

GEORGE McCALL THEAL

HELEN HARPER STEEVES

SOME forty years ago, a pair of horses drawing a carriage with a party of visitors drove into the picturesque village of Cocagne, N. B., where they drew up before the commodious home of the late Mr. Andrew Dysart, father of the present premier of New Brunswick. An elderly gentleman was seen to alight and make his way to the entrance of the house, where he requested that he might be permitted to have a drink of water from the old well on the premises—the well from which, as a boy, he had so often quenched his thirst. Never during all succeeding years had the visitor, Dr. George McCall Theal, distinguished historian of South Africa, tasted any water quite so good as that of this old well at Cocagne, the village where, as a boy, he had spent a portion of time when his father, the late Dr. William Young Theal, formerly of St. John, practised his profession here in the good old days—the days when the Maritime Provinces were famous for their “wooden ships and iron men”—the days when from the port of Cocagne went forth many ships laden with timber for the British market. The old well had then been on the property of Dr. Wm. Theal, this property which now formed a part of the Dysart homestead.

Having drunk of the water, the gentleman was seen to wander along the beach, noting the ravages made by the fast encroaching sea over the fields where he had once played as a carefree boy. Pensively he gazed o’er the sparkling waters of the bay, the arm of the sea—the mysterious sea, “always the same, yet never the same.” And no doubt his thoughts reached far back to the “years that are told,” with the changes that these had wrought in physical nature around him, in the economic world in which he played a part, in his circle of old-time friends, his loved ones—yes, and in himself.

When he had rejoined the family members in the carriage, the party drove slowly away to the city of Moncton where his aged mother yet resided, and a few days later, George McCall Theal bade adieu to his beloved native land, his face set towards the home of his adoption—South Africa—where much work awaited him. It was work he must needs do before the gathering

shadows darkened—work which he held as a sacred trust, and a portion of which might never be done did he not do it.

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George McCall Theal was born in the year 1837 in the city of St. John. He was the eldest son of Dr. and Mrs. William Young Theal, and grandson of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Theal who came to St. John with the Loyalist migration of 1783.

The Theals had been among the earliest white settlers in the New England Colonies. Old records show that one, "Joseph Theall, supposed son of Nicholas Theall," was born in Stamford, Conn., in the year 1640, where he was "chosen representative" during the years 1671-1677. A few years later Joseph Theall had removed to Bedford, N. Y., where he was appointed "Chiefe Military Officer for the Train Band." In the year 1690, we find Captain Joseph Theall was residing in Rye, N. Y., where he had purchased a large tract of land from the Iroquois Indians, and had bestowed on the little settlement the name of Rye after the town of that name in England where the Thealls had resided for a time following their migration from Germany. Captain Joseph Theall appears to have been a man of considerable importance in his community, for we find him holding the offices of Justice of the Peace and Supervisor of the town of Rye.

During the Revolutionary War, like many other families in the New England Colonies, the members of the Theall family divided on the question of Independence. We find at least eight adult male members of this family casting in their lot with the harassed Loyalists. Leaving kith and kin behind in their well established homes, they sailed from New York to St. John in the year 1783, to make new homes for themselves in this undeveloped and then inhospitable part of what at that time was the province of Nova Scotia. Among the members of the Theall family now settling in the vicinity of St. John, we notice Samuel Theal, a youth of eighteen, the grandfather of the subject of this sketch. Samuel Theal in the course of time had married Maria Young, who had been born in New York whilst her parents, Captain and Mrs. Wm. Young of Philadelphia, were awaiting the sailing of the transports which were to convey them to their new home in St. John.

In the course of years Samuel Theal and his wife had established a comfortable home here, and had sent their two sons back to Mrs. Theal's former home, Philadelphia, and later to New York, to receive a medical education. On the completion of his studies the elder son, Dr. Wm. Theal, settled at St. John, later removing to Cocagne, but subsequently returning to St. John, where his

son George McCall Theal, who was destined to play so important a part in the economic development of far-off South Africa, received the greater part of his education, completing his scholastic studies in what was known as the old Grammar School. Subsequent events in the career of George Theal might prove that he was an apt pupil, and that his old-time teachers were educators in the true sense of the word.

In his *Story of the Loyalists*, the late Dr. J. G. Bourinot, C.M.G., of Ottawa, places the name of George McCall Theal in his list of descendants of the Loyalists "belonging to New Brunswick, who have attained distinction in literature, science and education." George McCall Theal won distinction both as littérateur and as historian in his adopted country.

At the age of eighteen, we find him accompanying his uncle, Captain Francis Leavitt of St. John, on a trip to Cape Colony, South Africa, the voyage being made in the good ship *Jonathan Leavitt*. Apparently the youth was most favourably impressed with the fine climate and possibilities of development in the new colony, then about to embark upon a period of growth and progress following the granting of a representative parliament on the part of the British government; for although George Theal accompanied his uncle on his return to New York, within a short period of time he returned to Cape Colony there to make his home and to enter upon a most successful career in that far-away land. Here he engaged in school teaching for a few years; but becoming greatly interested in the political and economic situation in the colony, he entered the journalistic profession. As editor of one of the leading newspapers, he became prominently identified with the discussions of the many difficult issues which confronted the settlement of the colony and neighbouring provinces or native states of South Africa.

