

Henty's Hidden Collaborator

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Introduction

When George Alfred Henty (1832-1902) was asked how he wrote his books, he laughingly replied, "I do not write any of my books myself. I get a man to do them for me" (*Chums* 159). That man was John Pettit Griffith (1860-1931) who was Henty's amanuensis from 1881 until Henty's death. As Henty wrote three to four boys' books a year from 1882 onward, each between 80,000 and 130,000 words long, Griffith must have written well over a million words for Henty. Such a long relationship, with such prolific results, suggests there was more going on than transcription.

Henty's writing method itself shows evidence that he must have collaborated with his amanuensis more than he declared. Mark Naidis described Henty's boys' books as "invented episodes full of hairbreadth escapes and rousing fights within a general frame of military history" (51). The historical framework often stands out from the adventurous episodes with marked passages that break from the hero's story to relate historical details. Indeed, Peter Newbolt has shown that Henty thought of the history and adventure story as two separate elements within his books (557). More than that, Henty produced the historical passages in a different way to the story itself. As I will show, it was the amanuenses' role to put the two together.

I first look at how Henty described his writing method. In several interviews for periodicals, Henty gave details of how he went about the task of composing his boys' books, from gathering research materials to telling the story. Aside from admitting that he had an amanuensis to take down the story he was making up, no information is given about him. Fenn gives little more than a name in Henty's biography – although that is more information than Fenn gives of any of Henty's family. Looking at the census records gives us a better idea of who Griffith was and why he would have worked with Henty for 20 years. I also consider the nature of oral storytelling and the transformation words can undergo when written down. Finally, I look at the history/story split in Henty's books and what that reveals about the way Henty and Griffith must have worked together to complete the texts.

Henty's Writing Method

The most detailed account Henty gave about his writing method was in "How Boys' Books are Written: A Talk with Mr G. A. Henty" published in *Great Thoughts from Master Minds*. In it Henty explains that he would first choose a period of history in which to set his tale, then send "to the London Library for ten books specially dealing with that period" (qtd. in Dartt 76). Of these he would choose three or four with "the kind of information" he wanted, and these would remain on a table near the sofa on which he sat or lay while composing (76). Then he sat down to "write without any previous idea whatever of what the story" was going to be (76).

By telling stories in this way Henty was able to work quickly. He told an anonymous interviewer for *Chums* that he worked from half past nine in the morning until half past one in the afternoon and sometimes put in a "couple of hours" in the evening, and that by doing

so he would complete a chapter of about 6500 words in a day. The interviewer suggested that “while an author might get a chapter in one day, he might go a week without writing a stroke, or go at it by fits and starts”, so the readers should not “with youthful impetuosity” think that Henty finished a chapter every day (159) - but that indeed was Henty’s claim. In the *Great Minds* article, he boasted of having finished books of 150,000 words in twenty days more than once (qtd. in Dartt 76), although he later claimed in the *Boy’s Own Paper* that the fastest book he ever completed was *With Buller in Natal* in 24 days (qtd. in Arnold 92). While this seemed implausible to the writer of the *Chums* piece, Henty’s reputation suggests he was not exaggerating. Fenn said Henty “was a man who meant work, and did it” (328). Roger Lancelyn Green was less charitable, declaring that Henty was “a conscientious workman” who was “able to maintain an amazing level of consistent, if mediocre, excellency” (83). Even when Edmund Downey called him a “model litterateur”, it was because he was “a man of strong will, reasonable ambitions, and a hard, steady worker”, not because he possessed any literary skill (114-15).

How Henty could maintain such a prolific output for as many years as he did, without a break, is easier to understand when you keep in mind two things. First, he drew heavily on an established formula and only had to fit pre-existing elements around the historical events he wanted to portray. Second, speaking a story aloud is a different process to writing one down and allows for greater speed as the act of performance demands that the teller cannot look back or spend too long deciding what comes next. Henty made his stories up on the spot, drawing on his knowledge of the adventure genre and its formulas and tropes, and never stopping to see what he had done. Once uttered, Henty did not see his stories on paper until they returned from the publishers as proof copy. While this has been seen as a sign that he did not care about his boys’ books (Dunae “New Grub Street” 19), I suggest it is because he was unflinching in his self-belief and trusted his amanuensis completely.

