

2

The Family and Mid-Victorian Realities

John Macmillan Brown: Scottish scholar and colonial mission?

In 1874, some 12 years earlier than Orme Masson, fellow Scottish academic John Macmillan Brown (1845–1935) departed from Britain to take up the foundation chair in classics and English literature at Canterbury College. Established at Christchurch in 1873, the college was an affiliate of the University of New Zealand. Like Masson, Macmillan Brown's main migratory motivations were career advancement and financial gain. The 28-year-old was a graduate of both the University of Glasgow and, more recently, the highly regarded Balliol College, Oxford. His previously brilliant academic record had been marred by an illness during his final exams at Oxford, resulting in a disappointing second-class degree instead of the predicted first-class honours. The outcome severely limited his prospects of an academic post in Britain and he turned his mind to the schools and universities being established throughout the Empire. There was no shortage of opportunities and Macmillan Brown was offered posts in India and Canada, as well as at Canterbury College.¹

1 John Macmillan Brown, *The Memoirs of John Macmillan Brown*, Whitcombe and Tombs, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 1974, pp. 69, 73–75.

Macmillan Brown later ascribed his choice to a curiosity about Māori culture, the perceived freer life of a pioneering country and an ingrained sense of adventure.² As the son of a North Ayrshire shipmaster and ship owner working from Irvine, which was then second only to Glasgow as a Scottish seaport, Macmillan Brown grew up with a heightened interest in the world beyond the narrow confines of his home town. In his *Memoirs*, he recalls the excitement of watching the arrival of incoming ships, the 'romances we wove round the distant lands the schooners had voyaged to' and the exotic foods and curios that his father brought home from his voyages.³ 'By nature' a 'migrative' community, mid-nineteenth-century Irvine represented for Macmillan Brown all that 'made the British Empire so wide-ranging in its interests and prosperity. It would be like a tour over the world to tell of all the fates that overtook my schoolmates.'⁴ Moreover, as Macmillan Brown contemplated his future in 1874, his family and extended family provided both examples of mobility and sources of advice: his married sister had settled in Sydney and a retired sea-captain cousin was living in Hokitika, the New Zealand goldfields town across the Southern Alps from Christchurch.⁵

If Macmillan Brown grew up at a time and place where migration was a commonplace, the family environment provided a philosophical outlook in which the prospect could flourish. The long absences of his shipmaster father meant that his 'deeply religious' mother exerted the greatest influence during his childhood. It was his mother who organised the establishment of the family household in Irvine to take advantage of the opportunities the town offered for the education of her children: well-respected ladies' colleges for the girls and the coeducational Irvine Academy for the boys. For John and older brother Francis, the academy of some 200 students offered the sort of traditional education that prepared capable boys for university study and entry to the professions. For an extra fee, it was possible to have additional lessons in Greek, Latin and mathematics. The coeducational experience would help shape Macmillan Brown's later views about higher education for women. Like his elder brother, he displayed talent in mathematics, but blossomed as the sort of all-rounder his

2 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, p. 73.

3 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, pp. 4, 13.

4 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, p. 5.

5 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, pp. 81, 98.

generation so admired. His intellectual talents were regarded as leading naturally to a career in the Church.⁶ Indeed, as Macmillan Brown later acknowledged, he accepted life as a clergyman as his 'destiny': 'I cannot imagine any career but that of the church likely to entangle my ambitions and aims.'⁷

It was a future that fitted family expectations. He grew up within a family that was religious 'by tradition and upbringing', where 'sober enthusiasm ... based on the old covenanting view of life and the world' went largely unchallenged.⁸ Indeed, as he was later to write, Puritan Scottish families like his own exhibited minds 'steeped in the tenets of their special sect even before they know what they are'.⁹ In such an environment, the Bible became both the young Macmillan Brown's frame of reference for interpreting the world and also his literary guide. Family and religion provided the setting in which Macmillan Brown first confronted the philosophical issues of his age. He was later to identify the experience of listening with other family members to churchyard discussions, sparked by the weekly sermon, as shaping his youthful attitudes and laying the foundation for a mode of thought that was to influence his life choices.¹⁰

Macmillan Brown's experience as a student at the universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Oxford between 1864 and 1874 was transformative. His university years coincided with the beginnings of a concerted response by a school of British philosophers, known as the British Idealists, to Darwin's theories of biological evolution and what they saw as the individualism of Herbert Spencer, the empiricism of John Stuart Mill and the developing dominance of scientific materialism. At the University of Glasgow and at Balliol College, Oxford, Macmillan Brown was to be greatly influenced by three of the more prominent leaders of this group, Edward Caird, Thomas Green and Benjamin Jowett. Caird's attempts to reconcile religion and science and his efforts to rebut the disciples of Comte's 'religion of humanity' helped sustain Macmillan Brown's conventional religious beliefs, and he became something of an acolyte of the Glaswegian professor

6 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, pp. 5–12.

7 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, p. 9.

