

*A Blighted Fame. George S. Evans 1802-1868. A Life*

Helen Riddiford

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Reviewed by Raewyn Dalziel

It seems odd to refer to George Evans -- classical scholar, headmaster, lawyer, journalist, leading New Zealand Company official and colonist, Victorian politician and minister - as a man of blighted fame? Blighted by his own actions? Blighted by his personality? Blighted in his own time? Blighted by history?

Helen Riddiford started to produce a family history and found in the family tree a remarkable man about whom there appeared to be little remembered or written. George Samuel Evans' story could equally belong to New Zealand or Australia. He spent about ten years in Wellington and eleven in Melbourne. It was in Australia that he had the most political success, reaching ministerial status. The Australian Dictionary of Biography published an entry on him in 1972; there is no entry in The New Zealand Dictionary of Biography or Te Ara.

Yet Evans was a key player in the establishment of the Wakefield settlement of Wellington and has been called the father of that city. He has left many traces, in his prolific newspaper contributions, his political speeches, and correspondence. He aroused some strong emotions and there are many recorded views of his personality and activities. Why is Evans so forgotten? Riddiford considers it was his personality- a sense of superiority, an unbridled temper, a self-centredness that made some of his actions inexplicable - that made him unpopular in his own time. And his mobility prevented him from being written indelibly into the history of Wellington.

George Samuel Evans was born in 1802, the son of a charismatic Congregational minister and his wife, Hannah, from a professional family. The family moved to the east end of London in 1807 and George had a privileged London education, followed by two years at a theological college for dissenters in Hertfordshire and three years at Glasgow University. Evans was clever, superbly educated in the classics and philosophy, and returned to London with the prospect of a good career in an academic post of some sort.

His first job, however, may have been something of a hospital pass. He became the headmaster of Mill Hill Grammar School, a well-known but troubled institution for the sons of middle-class dissenters. He was popular with the students, but a liaison with the married, possibly separated, school matron, Harriet Riddiford, soon had him shown the door. George and Harriet then opened a school in north London and married in 1830 after the death of her first husband. Such a start would not have been easy to overcome in some circles, and although they do not seem to have worried the Evans's and their friends, the circumstances of his marriage may have played a part in the family decision to emigrate.

School teaching was never going to satisfy the restless, ambitious Evans. He made friends with a number of the philosophic radicals, campaigned for political reform, began to study law in 1832, and joined the Reform Club when it started in 1836. By the autumn of that year he had met Edward Gibbon Wakefield. He later claimed that Wakefield, turning a globe until New Zealand got to the top, said grandly 'Let us colonize New Zealand'.

Evans became a great supporter of Wakefield; probably one of his staunchest allies. In 1837 he became the honorary secretary to the New Zealand Association and spent a lot of his time and money getting the Tory off on its survey expedition. He attended meetings with politicians, gave evidence to Select Committees, waited on the Colonial Office officials and worked with Wakefield and others to shape up a viable venture that would be protected by the Crown, make valid land purchases and return a profit to investors. He sunk money into yet-to-be purchased Wellington land, borrowed more money and left with Harriet, her two adult children, Daniel and Amelia, and Daniel's wife Harriet, on the Adelaide in late-1839.

The journey to New Zealand was an indication of things to come. Evans came to New Zealand with the titles of Chief Judge and Umpire of the First Colony's Council and the authority to preside over all criminal and civil proceedings. On board ship he fell out with his colleagues, including the influential Samuel Revans, was challenged to a duel by another settler whom he had insulted, and railed at the Captain. There is no doubt that Evans was a difficult man. He was pompous, short-tempered, inconsistent, resented challenges to his authority, got his own financial affairs into a mess, but once at Port Nicholson he was a force to be reckoned with. It was Evans who persuaded the Company to move from the flood-prone first settlement at Petone to Thorndon. In September 1840 he went to Sydney to protest the New Zealand Land Bill which would have invalidated the Company's land purchases and negotiated an arrangement over Company land with Gipps. He represented the Company at Spain's enquiries into land claims and was one of the group of Wellington men who went to the Wairau after the shootings in June 1843, then to Auckland to advise Shortland of the events.

Evans spent five years at Wellington. He worked as a barrister and sometimes as a magistrate, he was fully involved in the intertwined political and social life of the settlement, fought for municipal government once the illegal Council the Company had constituted to run Port Nicholson was disbanded, tried to sort out the convoluted details of land purchases (his own and those of the Company), and negotiated with Māori (he could speak Māori quite well) over land and issues of law and order.

At the end of these five years, Evans returned to London in charge of a memorial from the settlers to the Colonial Office complaining of FitzRoy's financial and political decisions. He provided insider information for the big debate on New Zealand affairs in the House of Commons in 1845 and managed to persuade the Company to buy back much of his Port Nicholson land, thereby resolving some of his financial problems. Having missed out on a job as judge in the Bankruptcy Court at Tower Hamlets, he resumed law practice in London, and Harriet joined him some time later.

However, Evans was not well in England and his finances were very stretched. He had kept his house in Wellington and in 1852 he and Harriet returned. He took up legal work, but was in a short time moved on to Melbourne. Evans perhaps had his greatest success in Victoria: he was elected to the first Victorian Legislative Assembly in 1856 and became a Minister in the O'Shanassy Government between 1858 and 1860. In February 1861, during a period of political instability, he was one of a number of men approached to form a Government. He failed, but was back in Government later in the year. His career in Melbourne is notable in Riddiford's eyes largely because he tried to help Wellington, floating early ideas for trans-Tasman cables and steam ships. In 1864 he lost his seat and a year later returned to Wellington where he died in 1868, Harriet having died before him.

Riddiford has done an immense amount of research into Evans' life and times. Sometimes the times take over in an unsatisfactory manner. For instance, in trying to explain what Evans did when he spent time away from his duties at Mill Hill, Riddiford states it is 'likely' he visited William Wilberforce and he 'might' have discussed with Wilberforce the issues of the day (p.16). This sort of speculation adds nothing to the life. Riddiford is on stronger ground when she tries to explain Evans through detailed descriptions of events in

which he was involved. In places the story is fragmentary and episodic rather than coherent and complete, but the details add to our knowledge of some significant events in colonial history and acquaint us well with this man whose education, intellect and voice were exploited in colonial affairs even though his fame was 'blighted'.