One question that needs answering, is why Henty used an amanuensis in the first place. Before turning to writing fiction he was a special correspondent for *The Standard*, a job that required him to write his own copy out in the field, so he was certainly capable of writing his own fiction. Admittedly, his handwriting was reportedly appalling. Edwardian editor and writer, George Herbert Ely (1866-1958) relates that when he was editor of his school magazine, he wrote to Henty to ask him to petition another writer to provide a story for it (Crewdson 8). Henty said it was not his place to do so, but gave Ely a 15,000-word story, “The Fate of the *Seaflower*”. Unfortunately for Ely, Henty had written it “in his small, crabbed hand in violet ink” which the compositor could not understand at all, so Ely had to transcribe it. When Henty saw the copy he “began to anathematise the poor compositor for making such ‘d...d balderdash’ of his work”, but on learning it was Ely’s fault he laughed off the schoolboy’s errors (qtd. in Crewdson 8). Nevertheless, bad handwriting did not stop other Victorian writers from plying their trade and it is unlikely Henty thought ill of his penmanship.

For his own part, Henty claimed he dictated his stories because it helped him “obtain larger, finer sentences” (qtd. in Dartt 76). Another anonymous writer, this time for *Young England*, believed it may be “one reason” Henty’s stories went “straight to the minds and hearts of his readers” (414). For Fenn, Henty was always a *storyteller*. With some clearly imaginative assumptions, Fenn suggests that Henty’s profession as a boys’ writer began with his children appealing for a bedtime story. From the practice of telling longer and longer stories, which gave Henty “the power to compose with fluency and ease”, he developed the skills he needed to dominate the juvenile fiction market across the British Empire (327-28). Patrick Dunae

suggests that because the story of Henty telling his children stories is “of the type to engender any boys’ author good publicity”, it is not true (“New Grub Street” 19). It must be admitted, however, that Henty’s first juvenile adventure story, *Out on the Pampas* (1871), features four heroes who are all named for Henty’s children. The telling of after-dinner stories is even the framework for “The Pipe of Mystery”, an edited version of “The Pipe of Opium”, a short story set in India that Henty wrote for *The Dark Blue* in 1872, which he published in *The Union Jack* in December 1880.

If telling stories to his children did lead Henty to writing boys’ books, it would explain why he found it easier to dictate his works rather than write them in his own hand. Oral storytelling is a distinct art from writing and can perhaps explain some of the features of Henty’s stories. One aspect that becomes apparent is that his stories are often entertaining lectures. Guy Arnold compares him to a schoolmaster described in Henty’s *Through the Fray* (1886), with whom “History was rather a lecture from the master than a repetition of dry facts and dates by the boys” (88). At his best, Arnold suggests, Henty could turn a lecture into “a stirring descriptive piece”, largely because he was more interested in mood than fact. That is, Henty wanted to “convey the spirit of the times” and show the motivations behind the conflicts and actions he is covering (88). We can see this desire in the preface to *Through the Sikh War* when Henty says: “It is satisfactory to know that the conquest of the Sikhs ... was not brought about by any of the intrigues which marred the brilliancy of some of our early conquests ... but was the result of a wanton invasion”. One-sided as his interpretation is, it shows his interest in the historical forces behind the wars he describes and his desire to share them.

That said, Henty had a typical late-Victorian view of history that saw it more as a genealogy of Empire than anything else (Forman 99). Henty’s heroes reflect this attitude by always possessing the qualities and attitudes of a Victorian school prefect no matter what period of history they come from (Arnold 35). History showed Henty why the British Empire existed and why it should; his stories aimed to tell British boys they should want to be a part of it. As Henty told the readers of *The Boy’s Own Paper*, one of his main aims in writing for them was to “inculcate patriotism” (qtd. in Arnold 63). To do this, it undoubtedly helped that Henty apparently spoke directly to boys’ hearts and minds as the *Young England* interviewer claims. Whether dictating stories truly affected the readers’ experience of the final product or not, there is no doubt both they and Henty put great stock in the fact that he did.

Amanuenses and Oral Storytelling

In order to dictate a story, there must be someone to write it down. Yet, in all the accounts of Henty’s writing method that someone is barely mentioned. There are more references to Henty’s sofa and dogs than the person sharing the work of producing the text. Consequently, little is known about them. We know there were two amanuenses from 1879 until 1902, when Henty died. The first was an anonymous young man recommended to Henty by Edmund Downey. Besides some comments he made to Downey, which I will discuss later, and that he worked in the role for no more than two years, nothing is known about him. He was followed in the role by John Pettit Griffith, whom Henty met at the London Rowing Club (Fenn 367).

Census records show that Griffith, born in 1860, was the son of an architect and was working as a clerk for his father in 1881, the year he started working with Henty. In three subsequent censuses he listed his occupation as bookseller twice, in 1891 and 1911, and as novelist’s

clerk once, in 1901, the year before Henty's death. What this tells us is that Griffith had an upper-middle-class background, a professional interest in books and, importantly, a separate source of income from his work with Henty. It is unclear how he could take time away from bookselling to devote to taking down Henty's dictation, but it suggests he was in a position of some authority, possibly an owner or manager.

