“Sir Edmund Backhouse and How His Scandalous Chinese Memoirs Came to Canberra”

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I am grateful to APSIG, and particularly to Marie Sexton, for asking me to speak today about an extraordinary man and his equally extraordinary memoirs. I also wish to thank the National Library, especially Alex Philp and Di Ouyang, for help with images, the display and other arrangements for the talk. I am also most grateful to Damian Cole, Acting Manager, Reader Services, Pictures & Manuscripts, for providing me with details from the Library’s Backhouse acquisition file.

First a warning. When it comes to the subject of my talk, Sir Edmund Backhouse, it is difficult to be certain what is true. His entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography by the historian Robert Bickers (2004) begins by calling him a “Sinologist and fraudster” and ends “not a word he said or wrote can be trusted.” This does not make for an easy talk but perhaps my topic is fitting in an age of fake news and alternative facts.

On 3 December 1974, a package posted in Switzerland arrived at the National Library of Australia. It contained the typewritten autobiography of the eccentric British Sinologist, Sir Edmund Trelawny Backhouse (1873-1944). Sir Edmund insisted that his surname should be pronounced Bacchus as in the classical god of wine and merrymaking, but other family members pronounce it simply as “Back house.” After his death, he was almost forgotten, but in 1976 gained international notoriety. In a scathing biography published that year, Hermit of Peking: the Hidden Life of Sir Edmund Backhouse, the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper dismissed the memoirs as historically worthless fiction by a man who was a forger, confidence trickster and fantasist. One Australian scholar, Dr Alison Broinowski, has described Trevor-Roper’s book as a hatchet job. My own interest in Backhouse and his memoirs dates back to my reading Trevor-Roper and then wondering how and why the Library had managed to acquire one of only four typed copies of the autobiography, the only one held outside Europe.

The Backhouse family of Darlington in northern England had been prominent Quakers since the time of John Backhouse, who was imprisoned in 1661, early in the reign of Charles II. He had refused to pay taxes as a protest against religious persecution. One of his sons, gaoled for the same offence, died in prison. The Backhouse family prospered as bankers, missionaries and botanists. They established Backhouse Bank, which financed the famous Stockton and Darlington Railway, the world’s first
passenger train service. In the mid-19th century Edmund’s grandfather, also called Edmund Backhouse, represented Darlington in Parliament as a Liberal, while his father Jonathan Backhouse (1849-1918) became a director of Barclay’s Bank and was made a baronet in 1901 for services to the Liberal Unionist party. Sir Jonathan was the first in the family not to be raised as a strict Quaker. According to Trevor-Roper, Sir Jonathan’s four sons between them “repudiated all the peculiar Quaker virtues of pacifism, veracity and thrift.” Pacifism was certainly discarded by three of them. Edmund’s younger brothers all served in the armed forces and two became admirals, Sir Roger ending his career as Admiral of the Fleet. Veracity and thrift will feature prominently in this talk.

From an Australian perspective the most interesting relative was James Backhouse (1794-1869), a Quaker missionary and botanist. He visited Australia between 1831 and 1838, writing extensively on local conditions including the treatment of Aborigines and convicts. His travels are recorded in his letters and in *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*, 1843. He also collected plants and seeds in Australia which were sent back to Britain. The Backhousia genus of Australian flowering myrtles was named in his honour.

Sir Edmund wrote that his childhood was “ideally unhappy…I was born of wealthy parents who had everything they wanted and were miserable. ..I heard not a kind word nor received [any] sympathy.” He attended St George’s School, Ascot, where Winston Churchill was a slightly younger fellow pupil. In their memoirs both recalled the cruelty of the headmaster, “a sadistic tyrant” in Backhouse’s words. From there Edmund moved to Winchester College and then in 1892 to Merton College at Oxford, where he read classics, and studied Asian and European languages privately. He suffered a breakdown in 1894 and left the university the following year without completing his degree.

