

“[A] WIDE FIELD FOR PHILOSOPHICAL EXPERIMENTS  
ON THE PERFECTIBILITY OF HUMAN NATURE”: WILLIAM  
RATHBONE GREG (1809–1881) AND THE FOUNDATION  
OF THE BURY MECHANICS’ INSTITUTION IN 1829

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One of the problems faced by Mechanics’ Institutes of Victoria in planning the collection to be included in its Mechanics’ Institutes Resource Centre (MIRC) is the extent to which it can move outside its natural borders: the State (formerly the Colony) of Victoria. In MIV’s own territory the collecting aspiration should be comprehensive or even all-embracing, at least in the digital mode. But what should our committee do about the rest of Australia or Australasia, where institutes did not necessarily develop in the same way or within a strictly parallel legal and social framework? We know that we have to be selective while still bringing together enough of the secondary material in order to make the national, as opposed to the local, experience understandable. And then there is the English-speaking world at large from which our libraries, museums and teaching programmes took their inspiration. How much can or should we collect from the British Isles and from North America? We cannot ignore the origins and the shaping of a movement from Birkbeck and Brougham onwards because it is a large part of the explanation of what we have become. At the same time aspirations have to be tempered by realities, considerations of space and of finances. There is a fine balance between coherence, comprehension and available resources, and I do not want to prejudge the solution that we shall eventually adopt.

What I do want to suggest—in a brief paper—is that interactions and interconnections are an unavoidable part of the documentary heritage of our various countries. Think of the 1796 playbill, the earliest known piece of Australian printing, that was given by Canada to the National Library of Australia in 2007.<sup>1</sup> Think too of the unique examples of Sydney and Hobart imprints held in the Colonial Office records of the National Archives at Kew.<sup>2</sup> However, my purpose now is to draw attention to a case in reverse: the elements of a story relating to a British Mechanics’ Institute attested exclusively in Sydney, and to a lesser extent in Canberra.

Thirty years ago I published an article in the *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* on “W. R. Greg and Charles Darwin in Edinburgh and after—an Antipodean gloss”.<sup>3</sup> The whole number was dedicated to the late J. C. T. Oates, so that the combination of William Rathbone Greg (1809–1881), father of the great bibliographer Sir Walter Greg, and of Charles Darwin, who had given his name to the Cambridge College of which the distinguished librarian was a Fellow, was in some sense justified. Quite a lot of ground was traversed, including such topics as the 1820s Edinburgh vogue for phrenology and the early decades of Mechanics’ Institutes. In this bicentenary year of W. R. Greg—is it being noticed otherwise?—it is perhaps permissible to return to the beginnings of one who was a noted publicist in his time.

Not astonishingly, my article does not seem to have had much impact. It is gratifying that Adrian Desmond and James Moore took some notice of it in their biography of Darwin<sup>4</sup> and thus recognized the link, more tenuous than they suggest, between the author of *On the Origin of Species* and his fellow member of the undergraduate Plinian Society in Edinburgh. The minutes of that body were known to them directly, but some of the other material, being held in Sydney, had to be discussed via what I had quoted in my text. In their substantial, and perhaps controversial, contribution to the bicentenary commemoration, *Darwin’s Sacred Cause: Race, Slavery and the Quest for Human Origins*,<sup>5</sup> they have come back to the Greg documents held in Sydney I transcribed as well as to later sources derived from the papers of the *Edinburgh Review*. Greg has become a somewhat more important part of the argument, which need not concern us here except that it draws on letters about his involvement in a Mechanics’ Institute in Bury, Lancashire.

The hitherto unnamed source and key was Greg’s friend and correspondent Nicol Drysdale Stenhouse (1806–1873), a solicitor and literary patron who had emigrated from Edinburgh to Sydney at the beginning of the 1840s. An account, admittedly more succinct, of his letters from Greg also appeared in 1979 in a book by Ann-Mari Jordens based on an M.A. thesis: *The Stenhouse Circle: Literary Life in mid-Nineteenth Century Sydney*.<sup>6</sup> Published in Melbourne, this work had, it must be stated and deplored, even less chance of attracting attention in the Northern Hemisphere.

