, 'took a fit' for an episode of drunkenness, a 'fate worse than death' for a voluntary or involuntary loss of virginity, or the 'love that dare not speak its name' for homosexuality. Yet they could stoop to intrigue and subterfuge in 'adventures' such as the Jameson Raid without a second thought, as long as these were done in the name of Empire.

The Victorians seem far removed from our own politically correct, sex soaked era, where teenage girl magazines openly discuss fellatio and contraception, and frankly expansionist or racist beliefs are officially condemned. Yet in many ways we live in the world the Victorians made. Even our (often violent) rejection of them acknowledges their profound influence. It was the Victorians who, for better or worse, created Africa's nation states, who introduced Christianity, disrupted tribal life and replaced pre-industrial barter systems with capitalism. Paradoxically, they also sowed the seeds of liberalism which bolstered the third world nationalisms which would eventually irrevocably alter the world the Victorians had made. Henty's texts provide a window onto the collective psyche of these amazing men and, as such, deserve a detailed politically-nuanced, gender-based study. Come on! There must be a doctoral thesis in there somewhere.

Fellow of the College of Surgeons, South Africa  
Durban

\*\*\*\*\*