

Sir George Grey 1812-1898

George Grey was born in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1812. His father, Lieutenant Colonel George Grey had been struck down in battle at the Spanish fortress town of Badajoz a matter of days prior to his son's birth.

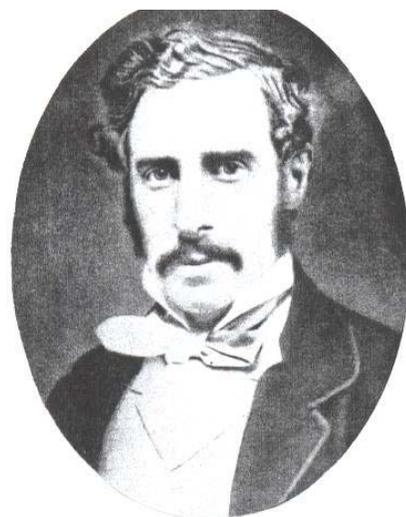
Young George and his sister Anne were raised by their mother Elizabeth Vignoles Grey, with the help of a close-knit extended family. In 1817 Elizabeth married the baronet Sir John Godfrey Thomas of Wenvoe, Vicar of Wartling and Bodiam. George and Anne subsequently acquired a number of half-brothers and half-sisters.

In 1826 George enrolled at Sandhurst as an officer cadet and on his graduation 4 years later was commissioned ensign in the 83rd Foot Regiment in Glasgow. During the regiment's posting in Ireland Grey began to recognize the repressive nature of English rule in the country and began to resent, and eventually loathe, its harsh indifference to human misery. He was moved to write a report on ways to improve Irish peasant conditions, but his suggestions were ignored.

In 1836 Grey returned to Sandhurst for an advanced course. He graduated with a first class certificate and special commendations, but with no desire to return to garrison duties. Grey's interest in colonisation was growing along with his desire to explore new lands. Together with colleague, Lieutenant Lushington, he developed a proposal to explore the mysterious north-west coast of Australia. The proposal was accepted and in June 1837 Lushington and Grey embarked HMS Beagle bound for Cape Town where they were to charter a small vessel in which to explore Australia's Prince Regent River and as much surrounding land as was practicable. They were to "familiarise the natives with the British name and character", record information on the country's suitability for colonisation and collect botanical and zoological specimens. A second expedition saw Grey exploring north of Perth and in 1839 when Sir Richard Spencer, Resident Magistrate of Albany (about 250 miles south of Perth) died, Grey was offered the post on a temporary basis.



Eliza Lucy Spencer, Lady Grey
1854 portrait by William Gush



Sir George Grey, photograph taken in
1861 in South Africa immediately prior to
his transfer back to New Zealand

Grey arrived in Albany in August and in November he married Spencer's sixteen year old daughter Eliza Lucy Spencer. The following year Grey was recalled to England. During the voyage he put his ideas for civilising the Australian Aborigine on paper under thirty-seven points. This was well received and copies were sent to the governors of the Australian and New Zealand colonies. Grey and his wife had only two months in England before he was offered the governorship of South Australia – a colony teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. He resigned from the army and in January 1841 set sail for Adelaide. Eliza was nearly eight months pregnant and gave birth to their son George, at sea.

Grey's initial efforts to turn around the financial and administration basis of the colony were not well received. It was not a happy time for the Greys. Their son died at the age of five months, Eliza made her dislike of Adelaide plain and Grey's reforms were making him very unpopular. However, by 1845 there were few critical voices raised against him. He had reduced public spending to one-fifth of its previous level and successfully restored the colony's economy.

Grey left South Australia in the same year. The Colonial Office was sufficiently impressed by Grey's abilities to appoint him Governor of New Zealand, another colony on the verge of bankruptcy. Grey was described as idealistic, high principled, endowed with great practical ability, quick of thought and action, and having the courage and self assurance to act confidently. Under Grey New Zealand was for the first time effectively governed and once again Grey managed to bring prosperity to a bankrupt and unproductive colony.

Grey did much to restore the faith of the Maori people in British justice, gaining their confidence in a way no other governor did. He believed that justice and prosperity were as important for the Maori people as for the settlers, and he strove always to understand the Maori viewpoint.

In 1848 Grey was invested as a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath (KCB) but despite this outward sign of favour there were soon indications of conflict with the Colonial Office. Grey had unusually strong faith in his own judgment coupled with intense feelings of loyalty to the Queen and the Empire. This combination sometimes led him to disregard instructions from officials 12,000 miles away, especially if he believed they were contrary to the course most beneficial to the colony. His judgment usually proved to be correct but his defiant and willful behaviour was not appreciated in London.