In thirty years research has not stood still, and my own understanding of the context has broadened a little. For example, I did not know that Audubon, a friend of the Greg family, was invited to attend a lecture by the seventeen-year-old at the Plinian Society “on the mental powers of the *animal* Creation”. The author of *The Birds of America* declined—“I was too old for such a Society”<sup>7</sup>—whereas Charles Darwin was present on 12 December 1826. Since 1979, Mary B. Rose’s *The Gregs of Quarry Bank Mill: the Rise and Decline of the Family Firm, 1750–1914* has appeared,<sup>8</sup> providing a lot more information about the business William Rathbone abandoned his Edinburgh studies to help manage. The same scholar wrote the entry on W. R. Greg in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.<sup>9</sup> In short the quality of the documentation on our principal actor is very much improved, although one could wish for a comprehensive study of the writings of someone who evolved—in a not altogether surprising way—from radicalism to conservatism.

The other point that needs to be made—if only to counteract a false impression given by the announced abbreviated version of my paper title—is that, to the best of my knowledge, I am not talking about the Bury Mechanics’ Institution founded, according to Mabel Tylecote,<sup>10</sup> in 1837 and later incorporated in the town’s Athenaeum. I do not pretend to tell that story, although there *may* be a link to the documents I do want to discuss. Trevor Howard-Hill’s recent splendid *The British Book Trade, 1475–1890: a Bibliography*<sup>11</sup> gives us a key to some of the relevant printed catalogues held essentially in the Bury Public Library, not only of the Mechanics’ Institution, but also of the much older Bury Subscription Library. The latter was given some attention in David Allan’s *A Nation of Readers. The Lending Library in Georgian England*.<sup>12</sup> Following the Scottish historian’s lead, and with the kind help of the Bury Archives Service, I have obtained a microfilm of the Subscription Library’s minute book between 1825 and 1848, the only substantial manuscript record of the activities of a body founded in the 1770s.

One needs to admit a failure to tie up loose ends, if only to encourage others to try harder to sketch a context and to define the space into which a Mechanics’ Institute would fit. According to a printed notice dated 1832 and prefixed to the minute book:

The Library consists of about 4000 Volumes of Standard Works; and the chief Periodicals of the day are taken in.<sup>13</sup>

It was open from 10 a.m. to 12 noon and from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. six days a week. The annual subscription was a guinea for gentlemen and 16s 6d for ladies, while strangers could gain access for 2s 6d a month. Every spring there appears to have been a dinner, in 1829 at the Hare & Hounds. The purchases discussed are often novels: a second copy of Scott's *Woodstock* in 1826, a replacement of Hannah More's *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* in 1828. All in all a serious effort was being made to cater for the genteel section of the local population.

Consultation of the microfilm of the *Manchester Guardian* for November–December 1829 and of the data-base of digitized British provincial newspapers for the 1820s did not reveal anything about an initiative for mechanics in Bury. There was, of course, no newspaper produced before the 1850s in that town itself. This does not mean that there is nothing on the record, but it does suggest that a greater effort has to be made before declaring the investigation fruitless. In Australia newspapers are an invaluable source for information about Mechanics' Institutes. A paragraph in the *Ipswich Journal* of 29 January 1825 about the Bury St Edmunds Mechanics' Institute proves that the local press cannot be neglected in Britain either.

For the time being I am left then with the two caches of documents I exploited in 1979. The major one is Stenhouse's inwards correspondence,<sup>14</sup> but it is important to note the existence in the National Library of Australia of books, pamphlets, offprints and extracts deriving from the collection of W. R. Greg himself. These came to Canberra as part of the very important purchase of economic and social literature from the London bookseller Kashnor.<sup>15</sup> That a certain anonymous tract is contained within it establishes fairly conclusively that Greg was the author, as we shall see in due course. It is this coincidence that makes Australia a significant locale for studying Greg, and especially the early part of his career.

