

## **12. Prime Minister – The Difficult Years (1874-78)**

The first year and a half of John's premiership went smoothly although he did suffer several blows, personal and political. A scarlet fever epidemic broke out in 1873. There were no inoculations in those days that could protect people and most of his and Maria's children went down with it. Little Alfred, who was only six, did not recover, and this tragedy was followed only ten days later by the death, also from scarlet fever, of one of John's closest friends from the Beaufort West days, Mr Vincent Rice. The following year, another friend, William Porter, who was also a political colleague, became so unwell that he resigned from Parliament and left the Cape for his native Ireland, and ill-health caused another colleague, Sir Christoffel Brand, to resign the Speakership of the House. John did not make friends easily and these losses were severe blows.<sup>1</sup>

In February of the same year, the Liberal Party in Britain was defeated in a general election. A Conservative, Lord Carnarvon, became the new Colonial Secretary and soon began a long-running interference in the affairs of the Cape Colony, and Southern Africa more generally. Indeed as we shall see, it ended up in Carnarvon seeming hell-bent on proving the truth of Lord Derby's quip about the Colonial Office being actually 'the Office at war with the Colonies'!

### **Caroline – the travails of being pursued by a besotted suitor<sup>2</sup>**

John also had a difficulty at home. Caroline was now twenty and had become a beautiful, confident and strong-minded young woman. Naturally, she felt bound by the conventions of the Victorian age as to how a respectable young girl should behave towards her father as well as other men, but she was equally determined to make her own decisions about how she conducted her life. Two suitors, in particular, were pursuing her in the years 1873 and 1874. As Prime Minister, her father was naturally invited, along with his wife and grown-up daughters, to the various functions organised by the military as well as officers of visiting Royal Navy vessels at Simonstown. In June 1873, a British Army Captain called Shaw, whose company was stationed in Cape Town, proposed to Caroline. He was, at first sight, a highly eligible man – English, upper class, well off, and madly in love with her.

About the same time she met a young Royal Navy officer, Dr Charles Murray, of *HMS Rattlesnake*. He was, in her sister Maria's description of him, 'a very tall and big made man.... Some consider him good-looking, but I think it is more his expression that is pleasing.... His features are rather prominent, blue eyes, and a good deal of reddish-brown hair.... A great favourite with everybody

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<sup>1</sup> The view of Francis Hirst in his biography of Percy Molteno, *A Man of Principle*, unpublished, Ch. 5, The Molteno Ministry.

<sup>2</sup> For much more detail about Caroline Molteno, read the delightful account by her granddaughter, Ceridwen MacKellar, *Rattlesnake Romance: The courtship of Caroline Molteno by Dr Charles Frederick Kennan Murray, 1871-76*, Blurb, United Kingdom, July 2019.

here, and the general opinion is that Caroline is very fortunate.<sup>3</sup> But he was Irish, not English, and had no independent income or prospects of a large inheritance. Charley, as he was known, had also fallen deeply in love with Caroline although his manner of woo'ing her was very different from Captain Shaw.

Caroline turned Shaw down immediately. She felt she hardly knew him and in any case 'disliked him exceedingly'. What's more, 'I knew that Dr Murray liked me very much and I liked him also a good deal.'<sup>4</sup> The disappointed Captain then made a mistake. Assuming that a girl would eventually defer to the wishes of her father, he sought a meeting with John Molteno. He confided that he was afraid he had a rival in Dr Murray, and suggested 'Papa should consider the difference in their positions'. This attempt to get her father on his side made Caroline 'very angry'. Shaw succeeded, however, in getting permission to visit the family the following Sunday – a permission that he promptly took advantage of to frequent Claremont House pretty much as he wanted – which, as Caroline confided in her Journal,<sup>5</sup> caused her endless embarrassment and distress in the months that followed.

Dr Murray, it turned out, had already been invited to dine with the family that Sunday. Caroline now had to put him off at the last moment and as a result she 'felt altogether most annoyed and put out with Captain Shaw'. The upshot was the Captain spending:

a long, wearisome and most uncomfortable afternoon with us and [he] finally proposed [their all] walking up to Aunt Annie's.<sup>6</sup> To our great surprise, when we came into their drawing room, who should be there but Dr Murray. I wanted to show Captain Shaw that I preferred Dr Murray; so I sat down next to him and talked to him til we went away. But Captain Shaw is certainly the most extraordinary man I have known, not anything I said or did seemed for a moment to affect his purpose. He walked home next to me, and I knew what was coming.... And Charley would not take the broadest of hints to walk on with Betty and Maria. We got home and all sat in the drawing room. Captain Shaw was in a perfect fever... and everybody was uncomfortable and restrained.... After a little while, I went out of the room, and he watched to see me coming back, and came to meet me in the sitting room. I did not feel sorry for him then, only angry, and I spoke so very abruptly and decisively that I thought he would never care to speak to me again.

Little did she realize he was too arrogant to believe a woman might turn him down and the months ahead saw him relentlessly pursuing her.

The following Friday, Dr Murray also proposed to her and she 'felt very differently about that'. What Charley probably didn't know was that her father had already spoken to her about the possibility of

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<sup>3</sup> Maria Molteno's description at the time of Dr Murray and Caroline Molteno's eventual engagement. Maria Molteno to Aunt Nancy Bingle, 21 May 1875.

<sup>4</sup> Caroline writing, in part, in retrospect – her Journal, 23 Jan. 1874. The account that follows here is largely drawn from her Journal.

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Molteno's Journal, 23 Jan., continued in Feb. 1874.