Griffith, then, elected to work as Henty's amanuensis for two decades because he enjoyed it. Griffith's respect for his employer is made manifest in the name of his first son, George Alfred Henry Griffith, who was born two months before Henty died. Henty must also have been happy with the arrangement and demonstrated complete trust in Griffith as he claimed to never look at the draft until it returned from the publisher as proof copies. Besides, it is unlikely the working relationship would have lasted if Griffith had not agreed with Henty in most things, especially given Henty described himself as a "fierce and truculent Briton" (qtd. in Dunae "G. A. Henty" 145) and had a reputation for being "outspoken, plain, straightforward, and to the point" (Fenn 348). Such a close working partnership no doubt reflects their shared values and beliefs, coming as they did from the same class backgrounds.

The importance of their working relationship is in the role Griffith played within it. As mentioned, Henty was a storyteller and there is one more consequence to this beyond those already discussed. That is simply that Henty was relating an oral story which by its very nature observes different rules to a written one. Oral historian Alessandro Portelli explains that:

In order to make the transcript readable, it is usually necessary to insert punctuation marks, which are always the more-or-less arbitrary addition of the transcriber. Punctuation indicates pauses distributed according to grammatical rules: each mark has a conventional place, meaning, and length. These hardly ever coincide with the rhythms and pauses of the speaking subject, and therefore end up by confining speech within grammatical and logical rules which it does not necessarily follow. (34)

Another oral historian, Francis Good, agrees, stating that in the end we must accept that "transcription of the spoken word is more of an art than an exact science" (365).

Admittedly, Portelli and Good are referring to transcriptions of oral histories recorded by historians from people who are relating their experiences and memories, not composing a work of fiction. Henty likely attempted to construct his sentences so that they would be suitable for print, but as his storytelling evolved from making up stories for his children it would be natural for him to fall into looser grammatical structures. Henty's explanation that he dictated in order to "obtain larger, finer sentences" (qtd. in Dartt 76) suggests he was not observing written rules. Furthermore, Peter Newbolt observes that Henty's letters are grammatically lax, suggesting Griffith must have made minor amendments as he went (559). I suggest he was doing more than that: that he was in fact taking Henty's words and transcribing them into a readable format. As Francis Good points out, this act, far from being the simple act of writing down the words the amanuensis hears, is a complex task of putting those words into a new medium. Taking dictation here becomes an adaptation from the medium of speech to that of print.

Boiling Down History

There is another way that Griffith, and his anonymous predecessor, may have contributed to Henty's work. Downey recalls that the man he recommended to Henty once told him that Henty would say, "I'll leave you to yourself today. Boil down the official report of the Battle of So-and-So, or this passage out of So-and-So's book" (116). There is textual evidence to suggest that this practice may have been a general part of Henty's process. Namely, that there are many passages that stand out as historical instruction. Dunae claims this is because the amanuensis wrote the historical sections and that "Griffith's synopses and Henty's plots did not always blend" ("New Grub Street" 21). However, it is not clear that he always left the task of "boiling down" history to his amanuenses – assuming both Griffith's predecessor and Downey were telling the truth.

The break in the texts between story and history was noted critically in 1886 by the journalist and critic Edward G. Salmon (1865-1955). In an article "What Boys Read", published in *Fortnightly Review*, Salmon observed that in *The Cornet of Horse* (1881), Henty's history stood "too independently of his fiction" and had not been "sufficiently absorbed by romance" (8). Any but the most studious of boys, Salmon opines, would therefore treat the book "as a child often treats plumcake – pick out the fruit and leave the rest" (8). Guy Arnold actually suggests that is one reason for Henty's success, as "boys uninterested in history could still read one of his books as an adventure story, no doubt skipping the descriptions of battles or other set historical pieces" (39). However, Salmon sees *The Cornet of Horse* as an aberration in Henty's work, as it stood in 1886, and lists several titles in which he believes there is no such failure to blend history and story satisfactorily for boy readers. Included in the list is *In Times of Peril* (1881), which Henty himself told the readers of *The Union Jack*, in which it was serialised, that:

I fear that ... the story will be found almost too historical for a magazine appearing weekly. However, if occasionally (you) get a number in which the story seems a little dull, (you) will get so much adventure at other times that (you) will be pleased with it in the long run (qtd. in Dartt 147).