As long as Greg remained in Edinburgh his epistolary exchanges with Stenhouse were trivial things like invitations to dinner. However, as soon as he had moved elsewhere, essentially back to the Manchester district, he sought the assistance of his friend in

various weightier matters. First he wanted a letter inserted in the *Edinburgh Weekly Journal* in March–April 1829 rebutting Thomas Stone’s arguments against phrenology. This matter continued to agitate Greg through May and until August, when he delegated to Stenhouse the oversight of the publication of a pamphlet attacking Stone:

OBSERVATIONS  
ON  
A LATE PAMPHLET BY MR STONE, ON THE  
PHRENOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF  
BURKE, HARE, &c.<sup>16</sup>

Obtaining his diploma as Extraordinary Member and President of the Plinian Society was also a preoccupation, but the mind of this hyperactive teenager was already turning to other things.

A background was outlined in a quite colourful way on 15 May 1829:

[...] since I left Edinburgh I have been like Cain, a houseless peripatetic, wandering to & fro upon the earth. Not that my sphere of motion has been very enlarged, but I have been constantly going backwards & forwards & unable to settle any where. At length I am fixed in the spot where I must pass the greater part of my earthly pilgrimage, till age shall have conferred upon me the privilege of indolence, and that rural retirement to which I look forward with impatient expectation. I have the charge of an immense manufacturing concern here, which employs about 600 people, probably as great barbarians as can be found out of Africa & Australia—so that I have a wide field for philosophical experiments on the perfectibility of human Nature. Not long since it was by no means uncommon to pick up fragments of noses & ears in the streets of Bury, and even now not only every moral principle but almost every moral perception seems to be banished from the place. I came here full of philanthropic visions & schemes; of brightening the intellects & purifying the character of the people committed to my care, but all these vanished before the anti-magical effect of a fortnight’s residence among them. The leopard & the lion w<sup>d</sup> be more tractable pupils.—My Mill is on the

outskirts of the town, and my house, which I am busy fitting up is a pretty situation about  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile into the Country, & surrounded with trees. I have a good horse, & 20 miles riding will at any time bring me to the home of my fathers;---So that in point of externals I have nothing to complain of. My business is as pleasant as any business can be, & 7 hours a day is sufficient for it. Yet still I am not happy, because I feel a capacity for happiness far intenser in its nature & far more permanent in its duration.<sup>17</sup>

After noting that “Phrenology is gaining ground in Manchester rapidly”, he mentions his current intellectual pursuits:

I employ almost all my leisure time in preparing my dissertations on the philosophy of History. At present I have only advanced a quarter thro’ my first dissertation, which is a view of the Philosophical view of the characteristic features of the several ages of the world.<sup>18</sup>

By the time the year was nearly over Greg had other fish to fry. On 19 December 1829 he wrote to Stenhouse:

Except in the few hours requisite to write my reply to Stone, I dont think Phrenology has occupied any of my thoughts since I saw you, or at least since I wrote. I have been completely taken up with other subjects. Inprimis, I finished the first half of my opening dissertation on the Philosophy of History 2 or 3 months back, and no sooner had I done so than I was called upon to take an active part in the establishment of a Mechanics Institution in this town, a point in which I have always been much interested. In our opening meeting, the principal part of the speaking was left to me. I spoke to an audience of 500 for about 40 minutes, and with great success. Subscriptions poured in from all quarters—2, or 300 members were soon enrolled,—a library was set on foot—several Gentlemen of the Town volunteered to give lectures gratuitously, and I was requested to commence on Geography, i.e. an account of the manners, customs, productions etc. of all countries. We have gone on swimmingly hitherto—The Room is always crowded to excess—and I lecture every week for above an hour to an audience of about 650, of all classes, & with a row of bright eyes & smiling faces, which tho’ you despise

them in the arrogance of your cynical philosophy, are among the necessities of life to me.—We have begun upon quite a new principle, of making our institution, less *useful* & more attractive—of attending less to science than to literature—& of seeking less to give *knowledge* to the lower classes than to sharpen their intellects and refine their minds. I am convinced our principle is the right one—at all events it is a hopeful experiment, and all the Institutions of this kind which have commenced on a different plan, have fallen off, and lost their spirit. Again by having gratuitous lectures we save £100 a year—and a voluntary lecturer always will have a far greater influence, & moral authority over his hearers than a hired one. These lectures will occupy me for 8 or 10 weeks longer, after which I shall give myself a little rest, (as my health has been a good deal damaged by repeated attacks of quinsey)—and then shall set to work at Physiology and anatomy again, as I generally do in the summer, and I suppose the return of Autumn will bring me round to History again.—<sup>19</sup>