8 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, p. 9.

9 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, p. 7; Devine, *The Scottish Nation*, pp. 365–66.

10 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, pp. 8–9.

of moral philosophy.¹¹ In Caird's classes Macmillan Brown discovered that prose was his natural medium. Moreover the 'gentleness and sympathy' that he found so attractive in Caird's teaching struck a responsive chord.¹² The sinking of his father's uninsured ship, along with its cargo, as Macmillan Brown set out for university, had made it necessary for him to find tutoring work. He enjoyed assisting students from a variety of social backgrounds to cope with their studies and especially the first-hand experience of the less exclusive nature of the Scottish university system.¹³ The experience also stimulated a change of his own direction of study, which came gradually to point in the direction of journalism or academia rather than the Church.¹⁴

Upon completing his MA in 1865, Macmillan Brown was awarded the coveted Snell Exhibition Prize in Classics and Philosophy, which provided a five-year scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford. Founded by Scottish academics, Balliol was Caird's old college and the spiritual home of British Idealism. Noel Annan later described it as a place to which 'hard working hard-headed Scots came to irritate the gentleman idlers'.¹⁵ In its Scottishness and ethos of earnest endeavour, it proved a congenial college for the diligent, if spiritually troubled, Macmillan Brown. One of Oxford's most academically prestigious colleges, Balliol exhibited, in Macmillan Brown's view, much of the cloistered elitism of the older English university, and he was never to lose his preference for the general degree and more democratic ethos of the Scottish university.¹⁶ Nevertheless, he arrived at Balliol just as the college was being revitalised under the mastership of the theologian and classicist Benjamin Jowett (1870–93). Jowett's attempts to sustain Christianity by advocating a more liberal theology built around the more critical analysis of the Bible initiated by German

11 John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, London, 1957, pp. 50–59; Geoffrey Thomas, *The Moral Philosophy of T. H. Green*, Clarendon Press, Oxford and New York, 1988, passim; A. Vincent and R. Plant, *Philosophy, Politics and Citizenship: The Life and Thought of British Idealists*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1984; George Davie, *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and her Universities in the Nineteenth Century*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1981.

12 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, pp. 56, 23–64.

13 Gardner, *Colonial Cap and Gown*, pp. 59–64.

14 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, pp. 20–26.

15 Noel Annan, *The Dons: Mentors, Eccentrics and Genuises*, HarperCollins, London, p. 62; John Jones, *Balliol College: A History* [1988], 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005.

16 W. J. Gardner, 'Part I: The Formative Years, 1873–1918', in Gardner et al., *A History of the University of Canterbury*, pp. 91, 96, 103; Gardner, *Colonial Cap and Gown*, pp. 59–63.

theologians, was controversial. Between 1873 and 1893, however, he had a profound influence upon a generation of young men who were later to make their marks as politicians, statesmen, lawyers, educators, writers and clergymen.¹⁷ As the following exhortation delivered by Jowett to students makes clear, it was an influence that carried with it a strong moral imperative and sense of responsibility:

The object of reading for the Schools is not primarily to obtain a first class, but to elevate and strengthen the character for life ... What does matter is the sense of power which comes from steady working ... the power in a man to control and direct his own life instead of drifting on the currents of fortune and self-indulgence.¹⁸

To the young Macmillan Brown, these injunctions offered direction at a time when the 'freethinking' atmosphere and the 'variety of opinions and beliefs' of his fellow students had created doubt.¹⁹ He was, he later recalled, clinging to a 'creed which was slowly becoming a hopeless wreck'.²⁰ In an attempt to understand what he described as the 'aggressive dogmatism' of the professed sceptics, agnostics and atheists amongst the student body, he joined a 'speculative group' that met for Sunday morning breakfast and took long walks in the countryside, during which the ramifications of Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871) were earnestly discussed.²¹ The liberal Christianity, hard work and inculcation of individual responsibility offered by Jowett provided the industrious Macmillan Brown with a congenial philosophical framework. As an able and enthusiastic student he caught the eye of the Master and was soon regarded as one of his protégés. He became a frequent guest at 'Jowett's Jumbles'—Sunday evening dinners at his mentor's home, where the bright young students of Balliol were given the opportunity to mix with members of the intellectual elite, who made their way to Oxford. Such exposures to great minds were intended as a stimulus to excellence and carried with them the lofty implication that by emulation and hard work, each student could become part of the nation's intellectual leadership.²²

17 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, pp. 28–34; Annan, *The Dons*, pp. 61–72; Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, p. 55.

18 Annan, *The Dons*, pp. 62–63.

19 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, p. 35.

20 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, p. 42.

21 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, pp. 35–37, 40–64.

22 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, pp. 29–32; Annan, *The Dons*, pp. 71–72.