<sup>6</sup> Annie Blenkins, one of the Jarvis aunts. She and her daughter, Minnie, lived with her father, Hercules Jarvis, near Claremont House.

this proposal a day or two before. John told Caroline in no uncertain terms that he did not consider Charley was in a position to marry. He was only 25 and it would be ten years at least in his view before he ought to think of marrying. What's more, even if he left the Navy and went into private practice, 'the result would be much the same'. Little did John understand that his daughter was a chip off the old block! Caroline was not going to take No for an answer from anyone but herself! As she confided to her Journal, 'Now if there had not been that objection, though I liked Dr Murray very much, I am sure I should not have engaged myself to him...., but somehow Papa's objection seemed to be put forward to me as *the* great obstacle.'

The next day, Saturday, there was a lunch and croquet party. Charley stayed over at Claremont House and that evening had a long talk with John, which he subsequently told Caroline all about in a long letter.<sup>7</sup> It must have taken considerable courage to have what proved a difficult discussion with the formidable-looking Prime Minister. Charley conceded John's objection relating to his modest naval salary: 'Mr Molteno, I quite agree with all you have said to me with reference to my position and to your objections to a long engagement.' He also acknowledged that he had allowed himself to be carried away by his feelings and promised 'on my word of honour, I shall never again broach this subject either to you or any other member of your family, and I shall never attempt in any way unknown to you, or Mrs Molteno, to influence your daughter's affection.' But he went on firmly: 'My intention to leave the Service ... is fixed, being fully determined to settle in the practice of my profession in some part of this Colony.' And he ended their conversation by asking 'that I may still be allowed to come here [to Claremont House] as heretofore, merely paying an occasional visit, such as the most ordinary courtesies demands.' John was reportedly 'very kind' to him despite being inflexible: He 'did not dissent from, although he did not give his assent to anything, except that I might come as heretofore'. And he warned Charley to be very careful before taking 'such a decided step as to leave a service in which my prospects appeared good.'

Charley was as good as his word. However the very next morning Betty and Caroline were driving in a pony trap to see how an elderly man was doing who, a few days before, had been thrown out of his cart in a collision with their own. On the way back the girls chanced upon Charley on the road. Caroline started to apologise for all that had happened. But his reaction, typical of him, was cheerfully to start singing her a song he knew she was very fond of – they both loved singing. Then, all of a sudden, he took off the ring he always wore – it was from the Gold Coast where he had been on active service in the Ashanti War – and gave it to her. Caroline wrote how: 'I would not take the ring but he told me it was only a keepsake from a friend, that it was in no way a pledge; it was only a feeling that he would like me to have something belonging to him.' He was sure it couldn't be wrong to accept it. Betty's advice was sought and she said she thought Caroline could keep it.

A couple of days later, Charley mentioned the incident to Caroline in the letter explaining the conversation he had had with her father and replying to the letter of hers that he felt was 'as cruel as it was unnecessary'.<sup>8</sup> 'Forgive me if I appear to write harshly for you know that I would rather lay down my life than entertain even the faintest shadow of an unkind thought towards you. I did not

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<sup>7</sup> Dr C F K Murray to Caroline Molteno, 23 Sept. 1873. This 4-page letter was in reply to her letter to him, seemingly by no means agreeing to get engaged to him.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

look on that ring in any way as a pledge, and gave it to you then because it was the only thing which I had at the time, and which, on the impulse of the moment, I wished you to take as a keepsake. I trust that you will still keep it, and regard it merely as a curiosity from the Gold Coast.' And he concluded his already very long letter: 'In you there is nothing to forgive. It is I who ask you to forgive me for causing you so much trouble.... It was I who first sought you; it was I who was vain enough to hope for things which now appear to you to be impossibilities.' And he ended: 'my feelings towards you can never alter.... [May] God ever bless you and guard you from grief or trouble.'

A few days later, the *Rattlesnake* was ordered off to the West African Coast again and Charley came over to say goodbye to Betty and Caroline. The three of them agreed there was no sort of engagement between him and Caroline, 'but that if he should in two or three years' time be in a position to marry, and I had not met anyone I liked better, he could then be at liberty to renew his offer.'

Captain Shaw took immediate advantage of Charley's absence. He came to the house almost every day. Betty and her mother both told him they were certain Caroline would never change her mind. But this did not deter him and he embarked on a new strategy to put pressure on her by ingratiating himself with the whole family, in particular Caroline's younger sister Maria and Aunt Emmie (the youngest of the Jarvis aunts, and not that much older than Caroline). 'Gradually, one by one, everybody at our house and at Aunt Annie's were changed from foes to friends. He was constantly bringing presents to the children, and leaving books and little things for us, and I tried to be as cold as possible, but I began to feel very sorry for him.'

Things continued like this for some time. Then one day, the *Rattlesnake* was sighted sailing back into Simon's Bay, as it was then called.<sup>9</sup> Several of the crew had been wounded, including Dr Murray, and, most seriously, the Commodore. Captain Shaw, in his anxiety at the return of his rival, became 'very much excited'. John Molteno responded to the news by telling Caroline the morning after the ship's arrival that he did not wish her to meet Dr Murray. Indeed she was not to see him even if he came to the house! A stand-off took place between them. 'I would not agree to that,' Caroline said, 'and Papa would not agree to my seeing him [even] once.' Finally, it was decided that she would write to him that he should not visit the house, which she did immediately. In fact neither Captain Shaw nor John need have worried. Charley was entirely tied up looking after the Commodore and, when he recovered, he scrupulously respected Caroline's wish not to call.

Six or eight weeks passed before she chanced to see him for the first time since the *Rattlesnake's* return to Simonstown. She and Maria were riding alone one Saturday morning. As they cantered along the Main Road past the Newlands cricket field<sup>10</sup> where a match was in progress, Maria's horse shied and she came off. Dr Murray happened to be one of the players and came up to check she was alright, and he and Caroline exchanged a few words. The next time they bumped into each other was at a croquet party. Charley was in his usual good spirits and joked about the news that Captain

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<sup>9</sup> The precise dates of all these events are not clear from the Journal.

