

## A long way from Adelaide

Alison Broinowski

As Australia in 2014 circles cautiously around the China of Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, it is worth looking back at some history of Australian connections with China. Australian interest in China goes back for more than a century and some of the pioneers in the field were remarkable for the depth of their involvement with China. They also mixed with some exotic expats from Britain and Europe. Tracing the networks between these individuals unveils some fascinating glimpses of international intellectual life around the turn of the twentieth century, showing that some Australians at least were connected to a wider world.

From the 1890s, [George Ernest 'Chinese' Morrison](#) and [WH Donald](#) ('Donald of China') reported for the British press from Beijing, where [Banjo Paterson](#) met Morrison during the [Boxer Uprising](#) of 1899.<sup>1</sup> Morrison, who hired translators in both Japan and China, drew on the linguistic talents of [Sir Edmund Backhouse](#), an expatriate minor nobleman whom he considered 'wonderfully clever but morally unsound'.<sup>2</sup>



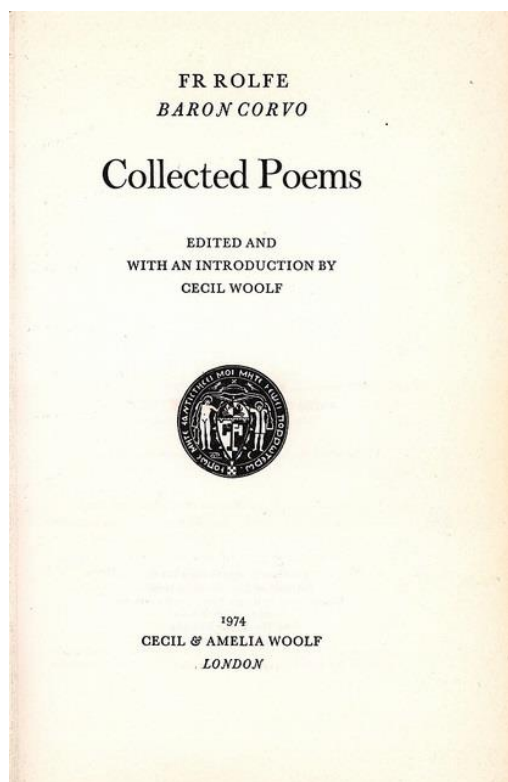
*Qing court return, the Empress Dowager, 1902 (source: Flickr Commons/Ralph Repo; [photo: GE Morrison](#))*

Backhouse (1873-1944) established a reputation as an oriental scholar with *China under the Empress Dowager* (1910) and *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking* (1914) both written with British journalist [JOP Bland](#). Apparently hoping for a chair at Oxford, Backhouse donated many Chinese manuscripts to the Bodleian Library there. He also worked as a secret agent for the British legation during World War I, managed an arms deal between Chinese sources and the United Kingdom and engaged in various failed business ventures.

In 1976 Backhouse's biographer, [Hugh Trevor-Roper](#), described Backhouse as 'a confidence man with few equals'.<sup>3</sup> Trevor-Roper's accusations of Backhouse's plagiarism and fakery were based on a manuscript of Backhouse's memoirs, *Décadence Mandchoue*, unpublished until 2011, which included a claim that Backhouse had an affair with the Empress Dowager Cixi.<sup>4</sup> Much of this work was based on a diary supposedly kept by a high court official Jing Shan, whose home Backhouse occupied after the Boxer Uprising. The diary was contested for years by scholars, notably Morrison (an advisor to President Yuan Shikai, whom Backhouse opposed); eventually, in 1991, Dr Lo Hui-min at the ANU in Canberra published proof that the diary was a fraud.

Backhouse's acquaintances certainly included Chinese artists, poets and courtiers. Among his intimates he also claimed the French poet [Paul Verlaine](#) (whose poems he quoted), [Victor Segalen](#) (who travelled in China during Backhouse's time and may have based *Rene Leys* on Backhouse), [Oscar Wilde](#) and [Frederick Rolfe](#).