Jowett's exercise in grooming placed a high value on social usefulness and implied a commitment to the needs of the wider community. Learning was not to be an end in itself but a means to both individual and social improvement. The link between the academy and society was to be made more obvious to Macmillan Brown in the teaching of two Oxford scholars, Thomas Green of Balliol and William Wallace of Merton. In the lectures of the 'two great Hegelians', as Macmillan Brown describes them, he was 'saturated with the idealism of that modern resurrection of Plato, Hegel'.²³ To Macmillan Brown and the more earnest of Jowett's students, a deep commitment to social betterment through education could and did take on the air of academic evangelism. This sense of moral purpose and engagement with the world outside the university was to issue in the 'university settlement programmes', whereby recent graduates lived among the working class in an attempt to narrow the gap between the social classes.²⁴ More immediately, it was an influence that informed the sense of mission with which Macmillan Brown approached life after university.

In 1874 as Macmillan Brown confronted his academic future this sense of mission took its place among the host of thoughts, emotions and impulses that surrounded an important transition point of his life. An illness during the final examination period had led to a second-class degree. The disappointment was in part assuaged by a consoling letter from Jowett urging him, as Macmillan Brown writes in his *Memoirs*, 'not to accept that as my rank in life; I was, as a student and a man, in the first class'.²⁵ Against this, some of his university friends reacted with trepidation to the idea of leaving Britain for 'a land isolated from the great centres of civilisation and still untouched by the cultural movements of the world, till at last [he] came to believe them'.²⁶ He began to defend the prospect by presenting the move as but a temporary 'exile' and an opportunity to rebuild a blemished academic career. The defence was buttressed by a professed determination to avoid forming any attachment to people or places while away from 'Home'. This professional predicament left no space for marriage. In an academic sense, the tyranny of distance from

23 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, p. 56.

24 Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, p. 55; Wilson, *The Victorians*, pp. 519–20.

25 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, p. 69.

26 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, pp. 82–83.

civilisation would impose great costs upon a scholar endeavouring to remain in touch with current thinking.²⁷ However accurately these thoughts reflect Macmillan Brown's attitude to migration in 1874, they do less than justice to the beliefs and assumptions that were to shape his future. Appointment as a foundation professor in a new colonial university, proposing a general degree based upon Scottish rather than English precedents and desiring to produce teachers rather than cloistered scholars, offered an environment in which a latent sense of academic evangelism could flourish.²⁸

Alexander Leeper: Irish gods and Australian passions

In July 1869, Alexander Leeper, the 21-year-old Dublin born and bred son of an Anglican curate, after whom he was named, and Catherine Porter, the highly educated daughter of William Porter, surgeon and President of the Royal College of Surgeons, temporarily put aside his undergraduate studies at Trinity College Dublin and sailed for Australia. He had been diagnosed with phthisis, an inflammation of the lungs more commonly known as consumption, and advised to spend some time in Victoria, which was, in Ireland, widely believed to possess a congenial climate. An elder brother, William (1846–1873), also a Trinity College student, had 'voluntar[il]ly transport[ed]' himself to Victoria after a failed love affair and a succession of scandals, and had lost contact with his family.²⁹ Alexander's departure came to be seen as a quest for improved health and a search for a lost brother. Sailing for Australia was thus not an act of migration but rather something of an antipodean sojourn. That it was, in a succession of stuttering steps, to lead to migration provides an opportunity to explore an example of Ireland's part in the construction of Victoria's nineteenth-century urban, professional middle class.

27 Macmillan Brown, *Memoirs*, pp. 82–83.

28 Gardner, 'The Formative Years, 1873–1918', pp. 92–106; Gardner, *Colonial Cap and Gown*, pp. 59–67.

29 Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, pp. 23–25; Freda Leeper to Alexander Leeper, 15 June 1893, Alexander Leeper Papers (ALP), Trinity College Archives, University of Melbourne Archives, T1, box 30/69. William Leeper's siblings attributed his behaviour to being prevented by his parents from marrying Sophie Bell, niece of Alexander Bell, because the Bell family lacked 'prospects'.

What began as a visit came to be a life-changing experience. After locating his brother on a sheep station, 'Terricks' in Victoria, the brothers moved together to Sydney, where Alexander secured a teaching position at the Collegiate School, Eglinton House, Glebe Point. The time in Sydney was not an altogether happy experience. His brother William's continued dissolute behaviour was, as Alexander observed bluntly, 'a powerful inducement for me to go home'.³⁰ Homesickness and worry about his health produced bouts of anxiety. His biographer, John Poynter, emphasises the young Alexander's propensity for depression and volatile moods.³¹ The following passage from Alexander's diary, written while he was teaching in Sydney in 1869, captures something of this tendency and neatly summarises how the young Irishman perceived his prospects:

