

FORGOTTEN FOUNDER--GEORGE HOUSTOUN REID

LONDON, 11 September 2018

It is no exaggeration to suggest that, in Australia today, George Houstoun Reid is virtually unknown. If the occasional, politically engaged citizen recognises the name as that of our fourth Prime Minister, then he or she usually knows little else about him. The fault is ours, for Reid lived a full and fascinating life, in public and, as we will discover, in his private life as well. We should know far more about his life and significant legacy.

Reid was an early Prime Minister. He was also the Mother Colony of NSW's most important colonial Premier, Australia's first High Commissioner to London, and the first and only Australian to sit in both the House of Representatives and the British House of Commons. Yet the remarkable sum of Reid's achievements, the catalogue of his curious habits and idiosyncrasies, and his countless acts of decency and kindness reach well beyond the list of his positions in public office.

Reid lived in turbulent times but he was always a figure, a larger-than-life figure, determined to meet conscientiously and purposefully the challenges that arose for him and his era. If the buoyant later decades of the nineteenth century shaped and educated Reid culturally, politically and morally, then the twentieth century graduated him into a world at once more volatile and, too soon, embroiled in catastrophic world war. Reid refused to recoil in the face of mounting pressures. This was his signature response always, calm in the face of adversity, something he learned from his Presbyterian minister father, whom he admired and loved. Throughout their different lives, father and son acted upon the ideal of public service – the duty of service for others.

A number of Reid's contemporaries, political opponents, did not know what to make of him. The most prominent of his critics was Australia's second Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin, who included a series of scathing observations of Reid in what is still the most entertaining 'insider' account of the Federation era, the posthumously published *The Federal Story*. This set of articles, retrieved by the family after his death and published for the first time in 1944, includes an intriguing 'Author's Note' by Deakin where he writes that although 'strictly truthful and fair', the pieces 'are very personal and unflinching in their candour'.

Those familiar with *The Federal Story* would know that Deakin's portraits of friend and foe are certainly 'personal and unflinching', but they are often neither 'truthful' nor 'fair'. For

the entrenched Victorian protectionist Deakin – dapper, trim, reserved, punctilious – the Free Trading New South Welshman George Reid – fat, occasionally dishevelled, extroverted, defiant – Reid represented everything that offended Deakin's delicate sensitivities. Of all the individual character descriptions in *The Federal Story*, none comes close to the seering assessment of Reid. So, in chapter nine, we read:

Every caricature has been unable to travesty [Reid's] extraordinary appearance, his immense, unwieldy, jelly-like stomach, always threatening to break his waist band, his little legs apparently bowed under its weight to the verge of their endurance, his thick neck rising behind his ears rounding to his many-folded chin ... He walked with a staggering role like that of a sailor. . . he denied himself nothing that he fancied, sucking ice or sweetmeats between meals and then eating and drinking according to his fancy. . . He had no taste for literature, for art ... or the study of the past. Newspapers satisfied his tastes; he was fond of society and social amusements, but even at the theatre his preferences were those of the crowd.

It was Reid's misfortune that, in the post-Second World War period, a new generation of Australian historians had their ideas about Federation moulded, consciously or unconsciously, by the Victorian Deakin's version of the 'federal story', along with the accounts of a few other 'Federation-at-any-cost' politicians who aligned themselves with Deakin and Australia's first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton. According to these Federation boosters, the so-called Federation 'Ultras' who resented any equivocation about Federation--much less any opposition to it--George Reid was enemy No. 1.

For Sir Henry Parkes in his last years, shocked by Reid's sudden dominance of the contested ground of New South Wales politics in the early 1890s, Reid was a 'babbling lunatic', the 'arch plotter against Federation'; for Edmund Barton, a good friend of Reid's when they were growing up (fishing mates they were), it was Reid who used 'slow poison' on Federation's cause; and for the articulate if vituperative Bernhard Ringrose Wise, a former supporter of Free-Trader Reid, turned bitter opponent, Reid's 'hostility' to Federation represented the main obstacle to its attainment.

None of these opinions stands up to close scrutiny. However, what becomes obvious almost immediately after the 1st of January 1901, the nation's beginning, was that Reid's principled, democratic stance in the 1890s, the backbone of his criticisms of the first Federation Bill--the assorted undemocratic clauses of the flawed 1891 Bill--Reid's stance ran the risk of being recast as carping, stubbornly oppositionist amidst the public's accelerating enthusiasm for the new Commonwealth. Too often history is written by the winners. The 'Ultras' grabbed the Federation narrative and held it tightly for decades.

George Reid was never an 'Ultra'. When both Barton and Deakin, unencumbered by high office or much responsibility during the 1890s, were stumping the country delivering pro-Federation speeches with a minimum of detail, Reid was either asking the difficult Federation questions that had to be answered, or he was leading his prickly colony of NSW, or both.

He was out in the open with a target on his back.

John Norton, the scandal-mongering editor of the infamous *Truth* newspaper, dedicated a 77-page publication in 1895 to Reid's unreliability as a colonial politician, labelling him 'Reid the Wriggler'. Some of the mud stuck. More damage occurred when Reid delivered one of the era's most significant speeches in 1898 at the Sydney Town Hall. For the audience, packed to the rafters because the historic first referendum vote on Australian Federation was only a couple of months away, Reid painstakingly considered Federation's merits and its demerits. A number of pro-Federation newspapers were alarmed at such guileless objectivity, affixing him with the name, 'Yes-No' Reid. Political opponents made regular use of this mischievous label for the rest of his life.