While at university he ran up large debts and was declared bankrupt. As Trevor-Roper says “In him long generations of Quaker frugality at last took their revenge.” Under a cloud, he moved to China late in 1898. There is no known documentation supporting his claim that he was sent to China on a diplomatic mission. He remained there until his death, despite succeeding his father as baronet in 1918. Although he became Sir Edmund, he continued to receive only a modest allowance from his family. When he died early in 1944 he was succeeded in the baronetcy by his nephew John Edmund Backhouse, son of Sir Roger.
Manchu noblewomen, 1900
Sir Edmund Backhouse witnessed the last days of China’s Qing or Manchu dynasty (1644-1911). The Manchus, Tungusic speaking tribes from north-east of the Great Wall, had been united by the early 1600s under their leader Nurhaci (1569-1626) as a strong political, military and economic force just outside the Chinese empire. As China’s Ming dynasty (1368-1644) weakened, the Manchus with a far smaller population than China were able to conquer and govern the empire by winning the cooperation of prominent Chinese, as well as leaving existing structures largely intact. The first 150 years of Qing rule have been called the last great flowering of traditional Chinese culture. The country was stable and prosperous under capable rulers. In particular Kangxi, who reigned from 1662 to 1722, completed the Manchu conquest of China while Qianlong, who ruled from 1736 to 1795, extended the nation’s borders. This gives me the chance to show depictions of Manchu rulers from the Library’s extensive and now fully digitized collection of Chinese pith paintings. For more details please have a look at The Chinese Pith Painting Collection at the National Library of Australia: An Annotated Guide https://www.nla.gov.au/sites/default/files/blogs/pith_painting_guide_reduced.pdf

Empress, from "Court figures in Qing dynasty China", pith painting 19th century

During the 19th century Qing power waned under pressure from internal revolts and foreign incursions by Western powers and Japan. Shortly after Backhouse arrived in Peking the Boxer Rebellion broke out
in North China in 1899. The Boxers were anti-foreign and opposed to Christian missionaries and their Chinese converts. The Qing court encouraged the Boxers as a way of stemming Western influence, but when foreign troops came to the rescue of their diplomats besieged in Peking in 1900, the court was forced to appease the West and Japan. Revolution finally ended the dynasty in 1911.

We will now return to Sir Edmund. His exceptional linguistic skills included Chinese, Japanese, Manchu, Mongolian and a number of European languages. From 1899 he assisted the Australian correspondent and political adviser in China, Dr George Ernest Morrison (1862-1920) (who became known as “Morrison of Peking” or “Chinese Morrison”). Morrison never mastered spoken or written Chinese. He relied on Backhouse to gather and translate court documents and Chinese newspapers, which Morrison then turned into dispatches for The Times. In 1903 Backhouse was appointed as a part-time lecturer at what later became Peking University. He appears to have held the position for ten years, though the duties do not seem to have been very demanding.

Backhouse’s reputation as a China scholar rested on two highly successful books of which he was co-author, with The Times journalist J.O.P. Bland (1863-1945). They were China under the Empress Dowager (1910) and Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking (1914). He also collaborated with Sir Sidney Barton on a revised edition of Hillier’s Pocket Dictionary of Peking Colloquial (1918). His first
book, *China under the Empress Dowager* had a strong influence on Western views of the late Manchu period in China. It depicted the Empress Dowager, the effective ruler of China for nearly 50 years, as intelligent and capable. Backhouse and Bland described her as “a woman of unusual courage and vitality, of strong will and unbounded ambition [but given to] vindictive ferocity on occasions [and] imbued with a very feminine love of luxury, addicted to pleasure and at one period of her life undoubtedly licentious.” I will have more to say about her later. Many editions have appeared including one published in Hong Kong as recently as 2011. As Bland readily admitted most of the text was from Backhouse, though turned into smoother English by Bland.

