

IN DEFENCE OF DR. GEORGE McCALL THEAL. A REPLY TO MISS MERLE BABROW

For the typing errors in my article in *Historia* of March 1964, I apologise; but for the great admiration I have for Dr. George McCall Theal there is certainly no need to apologise, and therefore I wish to answer Miss Babrow on the questions she raised in her reply to me.

Having read the documents which were quoted *in extenso* in my article, Miss Babrow is still of opinion that "Theal's claim that annoyance had been caused by the use of the church for Hottentot pandours, (*Theal (c)* p. 76-7) is also untrue." The use of "also" in a footnote gave rise to confusion. If Miss Babrow did not intend this to be read in connection with the statement qualified by the footnote, as I did, she should have incorporated it in the body of the text.

To come to the main point at issue, I still maintain that if Theal had seen no other documents than the three I quoted, his deduction that the church had been used by the pandours was historically justifiable. The first two documents Miss Babrow dismisses very airily as "obviously irrelevant". True, the word Hottentot does not occur, but Dundas is answering these letters and in his reply to the Board of Church Wardens he states in the first paragraph that the church unfortunately has to be used as a barracks, "there being no other means of lodging the troops stationed at the drosdy of Graaffrenette . . ." He knows furthermore that the number of armed Hottentots at the drosdy is increasing¹ and we know from a French letter written by Maynier to Dundas that the dragoons and pandours were being used as a unit.² Together they were "His Majesty's Troops" and together they were using the church "rather like a stable, nay, we dare say Brothel . . ."

Does Miss Babrow honestly think that in the second paragraph Dundas would suddenly wander off at a tangent and write about something that did not concern the Board of Church Wardens at all, but should have been inserted in a letter to the military authorities? One of the keystones of historical research is the correlation of relevant documents. These letters and the preceding letters are all concerned with one subject only: the desecration of the church *by the troops*. No, I did not misread the word "depredation", "deprevation" being an obvious and regrettable typing error. The word "depredation" is indeed quite clear. Dundas uses it in the original French meaning of the word: pilferage. The Hottentots together with the other troops quartered at the drosdy, for whom Dundas could not find other means of lodging than the church, were ruining the church by their thefts. Dundas says in the second paragraph of his reply that everything will be done to prevent this and then continues that Major Sherlock has been instructed that the church be cleaned before Divine Service and the books properly taken care of.

1. B.O.26: *Disturbances in the interior of the Co'ony*, pp. 719-720 and pp. 723-729.
2. *Records of the Cape Colony*, vol. IV, p. 31.

Cape Town, 17th February 1887.

My dear Mr. Fairbridge,

A few months ago a Society
 in Holland made me an offer,
 which may be summarized thus.
 To go on writing the history of the
 Dutch East India Company's rule
 in South Africa, from the date when
 the pen was struck from my hands.
 The Society to supply me with copies
 of all documents that I might
 need from the Archives at the Hague,
 to defray the cost of translation into
 Dutch of whatever I might write,
 to publish in both English and
 Dutch, relieving me of all

when I get on the task of these
 old books I don't know when to
 go about.

Very faithfully yours,

Geo. M. Theal

C. R. Fairbridge, Esq.,
 Cape Town

Aanhef en slotgedeelte van die skrywe van
 Geo. M. Theal waarna in meegaande artikel
 verwys word.

Miss Babrow has completely missed the point of my argument or is wilfully misinterpreting me when she writes that my view of Theal's version of South African history is that it shouldn't be altered or rewritten "until we have exhausted the archives in search of all possible evidence in support of him". I did say in my second paragraph that Miss Babrow was right in saying that "historians frequently make mistakes", that they "overlook or neglect important evidence, make uncritical use of unreliable sources, misinterpret documents and misunderstand issues" and that Theal did all these things, and I thought, rather naïvely, it now appears, that it went without saying that such things had to be rectified when noticed. When using secondary sources the least one can do is to check these sources and confront them with the original primary sources, as other historians are also fallible and liable to make mistakes.

When Miss Babrow however maintains that "Theal presented facts contrary to the evidence he had, distorts his material, misrepresents the issues and repeatedly ignores a massive quantity of relevant documents" she makes a statement that amounts to defamation of character. This statement Miss Babrow repeats in her answer to me, asserting that Theal's history is again and again in conflict with the documents he had included in *Records of the Cape Colony* and *Belangryke Historische Dokumenten*. To these accusations I object most strongly because they completely ignore the difference there is between the work of an archivist and that of an historian. As an archivist Theal listed documents, which does not mean that he studied them as an historian has to study his documents, for internal evidence in conjunction with other documents. Moreover the historical works on which Miss Babrow bases so many of her arguments were completed by 1893, whereas Theal started on his *Records* and his *B.H.D.* in 1897 and 1896 respectively. After 1893 Theal was fully occupied in preparing an incredible amount of source material for publication, which, though used by Miss Babrow, has not been assessed by her.

In her assessment of Theal's historical work she finds fault with his "vague generalities" and his "careless, unscholarly specific charges" adding in a footnote "which are drawn *entirely*³ from a second-hand source, and not based on his own wider reading".⁴ She continues in a paragraph that can hardly be considered as a classical example of scholarly writing:

"If Theal had been more honest, he might perhaps have been moved to say what Cory said of Philip's arguments. Commenting on a speech made by Philip in England, which he had obviously been trying to contradict, he explained in exasperation that it contained 'that mixture of truth and falsehood . . . or perhaps instead of falsehood . . . that association and dovetailing together of statements which taken by themselves were perfectly true, but from the arrangement he gave them he conveyed entirely erroneous and unjust impressions'. Theal did, in fact once say something

3. Underlined by Miss Babrow. This judgment is expressed in connection with Theal's way of dealing with Dr. Philip's views, which she agrees with Marais, have been "seriously misrepresented" by Theal.

