

How Sir Edmund Backhouse's infamous China memoirs came to Canberra

by Andrew Gosling

The National Library of Australia houses rare typewritten memoirs by the eccentric British Sinologist, Sir Edmund Trelawny Backhouse (1873-1944) [1]. Although many of the details of his life are disputed, certain facts are clear. He was the son of a respectable Quaker banker, Sir Jonathan Backhouse. Born in Yorkshire, Edmund was educated at Winchester College and Oxford University, where he read classics, and began to study Asian and European languages privately. He failed to complete a degree.

After studying Chinese briefly at Cambridge, he moved to China in 1898. For most of his forty-five years in Peking Backhouse lived well away from the foreign legation quarter, and gained the reputation among his fellow Europeans of being a hermit. He adopted Chinese dress and customs. His exceptional linguistic skills included Chinese, Japanese, Manchu, Mongolian and a number of European languages. An indirect link to Australia was the translation and other assistance that he provided to the Australian correspondent and political adviser in China, Dr. G.E. Morrison ("Morrison of Peking"). Beginning in 1899 he "helped Morrison by keeping an eye on Imperial edicts and Chinese newspapers" [2]. Morrison did not speak or read Chinese.

Backhouse succeeded his father as baronet in 1918, but remained in China for the rest of his life, though with many visits elsewhere. His reputation as a China scholar was based on two books of which he was co-author, *China under the Empress Dowager* (1910) and *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking* (1914). Backhouse hoped to return to an academic position in England. In 1913 he was offered the chair of Chinese at King's College, London, but then declined it on health grounds. For many years he expected to be appointed Professor of Chinese at Oxford, but this did not happen. He was also a book collector and major donor of Chinese works to the Bodleian Library at Oxford, including great rarities but also manuscripts later found not to be genuine.

Bick-har Yeung's report on her recent European library visits, which also appears in this issue of the EALRGA Newsletter, discusses some of the most outstanding Chinese treasures in the Backhouse Collection at the Bodleian.

In his final years Backhouse prepared two volumes of autobiography, *The Dead Past* and *Décadence Mandchoue*. The former is an account of his youth, when he claims to have been the lover of the Irish writer Oscar Wilde, French poet Paul Verlaine, the British Prime Minister Lord Rosebery and other figures of the Naughty Nineties. *Décadence Mandchoue* concentrates on his first decade in Peking, from his arrival in 1898. It describes his real or imagined affairs with nobles and commoners, and also with the Empress Dowager Tz'u Hsi [Cixi], ruler of China until her death in 1908.

Backhouse prepared his memoirs with encouragement from Dr. Reinhard Hoeppli, a parasitologist and honorary Swiss consul in Peking during the Japanese occupation. The Swiss doctor befriended the ailing Backhouse and treated him as a patient. Hoeppli paid for and edited the memoirs. He added a postscript dated February 1946 saying the work was unsuitable for ordinary publication, but that he had prepared four typewritten copies to be given after his own death to the British Museum Library in London; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris and Harvard College Library in the United States. The original handwritten version and first typed copy were to go to the Bodleian [3].

While this may have been Hoeppli's original plan it is not what happened after his death in early 1973. In fact, in the National Library's typescript the final section of his 1946 postscript listing the four recipient libraries has a pencil line through it and a note also in pencil dated 26 September 1972, indicating that the page was to be changed [4]. The third and fourth typed copies were actually donated to the University Library, Basel, Switzerland [5] and the National Library of Australia. This was pointed out in 1975 in Cliff Burmester's *National Library of Australia: Guide to the Collections* [6], but Derek Sandhaus in his scholarly edition of *Décadence Mandchoue* published in 2011 only refers to Hoeppli's earlier intention that they be sent to the Bibliothèque Nationale and Harvard [7].

Backhouse became notorious in 1976, as the subject of a damning biography. After Hoeppli's death Hugh Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, was asked to look at the Backhouse manuscript by its Swiss custodians. They thought that such an extraordinary and explicit document "should first be examined by a British historian before being passed on to the Bodleian Library" [8]. Trevor-Roper initially considered publishing it but then wrote *Hermit of Peking* (first issued as *A Hidden Life*) in which he dismissed the work as historically worthless fiction by a man who was a forger, confidence trickster and fantasist. He concluded, "Backhouse's 'memoirs' are not an edifying work. They are a pornographic novelette," [9] which could never be published. He was wrong on the final point, as *Décadence Mandchoue* did appear in print many years later.