<sup>10</sup> The Newlands Cricket Ground became famous for its spectacular location with Table Mountain rearing above it.

Shaw's company had just been ordered to Natal. The *Rattlesnake* was the only ship available to transport them, so Charley, as ship's surgeon, would be responsible for the Captain's good health!

Meanwhile Shaw some time before Caroline had told Captain not to come to Claremont House anymore, but he would not hear of it. He had also ordered a locket from England as a birthday present for her. She 'utterly refused' to accept it, but was eventually persuaded by Aunt Emmie and other members of the family to change her mind. It was a most expensive piece of work – gold with a pink enamel oval setting on which a large letter 'C' was picked out in pearls.<sup>11</sup>

The final crisis took place soon after, and with a denouement more like an Italian opera than respectable Cape society. Three Balls in one week were being given in honour of *HMS Challenger* to all of which Caroline and Betty went with their father, their mother Maria staying at home because she was once again heavily pregnant. The first ball was at Government House just before, as it happened, the *Rattlesnake* returned from the Gold Coast unexpectedly. But Charley was able to be present at the next two which took place in Cape Town's Commercial Exchange. He asked Betty for a dance at the first, but by the time he asked Caroline her card was already full.<sup>12</sup> The next night, Captain Shaw tried to monopolise her, but Charley came up and asked for two dances at one go. Caroline was so surprised that she said 'Yes' before she could think. After supper, her second dance with him was due but he asked her to leave the dance floor and talk to him instead since he had something to tell her. His news was that he would be leaving the Navy as soon as his ship got to England and he had arranged to come out to the Cape and set up practice with Dr John Wright, with the result that his financial prospects were now much better than he had ever expected.

Twice during their conversation Captain Shaw came up and tried to interrupt and take Caroline off, saying her father wanted to know where she was! A short while later Caroline suddenly heard Betty scream in the room where the dancing was taking place. She hurried in and found her 'in a dreadfully excited state'. John Molteno came in soon after, accompanied by Dr Bolster of the *Flora*. Betty threw her arms around his neck to tell him something and Caroline heard her say, 'But he won't do it, will he, Papa?' John said, 'No, I'll go and see about it.' Caroline for her part was utterly bewildered although she saw Captain Shaw standing at the door and guessed he must have said something that had seriously upset Betty. By this time, Betty was lying on the floor with Caroline and Dr Bolster kneeling beside her. The Captain kept calling out from the doorway to Betty 'Miss Molteno, Miss Molteno', which only made her worse. John Molteno went and spoke to him, but he refused to leave. As Betty was getting no better, John then decided himself to leave with his two daughters. He half-carried Betty to their carriage and the three of them went home. At the beginning of the hour-long drive to Claremont House, Betty kept repeating: 'But do you think he will do it?', to which her father replied very firmly: 'No, it is all nonsense and I have told him he must never come to our house again.'

The next morning, Betty told Caroline how Captain Shaw had come up to her several times demanding that she fetch Caroline away from Dr Murray. Betty, in desperation, had eventually

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<sup>11</sup> This locket came down to Caroline's youngest daughter, Kathleen Murray, who gave it to her niece, Ceri Mackellar. For a photograph, see *Rattlesnake Romance*, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> To modern ears, these formalities sound like something out of a Jane Austen novel a century earlier.

retreated to the cloakroom, but the Captain followed her and threatened to barge in if she did not speak to him. So she came on to the dance floor where he burst out: 'Your sister has behaved shamefully, shamefully.' And then hissed hysterically in her ear: 'If she marries that man Murray, I'll blow my brains out. I'll do it tonight.... I'll go from here and do it at once.' This is what had prompted Betty to scream. Much to Caroline's distress, Betty now blamed her. 'You nearly drove that man mad last night. It was wicked, it was cruel of you.'

A few weeks later, Charley's ship left for the Gold Coast for another tour of duty. He remained completely certain he wanted to marry Caroline, resigned his commission in due course as he had told her he would, and settled in Cape Town. Caroline may not initially have been quite as in love with Charley as he with her. But she had not taken kindly to her father's attempts to veto their marrying. In May 1875 they finally got engaged. This was, however, a full year after the family had been devastated by a great tragedy.

### **Maria Molteno's death**

Shortly after Captain Shaw's callow attempt at the Ball to terrify Betty into persuading Caroline to change her mind, their mother, Maria, gave birth on 22 March 1874 to a little girl. Sophia Mary was the first female child Maria had borne in nearly 20 years of a long succession of sons. Everything seemed to have gone well. That very afternoon, a family friend, Mr John Prince, had called to chat with John Molteno. And as Caroline related, 'while they were together, the baby was born and Maria<sup>13</sup> called Papa who hurried to Mamma's room immediately. After some time the Nurse came out and said Mamma was well and the baby a girl. We were so delighted that we could scarcely believe it. Mamma and we had been so longing for a girl.'<sup>14</sup>

John emerged looking 'pleased but rather anxious'. Maria then came in again and said: 'Dr Wright is to be sent for immediately'. A delay then ensued and, when he arrived, Dr Wright stayed until 10 o'clock that evening when Dr Ebdon relieved him and stayed through the night. Next day, however, they said all danger was over, but Caroline commented: 'It was a terrible feeling that Death had been so near.' And the family were only allowed to troop in and see their mother two days later.