Yet the reasons for Reid's fade from community view after his death – which occurred in London on 12 September 1918, 100 years ago tomorrow – these reasons have more to do with what has taken place since his death than anything that occurred while he was living. Scholarship has not been overtly kind to Reid, the fault for this cutting both ways. He certainly didn't help historians wanting to explore the details of his legacy when, as his only authoritative biographer, Winston McMinn, points out in his 1989 biography, Reid 'left no great mass of papers through which a biographer might sift not only for the facts of his public life but also for something of his personality, private attitudes, faiths and prejudices, loves and friendship'. Reid kept no diary.

Compare this to his erstwhile opponent, Alfred Deakin, with his National Library of Australia shelf of notebooks, crammed full of diary entries, and thousands upon thousands of pages devoted to subjects ranging from humankind's great spiritual leaders, to miscellaneous seances he attended, to memorable quotes and aphorisms. Not to mention numerous plays and a multitude of poems. Deakin obsessively wrote, collected and preserved.

No such luck with Reid. He didn't keep many letters at all, and he adhered to what McMinn refers to as a 'rigid separation . . . between his public and private life, his insistence that the letter should be very private indeed . . .'

Confronted by these obstacles, I'm sure I'm not the first researcher to light upon Reid's autobiography with a sense of relief. *My Reminiscences* he called it--a 400 page door-stopper published in London by Cassell in 1917, the year before he died. Now this had to be a mother lode of assistance, didn't it? A work chock-full of his distinctive personality quirks, humour and wit. Didn't it?

The best answer to these questions was given by A B Piddington, a fellow politician and good friend of Reid, who produced a pithy response shortly after publication of the *Reminiscences*:

[George] Reid deserved a biography but all he got was an autobiography. His life, as he lived it, was full of movement, adventure and surprise; his life as he wrote it, has only the last [of these] – the surprise being that a mind so lively could write a book so dull.

The profound disappointment of the autobiography for the interested researcher, compounded by his eventual biographer McMinn's decision in his 330-page work to allocate a mere 12 pages to the first half of Reid's life, makes the task of doing justice to Reid and his times more challenging – and more necessary – than it might otherwise have been.

In my lecture this evening, I intend to add to Reid's rehabilitation for a 21st century audience, spending at least as much time on his formative years, the character-building years--his early to middle-adult years--as on the later overtly political years. It's important to get to know the young and proud colonial before he got into politics.

In doing that, I'll explore four fundamental questions: firstly, if the self-absorbed William Morris Hughes, Australia's controversial seventh Prime Minister and a man not given to excessive praise for anyone, if he could describe Reid in the 1890s as 'the most democratic Premier [New South Wales] ever had', what prompted this description—and from such an unexpected source? The answer can be found in Reid's upbringing and his early years, when he was regularly exposed to a coterie of the NSW colony's most progressive thinkers, movers, and shakers. He wanted to take his place among them, and he did.

Secondly, why was the extroverted politician Reid, described by one political contemporary as 'the best platform speaker in the [British] Empire', such an uncompromising protector of

his private life and that of his family? I believe the answer lies in a series of domestic matters that impacted on Reid and Flora, his lifelong wife and partner, early in their relationship. This vital slice of Reid's private life exerted its most dramatic impact during the 1890s, in political terms the most significant decade of Reid's entire life. Biographer McMinn appears to be entirely unaware of this personal turmoil.

Thirdly, in light of the bitter criticisms directed at Reid by a few high-profile Federation 'Ultras', how could outstanding Federation historian L F 'Fin' Crisp describe him as 'one of the greatest (and unquestionably, one of the shrewdest)' of all the illustrious 'Federation Founding Fathers'? For Winston McMinn, not surprisingly, Reid was the most influential Founding Father.

Fourth and finally, why have Reid's manifold achievements in London during the last ten years of his life, especially the exhausting Great War years, received such scant attention from historians, even those concerned with the substance of his legacy? Why are these years marginalised as anti-climax?

First, then, the origins of Reid's unshakable belief in democracy.

Australia's first two Prime Ministers, Edmund Barton and Alfred Deakin, were born in Australia, 'native-born' in the common phrase of the era. Our third Prime Minister, John Christian 'Chris' Watson, in the top job for a slim four months, was born on a boat in Valparaíso harbour, on the west coast of South America.

George Reid, #4 and the oldest of the first cluster of Prime Ministers, was born on 25 February 1845 in Johnstone, on the outskirts of Glasgow, Scotland, the fifth son of Renfrewshire Presbyterian Minister, John Reid and Jean Crybbace, herself the daughter of a Presbyterian Minister. The Reids named their fifth-born 'George Houstoun' after his godfather, one of Renfrewshire county's members of parliament.

The Reids were never threatened by a stint in the poorhouse, but it does appear that the unswerving commitment of both of young George's parents to improving the lot of society's downtrodden, and father's poor financial management of the home, were enough to make life on occasion difficult for a large family. Reid in later life had a recurrent image of 'quite enough porridge' but not quite enough treacle'. This of course was just another anecdote he enjoyed telling. We have ample evidence of a doting mother and a 'wonderfully kind' father.