I am destined to be short-lived. Born with a good constitution and with prospects of a prosperous and distinguished career. What a failure I have made! ... Here I am an underpaid usher in a second-rate Australian school snubbed and slighted in Society in consequence of what is regarded as a menial position. And what might I have been ... I might now be holding an honourable position in the Legal or Medical profession at home, or might be winning my way to affluence and distinction in the Indian Civil Service. But what have I gained to compensate for what I have lost? A more than average knowledge, (but little aesthetic appreciation) of the Greek and Latin language; but at best an inaccurate knowledge of everything. I am nearly as much as ever afflicted with *mauvaise honte*, and have not gained what I anticipated would be produced by travel, namely free, manly, outspoken ways. I sneak and cringe, and lie as much as ever.³²

The melodramatic diary entry reflects a life hedged in by a propensity for complicated personal entanglements, and it is to those that we must turn to understand the forces that shaped his ultimate decision to become a settler rather than a sojourner. An embarrassing situation at home in Dublin, where he had misled a young woman into thinking they were engaged, made him reluctant to return and face the wrath of her family.³³ The admonition of a friend, as he was leaving Ireland, to avoid such entanglements because Australian girls were 'a low common

30 Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, p. 26. William Leeper died in Melbourne on 17 July 1873 after being transported to Victoria from Sydney to face a charge of bigamy.

31 Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, pp. 5, 19.

32 Diary of Alexander Leeper, 1870, ALP, T5, box 35.

33 Diary of Alexander Leeper, 1870.

sort' did not seem to dampen his ardour.³⁴ His teaching position at Collegiate School brought him into contact with Adeline Allen, the 16-year-old sister of two of his pupils. The daughter of George Allen (1824–1895), a prominent and wealthy Sydney Methodist lawyer, who was Mayor of Glebe, shortly to become Speaker of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly and knighted in 1877, seems to have been somewhat indifferent to Leeper's obvious infatuation. George Allen was blunt: his daughter was too young for romantic involvement and Leeper's career and health prospects were unfavourable. In despair, and convinced that his life would be short, Leeper returned to Dublin in May 1870.³⁵ There he began a complex, long-distance 'courtship' that spanned almost a decade, largely conducted via correspondence with Adeline's mother and brother. It would bring family interference on both sides, misunderstandings and confusion.

There can be little doubt that this affair of the heart must be placed at the centre of any discussion of Leeper's attitude to the prospect of a life in Australia. In 1875, after some five years largely crippled by hypochondria and making little progress with his attempts to win over a reluctant Adeline and gain the consent of her father, he secured a position as Second Master and Senior Classics Master at Melbourne Grammar School, the leading Anglican school for boys. Melbourne was not Sydney, but acceptance of the post placed him closer to Adeline and her family and allowed him to look for other positions more to his taste. Within a few months he negotiated a three-year contract as principal of the Anglican Church's Trinity College, later to become affiliated to the University of Melbourne. Important as this position was to become in Leeper's life, it does not mark any change in his attitude to Australia or the question of where he saw his future. Nor does it seem to have been based on any particular fondness for Melbourne. Any sense of permanent commitment to Melbourne or Australia was to await his eventual marriage to Adeline Allen, a second-generation Australian, in December 1879.³⁶

Leeper's acceptance of a future life in Australia needs also to be set within the context in which his world view was shaped. Indeed, it is at least arguable that the significance of Ireland in his Australian life

34 George Wildig to Alexander Leeper, 16 January 1870, ALP, T1, box 21b/11.

35 Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, pp. 27–31.

36 Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, pp. 45–99.

was to increase rather than diminish with the passage of time. Leeper's family background places him and his nine siblings firmly within the ranks of Dublin's privileged professional Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and on the fringes of the more wealthy, yet socially aware, intellectual and cultural Irish elite. His mother Catherine Porter (born 1817) was the daughter of Trinity College-educated, leading Dublin surgeon William Porter and grew up with her three younger siblings in some affluence in Kildare, a south Dublin suburb. Physically hardy, strong-minded and academically orientated, Catherine received a somewhat unorthodox education at the hands of her father, who taught her at home and shared his interest in science with her. She developed into an earnest, well-read, articulate and opinionated young woman with a talent for horse riding, music, art and writing and had several works published in later life. Her Anglicanism was low church rather than high and, as a teenager, she taught Sunday school in St Anne's Church, Dublin.³⁷

Catherine's politics, as far as we can assess them, can be placed at the liberal end of the spectrum. Her grandfather had been involved in the late eighteenth-century movement known as the United Irishmen, who sought parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation, and opposed the Act of Union of 1800. We know little of her adult life before her marriage in 1842, at the age of 25, to Alexander Leeper (1815–1892), a young Anglican assistant curate at St Mary's Church, where she was now teaching Sunday school. Ten children and 14 years of childbearing followed. From them we gain few clues of her beliefs and preoccupations. She named her eldest son William Melancthon, after Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), a German professor of Greek, humanist theologian and supporter of the Lutheran reformation, who favoured moderation and the peaceful reconciliation of Catholicism and Protestantism.³⁸ After the pressures of domestic life diminished, she published an article on the Irish theologian Alexander Knox (1757–1831), who supported Catholic emancipation and defended religious liberty and differences.³⁹

37 Canon Alexander Leeper, 'In Memoriam. Catherine Leeper', ms, ALP, T6, box 35; 'Obituary: Mrs Leeper', *Church of Ireland Training College Magazine*, July 1889, ALP, T6, box 35; Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, pp. 7–10.