Every day thereafter, Caroline relates, 'They said Mamma was better, but she did not seem to get much stronger. She was always so cheerful and smiled so happily when we got into the room; [but] we could not talk much to her as she had to be kept so very quiet.' About ten days after the birth, Caroline went for a ride with one of her brothers to inquire after Lady Barkly, the Governor's wife, who had been unwell and was staying with the Rathfelders a few miles off in Constantia. As soon as she got home, she went into her mother's room and started cheerfully chatting about her visit. Betty was sitting beside their mother and it was then that

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<sup>13</sup> Caroline's younger sister.

<sup>14</sup> This account is entirely based on Caroline Molteno's Journal where she wrote up the details of what had happened nine months previously. Entries dated 15 Feb. and 23 May 1875.

Caroline saw that she looked rather flushed and feverish. 'I think that was the first shadow of dark anxiety that ended in such crushing darkness.'

The last two days were terrible. 'I think I can never write about that last scene' and certainly Caroline became unusually incoherent as she remembered how their mother gradually slipped away. She wrote down just the little things she whispered. To her daughters: 'Wherever I am, I shall always be thinking of you all.' To Aunt Annie: 'Is it not hard to part?' – something she repeated to one of the children shortly before she died. And almost her last words: 'I do not wish to get better now.'

Her faith helped her. As she bade the children goodbye, 'she said in such an assured way: "We shall all meet around God's glorious throne."'

All through her ordeal, she never forgot her duty as a mother and wife. 'Once she turned to me [Caroline] and laid her hand on her breast and said: "The little baby, take care of it." And she told the children "to comfort Papa and fill her place".'

Maria died on 8 April. She was only 43 years of age. Severe haemorrhaging and then an infection seem to have been what happened. But it is difficult not to think that the succession of 14 pregnancies in 23 years of marriage had finally worn her out.

Four days later, after the funeral had taken place, Caroline wrote to Aunt Nancy Bingle in London: 'I never could have thought that anyone who was dead could look half so beautiful as she did. She is buried beside her three little boys.'<sup>15</sup>

The funeral inevitably became a public occasion. 'A special train was provided at 3 o'clock, by which a large number of our leading citizens went out, as well as the members of the Civil Service. The public offices were closed at 1 o'clock and the flags over the town half-masted.... The cortege from Mr Molteno's residence to the churchyard at Claremont commenced to move soon after 4 o'clock, and the concourse was a very large one, comprising representatives of *all classes* of the community [my italics]. The members of the Cabinet ... acted as pall-bearers.' The Governor, Sir Henry Barkly, attended. And the service was conducted at the graveside by Dr Faure, the Moderator of the Dutch Reformed Synod.'<sup>16</sup>

John was devastated. As Caroline wrote to Aunt Nancy, 'The blank is, to us, and always will be, terrible, but it is worst of all for poor Papa. The last five days he nursed Mamma night and day, and we were afraid he would break down altogether under this, but he bears up very bravely.'<sup>17</sup> He was, however, suddenly and utterly unexpectedly adrift emotionally after more than 20 years of being happily married. In Caroline's words again: 'You know, Aunt Nancy, how passionately fond of Mamma he was, and there is such a terrible, terrible change here

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<sup>15</sup> Caroline Molteno to Mrs Nancy Bingle, 12 April 1874. F. Hirst, *A Man of Principle*, op. cit. The 3 boys and Sophia Mary were Maria's four children who died in infancy.

<sup>16</sup> *The Cape Argus*, 11 April 1874.

<sup>17</sup> Caroline Molteno to Nancy Bingle, 12 April 1874. Cited in F. Hirst, *A Man of Principle*, op.cit.

now. He made her his only intimate friend and companion, and she was everything to him.<sup>18</sup> Fortunately perhaps, as Caroline observed, his prime ministerial duties meant that he 'has had had a great deal to do lately, and as Parliament is to be opened this week [late May] he will be still more busy.'<sup>19</sup>

As for the children and their emotional needs at this terrible time, John had always been a father who felt passionately interested in their doings. He loved their being around and interacting with them. But he was a 19<sup>th</sup> century patriarch and must have felt at a loss how to respond adequately to what they now needed. Their mother's death had a devastating impact on them too, of course. Caroline wrote how: 'It has all come so suddenly that it is just like a dream, and we shall only gradually realise it all as we get more settled. She was more than a mother to us girls; she was always thinking about us and taking such an interest in everything that pleased us.... She never would make us anxious about anything, and always looked at the bright side of things.... I think death can never be painful to us when we think that we shall meet her again.'<sup>20</sup>

Betty and Caroline were the only grown up children at the time of their mother's death. Their two eldest brothers were young teenagers – Charlie fourteen and Percy thirteen. Frank, James and Victor were even younger; and Wallace was only five and the very youngest, Barkly, two years old. Betty and Caroline, in addition to dealing with their own grief, had to step into the breach. This meant running the household, something Caroline had done once four years earlier when her parents, accompanied by Betty, were away at the Caledon Baths during John's prolonged sciatica attack. Now the two of them also had to take emotional responsibility for their brothers. They did it in a manner that, just to take the example of the youngest, Barkly, he never forgot and dearly loved them for all his life. When a full-blown Royal Navy Captain and in command of a battle cruiser, he wrote to Caroline, 'You have indeed always been both sister and mother to me.'<sup>21</sup> And another letter years later when she was in her mid 70s, he told her again: 'I wish I could express all the gratitude I feel to you for your wonderful love and wide sympathy to me and to *everyone* you've ever come in contact with. I do feel how blest I've always been in having you a sister. I've never turned to you without finding all I wanted in your sympathy and love.'<sup>22</sup>

And on top of all this sadness and emotional need was the worry of the new-born, sickly little baby, Sophia, who lingered on for many months after her mother's death, only to die in February the following year.

