

## G.A.Henty 1832-1902 – An “Active Life”

Hailed as the “Prince of Storytellers” and “The Boys’ Own Historian”, G.A. Henty the boys’ adventure writer was born in Trumpington, near Cambridge. Much of what has been written about Henty in the past has been gleaned from the biography written by his friend and contemporary George Manville Fenn, whose work *An Active Life* (1907) gives a factual and extensive overview of Henty’s life and works.



As a child Henty suffered frequently from illness and spent long periods of time confined to his bed. During his sickly childhood he became an avid reader and developed a wide range of interests which he carried into adulthood. Henty attended Westminster School, London and later Gonville and Caius College Cambridge, where he was a keen sportsman. He left the university early without completing his degree to volunteer for the Army Hospital Commissariat when the Crimean War began. He was sent to the Crimea and while there he witnessed the appalling conditions under which the British soldier had to fight. Henty’s letters home to his family were filled with vivid descriptions of what he saw. His father was so impressed and moved by his son’s work, that he sent them to the local newspaper *The Morning Advertiser* which printed them. This initial writing success was a factor in Henty’s later decision to accept the offer to become a War Correspondent

Shortly before resigning from the army as a captain in 1859 he married Elizabeth Finucane. The couple had four children. Elizabeth died in 1865 after a long illness and shortly after her death Henty began writing articles for the *Standard* newspaper. In 1866 the newspaper sent him as their Special Correspondent to report on the Austro-Italian War where he met Giuseppe Garibaldi. He went on to cover the 1868 British punitive expedition to Abyssinia, the Franco-Prussian War the Ashanti War, the Carlist Rebellion in Spain and the Turco-Serbian War. He also witnessed the opening of the Suez Canal and travelled to Palestine, Russia and India.

Henty once related in an interview how his storytelling skills grew out of tales told after dinner to his children, demonstrating his affiliation with the oral tradition of storytelling. He wrote his first children's book, *Out on the Pampas* in 1871, naming the book's main characters after his children. The book was published by Griffith and Farran in November 1870 with a title page date of 1871. While most of the 122 books he wrote were for children, he also wrote numerous fiction and non-fiction for adults such as *A Search for a Secret* (1868) and *The March to Magdala* (1868), short stories for serials such as (the likes of) *The Boy's Own Paper* and at the same time, edited the *Union Jack*, a weekly boy’s magazine.

Henty’s novels typically revolve around a boy or young man living in troubled times. His heroes are often orphans, a crucial factor which allows his protagonists to embark on perilous adventures in strange new lands, without the intervention of parental authority. His stories encompass an imperialist

dimension, prizing the notion of Englishness and the glory of the British Empire. His historical novels range from Ancient Egypt and the Punic War to more recent conflicts such as the Napoleonic Wars or the American Civil War. His heroes - which rarely include young ladies - are uniformly intelligent, courageous, honest and resourceful with plenty of 'pluck' yet modesty is a central virtue. These character traits have made Henty's novels extremely popular today in America, where they are being reprinted and sold predominantly to the home schooling market.

On November 16, 1902, Henty died aboard his yacht in Weymouth Harbour shortly before he finished his last novel, *By Conduct and Courage.*, which was completed by his son Captain C.G. Henty.

Contrary to popular belief, Henty was neither a bigot nor a racist. Guy Arnold's critical work *Held Fast for England* (1980) serves to reinforce the traditional Henty stereotype, which strives to elevate Henty's xenophobic reputation, demonstrating the need to conform to predominant beliefs, rather than establish new horizons of expectation.

Henty wrote 122 works of historical fiction. It is a common misconception that American Henty titles were published before those of the UK. All Henty titles except one were published in the UK before those of America. The simple explanation for this error is that Charles Scribner's Sons of New York dated their Henty first editions for the current year. The first UK editions were always dated for the coming year, to have them looking fresh for Christmas. The only Henty title published in book form in America before the UK book was *In the Hands of the Cave-Dwellers* dated 1900 and published by Harper of New York. This title was published in book form in the UK in 1905, although the story itself had already been published in England prior to the first American edition, in *The Boy's Own Annual*.

To find out more about the Brown Collection and Henty's work please click on the following link:

<http://www.worc.ac.uk/iis/893.htm>

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