![Cover of "China under the Empress Dowager" by Bland and Backhouse, Peking edition, 1939](image)

Backhouse hoped to gain an academic post back in England. In 1913 he was offered the chair of Chinese at King’s College, London, but declined it claiming poor health. For many years he waited in vain to be appointed to the more prestigious though much less well paid chair of Chinese at Oxford. He also donated valuable Ming and Qing dynasty Chinese books to the Bodleian Library at Oxford, including six volumes of the exceptionally rare Yongle Encyclopedia. In doing this he hoped to smooth his path to the professorship. The Bodleian describes the Backhouse Collection as “one of the finest and most generous
gifts in the Library’s history...[containing] many fine Chinese editions. Much of its content is unique in the West and exemplifies the art of Chinese printing in all its variety.” A later presentation of 18 manuscripts proved to be forged, in fact quite crudely forged, but Backhouse always insisted they were genuine.

After 1921 Backhouse ceased travelling and remained in China for the rest of his life. He became more reclusive and stayed well away from the foreign legation quarter except in times of crisis. Adopting Chinese dress and customs he avoided other Westerners, though when they occasionally called on him he was always polite, charming and good company. Among the few characteristics agreed on by his admirers and detractors are his impeccable manners and charm.

In the early 1930s he and Bland discussed the possibility of writing a third book together, this time based on the diary of the Manchu court’s Chief Eunuch, Li Lianying (1848-1911). Nothing came of this and no such diary ever came to light. Bland and Backhouse fell out more than once and at one point Bland wrote of Sir Edmund, “I have come to the end of my patience with this gelatinous individual.” Backhouse also claimed that he was preparing a major Chinese dictionary. If so it was apparently lost in mysterious circumstances in 1939 along with his other papers and books. After the Japanese attacked in 1937 his family sent him a ticket home to England but he sold it. When the Pacific War began in December 1941 Backhouse’s remittance ended. He moved into the British Legation compound, and was not interned by the Japanese because of his age and fragility. In 1942 he converted to Catholicism and spent the last months of his life in a French Catholic hospital. As we shall see his memoirs do not read like a confession in any conventional sense.
In his final years Backhouse prepared two volumes of autobiography. *The Dead Past* is an account of his youth. He claims to have been the lover of the Irish writer Oscar Wilde, French poet Paul Verlaine, the British Prime Minister Lord Rosebery, and an Ottoman princess, who according to Sir Edmund preferred him to another admirer, Lord Kitchener.

![Cover of Backhouse's "Décadence Mandchoue." Hong Kong: Earnshaw Books, 2011](image)

The much longer *Décadence Mandchoue*, or Manchu Decadence, concentrates on his first decade in China, 1898 to 1908. It describes his real or imagined affairs with nobles and commoners, but in particular with the Empress Dowager Cixi (Tz’u Hsi) at the Garden of Cultivated Harmony, usually known as the Summer Palace. This was her main residence.
The Summer Palace, site of Backhouse’s claimed affair with the Empress Dowager

She is the chief focus of the memoir. Nearly 40 years older than him she was the last great Manchu ruler of China until her death in 1908.
Empress Dowager Cixi, by Katharine Carl 1903
Born in 1835 she was a minor consort of one emperor, but mother to his only surviving son. From 1861 she became regent to her infant son when he succeeded to the throne. When he died in 1875 she became regent to her nephew, exercising direct or indirect power for nearly half a century. She was long regarded by Chinese and Western authors as a corrupt, reactionary despot who prevented China’s modernization and helped bring about the fall of the Qing dynasty. Other more recent studies have seen her as a strong woman defending China against foreign aggression and trying to modernize the country. Backhouse wrote in his memoirs that when she died, “masses were chanted daily at dawn, noon and eve, for the repose of her soul ... and as I listened to the melancholy ‘plain-chant’ of those Tibetan choristers, I felt that they were verily singing a farewell requiem to my buried happiness, to our affection that shall not and cannot die.”