### **A new shock hits the family**

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<sup>18</sup> Caroline Molteno to Nancy Bingle, 26 May 1874. Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Barkly Molteno to Caroline Murray, 12 Nov. 1910(?).

<sup>22</sup> Admiral Barkly Molteno to Caroline Murray, 1 Sept. 1926.

A few months after this further death in the family – it was May 1875 – John Molteno took a decision that landed like a bombshell. A year had passed since Maria's death. What happened now is not completely clear. It seems that young Minnie Blenkins<sup>23</sup> was at Claremont House and John went into the room where she was and had a long discussion with her. But this was only after he had already gone and spoken to her mother. In any case, he came downstairs and made the stunning announcement that he had just asked Minnie to marry him, she had accepted and they were now engaged. Minnie was the stepdaughter of Annie Jarvis, John's sister-in-law and the widow of Major Blenkins.<sup>24</sup> Ever since Annie had returned to the Cape in 1852 and lived with her parents, Minnie had grown up as part of the Jarvis and Molteno families. She was only five years older than Betty, and the two of them were best friends.

To make matters worse, John made his announcement only four days after Caroline and Dr Murray had at last got engaged and were planning when to hold their wedding. As chance would have it, Maria was writing to Aunt Nancy on the very day her father made his announcement.<sup>25</sup> Two weeks later, she wrote Nancy a fuller and more measured account:<sup>26</sup>

'You will soon see that it is the best thing which could have happened, not only for Papa's own happiness but for all of ours. Papa is engaged to Minnie Blenkins.... It has taken us all entirely by surprise. We had no idea of it until he came down from Aunt Anne yesterday and told us that he was engaged to Minnie. I am sure that she will make him a very, very good wife indeed; and it is because he loved my mother so much, and finds that he cannot go on living like this, that he is going to marry again. All his joys and pleasures are so entirely dependent on his home life that the want was too great for him.'

Caroline took a much bleaker view of what had happened, which she confided eventually to her Journal.<sup>27</sup> Her own engagement to Dr Murray [had]'come so suddenly and seemed ... like a ray of light from a sky that was black with clouds; for never yet had my life appeared to me so hopelessly dark and wretched.' Now her father's utterly unexpected decision struck the whole family like a thunderbolt. She knew, of course, that 'Papa was very much distressed' by his wife's death and 'the house very desolate and cheerless to him afterwards', 'but it makes my heart ache to think that he could fill her place in the way he has, little more than a year after. It has been a bitter, bitter trial to us.' She then catches herself, knowing that she must try and put her feelings aside, and cries out: 'May God help us to take it in the way we should, and show us our duty towards our father and towards Minnie.'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> She was named Maria Sibylla (sometimes written Sobella) Minnie Blenkins. India Office birth register records in the British Library.

<sup>24</sup> See Ch. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Maria Molteno to Nancy Bingle, 21 May 1875.

<sup>26</sup> Maria Molteno to Nancy Bingle, 2 June 1875.

<sup>27</sup> Caroline Molteno's Journal, 22 Oct. 1875.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 May 1875.

John's decision to marry again hit Betty terribly hard too. She wrote to Lady Barkly, the Governor's wife, in reply actually to the latter having just written to congratulate the family on Caroline's engagement. Reining in her often unruly emotions, she wrote: 'Papa wishes me to make you another announcement which can scarcely surprise you more than it has done me. He told us yesterday that he had engaged himself to Miss Blenkins. We [Minnie and Betty] have been the greatest of friends since childhood.'<sup>29</sup> Then added bravely: 'If she and Papa are happy, I think we should be too.' Lady Barkly guessed at once how this news might destabilise Betty's always vulnerable nature and invited her to come and stay a while with her in Government House – which she did for a week. And after the wedding actually took place a couple of months after John's announcement, Lady Barkly invited all three girls, and any of their young brothers who wanted to, to stay with her again.<sup>30</sup> Betty was hugely grateful and, writing from Government House, told her friend, Constance Brounger, 'You always knew that I have had a good many troubles and that they have been hard to bear. I have felt altogether so worn out and done up... I do not know what I should have done without Lady Barkly. It seems to me as if I could scarcely have lived on without her sympathy and kindness.' She went on: 'Papa is to be married next week. I think you will understand something of the way in which I feel.... I have been in such a kind of whirl ever since Papa made the announcement, and do not feel the same kind of person at all.'<sup>31</sup>

Minnie herself was also incapable of taking the whole thing calmly. One night before the wedding, 'she was half hysterical and seemed quite done up' and Caroline had to sleep with her in order to calm her down.

The traumatic effect on the family was perhaps all the greater because John insisted on the ceremony taking place as soon as possible, arguing that it had to be before the opening of Parliament. So it took place in early August and, at the insistence of the Jarvis aunts – Minnie's mother, Annie, and her sister Emmie – was a very quiet affair: 'No one but ourselves' (in Caroline's words), 'and of course the Bishop and the clergymen who assisted him in the ceremony'.

John was now 61; his new wife only 29. As for Caroline and Dr Murray's wedding, that had to be put off to the following year. And Betty continued to feel so upset that, the month after her father's remarriage, she fled Claremont House and went to live for a time with her Aunt Betty hundreds of miles away in Port Elizabeth where Betty's husband, James Bisset, was employed as the engineer in charge of the new port and railway developments.

#### **John Charles Molteno (1814-1886) and Sobella Maria 'Minnie' Blenkins' (1846-1926) Children**

Birth	Christian Names	Marriage	Spouse/Partner	Death
1876 – 13 May	'Minnie' Evelyn Molteno			1953 – 6 Jul.
1877 – 31 May	Edward 'Ted' Bartle Frere Molteno			1950 – 18 Jul.

<sup>29</sup> Betty Molteno to Lady Barkly, (probably) 28 May 1875.