The tightness of the family unit would have made the major changes ahead a little easier for all to manage – specifically, the parents' momentous decision in 1852 to immigrate to Melbourne when George was seven, and then a move to Sydney in 1858, when he was thirteen. While it is certain that Reid's father was not recklessly heading to the Australian colonies, like so many of his generation, to try his luck on the rich Victorian goldfields, the exact reasons for the decision are not clear. The main one seems to have been the appeal of being a part of a burgeoning community performing Christian good works in a wholly different, sunnier, healthier climate.

The best measure of young George's only six years of schooling, all of them in Melbourne at what became Scotch College, is that he looked back on them as a period of little cultural and intellectual stimulation. In a 1904 article he wrote for *Life* magazine, Reid recalled that as '*a school-boy, I was so morbidly sensitive and bashful that when I had to go up before the school, in the presence of my school-fellows, it cost me the keenest suffering*'.

It is worth noting that neither George Reid, at Scotch College in the later 1850s, nor second Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin, unhappily attending Melbourne Grammar School in the early 1860s, had any affinity whatsoever for the 'muscular' Christianity practised at English public and Australian private schools. Deakin was never interested in playing up, playing up and playing the game. He was devoted to books – the adventures of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver* and the exotic world of the Arabian Nights.

Reid too rejected the *Tom Brown's Schooldays* conditioning of Scotch, preferring to feed his appetite for alternative learning elsewhere. Once in Sydney, and barely into his teens, he left school and got a job as a junior clerk at a merchant's counting house. It might sound a little Dickensian, but it wasn't. Reid had begun life's journey, drawing his substantive education from two disparate yet fertile sources. His place of birth for one, what his granddaughter Anne Fairbairn has referred to as his 'intense pride in his Scottish background'. Even though very young when he left Scotland, the land of thistle and heather would continue forever to maintain a treasured place in Reid's imagination, whether through the satisfaction he derived from being linked to Puritan ancestors on his father's side, his doubtful links to Robbie Burns on his mother's side, or his entrenched belief in the

superiority of the Scottish education system. From the time Reid entered politics in 1880, he acted on the belief that every child had a right to a sound education.

The second, and more influential source of Reid's 'real' education was the progressive community in which he grew up, and the era he was fortunate enough to be a part of – rowdy, energetic Sydney in the 1860s and 1870s.

In the workplace, Reid's advancement was rapid. He was very good with figures and their macro-application. Modest counting-house beginnings led to appointment, aged 19, in the Colonial Treasury; and finally promotion to Secretary, in the Attorney-General's Department, in 1878, aged just 33.

Such impressive career mobility was driven by Reid's own set of personal ambitions – initially fuelled in the home, around the family table--and observing his father at work in his church. My father, Reid later wrote, was 'a very eloquent man' whose sermons and conversation provided 'intellectual nourishment' that was 'incalculable'. The Rev. John Reid died when George was 22, but not before he had become his son's role model for life, his fixed moral compass.

Despite attempts later in life to portray himself as excessively wayward when young, given to life's pleasures, Reid eagerly embraced the various cultural opportunities available to him: he joined the Sydney Literary Association as its youngest member by far; he was active in the Presbyterian Men's Union, as secretary for a time; and about 1860, in his mid-teens, he joined and became a leading member of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, Sydney's 'leading institution of self-education'. Reid thrived in the boisterous atmosphere of a range of clubs he later described as 'a splendid sort of mental gymnasium'. These clubs, together with his father's ministry – the progressive Interdenominational Mariners' Church in Lower George Street – brought young George into contact with some of Sydney's sharpest political minds.

Reid was favoured by personal circumstances. At his father's church, he was routinely mixing with the noble, older reformers prominent in the 1830s, '40s and '50s – remarkable individuals including outspoken republican, the Rev John Dunmore Lang; Dr William Bland, benefactor of liberal causes, scholar and man of science; and Richard Sadlier, activist, politician, philanthropist and advocate for Aboriginal rights, a hundred years ahead of his time. Men such as these helped to re-configure NSW, from a penal settlement, an infamous 'sink of wickedness', into a thriving colony with a bright future. They also helped to shape

George Reid's evolving political beliefs and assumptions. Principles of democracy and fairness were inculcated. The compassion of his parents rubbed off.

At the many political meetings Reid attended, he received what he recalled as his 'first impressions of the unbridled eloquence of which political reformers are capable, and the gloomy forebodings which haunt the imaginations of some of their Conservative opponents'. Reform as a prerequisite for social progress solidified into a core Reid belief, as he (and his colony) moved into the watershed 1870s.

The significance of the 1870s as a transformative decade in Australian colonial society cannot be overstated. Transportation of convicts to NSW had effectively stopped in 1840, but the last convicts sent to Australian shores were landed as late as 1868. The grim past still weighed heavily on the antipodean imagination. As all colonies basked in the glow of the 'long boom' produced by gold, wool and improving trade, convictism remained stuck in the community's throat. Social and cultural commentators began to consider the impact of the dark past on the present and future. Would the first free-born Australian generations be affected by the criminal past? Would the sins of the fathers and mothers be visited on their sons and daughters, and the generations thereafter? Questions of Australian identity were vigorously debated.

As new nation-states popped up all over the world, speculation in Australia about an Australian 'national type' took hold. English novelist and travel writer, Anthony Trollope, offered one opinion when, in his much-discussed work *Australia and New Zealand* (1873), he identified considerable 'self-adulation' amongst young Australians. He accused them of being 'blowers'. On the other hand, and about the same time, acclaimed Australian novelist Marcus Clarke wrote that 'in a new country . . . there are opportunities for fresh and vigorous delineation of human character'.