Backhouse completed his autobiography at the urging of Dr Reinhard Hoepli (1893-1973). He was an eminent parasitologist and honorary Swiss consul in Peking during the Japanese occupation. The Swiss government looked after British and other Western interests during the war. Hoepli befriended the ailing Backhouse and treated him as a patient. He paid for and edited the memoirs. In February 1946 he added a postscript saying that the work was unsuitable for ordinary publication, but that he had prepared four typewritten sets. They were to be given after his own death to the British Museum Library in London; the Bodleian at 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.

While this may have been Hoepli’s original plan it is not what happened after his death early in 1973. 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. It indicated that the page was to be changed. The third and fourth typed copies were actually donated to the University Library, Basel, Switzerland and the National Library of Australia. This was pointed out in 1975 in the second volume of Cliff Burmester’s National Library of Australia: Guide to the Collections. However the most recent major work on Backhouse, Derek Sandhaus’s scholarly edition of Décadence Mandchoue published in 2011 only refers to Hoepli’s earlier intention that they be sent to the Bibliothèque Nationale and Harvard. Incidentally Burmester’s guide makes no clear reference to the love affairs which are such a major theme of the memoirs. Burmester also includes Backhouse’s doubtful claims that he worked on the personal staff of the Prime Minister, Lord Rosebery, his supposed lover, and that he first went to China on a diplomatic mission. Burmester’s guide also states that in 1913 Backhouse returned to England and took up the professorship in Chinese at King’s College, London. As already mentioned he declined the offer supposedly on health grounds. This is no criticism of the Burmester guide which was prepared before the publication of Trevor-Roper’s book questioning Backhouse’s veracity.

If it were not for the involvement of two Canberra residents, it is extremely unlikely that the Backhouse volumes would now be at the National Library. The first was Alastair Morrison (1915-2009), son of Dr G.E. Morrison. Alastair and his wife Hedda Hammer Morrison (1908-1991), the renowned photographer,
had been friends with Hoepli in China during the 1940s. In 1953 the Swiss doctor stayed with the couple when they were stationed in Sarawak, where he told them about the memoirs. In response to Trevor-Roper’s charge that Hoepli naively accepted Sir Edmund’s writings as truthful, Alastair Morrison later wrote “Hoepli 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 Hoepli was entertained by Backhouse’s bizarre and scandalous recollections.”

Marriage of Captain Alastair Morrison and Hedda Hammer, with Vaughn Meisling, Peking 5 July, 1946
[picture]/ Reg Alder [nla.obj-140413093-m]

The second Canberra citizen was the historian Dr Lo Hui-min (1925?-2006) of The Australian National University, who undertook research on Dr Morrison and Backhouse. Lo’s magnum opus, a two volume edition of G.E. Morrison’s correspondence, includes the latter’s opinion that Sir Edmund showed “extraordinary abilities. He is one of the greatest scholars England possesses.” Relations between Dr Morrison and Backhouse later soured. The Australian was the first to doubt the authenticity of a diary by a high Manchu official, Ching-shan (Jingshan), which Backhouse claimed to have found after the anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion in 1900. The diary became the centerpiece for his bestselling China under the Empress Dowager. In his memoirs Backhouse categorically denied that it was a fake. In 1991 Lo Hui-min published an article in the ANU journal, East Asian History. It proved once and for all that Dr Morrison’s suspicions were right. The diary, which did not match other Chinese documents about Ching-shan, was indeed a forgery. Lo also planned a book on Backhouse and the forged diary, to be called The Quest for the Ghost of Ching-shan but sadly he never completed it.
On 27 September 1967 Alastair Morrison wrote to his old friend Hoeppli asking him to send a set of the Backhouse memoirs to the National Library for Dr Lo’s research. In Alastair’s words Hoeppli, in his reply of 28 November, “said that he would not diverge from his promise to Backhouse that the memoirs were not to be made available until after his own death.” Hoeppli agreed that if one of the libraries selected to receive them 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.