<sup>30</sup> Caroline Molteno to Nancy Bingle, 5 July 1875.

<sup>31</sup> Betty Molteno to Constance Brounger (later Mrs Gamble), 30 July 1875.

1878 – 2 Aug.	'Clifford' William Blenkins Molteno			1958 – 12 Oct.
1880 – 30 Sep.	Henry 'Harry' Anderson Molteno			1969 – 21 Jul.

### **Nelspoort and the great drought, 1876-78**

Adding to all the emotional pressures on John of the past few years, a new source of strain descended within a few months of his remarriage. Periodic drought was an ever present worry for the Karoo's sheep farmers.<sup>32</sup> Usually the rainfall oscillated around a pretty minimal 8 inches a year; and even then rain storms were often very localised and might pass a particular farm by entirely. But the great drought of 1876-78 was different. It dragged on for two years. At Nelspoort only one inch of rain fell during all this time. The lambs had to be killed in order to save what little grazing there was for the ewes to breed in future seasons. Two-thirds of the stock was lost. And the suffering of both animals and those working on the farms was terrible. John as Prime Minister was no longer managing the farms directly and had in any case to stay on in Cape Town. But his income fell sharply and being far removed from the scene of the disaster would not have helped much in reducing the tension and worries over what was happening during these years.

### **Imperial Hubris – Britain's South African Confederation scheme**

Through all this sadness and turmoil in the family, and the worry and financial pressures caused by the drought, John was also having to endure an unexpected, and it turned out, prolonged campaign of political pressure on the part of the British Government. The new Tory Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Carnarvon, wanted him to go along with a madcap scheme to force the two independent Boer republics, the self-governing Cape Colony, Natal and Griqualand West (both still directly ruled from Whitehall) , and what independent African tribal societies remained into a confederation under British suzerainty.<sup>33</sup> The idea first came to light only six months after Maria's death during a visit to the Cape of the historian, J. A. Froude, in September 1874. Fending off this pressure took up more and more of John's time and energy over the next couple of years, and diverted him from what he regarded as his main mission – making a political and economic success of self-government.

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<sup>32</sup> Rainfall records only began to be kept after the end of the great drought. John Molteno in his old age and his sons, Charlie and Wallace, who followed one another at Nelspoort, had to endure successive droughts in 1876-78, 1883, 1895, 1903, 1908, 1915-16, and 1926-27. Wallace in particular was driven to despair during the First World War and again in the 1920s. W. G. H. and S. Vivier, *Hooyvlakte*, op. cit., p. 224.

<sup>33</sup> This controversy is related in detail by Percy Molteno in his 2-volume life of his father, *The Life and Times..*, op. cit. R. F. M. Immelman's unpublished draft biography, *Sir John C Molteno*, op. cit., provides an excellent summary, as does Francis Hirst, *A Man of Principle*, op. cit. , Ch. 5, The Molteno Ministry 1872-1878 .

Carnarvon's Confederation scheme raised a whole raft of important questions. What would be the consequences for peace in the region? And for good relations between Dutch- and English-speaking people? And did the British Government really respect the constitutional status of the Cape as a self-governing state, with the right therefore to reject the Colonial Secretary's scheme? John was not opposed in principle to the territories of Southern Africa coming together at some point in the future. But he saw it as something that could only be brought about when the people of the various parts of the region wanted it.<sup>34</sup> 'He desired that it should come as a natural growth and not be forced on the country. His determination was to make [the Cape] Colony a kind of object lesson to the independent states; ... his firm belief was that they would in the course of time voluntarily ask to be admitted as members of a confederation of South African states.'<sup>35</sup>

John also realized that any hasty scheme might threaten the Cape's non-racial franchise and legal institutions. Natal had no elected government at all. The South African Republic and Orange Free State did not allow any South Africans of colour to participate politically. What, then, would be the political and legal principles on which any federal South African institutions would be based? He and Sir Henry Barkly perceived the danger very clearly: the Under-Secretary of State, R. G. W. Herbert, had already written during the drafting of a Permissive Bill for Confederation that 'the Cape Native Franchise would have to go' (in order to win over the Boer Republics).<sup>36</sup> John X. Merriman, a Minister in John's Cabinet, made clear that 'the Cape Ministry ... heartily oppose and detest Mr Froude's and Lord Carnarvon's native policy'<sup>37</sup> because, in John's own words, it would involve 'the unmerited disenfranchisement of the whole of the Coloured races, Kafirs, Hottentots, emancipated Negroes'.<sup>38</sup> This threat to the Cape's colour-blind political system was a major reason why John regarded Carnarvon's plans as utterly ill-advised.

The Secretary of State, however, was in a hurry. Britain had already annexed the diamond fields, contrary to the Orange Free State's wishes. He had no understanding of how this was already exciting renewed Boer suspicion of British intentions, and might ignite antagonism between Dutch- and English-speakers, which did not exist in Cape politics at this time. It also became apparent that Froude was not just a historian, but the Colonial Secretary's agent, and prepared to meddle openly in the Colony's affairs. When John made it clear his administration opposed Carnarvon's plans, Froude spent many months in 1875 touring South Africa, addressing public meetings and whipping up public feeling amongst Dutch speakers against the Cape government. He actually persuaded many of them that the British Government was intent on putting a self-governing South Africa in predominantly Dutch hands. In Froude's own words 'that for the first time since 1806 an English minister had shown a disposition to do justice to the Dutch'. [INSERT FOOTNOTE] He achieved this by playing his second race card, overtly directed against South Africans of colour, indicating that a confederation would 'settle Native difficulties in a manner agreeable to the Afrikander colonists'.

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<sup>34</sup> *Biographical Encyclopedia of South Africa*, p. 484.