4. *A Critical assessment of Dr. George McCall Theal*, p. 104.

similar; he refers to a speech of Philip's in which 'sublime truths were mixed with fantastic theories' — whatever that may mean. Theal did concede that Philip was clever, very clever. So was Maynier. He was, in fact 'much too able intellectually' for uneducated South African farmers. En toe ook vir ons Kanadiese-gebôre, Edele Doktor en koloniale historio-grapher nè? (*sic passim*) who is not beyond taking refuge behind good-hearted, honest unsophistication when arguments become too powerful".⁵

If Miss Babrow had started her critical assessment of Theal with an open mind, as she would have us believe, she would have tried to discover why Theal did not give his sources and used no footnotes. She would have found the answer in the Cape Archives. In 1881 Theal wrote in connection with his historical work: "If I could be at The Hague for a few weeks to examine the charts and some documents which are there, but which are not in South Africa, I could prepare a volume which would be permanently useful. The nature of the work however, is such that it could not be made to pay in a pecuniary sense. It would need to be illustrated with maps and to be supported by a large mass of proofs, so that the cost of publication would be considerable".⁶ In Theal's case the main reason for the lack of footnotes was the need to economise. Other historians of repute have been faced with the same dilemma. Thus Charles Seignobos writes in the introduction of his *A History of the French People* first published in 1933, that the great mass of knowledge accumulated during a lifetime "compels me to violate the fundamental rule of historical method according to which every assertion ought to be accompanied either by a piece of evidence supporting it or else by a reference to the work in which it had previously been proved. But to conform to this I should have required several thousand volumes, for every passage in this book, sometimes even every phrase, sums up the whole work of some scholar. By renouncing the whole mechanism of proof, I expose myself defenceless to the attacks of critics".⁷

Seignobos was relying on his reputation for integrity. Theal in the preface to his works did the same.⁸ There is not a single proof that any government ever interfered with the work he was doing. Miss Babrow's "discovery" that Theal's earlier works were different "both in their facts and in their 'liberal' interpretation, from his later, more orthodox and well-known Histories of South Africa" led her to the extraordinary conclusion that Theal was later concerned to produce an acceptable "official" version of South African history. The facts of Theal's life do not substantiate this view. His closest and perhaps his only true political friend was Saul Solomon, that real liberal in the original sense of this

5. *Ibid.* The "nè?" is inserted in ink, presumably by Miss Babrow; the *sic passim* is added by me.

6. C.O. 4218: Memorials S. — T. 1881, no. 27.

7. Charles Seignobos, professor of modern history, University of Paris: *A History of the French People*, p. 8.

8. Preface of last edition of his history he saw through the press, Wynberg, August 1915.

much misused word. While he was occupied in writing most of his historical work he was earning his keep as a civil servant, doing much of his historical work at night. He was not made Colonial Historiographer until 1891, when much of his historical work had been written. His attitude to his work is shown clearly in a letter written to C. A. Fairbridge in Cape Town on the 17th February 1887:

“My dear Mr. Fairbridge,

A few months ago a Society in Holland made me an offer which may be summarized thus: I to go on writing the history of the Dutch East India Company's rule in South Africa from the date the pen was struck from my hand. The Society to supply me with copies of all documents that I might need from the Archives at The Hague to defray the cost of translation into Dutch of whatever I might write, to publish in both English and Dutch, relieving me of all pecuniary responsibility, while securing to me any profit if there could be any.

The offer was a very flattering one, and as it was made to me through one of the best known professors in the university of Amsterdam I took a little time to consider whether it might not be worth my while to throw up my present employment and accept it. Unfortunately I am dependent for bread and butter upon daily toil, and I saw no way of earning bread while the work was in progress. To have gone on with it during the evenings was out of the question. Sir Gordon Sprigg has neither affection nor esteem from me, but he is the head of the Government and I am a public servant, and he is therefore entitled to *loyal*⁹ service from me. Now he has declined to allow me access to the Archives in Cape Town, and it should therefore be treachery on my part to procure copies of those same papers from The Hague with the object of working with them. If I cannot do that work openly in the clear light of day, I will not do it at all.

I have therefore written to Holland that I am as anxious to do the work as they are that I should do it, but that at present I cannot take it in hand. An so the scheme has fallen through. There was another reason which weighed with me in coming to this decision. A Society doing so much towards the production of a book would desire that it should be coloured to suit their own ideas. At least I suppose it would be so. Now I must be free to write what I believe to be the truth, altogether regardless of the opinion of any man or Society of men, otherwise the work would not be congenial.”

Theal continues his letter by describing three books that were sent to him by a friend in Holland and ends his letter thus:

“So much for these books.

I am getting a volume published in London, to be called *History of the Emigrant Boers in South Africa from 1836 to 1854*. I hope it will

9. Underlined by Theal.

be out in a couple of months or less. I do not know what Sir Gordon will say about it, but my own chief gave me permission to publish it, so he can't hang me for it. The material was collected before his return to office, and the time spent in its preparation was stolen from sleep.

I am afraid you will think me monstrously long winded, but when I get on the tack of these old books I don't know when to go about,

Very faithfully yours,

Geo. M. Theal¹⁰.

From this letter Theal's integrity is abundantly clear.

Dr. A. J. Böeseken.

10. Cape Archives: Acc. 1426: Letter received from Mrs. A. E. Adern