There were no further developments for six years. On 12 February 1974, a year after the event, Lo Hui-min informed the National Library of Hoeppli’s death. The Library contacted its Liaison Officer in London, David Barron (1936-2012) asking that the British Museum arrange copying of the typescript. The Museum referred the matter to the Bodleian Library, which held the original. Barron reported back to Canberra on 1 August that the Bodleian would not agree to photocopy the memoirs, because of copyright and other restrictions. Even though Alastair Morrison provided his correspondence with Hoeppli, which Barron showed to the Bodleian, it was 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 Hoeppli. Geigy advised that Dr Barbara Begelsbacher, another of Hoeppli’s friends, would be willing to supply Canberra with a copy of the memoirs in her keeping. On 8 October she wrote to the National Library saying she had posted the manuscript, which as I mentioned earlier was received on 3 December 1974. She was also responsible for donating a copy to the University Library in Basel. Incidentally when I was preparing an article about Backhouse I wrote to Dr Begelsbacher in Switzerland asking if she could provide more information about her role but I did not receive any reply.

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 saw him as a reputable British scholar who would be in a position to judge its worth. Originally he planned to have it published, but when he examined it closely and started to doubt its veracity he decided to write a biography of Backhouse instead. As I mentioned at the beginning of this talk he called the Sinologist’s writings historically worthless fiction. In Hermit of Peking Trevor-Roper concluded, “Backhouse’s ‘memoirs’ are not an edifying work. They are a pornographic novelette,” and unlikely ever to be published. He was wrong on the final point. Décadence Mandchoue did appear in print in 2011. So far nobody has published the other volume, The Dead Past, so the National Library houses one of only a handful of manuscript copies.

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 notes has made the memoirs far more accessible. So has the appearance of a Chinese language edition in Hong Kong.
Backhouse and Hoepli both appear prominently in the Australian author Linda Jaivin’s lively novel, *The Empress Lover*. Set in contemporary China it harks back to the past. On the first page Sir Edmund calls his own life story “a wild tale, far-fetched and fantastical, but I assure you of its veracity.” 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”. It is interesting that Jaivin like Sandhaus finds much humour in Backhouse, unlike Trevor-Roper for whom the memoir seems only pornography and lies.

Opinion is divided between those like the historian Robert Bickers who accept Trevor-Roper’s systematic condemnation of Backhouse and his memoirs, and those who feel Trevor-Roper went too far. Derek Sandhaus, who edited the published version of *Décadence Mandchoue*, believes that Trevor-Roper was prejudiced by his dislike of Backhouse’s sexuality and the latter’s expressed hostility towards his native country and admiration for Japan in the Second World War. Sandhaus thinks the *Hermit of Peking* is
mean-spirited and narrow minded in its assessment of Sir Edmund. Sandhaus states that Trevor-Roper failed to consult China scholars or people who knew Backhouse in China. He concedes that Trevor-Roper has shown Backhouse took many liberties with the truth but believes that whatever his faults, Sir Edmund “knew Peking and its people better than just about any of his foreign contemporaries...[The memoir], his final work, is a eulogy for the [Qing] dynasty, an erotic love letter to a bygone era. Even if it were completely fabricated... it would still be an engaging and often hilarious historical fiction by a well-informed linguistic genius.”

At this point I should say more about the style of the memoirs. Although written in the 1940s they read more like a work from late Victorian England by a highly educated man with a love of languages and cultures. In the words of Professor T.H. Barrett of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London “his affection for the Chinese language and the lore it embodies shines through the pedantic display of erudition which disfigures his written style.” The sexual passages which prevented publication for nearly 70 years are certainly highly explicit and make up about a quarter of the text. They combine graphic erotic scenes with Chinese, Latin, French and other literary and historical allusions.

Here are a couple of examples of his style, which will disappoint anyone wanting the steamier chapters.