The Australian community began to take positions on both sides of this debate, but one theme kept recurring in discussion: what James Hogan identified in his contribution to the *Victorian Review* in November 1880 as the Australian's 'inordinate love of field sports'. Sport in the 1870s changed the game. At the beginning of the decade, a pall of hesitation and humility typified much colonial behaviour. However, a mere ten years later a radical change had occurred. For much of the nineteenth century, heroic, triumphalist Empire literature had trumpeted the importance of sport, especially the gentleman's game of cricket, in providing a young Britisher with a suitably well-rounded education – sport's capacity to

produce warriors, leaders of men. After all, wasn't it the Iron Duke himself who said that 'the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton'?

Australian colonists pre-1870 were perfectly content with the apparent rightness of these sentiments. But what happens when those relegated to the distant geographical periphery, begin to produce sporting champions? Australian sculler 'Ned' Trickett went to Headingly in 1876 and returned home with the world rowing title, greeted in Sydney harbour by a crowd of some 25,000 people.

The cricketers made an even more compelling statement.

Their results dismantled the stability of Empire assumptions. In 1877 an Australian XI beat a high quality English XI in Australia in a match regarded as the first-ever Test. Then, in the European summer of 1878, an Australian XI beat a star-studded MCC XI, according to Wisden 'one of the strongest MCC XIs ever put out by the famous club', including the legendary W.G. Grace himself, at the hallowed Lords ground. Australian fast bowlers, Fred 'the Demon' Spofforth and former Bendigo gold miner, Harry Boyle, terrorised their opponents. W G Grace was the 'Demon's' bunny!

The colonial sport journalists quivered with excitement, and Australia's future fourth Prime Minister with them. The status quo had been flipped on its head. Reid himself wasn't particularly flash at sport, including cricket, but he loved the game, and he knew how important it was for his countrymen – the symbolic role it could play in what he termed 'the advance of Australia'.

Aged 21, in 1866, Reid was appointed as a delegate to the fledgling NSW Cricket Association, and in 1875 he was made its treasurer. He wanted to be an agent for change, and during the 1870s he took steps to realise the goal.

Reid started a law degree, and was admitted to the Bar in 1879, developing into a brilliant cross-examiner, ultimately the colony's most respected. He began to move in influential circles, in particular as a regular attendee at prominent businessman Thomas Sutcliffe Mort's political salons held at his plush Darling Point residence, 'Greenoaks'. Reid would pay tribute to these occasions, the next stage in his apprenticeship, as his 'first successful steps in politics'.

Rubbing shoulders with men of power and influence resulted in a few curious changes in Reid at this time. He was getting older, a little more conscious of his public posture. So he began using notepaper with a GHR monogram, he joined a masonic lodge to get on (maintaining the connection for the rest of his life), he started using a monocle to the delight, later on, of Australia's army of cartoonists, and he settled on his own Latin motto – in English, [be] 'prepared for any eventuality'. Reid was always partial to the odd affectation to promote himself as a well-dressed man getting about progressive Sydney town.

But to be fair, he was at the same time planning carefully for a career that could advance his colony--advance Australia.

This proactivity is also evident in an eclectic assortment of writings he produced in the 1870s. The two most important of these were his *Five Free Trade Essays*, published in 1875, and *New South Wales – the Mother Colony of the Australias*, published in 1878, both volumes of timely propaganda, and essential items in the Reid CV. Both were statements of political and cultural intent.

It is impossible to do either book justice here, but they created quite a stir, across Australia and internationally, for different reasons. The *Free Trade* volume, a sound assessment of the shortcomings of tariff protection in Great Britain, the USA and Australia, was produced to challenge the majority support for protection of industry in the neighbouring, gold-rich colony of Victoria. The last paragraph encapsulates the spirit of his free trade vision:

We fervently trust that so mischievous a barrier to the union of the Australian Colonies as Protection will soon be broken down; and that the genius of commercial liberty will speedily emerge ... diffusing her equal blessings over our scattered populations, [binding them] as closely in the relations of free trade and goodwill as they already are bound by the ties of kindred blood, and the promise of a grand future.

Five Free Trade Essays secured for Reid honorary membership of England's Cobden Club and he did receive a personal letter from William Gladstone, dated 13 July 1875, congratulating him on a worthy contribution to the global debate and inviting the Australian to make any use of the letter as may serve his, and free trade's, best interests.

Reid was destined to become the leader of the free trade politicians in the NSW Legislative Assembly (and after that in the Commonwealth Parliament). He firmly believed that, when properly implemented, free trade produced a more equal society. Once in politics, it was the policy for which he would fight for 25 years.

Reid's other major publication of the '70s decade, an engaging account of his home colony, was published in Sydney, London and New York. It gave him the opportunity to promote to a mass audience all of the subjects of importance to him, and highlight those individuals who stood out, in the popular phrase of the time, as Australia's 'Coming Men'.

If the number of glowing international reviews is a guide, then Reid succeeded spectacularly. He introduced a global audience to what he regarded as his colony's, and indeed 'young' Australia's, unmatched climate, higher form of democracy, capable citizenry and (as he put it) 'remarkable' political progress. Reid had become more 'native-born' than the 'native-born':

There is no sky clearer by day than the Australian [he wrote]. Fine specimens of mankind are to be met in every district. The endurance, pluck, and activity of Australian bushmen are proverbial.