In order to have a true understanding of the various problems of the country and to be fully acquainted with the basic facts underlying these problems, Mr. Theal made a thorough study of the history of South Africa; and that he might more intimately know of tribal conditions, made his home for some years in various parts of the colony, studying the languages and habits of living of the native tribes, and assisted by his admirable wife, the daughter of a Scotch Presbyterian clergyman, engaged in missionary work among the benighted tribesmen.

In the year 1877 he was successful in settling a dispute with the Gaika Kaffirs, after which he entered the Cape Colony Civil Service in the Native Department, filling many important positions

in connection with governmental affairs. In recognition of his research work on the early history of South Africa, Mr. Theal was appointed "Keeper of the Archives", and in 1891 was made Colonial Historiographer. He held this position until 1905.

In 1895, he was commissioned by Cecil Rhodes, then premier of Cape Colony, to go to Europe for the purpose of examining records in the Portuguese, Dutch, and British archives which bear on the history of South Africa—a task which extended over a period of several years.

An accomplished linguist, Mr. Theal was eminently qualified to carry on this work in the original text, and his research brought to light a mass of unknown documents of high value. In a letter written to a relative in Canada in Dec. 1898, he states that he is now in London "working with Portuguese documents more than three hundred years old, relating to the territories which Mr. Rhodes had added to the British Empire." On his return to South Africa, in recognition of his scholastic attainments, he was appointed to a position connected with the University of Pretoria, a position which he held until declining years necessitated his retirement to private life.

A man of broad education, Mr. Theal was made a member of many learned societies, and received the degree of LL. D. from the University of Utrecht in appreciation of his research work in the interests of the Dutch colonists in South Africa.

He was the author of many published works on South African history, which have received world-wide recognition. His *History of South Africa*, published 1908-1910, has been placed in the "Story of the Nations" series, and his various histories are in constant use at Oxford University. In the British Houses of Parliament for many years past in all discussions relating to the many vexed questions of colonist and tribal "rights" in South Africa, statements made "according to Theal" have been considered of paramount importance.

Dr. Theal spent the last years of his life in the beautiful village of Winberg, situated at the base of Table Mountain, which rises like a massive wall at the back of Cape Town. Here amongst its luxuriant vegetation, its gardens of flowers, shrubs and vinelands, he rested from his abundant labours—surely a well merited rest after a long life of prodigious toil.

During the period of his residence in South Africa, he had witnessed many changes in the political aspects of the country. Many momentous questions had been settled, many economic problems solved, and Dr. Theal lived to see the consummation of

his hopes—the federation of the different provinces or states of South Africa into the Union of South Africa in the year 1910. He passed away in the year 1919. His devoted wife and loyal help-mate had died before him, as had also his only son, who had died subsequent to his release from a Boer prison where he had been confined during the Boer War of 1900. A short time prior to his death, Dr. Theal's services on behalf of his adopted country, along the line of historical research, were recognized in a formal resolution by the Senate of the University of South Africa. The resolution referred to the importance and value of the research which he had carried on, and urged the establishment of a South African School of History which must necessarily regard Dr. Theal as its founder. The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, edition XIII, in its reference to the literature of South Africa, makes the statement that "among the later workers in historical research the name of George McCall Theal stands out conspicuously for the untiring industry which he gave to the original records upon which the works of future historians must be based." Although a devoted patriot of his adopted country he never lost his love for, or interest in, the land of his birth, and on his last visit to Canada made a personal presentation of some of his writings to the Public Library of his native city, St. John.

Ever fearless in the espousal of a righteous cause, Dr. Theal used his pen in the interest of fair play to both tribesman and colonist, winning the esteem and respect of all nationalities, parties, and creeds. Worthy son of Canada, and devoted patriot of his adopted country, Dr. Theal by his life of service on behalf of South Africa should ever prove a bond of union between that country and Canada, widely separated yet integral parts of Britain's "far-flung Empire."

NOTE.

The following is a list of Dr. Theal's publications:

- 1907-10.—*History and Ethnography of Africa, south of the Zambesi, from 1505 to 1795*; three volumes.
- 1908-10.—*History of South Africa since 1795*; five volumes.
- 1897-1905.—*Records of Cape Colony from 1793 to 1827*; 36 volumes.
- 1898-1903.—*Records of South Eastern Africa from 1895 to 1903*; nine volumes.
- 1877.—*Compendium of History and Geography of South Africa*.
- 1882.—*Kaffir Folk Lore*.
- 1883.—*Basutoland Records, copies of official documents of various kinds, accounts of travels, etc.*
- 1894.—*The Story of the Nations: South Africa*.
- 1896.—*The Portuguese in South Africa, with a description of the native races between Zambesi and the Cape of Good Hope during the 16th century*.
- 1900.—*A Little History of South Africa, from original researches in the Archives of Great Britain, the Netherlands and Cape Colony*.
- The History and Ethnology of South Africa*; three volumes, of which there were three editions.