<sup>35</sup> Sir Henry de Villiers, Chief Justice, to Percy Molteno.

<sup>36</sup> Mona Macmillan, *Sir Henry Barkly*, op. cit., p. 254.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> As reported by Sir Henry Barkly to Lord Carnarvon.

The implication was that Boer farmers would be able to go on seizing and appropriating tribal lands in the Free State and South African Republic, forcing their Black populations to work on white-owned farms, and subjecting them to all sorts of discriminatory taxes and laws. All this totally contrary to the policies John's government was pursuing in the Cape.

Froude's campaign of political interference at the behest of London was a violation of the principles of responsible government. Even more serious were the ways his efforts to win over Boer opinion to confederation stirred up their latent prejudices against both English-speaking whites and all people of colour. In the judgement of a local Cape journal, the damage done was two-fold: 'The natives got the idea into their heads that the white men were about to combine against them, and ... Dutch colonists, in their turn, were persuaded that they were a much-injured people.'<sup>39</sup>

John stuck to his guns and persisted in his objections to Carnarvon's plans and the imperial interference in the affairs of a self-governing colony they represented. The Cape Parliament supported him, instructing him to have nothing to do with the scheme.<sup>40</sup>

Carnarvon then tried to force the pace. Without consulting either John as Prime Minister or the Governor, he summoned a conference to meet in Cape Town in 1875. And to compound matters, he had the temerity to name the delegates each country should send. The Cape, despite being by far the largest and longest established of the four states, was only to have two delegates, John representing the Western Province and his long-standing opponent, Paterson, the Eastern Province.<sup>41</sup> This was a transparent attempt to undermine John's position as Prime Minister of the whole colony, and resurrect the old regional suspicions that his policies had recently laid to rest.

To make matters even worse, Froude was then unwise enough to write to John 'that there was nothing in the way of personal honours which he might not have if he agreed to support with his influence Lord Carnarvon's policy'. Sir Henry Barkly recalled how: 'I well remember how angry Mr Molteno was when he showed it to me, and how contemptuously he alluded to the fact that a similar missive had been addressed in the same mail to John Paterson'.<sup>42</sup>

The invitation to the Conference was laid before the Cape Parliament, along with the Cape Ministers' minute turning it down. Every sentence of the minute, as it was read out, was punctuated with cheers by the M.P.s who then passed a resolution approving the Cabinet's response. Carnarvon

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<sup>39</sup> *The Lantern*, 4 Sept. 1886. My assessment of the political consequences of Carnarvon and Froude's actions is supported by Mona Macmillan's account in her *Sir Henry Barkly*, op. cit., Ch 13.

<sup>40</sup> R. F. M. Immelman, *Sir John. C. Molteno*, op. cit., Ch. 8.

<sup>41</sup> *Bibliographical Encyclopedia of South Africa*, p. 484.

<sup>42</sup> Sir Henry Barkly in a letter to Percy Molteno when he was writing the biography of his father. F. Hirst, *A Man of Principle*, op. cit.

would still not admit defeat and the following year tried to resurrect the idea of a Confederation Conference, this time to take place in London.<sup>43</sup>

### July 1876 – John travels to London to confront Lord Carnarvon

In response, John decided to go to London and discuss various South African matters with the British Government, but not confederation. He took Minnie and her baby (who had been born a couple of months before their departure) with him, as well as his two eldest sons – Charlie and Percy. Betty and Maria were left in charge of Claremont House and all the younger children; Caroline had married only a couple of months before and she and Dr Murray were now living in their own home next door to Claremont House. John wanted to keep closely in touch with everything that was going on at home and instructed Maria that she and Betty must write two or three letters a week to him.<sup>44</sup> He wrote too, albeit less frequently; and his letters to the children were always most affectionate.<sup>45</sup> Two days after arriving in London, for example, he wrote Betty: ‘I wonder how you all are, how you have got on since we left. I hope, please God, this will find you all well. You must consider this letter as written to all my dear children at the Cape. Your absence is the only drawback to the pleasure and good I am deriving from this trip.... How are Barkly and Wallace? They being the smallest, I mention them more particularly. Jamsie and Victor will, I hope, write to me themselves. Ask Barkly if anyone has been teasing him while I have been away; if so, they look out when I return!’<sup>46</sup> And he ended: ‘My kindest love to you all, my dear children. Many kisses for Barkly and Wallace – you must ask them how the polar bear and walrus are getting on. I wish I could just look in and see you all for a little... I fancy if once back again, I should not easily make up my mind to leave you all again.’

He was now, of course, a significant colonial figure and on arrival saw Lord Carnarvon and ‘all the people at the Colonial Office’. Charlie and Percy did much of the copying of despatches between him and those he met. And Percy remembered with pride how his ‘father must have had considerable confidence in me; for one day he sent me with a draft for £467 to be cashed at the Bank of England, a very formidable undertaking for a boy of fifteen on his first visit to London.’<sup>47</sup>

President Brand of the Orange Free State was also in London and called on John. John also met with Sir Garnet Wolseley, one of the British Army’s most influential commanders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And although his health had been poor due to overwork prior to his departure from Cape Town, and he

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<sup>43</sup> The full story is told by Percy Molteno, *The Life and Times of Sir John Molteno*, op. cit. F. Hirst, *A Man of Principle*, op. cit. provides a concise and readable summary of Carnarvon and Froude’s two year long campaign.

<sup>44</sup> Maria Molteno to Nancy Bingle, 23 Oct. 1876.

<sup>45</sup> John Charles Molteno’s business correspondence with his partner, Percy Alport, and family correspondence. UCT Archives.

<sup>46</sup> John Molteno to Betty Molteno, 1 Aug. 1876.