It is important, however, that we measure such effusive sentiments against the volume's concluding sentence, where Reid states that if NSW can only 'emulate the virtue of the British character, [it] may soon become the Queen of the South'. Like so many colonists, Reid had dual loyalties, to colony and to Empire. They were about to come into very public conflict.

The catalyst? A cricket match, but not just any cricket match – rather, the most controversial game to take place in the Australian colonies in the entire nineteenth century. It caused George Reid's segregated worlds to collide: brash loyalty to his Australian home and attachment to his British background. What happened, precisely, to have Sydney and Melbourne in uproar, London disgusted, and not one but two future Australian Prime Ministers closely involved in what became known as the 'Sydney Riot'?

Let me summarise: the dashing performance of Australian cricketers in 1877 and 1878 was the trigger for a tour of the colonies in the first months of 1879 by an English XI of amateurs (well, amateurs plus two professionals to do all the bowling) – and this English side was led by the pucker and opinionated 28-year old George Robert Canning Harris, the fourth Lord Harris, Eton and Oxford-educated. According to historian Geoffrey Bolton, Harris 'epitomised the tranquil consciousness of effortless superiority which distinguished the gentleman amateur'. The English side had gone sufficiently poorly on the first leg of their tour, in Victoria, that when they came to Sydney to play an outstanding NSW team at the Moore Park ground – later the SCG – in early February 1879, they were clear underdogs. The fiercely partisan NSW spectators, who loved a wager, plunged heavily on the home team.

The English side went rather better than expected, and when star NSW and Australian batsman Billy Murdoch was adjudged 'run out' by the Victorian umpire, George Coulthard, hand-picked by Lord Harris, three separate pitch invasions occurred. One of Harris' team was heard to remark that such behaviour was all you could expect from the 'sons of convicts'. The NSW Cricket Association President, Sir George Innes, issued an apology to Lord Harris for the crowd behaviour, 'a most humble apology' we are told, which was 'graciously' accepted.

But one may smile and smile and be a villain.

The smiling Lord Harris later provided an extended account of the match for the London *Daily Telegraph*, excerpts of which ended up in all the Fleet Street papers. He wrote home that his cricketers had been subjected to 'horror' and 'insult' by a 'larrikin' crowd that became a 'howling mob'.

On the Saturday of the pitch invasions, the composed presence of the umpire at the other end, Edmund Barton, destined to become Australia's first Prime Minister, helped to calm combustible tempers. Within months, Barton had finessed the publicity he received into a political career.

George Reid had a completely different role. In a speech in Melbourne, Lord Harris singled out a writer to the colonial newspapers who had accused him of using 'his elbows . . . to disperse the [Sydney] crowd' and producing an umpire for the match who was incompetent. Harris named the writer: 'Reid' of Sydney.

What ensued was a public altercation between the English Lord and the Sydney civil servant George Reid that lit up the local dailies. The Australian sent his account of the Sydney game back to England. He said he did not believe that Lord Harris' version was 'wilful representation', but when the NSW Cricket Association passed a resolution deploring Lord Harris' behaviour, Reid seconded it with a 'rousing knockabout speech'. Amidst great hilarity, he dismissed the Englishman as a spoilt child, declaring that he was sick of being 'at the mercy of [such] superficial and supercilious tourists ... '.

Less than 18 months later, George Reid was elected to the NSW Legislative Assembly, the new member for the blue ribbon seat of East Sydney. He now had his own 'rousing' public profile and he set about using it.

While Reid was prepared for the bear pit of the NSW Legislative Assembly, he made it clear that he entered politics with an elevated belief in the politician's opportunity to solve nothing less than the great problems of life. On the day that Ned Kelly was hung in Melbourne, Reid took out columns of space in the *Sydney Morning Herald* to outline what he stood for: defence of free trade policy, which he called 'the glory of New South Wales'; the need for a robust and fair public school system, provided within an 'atmosphere of religious toleration'; a free public library in Sydney with 'halls for evening lectures for young men in the employed classes of the community'; and an equitable system for the disposal of Crown lands. The influence of his father's generation of reformers lay behind all these foundation goals.

As his law practice continued to gather pace, Reid made land and education his principal issues in the Assembly. So when Alexander Stuart became the latest Premier on the chaotic merry-go-round of NSW politics, he was so impressed by Reid's mature performance, and impeccable economic credentials, that he offered him the position of Treasurer in his new government.

With an independent resolve characteristic of Reid, young and old, he rejected the plum job, and instead requested Education. Decidedly unsexy Public Instruction. Reid wanted action and, over the next year in the portfolio he provided it in several egalitarian reforms: he refreshed and enlarged the colony's primary school system; established his colony's first high schools; and introduced a technical education system so good that the other colonies copied it almost immediately.

Still single and in his mid-40s, Reid had picked up a reputation as something of a ladies' man, a raconteur. One contemporary politician, Labor's William Holman, noted Reid's weakness for 'the pleasures of the club, the theatre, [and] the ballroom', but this was a weakness with which Reid himself was entirely comfortable. Newspaper and magazine commentary embellished the image. It won him votes, as did the humour he derived in his speeches from his ever-expanding body shape. He made jokes about his bulk, and the Sydney public loved him for it. He was one of them, and they came to his public meetings in droves.