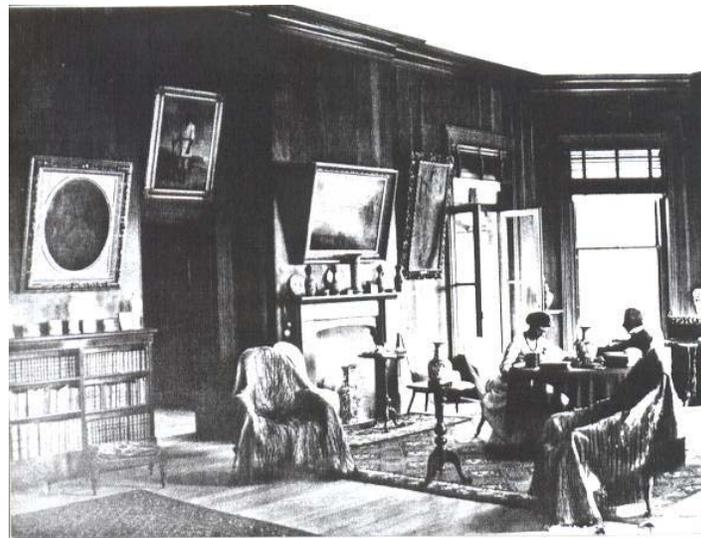
Sir George Grey returned to London in 1854, made his peace with the Colonial Office and was offered the post of Governor of the Cape Colony and High Commissioner for South Africa. Although once again he was very successful in his administration he again antagonised the Colonial Office by disregarding instructions if he did not believe that they were in the best interest of the Empire. He was again recalled to London, but a change in personnel at the Colonial Office saw him reinstated as Governor almost immediately.

On the return voyage to Cape Town an unfortunate incident occurred after which Sir George insisted on a separation from Lady Grey. The possibility exists that Lady Grey, unhappy in her marriage before the voyage began, may have confided in a fellow passenger, Sir Harry Keppel. It is reported that Grey grew exceedingly angry and later attempted to protect his reputation by accusing Keppel of having stolen his wife's affections. Lady Grey returned to England and Sir

George continued on to Cape Town. Rumours of the circumstances that lead to the separation abounded and Grey grew less self-confident and even less inclined to explain his actions than previously. Within two years Grey had volunteered to return to New Zealand.

In 1861 his offer was accepted and he was once again appointed Governor of New Zealand. It was hoped that his influence with the Maoris might diffuse the conflict that was growing between the colonists and Maori. In the time since Grey's last governorship great changes had occurred in New Zealand. The European population had trebled whilst the Maori population was diminishing. Trade had increased and the colony had become virtually self governing. The colonists' demand for land was increasing at a greater rate than their numbers and Maori had an increasing fear of losing their land and being out numbered by the colonists.

Grey was not successful in solving New Zealand's problems. The Maori chiefs were determined to test their strength against pakeha authority. Grey's influence over the Maori people had diminished, and this coupled with the conflicting attitudes of the New Zealand and British governments made decisive action impossible. Grey found himself more and more taking the colonial viewpoint against that the British authorities. This finally resulted in a complete breach with the Colonial office and Grey's curt dismissal after 25 years of colonial service.



Sir George Grey and his niece Annie Matthews in the drawing room of Mansion House, Kawau Island C1872

Grey had purchased Kawau in 1862 and after his dismissal he spent a brief period of respite on the island. His companion and hostess was sixteen year old Annie Matthews, daughter of Grey's half brother Godfrey. Grey had adopted Annie as his daughter on Godfrey's death in 1861. Grey made the decision to return to England to firstly try to gain another colonial appointment then to stand for Parliament. He was unsuccessful in both and in 1870 he returned to New Zealand and Kawau Island.

For the next four years Grey enjoyed transforming the island to a gentleman's estate – experimenting with the acclimatization of exotic plants (including walnuts, olives, bananas, camphor and cinnamon) and animals (peacocks, guinea fowl, ducks, quail, geese, zebras, kangaroos, wallabies, antelopes, deer, monkeys). Annie married Seymour Thorne-George Kawau's estate manager.

In 1874, however, political events drew Sir George back into public life. He was elected Superintendent of Auckland province and Member of Parliament for Auckland City West in 1875. Two years later he was made Premier (Prime Minister) of New Zealand, a position he held for two years. Grey remained in government until 1890 as a member of the Opposition. His idealism and radical beliefs did not make him a successful practical politician. However, his unwavering belief that the welfare of the people was all important was a vital factor in the development of New Zealand as a democracy and welfare state. During his first governorship of New Zealand Grey laid the foundations of the welfare state with his hospitals and schools, he also proposed universal suffrage long before it was attained in Britain.

In 1894 Sir George returned to England where he was invested as a Privy Councilor by the Queen whom he had served devotedly throughout his career. He was briefly but unsuccessfully reunited with Lady Grey and died within a few weeks of her death in September 1898. At his death he was honoured with a state burial at St Paul's Cathedral. A poignant message from the Maori people –

“Horei Kerei, Aue! Ka nui matou aroha ki a koe” *George Grey, alas! Great was our love for thee.*”

References

Hauraki Gulf Maritime Parks Board

The Story of Mansion House

STUART Vivian. 1967 *The Beloved Little Admiral. Admiral of the Fleet the Hon. Sir Henry Keppel, GCB, OM.* Robert Hale, London

BOHAN Edmund. 1988 *To Be A Hero: Sir George Grey 1812-1898.* Harper Collins New Zealand

Life at Kawau

6.45am: Cup of tea. Exercise on the beautiful breezy promontory hard by – wooded sides, grassy top with scattered trees. A little theological reading. Godet on Romans at present.

9.am: Breakfast. Walk about the ground with Sir George Grey. A little reading and writing, study of N.Z. political history.

1 pm: Dinner. Walk and talk with Sir George

5 pm: Tea. Walk up and down the jetty with Sir George. Somewhat profound discussions.

9.30 pm Bedfordshire.