38 Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, pp. 10–14; Canon Alexander Leeper, 'In Memoriam. Catherine Leeper', ms, ALP, T6, box 35; 'Obituary: Mrs Leeper', *Church of Ireland Training College Magazine*, ALP, T6, box 35.

39 Catherine Leeper, 'Alexander Knox', *The Churchman*, July 1889, ALP, T6, box 35.

Catherine Porter's husband came from considerably more modest origins. Rev. Alexander Leeper was the son of a Dublin-based artisan and merchant (saddler and harness maker). A brilliant scholar, he won a scholarship to Trinity College Dublin, where he excelled in modern and ancient languages, winning several prizes before graduating in 1841. In 1842 he was ordained into the Church of Ireland and served as curatorial assistant at St Mary's Church between 1843 and 1859. He and Catherine initially lived with their young and growing family in one of the less well-off Dublin suburbs until a new and better paid posting enabled them to move to a still relatively modest home in the more fashionable Kildare Place, across the road from wife Catherine's childhood home. It was from this comfortable and genteel setting that the Leepers experienced the volatile economic, social and political realities that confronted Ireland as famine ravaged and divided the country. It was from here, too, that in 1846 Alexander Leeper was appointed catechist at the teacher training school of The Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in Ireland, also known more popularly as the Kildare Place Society. Formed in 1811 by a group of philanthropic Dubliners who wanted to establish a non-denominational institution for educating the poor, it was affiliated with the Church of Ireland in the 1830s and eventually became subsumed by the Church Education Society in 1855. In 1853 Leeper became chaplain and superintendent of the Kildare Place Society, and secretary of the Church Education Society in 1855.⁴⁰

From this perspective, Catherine and Alexander Leeper and their family experienced the realities of Irish poverty, both urban and rural. The experience nurtured an increasing belief in the transformative power of education as a means of alleviating the lives of the poor, and a deepening sense of duty. In combination, these beliefs produced an emotionally close family environment that was deeply religious and committed to high academic goals. Theirs was an Anglo-Irish middle-class professional lifestyle lived within the intellectual context of that social position, and they were comfortable within an imperial framework. The education of the children took place in the family home, as well as private schools, and in the Church of Ireland, where Alexander preached. Son Alexander and his siblings attended their

40 Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, pp. 10–12; Susan M. Parkes, *Kildare Place: The History of the Church of Ireland Training College 1811–1969*, CICE, Dublin, 1984.

father's weekly High Church sermons, from which they took not only a sense of religious duty and moral mission, but also a preoccupation with personal moral worth, guilt and sin and the need for redemption. These were themes that troubled the earnest amongst their generation and were to play a significant role in young Alexander's life in Australia.⁴¹

Academic ability appears to have been a Leeper family trait, though the intellectually precocious Alexander seems to have been singled out by his parents as destined for academic success. After being taught by his father until the age of 13, Alexander received the typical private school education of a middle-class boy destined for university and a professional career. He attended Kingston Grammar School in south Dublin, where he showed a leaning towards the classics and tutored the younger boys to earn some money. In 1866, at the age of 16, he embarked upon the customary, Scottish-modelled, general undergraduate degree at Trinity College Dublin, having won a scholarship for boys of 'limited means' and four entrance prizes in Latin and Greek composition.⁴² His elder brother William had preceded him to the ancient university, which was thought to be a bastion of privilege and learning equivalent to the English universities of Oxford and Cambridge, though more liberal in its course of study by this stage. The college remained, however, as Poynter describes it, a 'finishing school for the rich and a university for the clever'. Though there was no religious entry requirement, in reality the university was dominated by Anglicanism. Like Oxford and Cambridge, Trinity College Dublin students were taught in small groups with private tutors, a practice that influenced Alexander Leeper in his later role as principal of Trinity College, Melbourne. The environment suited the young Leeper, and he became something of a protégé of Reverend John Mahaffy (1839–1919), the distinguished classicist and Professor of Ancient History.⁴³

41 Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, pp. 7, 14–17.

42 Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, p. 17.

43 Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, pp. 16–23; William Stanford and Robert McDowell, Mahaffy: *A Biography of an Anglo-Irishman*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1971; C. H. Holland (ed.), *Trinity College Dublin and the Idea of a University*, Trinity College Dublin Press, Dublin, 1991. Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), a student at Trinity College Dublin (1871–74) was also taught by Mahaffy and became an acquaintance of Alexander Leeper.