When a heckler in Newcastle pointed to Reid's prodigious belly, and asked what he intended to call the baby, Reid shot back: 'If it's what I think it is, all piss and wind, I'll call it after you young feller'. Travelling by train or bus, he regularly offer his seat to not one but two ladies. When he saw an advertisement in England for Reid's Stout, he was heard to remark: 'Of course he is, but they need not proclaim the fact'. Reid is also given credit for this one:

when a woman called out at a political meeting, 'If I was your wife, I'd poison you', Reid replied: 'Madam, if you were my wife, I'd poison myself'.

At the peak of his powers, Reid came to dominate NSW politics in the 1890s, energised by the stringencies of the times. His decade of responsible Legislative Assembly behaviour had made him few enemies; he had become NSW's most marketable politician; he had refused to involve himself in divisive sectarian debate; he had almost singlehandedly advanced schools and schooling in NSW; and he had made a singular contribution already to his colony's political, cultural and sporting fabric.

The job as Premier of Australia's 'Mother Colony' beckoned.

The political manoeuvring in NSW in the early 1890s was unrelenting, centred mainly on free trade versus protection and the settling of old scores. Ill-focussed Federation debate made things harder still. Reid had nothing to do with the Australian Federation Conference in Melbourne in 1890. It didn't concern him at all, but the next Federation gathering, the National Australasian Convention in Sydney in 1891, did, because this time delegates were tasked with drafting a bill to constitute the Commonwealth of Australia. Reid was right in asserting that, in his colony of NSW at that time, there was little interest in Federation--and he was also correct in stating that NSW's free-trade principles could be compromised. As he memorably expressed it, NSW joining this first version of Federation would be akin to a reformed alcoholic setting up house with five drunkards.

Reid felt the framers of the first draft constitution were 'almost childish' in their failure to consider 'the manifold difficulties which surround the subject'. The bill was 'undemocratic', he said, and the alert voters of NSW knew it!

During a sequence of busy months in 1891-2, there was a development in Reid's private life that subsumed all else for the then 46-year-old--an affair truly of the heart. Reid's biographer spends less than a page on Reid's sudden and mysterious marriage on 17 November 1891 to Flora Ann Brumby, the vivacious 23-year-old daughter of a Cressy, Tasmania, farming couple. He puzzles as to why the marriage was not announced until August of the following year. Flora, a forebear of former Victorian Premier John Brumby, was half Reid's age and about a quarter his size.

It is possible that the gossip of the time was correct--that Reid, massive, charming George, had secured Flora's affections at the expense of rival politician Bernhard Ringrose Wise. Regardless, what is certain is that some six and a half months after the marriage took place in late 1891, Flora gave birth to a daughter, Flora Marion 'Thelma' Reid. The marriage vows were made in secrecy in the Presbyterian Manse in Wangaratta, well away from the prying eyes of Sydney and Melbourne. Daughter Thelma would be publicly introduced into the community sometime in 1897 or 1898, with sleight-of-hand, some years after a first brother's birth, and a couple of years before another brother's arrival. The miracle is that John Norton's scurrilous *Truth* newspaper never got wind of the story, nor any of the magazines bent on exploiting scandal.

So the scene was set for the remainder of the 1890s: as the cleanskin leader of the free traders in NSW, Reid sought government for his rejuvenated Party; as the unflinching opponent of the Federationists-at-any-cost on the national stage, he demanded a more democratic, properly researched Constitution for an Australian federation, one which did justice to the status of NSW's position among the colonies, as he saw it. Most of Reid's lasting political achievements occur in the pressure-packed 1890s. Indeed, the majority occur in his five years as NSW Premier, from his election with a working majority in July 1894 to his resignation in September 1899.

In his first parliamentary session as leader, Reid moved immediately to introduce a number of bills which took their principles from his long-held liberal, reformist sentiments: amendment of the land laws; a fiscal policy overhaul; an inquiry into the public service; a Coal Miners Regulation Bill; amendments to the Conciliation and Arbitration Act to introduce compulsory provisions; establishment of a department of industry and labour; and legislation to improve the lot of shop and factory workers. By any measure, it was an extraordinarily ambitious program.

The Reid government's policy initiatives included three planks from the emergent Labor Party's fighting platform and four from its general platform. In volume five of his multi-volume history, Manning Clark treats Reid superficially, but he is right in stating that Reid and the Labor Party were 'strange bedfellows'. Reid's problem in government was not the Labor Party; it was the arrogant, reactionary NSW Upper House, the Legislative Council. The open combat between fiercely determined Premier and intractable Council is too large a narrative to cover here, but the Council rejected Reid visionary bills, sending them back to the Legislative Assembly shredded. Reid called for another election the following year, 1895, and he won convincingly. The Legislative Council had its wings clipped; Sir Henry Parkes took on Reid in the Premier's own seat and lost badly, his career at a humiliating end; and Reid finally had the freedom to embark on his 'Rampaging Electoral Program' with

Labor Party support. He set an impressive example in a parliament that included no less than four future Prime Ministers: Reid, Cook, Watson and Hughes.

In this elevated company, it was Reid who shone brightest. As one contemporary observed, he was 'like the moon among the smaller constellations'. Even staunch labour newspaper, the *Worker*, on 13 July 1895 recognised genuine leadership: 'For the first time, we have a Premier who has shown himself favourable to progressive legislation, and who has given evidence of his bona fides by cutting himself adrift from the old high and dry parties . . .'