In Times of Peril, which was serialised in 1880, is one of the few boys' books Henty produced while the anonymous amanuensis was in his service. The others were *The Young Buglers* (1880), and the serialised versions of *Facing Death* and *The Cornet of Horse* which both ran in *The Union Jack* in 1880. Griffith's first job would have been the extended version of *Facing Death* published in book form by Blackie & Son in 1882.

Many of the historical passages are more than paraphrases of historians' words as they bear the mark of Henty the lecturer. In these passages history is not merely doled out but judged. One example is his lecture on Mahratta politics leading to the Battle of Assaye in *At the Point of the Bayonet* (269-72). In this passage Henty shows himself as an experienced and dispassionate war correspondent:

The partition of Mysore had indeed done much to unite the Mahrattas together. The ever-increasing power of the British was a serious source of alarm, for, in addition to Mysore, Lord Wellesley had, without a shadow of justification, obtained the control of Oude. (270)

Here is the journalist who can see both sides and even indicate disapproval for actions the British may have taken. Some actions warranted a more passionate condemnation, such as the making of false treaties and other duplicities practised by Clive prior to the Battle of Plassey which Henty roundly condemns, saying, amongst other things, that “a more disgraceful transaction was never entered into by a body of English gentlemen” (*With Clive in India* 284).

Given Henty’s reputation as being outspoken and truculent – a rival boys’ writer, Dr Gordon Stables, once described him as a “stiff, dogmatic pagan” (qtd. in Arnold 12) – it is unlikely he left passages bearing strong opinions to his helper, however much he trusted him. What is more likely, is that when there was a battle to describe in general terms before detailing the hero’s part, Henty left the summarising of history to his amanuensis. It was, after all, a process of cut and paste with some editing to make it more appropriate for a juvenile audience than the adult reader of the source texts. Newbolt suggests that the fact Henty would leave his amanuensis to write the historical passages shows two things. First, that the division between the historical context and the adventure story was firm in his mind, and second, that Henty likely found “some of the history not very gripping” (557).

That may well be, but it does not explain how the two managed to produce texts that marry two distinct types of passage. One of the most glaring examples of the division is in *Through the Sikh War* (1894). In the chapter that covers the Battle of Aliwal (1846), the synopsis and story elements are self-evident. The chapter opens with an impersonal account of troop movements in the lead-up to the battle; this account is then interrupted by a short section where the book’s hero, Percy Groves, is given a place under the general in charge of the British troops and where one of his mentors gives him some more career advice – a frequent occurrence in Henty’s books. Following that, the synopsis of the battle picks up again as if it had never stopped and continues through to the ultimate outcome of the fighting. Again, the text returns to Percy, this time to account for his actions in the battle. Unfortunately, in this case Percy did not do anything but observe. Slightly unusually for one of Henty’s heroes, Percy is a civilian, serving voluntarily as a political officer. As such, his story is him and his two followers, Bhop Lal and Akram Chunder, discussing the battle among themselves.

This passage is revealing in its structure. Alerted to the distinction between passages, a reader can easily note when the chapter shifts from synopsis to story; however, there is no break in the text as it is presented and to a casual reader – like the boys it was meant for – the division is less obvious. The history then, in Salmon’s terms, has been sufficiently romanticised and absorbed into the narrative. Furthermore, the story sections are not lengthy. Given Henty’s method was to dictate for hours at a time it seems unlikely he would have broken up his narrating so frequently. A more likely scenario is that he told his story, then, on reaching a point where the synopsis would take over, Henty would tell Griffith that he would need to insert a historical synopsis covering the events between this moment and the next, then took up his story again. Griffith would therefore have to knit together the story and the historical synopses. Alternatively, having ‘boiled down’ the Battle of Aliwal, Griffith and Henty worked out what Percy would need to do during the time and Henty would then dictate those passages, which Griffith would have to work into his synopsis.

There is a third option, that Henty fitted the synopsis and the story together. Newbolt would seem to favour that idea as he says, “no doubt Henty would have read, and possibly corrected, each precis made for him” (557). If so, however, Henty worked far more diligently than his own accounts of his working methods put forward. As we saw, Henty said he worked

quickly and never looked back until the proof copies arrived. Moreover, given such quick back-and-forths between story and synopsis as the Aliwal passage, having to check Griffith's precis and fit his story around it – a story he dictated – seems a convoluted means of production for someone determined to compose a chapter a day. In whatever way they arranged it, however, the melding of the synopses and story passages had to have been done collaboratively. The only thing we do not know, is their precise working arrangement.