Content within the scholarly and cloistered Trinity College environment, Leeper's view of life after university took shape slowly. He considered the 'family professions' of medicine and the Church. There was little pressure from his family to choose religious orders; his mother thought he lacked the requisite seriousness. Teaching did not appeal.⁴⁴ To increase his options, he undertook the newly established courses in law in addition to his BA degree. As we have seen, illness and a subsequent trip to Australia interrupted his studies, as did a five-month tutoring job when he accompanied a young aristocrat on a tour of the Middle East (December 1870 – April 1871). It was not until December 1871, five years after he began at Trinity College Dublin, that Leeper graduated with a BA (placed at the top of the First Class), an LLB degree and a number of academic prizes.⁴⁵

By now Leeper's mind was dominated by his desire to return to Adeline Allen, and for the next five years his life took a series of bizarre twists and turns that resemble a Victorian melodrama. At the end of 1871, he applied unsuccessfully for positions at the University of Melbourne and Sydney Grammar School. Then, when correspondence with Adeline Allen's mother convinced him to further his education, and preferably at some distance from Australia, he obliged. Taking up a suggestion from Adeline that he should go to Oxford, he successfully applied for a five-year scholarship to St John's College. There, in October 1872, he embarked on another degree in classics and *literae humaniores*. A letter from Mrs Allen with news of Adeline's engagement produced a bout of despair. When that engagement was broken off, Leeper sent a supplicatory appeal to Adeline, in which he undertook to follow 'any wish you might express—to try to gain a Fellowship at Oxford, or be a Parish Clergyman in Australia—I care very little what—with you to share my lot I believe my life would be happy and noble anywhere'.⁴⁶

When his entreaty was rebuffed, Leeper was dispirited. Never as happy at Oxford as he had been at Trinity College Dublin, he nonetheless immersed himself in life at Oxford and became librarian of the Oxford Union and Secretary of St John's College Missionary

44 His younger brother Charles (b. 1850) qualified as a lawyer while brothers George (b. 1856) and Richard (b. 1858) qualified in medicine.

45 Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, pp. 31–35; *The Melburnian*, 14 November 1877.

46 Alexander Leeper to Adeline Allen, 17 April 1873, ALP, T1, box 21c/13.

Association. In 1874, he gained a First in classical moderations, but a misunderstanding led Leeper to go on a walking tour of Norway in June 1874 without sitting all of his final exams or fulfilling the residential requirements, with the result that he could not be awarded an Oxford degree. Returning to Dublin, he seems to have done some tutoring and acted as an assistant for Mahaffy, while he continued searching for work in Australia. An application for the headmastership of Melbourne Grammar School was unsuccessful, but the appointee, an older Oxford graduate named Edward Morris, offered him the position of Second Master.⁴⁷ With his health largely restored, and determined to see Adeline Allen, he accepted the position. Thus, in February 1875, he sailed once more for Australia, better qualified than previously and hopeful that his future might be spent with Adeline, wherever that might take him. At 27 years of age, Alexander Leeper, a product of both the English and Irish university systems, had travelled very little distance from the beliefs and value systems of the family environment in which he had been raised. He had remained within the Anglicanism of his parents; religion, education and scholarship had formed the cornerstones of his career and were to be intertwined with his subsequent career as principal of Trinity College, Melbourne.⁴⁸

Henry Bournes Higgins: Irish woes and Australian opportunities

In November 1869 Irishman Henry Bournes Higgins (1851–1929), an 18-year-old clerk and son of Wesleyan minister John Higgins and Anne Bournes, left his home country bound for Melbourne, Victoria. He did so not as an individual, but as part of a large and close-knit family group in search of a healthier environment.⁴⁹ He sailed for Australia with his mother and his five younger siblings: George (14), Samuel (12), Ina (9), Anna (7) and Charlie (5). Until the family was joined a year later by brother John (17) and their father, who had remained

47 Olive Wykes, 'Morris, Edward Ellis (1843–1902)', *The Australian Dictionary of Biography* (ADB), vol. 5, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Victoria, 1974, pp. 293–94.

48 Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties*, pp. 36–57.

49 See F. B. Smith, *Illness in Colonial Australia*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2011, pp. 117–31; and Richards, *Britannia's Children*, p. 185, for a discussion of the 'therapeutic migrant'.

in Ireland until he had completed a three-year circuit as Wesleyan preacher in Wexford, Henry stood alongside his mother as joint head of household. The separation was an act of desperation precipitated by family tragedy. The youngest child, William, had died in infancy in 1867; the eldest child, James, died on 30 June 1869, aged 20, after a two-year battle with consumption, contracted when he joined the stream of young Irish men attempting to find work and a better life in New York.⁵⁰ A seemingly inherited family weakness in the lungs meant that chest complaints such as asthma and bronchitis had continually dogged the family. Years of shifting around Ireland on the Methodist circuit had plainly failed to help mitigate the deleterious effect of the cold, damp Irish climate. Migration was thus a matter of family survival.