This was the pinnacle of George Reid's political career and, as historian M.H. Ellis points out, the raft of measures he went on to introduce 'formed the basis of the foundations of modern political policy and the [Australian] welfare state'. In some later accounts, Alfred Deakin's second Commonwealth Government of 1905-8 gets the credit for this, most recently from journalist Paul Kelly in his book *The End of Certainty* (1993). Kelly calls Deakin's achievements 'the Australian Settlement' but this ground was first tilled by Deakin's avowed political opponent in NSW, his bow-legged, sweet-sucking antagonist, a full decade earlier.

Reid's remaining years as Premier were less productive, as the Labor Party became increasingly aware of its electoral appeal as a stand-alone Party, and the Legislative Council continued to obstruct the will of the people whenever it thought it could get away with it. Ironically, in the very year of Reid's most significant electoral and legislative triumphs, he started to feel the political ground shifting under him. Alerting to greater community interest in the prospect of nationhood as the new century neared, he turned his attention to the faltering cause of Federation. His interventions were crucial, and for these he has never received his scholarly due.

First, he gave Federation a fresh start when he invited the other colonial Premiers to Hobart during a roasting Australian summer to obtain agreement on the best way forward. Expectation about Federation was increasing, ramped up in the Christmas/New Year months by a cricket series taking place between a combined colonial team, playing under an Australian banner, and a visiting England team, in front of massive crowds, generating unparalleled press interest. Reid readily pursued his agenda, the other Premiers well-aware that, without NSW, there would be no Federation. Reid secured unanimous agreement for an electoral convention based on the model of the Victorian John Quick, after which the resulting draft constitution would be put to referendum. Federation would at last be process-driven. This was a circuit-breaker.

Secondly, in March/April 1897, Reid utterly dominated the proceedings of the first of three meetings of the National Australasian Convention, in Adelaide. Even Alfred Deakin had to acknowledge that Reid was:

... the author of the Convention, Premier of the greatest colony, the best platform speaker ... [and] monarch of all he surveyed . . .

Two months later, Reid departed Australian shores for England to attend, as NSW Premier, Queen Victoria's Jubilee. It was a seminal moment in his life. In Britain for the first time since he was seven, he was overwhelmed by the rock star attention he received. Secretary of State of the Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, included him in his inner circle; he was made a Privy Councillor; he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Oxford University; and he visited the venerable Gladstone at Hawarden Castle. In addition, he was deeply moved, humbled, when the citizens of Johnstone, his birthplace in Scotland, accorded him 'triumphal progress' through streets he probably remembered.

The gushing attention changed Reid for a time, and not for the better. For reasons we can only speculate upon, his hitherto impeccable political and cultural radar faltered. Over the next ten years, he made the worst strategic decisions of his career.

The 'Yes-No' speech in 1898 was a disaster. NSW Labor members sensed vulnerability and pursued a better deal for their Party with William Lyne, ironically the new Protectionist, anti-Federalist Leader of the Opposition. Lyne gave Labor concessions that Reid was not prepared to countenance; Lyne was duly elected Premier; and Reid moved to the Opposition benches. Thus, he was not Premier in NSW in 1901; he would not be offered the Prime Ministership in the inaugural Commonwealth Parliament. That honour went to Edmund Barton.

In the years that followed, with Reid Opposition leader in the Commonwealth parliament, his pursuit of the top job only got harder. Travelling from Sydney to Melbourne for sittings was both time-consuming and expensive, a tyranny of distance, and he had to make sure that his wife and three children were well-cared for in Sydney. This meant juggling parliamentary and legal practice responsibilities. Both suffered, and he was subjected to newspaper criticism for his Melbourne absences.

Yet Reid has to shoulder his share of the blame for a surprising lack of adaptability in an under-performing, eight-year federal parliamentary career. When Alfred Deakin moved craftily to occupy the ideological middle ground of Australian politics, in a mutually

beneficial deal with the Labor Party, Reid was for the first time left floundering. His race and religious views shifted to the right, and the Imperial connection became more important to him than it had ever been.

In this unflattering context, George Reid became Australia's fourth national leader for a short period in 1904-5, a Prime Ministership tainted from the start. He got the job at the whim of a scheming Alfred Deakin--and only by ousting the world's first national Labor Government under Chris Watson. Then he in turn was replaced by Deakin ten months later. Reid tried to avoid any blame for his culpable role in the short life of the Watson government, but the *Tribune* newspaper was not in any mood to indulge him, describing his government as 'a temporary combination of incompatibles'. And worse:

As a reckless, borrowing, spendthrift people, more attached to racecourses and theatres than to considerations of the public good, it is fitting that we should have a clown for a Prime Minister.

To most political observers it did appear that Reid was desperate to be Prime Minister, whatever the circumstances, and at whatever personal cost. Even his biographer concedes that it was 'an exercise in unprincipled opportunism'.

Had it finished there, Reid's public life would have terminated as anti-climax. However, there was one last chapter in the story: his decade spent in England.

In late 1909, a Bill was passed in the Commonwealth Parliament to constitute the office of Australia's High Commissioner in London. No less than eight administrations in Federation's first nine years delayed the creation of the position, but as influential political and social commentator of the day, H.G. Turner, states in his book, *The First Decade of the Australian Commonwealth* published in 1911, there was more to the delay than ongoing political instability:

The national consideration of securing the ablest man, from whatever source, was subordinated to the idea that it was a prize naturally pertaining to political services.

However, Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, at the head of his precarious third government in late 1909, was desperate to avoid controversy. Reid appeared to be the perfect choice for the new job: as popular with the public as ever, politically experienced, financially expert, articulate, personable and, as a result of the Queen's Jubilee trip, known and well-respected by the London establishment.

Reid liked the idea, finally content that, as he wrote to a colleague in 1910, in Australia he had played 'the best sort of 'not-out' innings in the great political game'.

He carried his bat, and his family, off to England.

There is a book to be written on Reid's sunseting sojourn at 'the heart of Empire', but it will have to wait. Suffice to say that it was a gracious parting gesture to public life. To cite only a small selection of his important achievements in England:

** Asked to be politically neutral, Reid carried out his ministerial instructions with due diligence, a tricky appointment resulting in another considerable triumph;

** Reid's financial acumen resulted in significantly more credit for his country in the tight London money market;

** Reid established publicity and immigration departments for the High Commission which led to increased expenditure on advertising, and that in turn produced a net British immigration increase to Australia in 1911-13 of 230,000;

** Despite scurrilous Australian commentary that Reid and his Tasmanian wife would be entirely out of their depth in English society, the opposite was true, the Reids striking up a most congenial relationship with King George V and Queen Alexandra, amongst many others;

** During the Great War, Reid dedicated himself to the interests of what he called 'the splendid array of Australian soldiers' around him, men for whom he had immense admiration. He visited his countrymen in the Somme trenches, proving instantly popular with his morale-boosting speeches, at once patriotic towards country and Empire, and subtly empathetic. He succeeded in taking the minds of his war-weary Anzac audiences off the horror of their situation, and in one of his French battlefield speeches touchingly described his mission: 'Many anxious mothers have implored me to look after their sons'. He and Flora did their best;

** Reid was awarded a high honour for his services in 1916, the Order of the Bath with rare Grand Cross, and in 1917, for her extraordinary work with injured Australian soldiers, Flora Reid was recognised with a GBE in the inaugural round of that honour, with only three other recipients.

If anything, George Reid's popularity in his own country was eclipsed by the breadth of his appeal in England and Scotland. Political, social, scientific, cultural, financial, sporting, Western Front audiences and crowds--it didn't matter to a man who was a born entertainer. For Australia, there were collateral benefits. Reid succeeded in introducing his country to

many Britons, one commenting that Sir George had 'discovered Australia for him, [throwing] a flood of light and information upon what had hitherto been a "terra incognita". Lord Grey took to calling his close friend, simply, 'Australia'. Even before Reid finished as High Commissioner on 21 January 1916, a number of his well-credentialled friends ensured there would be political life after the diplomatic role. He was invited to stand for the House of Commons seat of St George's, Hanover Square, and, describing himself as 'an independent Imperialist', he was elected unopposed.

One building symbolically bookended Reid's London years – this building—its journey from conception to grand opening, 1910 to 1918, a confident expression of Australian cultural intent. At first, Reid had a few sites in mind, one of them near Trafalgar Square, but he settled on a patch of prime, then flower-laden real estate right here in The Strand.

Reid nurtured the High Commission project through most of its construction by prestigious Scottish firm A Marshall Mackenzie and Son, under the watchful artistic eye of an elite judging panel including Bertram MacKenna, John Longstaff, George Lambert, Fred Leist and Arthur Streeton. John Smith Murdoch, who assisted the Mackenzie firm, would a few years later be appointed architect for the Provisional Parliament House in Canberra.

The Commission building's foundation stone ceremony was held on 24 July 1913. While it happened on a day described as 'bathed in quite Australian sunshine', the King's speech was shaped by the darkening clouds of war. He was anxious to secure Australian allegiance in the event of conflict, and he would have been heartened by Reid's words:

Some ties have gone, but the ties that really do unite Britain and the Dominions beyond the seas – mutual betterment, pride of race, grandeur of tradition, glory of achievement, loyalty to the Throne, a resolve to stand shoulder to shoulder when our King calls – all these remain, and they are strengthened by the flight of time.

When George V delivered his speech to formally open the High Commission, on 3 August 1918, George Reid was too ill to attend. He died six weeks later.

To conclude: when Robert Menzies in 1947 wrote the Introduction to John Reynold's fine biography of Edmund Barton, he observed that 'we Australians somewhat lack pride in our predecessors'. The comment is as pertinent today, as it was 70 years ago.

George Reid demands our attention for a career that mattered: his political and cultural leadership; his pathfinder's sense of social mission; his moral example; and perhaps above all else, his entrenched sense of fair play, in politics and in life. For the King he was 'an old friend'; for Queen Alexandra, 'a great and good man'. But it was probably two staunch Labor politicians, two Prime Ministers, opponents, who captured the essence of the man in epitaph. Belligerent Billy Hughes felt that:

Reid was about the best leader in the House ... An effective, remorseless debater, he was never vindictive. He came to NSW politics with clean hands and kept them clean. ...

Andrew Fisher was more cogent still:

Few public men fought as well for the views he held and [yet] remained a genial friend of those who were strenuously opposing them. . . There is no joy [that] sterling manhood feels like a contest with the brave and true.