This is his description of the Empress Dowager:

“At first sight...she gave to one the impression of a dear, good-natured elderly lady who wished to look juvenile, kind-hearted to a fault, fond of gossip...very anxious to win others’ good opinion and inclined to be touchy... But, as one listened to her conversation, now and then the expression of her eyes completely changed as she alluded to some person or some incident which had caused umbrage, those eyes which could fascinate and terrify, that Medusa-like stare... It was the basilisk glance before which China’s greatest men had quailed...”

Queen Victoria (1819-1901) features prominently in the memoirs. The following dialogue dates from August 1904 when Backhouse says he accompanied the Empress Dowager and other court ladies by boat on the lake at the Summer Palace.

“Tell me, was Queen Victoria in love with her attendant Po Leng [meaning her Scottish servant John Brown]? I have seen a photograph of him carrying her in his arms across a stream near her Summer Resort (Balmoral) and he looks very handsome and amorous.”

“Madame the late Queen made herself most ridiculous by the attention she paid to him. In fact the people of her Scottish capital ... mocked the queen by shouting Mrs Brown at her carriage.”
“Did not Victoria have the rebels punished for their treason? I should like to see the people of Peking mocking me…”

We come back to the veracity or otherwise of Backhouse’s memoirs. As Professor Robert Aldrich of the University of Sydney has asked, are they “fact, fiction or a mad mixture of both.” Unless further Chinese or Western sources come to light, we may never know for certain. Dr Hoeppli recounts that in the early 1940s he passed Backhouse in a rickshaw. Hoeppli’s Manchu rickshaw puller told him that the man they had just seen was famous for having been the lover of the Empress Dowager. After the publication of Trevor-Roper’s *Hermit of Peking* a document was discovered revealing that when the Boxer Rebellion had been suppressed, a British army officer, Major Noel du Boulay, was responsible for returning looted treasures to the Manchu court. He was assisted by Backhouse. In his memoirs Sir Edmund claimed that he first met the Empress Dowager when she thanked him personally for returning such treasures to the Palace. While none of this proves he really did have a relationship with the Empress Dowager, and most writers remain sceptical, it is indeed intriguing.

Whether gentle scholar or scoundrel or a combination of the two, Sir Edmund Backhouse was a remarkable man. The National Library is fortunate to house a rare copy of his extraordinary adventures evoking late Victorian England and late Manchu China.

If you are interested in knowing more about the Manchus who ruled China as the Qing dynasty and the National Library’s rich holdings on this period, do read Dr Nathan Woolley’s *Celestial Empire: Life in China 1644-1911*. He wrote it to accompany the exhibition of the same name that he curated here last year. It features holdings from the national libraries of China and Australia. *Celestial Empire* is available to read in the Library or to buy at the Library’s excellent bookshop. So too is my book *Asian Treasures: Gems of the Written Word* which describes a number of the Library’s rare books, maps and manuscripts from Qing dynasty China as well as other precious works from across Asia.

I might finish with another warning, this time about the dangers of disturbing the ghost of Sir Edmund Backhouse. Having exposed his frauds and deceptions in *Hermit of Peking*, Hugh Trevor-Roper was himself caught out badly in 1983 when he authenticated the forged Hitler Diaries, though he did soon change his mind. As we have seen, the Australian scholar Dr Lo Hui-min proved that the Manchu diary supposedly discovered and translated by Backhouse was a fake. In 1986 and again in 1991 Lo Hui-min wrote that he was preparing a book about Sir Edmund and the forgery. He never completed it, though he lived until 2006. According to Burmester’s guide to the National Library collections Dr Lo was actually working on a book about Backhouse even earlier, in 1975.

I have had my own minor troubles with Backhouse. I originally wrote an article about him for the *National Library Magazine* three years ago. Publication was delayed and then set for September 2016,
but the magazine ceased in June. In December a condensed version was included in the first issue of the Library’s new online magazine *UnBound*. A couple of weeks ago the USB with the latest draft of my talk for today mysteriously ended up in the washing machine, and no I must confess it was not backed up properly. To my relief it survived the ordeal and was still usable, so that I am able to address you this afternoon.

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National Library of Australia