Ireland had a powerful and lifelong influence upon Higgins and shaped his understanding of the family. As his niece, Nettie Palmer, was later to write:

[he] carried his youth about with him always, renewing himself with its memories ... Scenes and sayings, that had been without meaning for him at the time, remained in his mind and illustrated the opinions that he came to hold later on. Looking back, he felt that, with all its suppressions, Ireland in the [eighteen-]sixties had been a place of germinating ideas.⁵¹

His parents, Anne Bournes and John Higgins, both from small rural towns in the west of Ireland, had married in 1848, when the potato blight was at its worst. Both were from well-educated, small land-owning families that, in Irish terms, had achieved modest prosperity, although on the eve of their marriage the Higgins family was in some financial difficulty.⁵² Anne Bournes had attended a Dublin boarding school, where she excelled at music and French, and John Higgins had received the classical education typical for boys of the professional classes, before taking a job in the Bank of Ireland in accordance with his Anglican father's wishes.⁵³

50 Rickard, *H.B. Higgins*, pp. 6, 25–33.

51 Nettie Palmer, *Henry Bournes Higgins: A Memoir*, George G. Harrap & Co., London, 1931, pp. 4, 48.

52 Rickard, *H.B. Higgins*, pp. 2–4.

53 Palmer, *Higgins: A Memoir*, pp. 5–8.

John Higgins's decision to enter the Wesleyan ministry in 1842, aged 21, in answer, as one writer puts it, to the business of 'saving souls', dramatically altered his social status and economic position.⁵⁴ It was a choice that placed him and later his wife and children unequivocally in the ranks of the lower middle classes and ensured a life of 'genteel frugality'.⁵⁵ The meagre stipend and itinerant nature of the Wesleyan preacher's circuit—ministers were posted to a different area of the country every three years—contributed to the lowly status of the Methodist minister. The society in which the Higgins family moved was that of shopkeepers and clerical workers. It was also a constantly changing one. Henry, for example, was born in Northern Ireland in 1851 and experienced, throughout his childhood, small, struggling rural townships and the larger, industrial cities of Northern Ireland, where religious, class, social and political differences were more obvious. 'Home' to Henry Higgins was simply where his family was. As well as providing a range of experiences, the constant moves contributed to a deepening of family ties, mutual obligations and responsibilities, as individual members came to depend on each other for companionship and support.⁵⁶

The Higgins family environment combined warmth and affection with a religious earnestness, 'high moral expectations' and intellectual ambitions for their children.⁵⁷ In combination with the ever-present cloud of illness and financial strain, the family setting was to produce a tendency towards anxiety and over-seriousness in the young Henry. His introspection was reinforced by attendance with his siblings at his father's chapel prayer meetings, held three times a week, where the emphasis was upon constant examination of the 'soul' and exaltation of truth and goodness as the talismans of moral behaviour. Moreover, Henry's serious and thoughtful demeanour was accompanied by a love of reading, which he satisfied by immersing himself in the Bible. This enthusiasm was welcomed by his father as an indication of a highly religious nature rather than a quest for imaginative and literary stimulus. The judgement was to underlie parental expectations of the young Henry and shape his education.⁵⁸

54 Rickard, *H.B. Higgins*, p. 4.

55 John Rickard, 'Higgins, Henry Bournes (1851–1929)', *ADB*, vol. 9, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Victoria, 1983, pp. 285–89.

56 Rickard, *H.B. Higgins*, p. 7.

57 Palmer, *Higgins: A Memoir*, p. 12.

58 Rickard, *H.B. Higgins*, pp. 7–15; Palmer, *Higgins: A Memoir*, pp. 11–21.

The Wesleyan Connexional School in St Stephen's Green, Dublin, to which the scholarly 10-year-old Henry was sent in 1861 as a boarder, was in essence an extension of the moral atmosphere of his home. The headmaster, the Reverend Dr Crook, a young Wesleyan minister and distinguished classics graduate of Trinity College Dublin, oversaw a somewhat austere regime, establishing what John Rickard has labelled a 'moral dictatorship'—'opening the eyes of the boys to their moral infirmities'.⁵⁹ A small and financially struggling school intended to prepare boys for Trinity College Dublin and the professions, it provided Higgins with a sound classical education. In the summer of 1865, after four years at the school, 'inflammation of the lungs' forced the 14-year-old Henry to return to his family, now based in Newry, a seaport and industrial town in Northern Ireland. Apart from a brief interlude engineered by his mother at Dr Potterton's school in Newry, where he excelled in classical studies, he spent the next three years (1866–69) in paid employment. The prospect of his proceeding to Trinity College Dublin was now judged too great a strain for his delicate disposition and too great a drain upon family finances.⁶⁰

In retrospect, this move away from the narrow world of home and school proved to be a turning point in the making of Henry Higgins. Immersion in the world of work began faltering. An apprenticeship with a wholesale drapery warehouse in Belfast ended abruptly as deteriorating health, attributed by his father to poor living arrangements above the warehouse, saw Henry return home. After a period of recuperation, during which he attended Dr Potterton's school in Newry, Henry began work as a shop assistant with a merchant tailor in Clonmel. Finally, in January 1868, he moved to a furniture warehouse, Arthur John in St Stephen's Green, Dublin, where better wages and conditions enabled him to send money home to his family, now based in Wexford. These life experiences, his first outside the boundaries of a Methodist framework, broadened his horizons and brought him into contact, albeit in a limited fashion, with people of different religious backgrounds and political beliefs. They stimulated a sense of injustice and the beginnings of an awareness of Ireland's troubles. Politically uninformed, if not naive, he had been bewildered by the comments of tailors in the Clonmel shop, who supported

⁵⁹ Rickard, *H.B. Higgins*, p. 21.