Frederick William [Serafino Austin Lewis Mary] Rolfe (1860-1913) was another British expatriate, an artist and writer. A Catholic convert from the age of 26, he was drawn to displays of erudition and obscure scholarship, as in the title of one of his novels, *Don Tarquinio: a Kataleptic Phantasmatic Romance* (1905). Through Christopher Millard, Oscar Wilde's biographer, he entered a circle of men who shared some of his 'recherché interests and louche tastes'.<sup>5</sup> Even an admirer described Rolfe as 'morally unreliable, self-centred, quarrelsome and supremely vain'.<sup>6</sup>



Among Rolfe's friends were the artist Sholto Johnstone Douglas, a cousin of Oscar Wilde's friend Bosie, Lord Alfred Douglas. Another was AJA Symons, a book collector and wine-lover, who wrote a life of Rolfe, *Quest for Corvo* (1934). The writer, bon vivant, and gambler George Sims promoted Rolfe's fiction, principally *Hadrian the Seventh* (1904). By 1934, with the appearance of Rolfe's final novel, a homoerotic fantasy called *The Desire and the Pursuit of the Whole*, he had been praised by DH Lawrence, WH Auden and Graham Greene.<sup>7</sup> American art editor Donald Weeks wrote another biography, *Corvo*, in 1971.

(Photo source: Flickr Commons/Lunar Camel Co.)

Rolfe had a connection with Australia through his brother, [Alfred](#), with whom he corresponded regularly. This is where Australia features, albeit briefly, in the story. Alfred had migrated to Australia in 1889, married, and taught in schools in Parkes, Bega, and Orange. He married Beatrice Ashdown and they had five children. After becoming an Anglican priest he taught at St Peter's College in Adelaide and went on to become headmaster at private schools in Sydney. Frederick Rolfe based the protagonist of his last novel on Alfred.

Frederick left England for Venice, where he changed his name often, eventually awarding himself the title of 'Baron Corvo'. He died penniless and childless, leaving his debts and papers to Alfred.

A closer and more contemporary Australian connection to Frederick Rolfe is now provided by Robert Scoble, a rare book enthusiast who received a PhD for his thesis, 'The Corvo Cult', at the University of Sydney. His 15 monographs on Corvo, produced in 2006-11 and published in 2013 as a single volume, [Raven: the Turbulent World of Baron Corvo](#), seek to rescue Frederick's reputation, as does this review:

Corvo lived in palaces, rectories, stately homes and workhouses. He knew bishops, ambassadors, duchesses and prime ministers. He consorted with gondoliers, masseurs, navvies and prostitutes. He debated with historians, archaeologists, poets and professors. His sad destiny was to fall out with almost all of them, as each failed to live up to his strange

and antique standards, feeding his paranoiac conviction that he was surrounded by scheming and ill-intentioned enemies.<sup>8</sup>

Scoble became Master Secretary of the Corvine Society, which had met twice in 1929 over sumptuous banquets, but not again until 2013, when British and foreign Corvines marked the centenary of Rolfe's death with a third viniferous dinner in London.<sup>9</sup> Dr Scoble has since sold his collection of rare Rolfe documents and says he is 'moving on' from his Corvo addiction.<sup>10</sup>

A further tenuous link between Frederick Rolfe, brother of Australia's adopted Alfred, and Edmund Backhouse, translator for Australia's 'Chinese Morrison', is now created by Linda Jaivin. Noting in her new novel that late in their lives Backhouse and Wilde, like Rolfe earlier, converted to Catholicism, she 'reproduces' a typewritten manuscript in which Backhouse, while not denying all charges of immoral behaviour, protests against accusations of plagiarism and fabrication. He quotes his 'dear friend Baron Corvo' writing from Venice about his passion for swimming in the canals.

The former Corvo enthusiast Scoble doesn't believe Frederick Rolfe and Backhouse ever met.<sup>11</sup> If they did, they would have enjoyed each other's conversation and who knows what else. Meanwhile, George Morrison, the boy from Geelong, made his fame in China – taking time out to support conscription in Australia in 1917 – and Alfred Rolfe lived out a presumably blameless life teaching the sons of Anglicans in Hunters Hill.

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Jaivin, *The Empress Lover*, Harper Collins Australia, Sydney, 2014. [Reviewed](#) by Alison Broinowski.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Trevor-Roper, *A Hidden Life: the Enigma of Sir Edmund Backhouse*, published in the USA as *Hermit of Peking, The Hidden Life of Sir Edmund Backhouse*, Knopf, New York, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Trelawny Backhouse, *Décadence Mandchoue: the China Memoirs of Edmund Trelawny Backhouse*, (Derek Sandhaus, ed.), Earnshaw Books, Hong Kong, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> James Fergusson, 'On the Corvine banquet', *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 November 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Fergusson.

<sup>7</sup> [Rolfe, Frederick William](#), Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

<sup>8</sup> [Strangeattractor.co.uk/books](http://Strangeattractor.co.uk/books) 13 July 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Fergusson.

<sup>10</sup> Email to the author.

<sup>11</sup> Email to the author.