Why Griffith Stayed Anonymous

If Griffith was collaborating on the bestselling boys' books of his time, why did he never get any credit? To answer that, it is necessary to understand the relationship between a boys' writer and his readers, implied and otherwise. From the 1870s, boys' writers often manufactured an almost paternal persona to relate with their readers. Editors of boys' periodicals, of which Henty was one, would address their "Dear Lads" in editorials and, in Henty's case, the prefaces to some of their books. Henty for one also received mail from his readers and replied when he could. Being a sole author was an important part of maintaining such a persona.

An Edwardian reflection of this is Herbert Strang, the pseudonym for the collaborative efforts of George Herbert Ely (1866-1958) and Charles James L'Estrange (1867-1947). Together as Strang they were one of several writers to be declared the "next Henty". Ely and L'Estrange's method of collaborating was quite straightforward. L'Estrange was "the weaver of plots" and the "manipulator of events", while Ely, "with his ripe scholarship and wide historical knowledge, wrote the books as they actually appear" (*The Times* 11). This is analogous to Henty and Griffith's working relationship, except that, as well as weaving plots and manipulating events, Henty dictated much of the text as well.

It is also possible that, aside from maintaining Henty's persona, Griffith never wanted any credit for collaborating. It is likely, in fact, that he never saw his role going beyond that of a secretary as it was Henty who came up with the characters and stories – however formulaic and mechanical they may have been. Nevertheless, by drafting synopses, translating Henty's spoken word into written prose, and piecing it all together into a complete, readable whole, Griffith was an invaluable partner in a writing collaboration. Henty was undoubtedly the principal figure, but it is time to acknowledge the work of his amanuensis in helping Henty's texts achieve their final form.

Such acknowledgement not only gives credit where credit is due, it also redirects the way Henty is viewed as a writer. As it stands, Henty is known for his formulaic historical romances for boys. Behind the extensive catalogue is the man himself, the special correspondent who had had adventures himself, several of which he related in boys' papers like his own *The Union Jack*. Behind most of these tales, and the man himself, is another man thirty years Henty's junior who was only twenty-one when he began working with Henty. Boys' books and papers were targeted at readers that today are called teenagers and young adults (Pringle and Ashley 8); so, Griffith was essentially still a "boy" himself when he first wrote down Henty's words. It could only have helped the aging "truculent Briton" to have had the ear of a younger man when composing his tales. Henty may no longer have been telling his children bedtime stories, but he was telling them to a boy about their age. A boy

who would go on to name his first child after Henty. A boy who grew into a man, translating those stories into books.

We may never know the exact relationship between the two, either professionally or personally, but it is evident that George Henty and John Griffith held each other in high esteem – one higher than the other no doubt, but the respect had to have been mutual for the working partnership to last so long. Henty cannot, therefore, be viewed as single agent in the communications circuit of print culture. He was not working alone in producing text after text promoting British exemplarism, but composing those same imperialist works with the aid and input of a member of the next generation. Henty was, and is, seen as the premier author of a generation of older boys' writers who inculcated the next generation with imperialism. His fellows in the 1880s were writers like George Fenn, Andrew Ker and Gordon Stables, all men in their fifties and forties, who established themselves in the boys' fiction market while the next generation, headed by Rudyard Kipling, were all still "boys".

If nothing else, Griffith's persistent presence highlights the reality behind the projected paternalism of Henty's and his contemporaries' writings. When Henty wrote prefaces or articles that began "Dear Lads", he first said the words to Griffith, a lad himself compared to Henty. In that respect, Griffith is both the recipient and a producer of the texts bearing Henty's name. It seems more than coincidence that the increasingly formulaic nature of Henty's books and the decreasing humanity of his already somewhat mechanical heroes in the later years of his output, match not only Henty becoming an old man, but Griffith ceasing to be a "boy".

Conclusion

Henty was a storyteller: he told his children stories, then his amanuenses. The first of these found the work simple and mechanical, and two of the longest texts he worked on, *In Times of Peril* and *The Cornet of Horse*, were called out for faltering in the narrative flow between story and historical synopsis, the second by Salmon and the first by Henty himself. The second amanuensis, Griffith, evidently engaged in the work more enthusiastically, and while still a young man helped Henty pen the more inventive works of the mid- to late-eighties. By synthesising the historical and purely fictional sections of the work, and translating Henty's spoken words into a written format, Griffith gave life to Henty's stories and helped propel him onto the throne as king of boys' writers. By remaining hidden and unacknowledged, Griffith upheld the paternal image of Henty, engendering a familial relationship with his readers, and so reinforcing the moral message of imperialism their books portrayed. Griffith reminds us to look beyond the surface narrative behind figures like Henty to see the other agents engaged in producing their works and their celebrity personas.

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