Not everyone has accepted Trevor-Roper's systematic condemnation of Backhouse and his memoirs. Derek Sandhaus, for example, has written that whatever his faults, Sir Edmund "knew Peking and its people better than just about any of his foreign contemporaries...[*Décadence Mandchoue*] has a literary merit beyond shock value. This, his final work, is a eulogy for the Ch'ing [Qing] dynasty, an erotic love letter to a bygone era. Even if it were completely fabricated, and I do not personally believe that it was, it would still be an engaging and often hilarious historical fiction by a well-informed linguistic genius"[10].

The following is a brief account of how and why Australia received a set of the Backhouse typescripts. Without the involvement of two Canberra residents they would not have come to this country. The first was Alastair Morrison, son of G.E. Morrison. Alastair and his wife Hedda had been friends with Hoeppli in China during the 1940s. In 1953 he stayed with the couple in Sarawak, where he told them about the memoirs. In response to Trevor-Roper's charge that the Swiss doctor naively accepted Sir Edmund's writings as truthful, Alastair later wrote "Hoeppli was a sophisticated intellectual. He was not taken in by Backhouse but...had enough in common ...to be able to sympathize with him and to some extent to understand him. At the same time Hoeppli was entertained by Backhouse's bizarre and scandalous recollections"[11].

The second Canberran was the historian Dr. Lo Hui-min of The Australian National University, who undertook research on G.E. Morrison and Backhouse. Lo's magnum opus was a two volume edition of G.E. Morrison's correspondence, which includes Morrison's opinion that Sir Edmund "possesses extraordinary abilities. He is one of the greatest scholars England possesses"[12]. Relations between the two men later soured. Dr. Morrison was the first to doubt the authenticity of a diary by a high Manchu official, Ching-shan [Jing Shan], which Backhouse claimed to have found after the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. The diary became the centerpiece for his bestselling *China under the Empress Dowager*, written jointly with J.O.P Bland [13]. Many years later, Lo Hui-min wrote an article proving that G.E. Morrison was right, and that the diary was a forgery [14]. Lo also planned a book on Backhouse and the diary, *The Quest for the Ghost of Ching-shan* [15], but never completed it.

On 27 September 1967 Alastair Morrison, wrote to his old friend Hoeppli asking him to supply a typescript of the Backhouse memoirs to the National Library of Australia for Dr. Lo's research. Hoeppli replied on 28 November that if one of the four libraries selected to receive the memoirs

after his death did not want them then they should go to Australia instead. Later the two men agreed on Alastair's revised proposal that the British Museum make a reproduction of its copy for Canberra.

On 12 February 1974, a year after the event, Lo Hui-min informed the National Library of Hoepli's death. Through its Liaison Officer in London, David Barron, the Library immediately asked the British Library (which had separated from the British Museum in 1973) to arrange copying of the transcript. The British Library referred the matter to the Bodleian Library. Barron reported back to Canberra on 1 August that the Bodleian would not agree to photocopy the memoirs, because of copyright and other restrictions. Alastair Morrison provided his correspondence with Hoepli, which Barron showed to the Bodleian, but to no avail. There was a breakthrough on 7 September. The Bodleian told the National Library that they had consulted with the source of their copy, Dr. Rudolf Geigy, a friend and former colleague of Hoepli. Geigy advised that Dr. Barbara Begelsbacher, another of Hoepli's friends, would be willing to supply Canberra with a typescript of the memoirs in her keeping. On 8 October Dr. Begelsbacher wrote to the National Library saying she had posted the manuscript, which was received on 3 December. She was also responsible for donating a copy to the University Library, Basel [16].

Sir Edmund Backhouse seems in no danger of being forgotten. The publication of *Décadence Mandchoue* with its numerous passages in Chinese, French, Latin and other languages translated into English and its erudite references explained in meticulous annotations has made the memoirs far more accessible. There is also a Chinese language edition published in Hong Kong [17]. Backhouse and Hoepli both appear prominently in the Australian author Linda Jaivin's latest novel, *The Empress Lover*. In this lively contemporary tale harking back to old Peking, Jaivin quotes from *Décadence Mandchoue*, which she calls "Sir Edmund's infamous erotic 'memoir' of his affair with the Empress Dowager... [a] dense and hilariously pedantic manuscript" [18].

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3. Hoepli's postscript appears in both volumes of *Memoirs, 1943*.
4. Ibid. The note in v. 1 p.235 reads "page 235 to be changed," and in v.2 p.461 as "not to be used in the present form but to be rewritten."
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9. Ibid., p.335.
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