For the rest there are regrets that he has not heard about his President's diploma or from Sir William Hamilton and "all the rest of my Edinburgh Correspondents". His German and Italian are neglected. "I am kept quite too busy with the languages I do know to think of learning more at present." Then, as far as Stenhouse was concerned, there was silence. We hear no more about the Bury Mechanics' Institution of 1829.

It is hardly necessary to add that some of the themes and contradictions we have been discussing in the present conference are given voice in this report from the front by a very young man. Within a month he was to put it in print. A pamphlet presented by Mabel Tylecote as anonymous—

SUGGESTIONS  
RESPECTING THE  
*OBJECT AND MANAGEMENT*  
OF  
MECHANICS' INSTITUTIONS<sup>20</sup>

—can be incontrovertibly ascribed to Greg both by its position in the collected papers derived from Kashnor in the National Library of Australia and on internal evidence.

The text—modestly contained in seven pages of print—is dated “January 12, 1830”. With rhetorical skill and smoothness it elaborates on the points made in the letter to Stenhouse. Rather than summarize it now, I think I shall make it—with the National Library’s permission—the second in a series of Chaskett Press reprints. (The first will be the 1865 Goulburn sale catalogue of the library of Terence Aubrey Murray, father of Gilbert.) With luck it may come out this year to mark the Greg bicentenary. For the moment it is enough to note that the debate about the primacy of useful knowledge in Mechanics’ Institutes was already lively in the 1820s and that the beginnings in Bury, however uncertain and fragile they may have been, must be antedated by eight years.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See Elaine Hoag, “The Earliest Extant Australian Imprint, with Distinguished Provenance”, *Script & Print*, 31, 2007, pp. 5–19, and Wallace Kirsop, “Searching for George Hughes: A First Report on a New Investigation”, *Script & Print*, 31, 2007, pp. 58–62.

<sup>2</sup> See the Kirsop article cited in note 1.

<sup>3</sup> Volume III, part 3, 1979, pp. 376–390.

<sup>4</sup> *Darwin*, London, Michael Joseph, 1991, pp. 32, 33, 44, 392, 394, 579.

<sup>5</sup> London, Allen Lane, 2009, pp. 34, 40, 44, 145–146, 150, 155, 167, 183, 301, 368, 382, 383, 410.

<sup>6</sup> Carlton, Victoria, Melbourne University Press, 1979, pp. 22, 26–27.

<sup>7</sup> See *The 1826 Journal of John James Audubon* [...], transcribed & edited by Alice Ford, New York, Abbeville Publishers, 1987 [1967], p. 390.

<sup>8</sup> Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

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<sup>9</sup> Volume 23, pp. 646–647.

<sup>10</sup> *The Mechanics' Institutes of Lancashire & Yorkshire before 1851*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1957, p. 315 and passim.

<sup>11</sup> London & New Castle, DE, British Library & Oak Knoll with The Bibliographical Society and the Bibliographical Society of America, 2008, 2 vols, especially entries 18581, 18582 and 18624.

<sup>12</sup> London, The British Library, 2008, especially pp. 87, 94.

<sup>13</sup> Bury Archives Service, A.87.4 BUR, Bury Library, Minutes 1825–1848.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell Library MS A 99.

<sup>15</sup> National Library of Australia Kashnor Collection 2703/P-2711, especially 2709.

<sup>16</sup> Edinburgh, John Anderson Junior, 1829.

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell Library MS A 99, pp. 280–281.

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell Library, MS A 99, p. 282.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell Library MS A 99, pp. 241–242.

<sup>20</sup> Manchester, E. Thomson and Sons, 1830, 10 pp.