⁶⁰ Rickard, *H.B. Higgins*, pp. 16–25; Palmer, *Higgins: A Memoir*, pp. 22–31, 33.

a Fenian rebellion. In Dublin, as his health improved and his financial worries eased, the maturing Henry Higgins's interests and concerns widened. He was drawn to the slums of Dublin, where he attended the Cork Street Chapel and distributed religious reading material to the poor, and read widely; he also joined a branch of the YMCA, where he attended the debates of Trinity College graduates and students. Here he was exposed to the ideas of Auguste Comte and the English positivists. Lacking an intellectual mentor or guide, he was out of his depth, yet hungrily soaked up the new knowledge.⁶¹

It is not possible to know what Henry contributed to the family decision to leave Ireland, but his understanding of the motivations that impelled his parents was grounded in the family and Irish experience. Since the potato blight first sparked a mass exodus to America in 1845, migration had become an unwelcome reality of the Irish experience. It was frequently discussed within the Higgins family. When illness forced Henry to leave school at 14, his parents could not quite find the money to send him to recuperate in Australia in the care of a Wesleyan minister. When eldest son James sailed for New York in October 1866 to 'try his luck', the family was prepared to follow if they received a favourable report from him. The merits of South Africa, Australia and India were canvassed at various times. There can, however, be no doubt of the sequence of events within the family that precipitated the decision to sail for Australia. In May 1867 James returned from New York. Winter had proved debilitating, and, after being diagnosed with consumption, he returned home, where he died on 30 June 1869, Henry's eighteenth birthday. A distraught Anne Higgins consulted a well-respected Dublin physician, Dr Stokes, who advised that the entire family migrate to Victoria's warmer, drier climate.⁶² By securing the monetary value of her share in a Bournes family property, it was just possible, by taking the cheapest passage available on a cargo ship, for six of her seven surviving children to sail for Australia with her.⁶³

Thus in November 1869, Anne Higgins and the bulk of her family sailed for a land where they knew no one, had no accommodation arranged and no employment prospects. John Higgins senior and son John remained in Ireland to fulfil work commitments, and it was intended

61 Palmer, *Higgins: A Memoir*, pp. 33–36, 40–46; Rickard, *H.B. Higgins*, pp. 25, 27–30.

62 Smith, *Illness in Australia*, pp. 117–31.

63 Rickard, *H.B. Higgins*, pp. 25–27, 30–42; Palmer, *Higgins: A Memoir*, pp. 32, 36–40, 46–48.

that the former would send remittance payments. As Higgins's niece Nettie Palmer later wrote, 'even the youngest of them was conscious to some degree' of the 'finality' of their migratory act. As Palmer explains, 'it was no mere casual experiment for them: they had definitely pulled up their roots in the old country and entrusted their future to the new'.⁶⁴ The decision to leave Ireland was surrounded by a sense of urgency and seriousness; the departure for Australia was enveloped in tragedy even before the voyage to the antipodes was completed. Charlie, aged five, the youngest Higgins child, fell ill at sea and died two days before the family reached Australia's shores.⁶⁵

When we come to place Henry Higgins's arrival in Australia within the framework of middle-class migration to Australasia, we are clearly confronted by a different set of dynamics than those evident in our previous case studies. His departure for Australia was not, like that of the Wildings, infused with a sense of wider social betterment and the hope of a better world to come for all. Personal circumstance and the plight of those dearest to him dominated his thoughts. His educational and work experiences thus far had, unlike those of Frederick Wilding, Orme Masson, John Macmillan Brown and Alexander Leeper, provided little certainty of what direction his life in Australia might take. Insofar as his migration can be linked with a conception of the family, it is one nurtured within a close family drawn closer by the exigencies of life within the tiny Methodist community of mid-nineteenth-century Ireland. From within this environment, with its strong sense of mutual dependence and obligation, Henry Higgins was, in the Australia of the 1870s and 1880s, to formulate a commitment to family that became an amalgam of old world Ireland and new world Melbourne.

64 Palmer, *Higgins: A Memoir*, pp. 1–2.

65 Rickard, *H.B. Higgins*, pp. 34–42; Palmer, *Higgins: A Memoir*, pp. 55–56.

This text is taken from *Family Experiments: Middle-class, professional families in Australia and New Zealand c. 1880–1920*, by Shelley Richardson, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.