<sup>47</sup> £1 in 1876 would be worth at least £60 today. So £467 must have been about £28,000, which gives some idea of John’s affluence at this time.

was having to use reading glasses for the first time, he clearly thrived on the trip, writing to Betty in August that he was remarkably well.

The Conference itself fell apart. President Burgers of the South African Republic had refused to come to London. The Cape Parliament had instructed John not to discuss the subject of confederation during his visit; so he also refused to take part.<sup>48</sup> This left only one political figure present with any authority in his own country – President Brand. On the day the Conference opened, however, he announced he would withdraw at once if there was any attempt to negotiate a Confederation which endangered the independence of his country.<sup>49</sup>

John's trip to London was useful in one respect. It provided an opportunity for him to sign the final agreement that had been reached with Donald Currie's shipping company and the Union Line to provide much improved links between the Cape and London. Currie had come to meet John and his family party at the docks on arrival and went out of his way to make their visit a pleasant one. He took them around the City to see the Bank of England, the Telegraph Office and other sights, and invited young Charlie and Percy up to Scotland to stay on his estate at Clun near Aberfeldy. 'There', Percy recalled, 'we had grouse shooting, rabbit shooting, and many rides on ponies, and thoroughly enjoyed the novelty and excitement of this new experience in such a different world from that in which we had hitherto lived.' This was the first time young Percy had met Donald Currie who he wrote to Betty was 'a very nice gentleman'. His stay with the Currie family led, as we will see, to momentous consequences.

John and Minnie, and the two boys, were also able to see his sister Nancy Bingle in Richmond and her husband. She was always a faithful correspondent with her South African nieces and nephews, and very much a presence in the family despite living in England.

## The road to dismissal

With the collapse of the conference in London, the Confederation scheme looked as though it had hit the buffers. Still Carnarvon did not desist. The very next year, 1877, he recalled Sir Henry Barkly, with whom John had got on exceptionally well, and replaced him with Sir Bartle Frere as both Governor of the Cape Colony and High Commissioner for South Africa with a mandate to carry the Confederation scheme into effect.<sup>50</sup>

In August, a violent conflict between various Xhosa-speaking tribes on the Frontier broke out.<sup>51</sup> John's Cabinet treated it initially as a police action<sup>52</sup> and deployed various largely volunteer units at

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<sup>48</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, entry on Molteno, Sir John Charles, by J. B. Atlay, rev. Christopher Saunders.

<sup>49</sup> Mona Macmillan, *Sir Henry Barkly*, op. cit., p. 251.

<sup>50</sup> R. F. M. Immelman's view, *Sir John C. Molteno*, op. cit., Ch. 8. Also *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (on-line), entry on (Henry) Bartle Edward Frere by John Benyon.

<sup>51</sup> The detailed account of what happened, entitled 'Xhosa Wars', in Wikipedia is well worth reading, and I have drawn upon it in part.

its disposal – all armed and mounted – Xhosa-speaking Mfengu who had long been living in the Cape, Boer commandos, Khoi, and English settlers on the Frontier, under the overall leadership of Chief Magistrate, Col. Charles Griffith, and Commander Veldman Bikitsha. They moved fast, were very successful, and, with the initial conflict at an end, had been largely disbanded. John rejected the situation being used by Britain as a pretext for the conquest of Gcalekaland and moving the frontier eastwards. He extracted an initial commitment from the new Governor not to allow British Army regulars to cross the border and get involved.

Various differences then arose in a so-called war council set up on the Frontier. This council consisted of the new Governor, the general in command of the British troops, and two of John's ministers. Sir Bartle Frere still wanted to escalate the conflict into a full-blooded war and occupy Gcalekaland in order to open the area to white settlement. He also insisted that British Army officers should have command over the Cape's forces. And that Black soldiers should not be allowed to keep their firearms. What's more, the Colony was to bear the costs of the whole operation. John dashed up to King Williams Town and refused all the Governor's demands. Sticking to the lessons he had learned 30 years earlier during the 1846 Frontier War, he still believed that British regular forces were incapable of conducting the kind of rapid response operations this kind of warfare on the Frontier required. He felt the Cape's forces could do the job more quickly and at much less expense. And the Cape as a self-governing colony had the right to control its own forces. Frere's response was to dismiss John on the spot on 6 February 1878, with the Cabinet then loyally resigning in support of their Prime Minister.

The dismissal was 'a most unconstitutional and improper act', in the words of a later Cape Prime Minister, John X. Merriman. *The Times* said it was 'inconsistent with all constitutional precedents'.<sup>53</sup> *The Lantern* described it as 'a *coup d'etat* hitherto unknown in the history of constitutionally governed colonies'.<sup>54</sup> The Cape Parliament had not passed a vote of no confidence in John and his Ministers before his dismissal. Nor was it subsequently given an opportunity to convene and debate the matter until the Governor had persuaded sufficient MPs to support the man, Gordon Sprigg, he wanted as Prime Minister in John's stead.

What was even more serious, and for the whole of Southern Africa, was the disastrous course of action Frere now embarked on, using his powers as High Commissioner and with Sprigg's compliant administration playing its obedient part. His first move was to authorise the annexation of the Transvaal. This attempt to extinguish the independence of the Boer Republics resulted in the Boer War of 1880-81 which for the first time pitted British forces against Boer commandos. It ended in General Colley's defeat and death at Majuba, Gladstone's new administration recalling Frere and restoring the South African Republic's independence, and the abandonment of Confederation as British policy in South Africa. But the war had ignited the ethnic tinder and sparked the emergence of modern Afrikaner nationalism that was to dominate South Africa for the next hundred years.

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<sup>52</sup> *Biographical Encyclopedia of South Africa*, p. 484.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Percy Molteno to Betty Molteno, 5 June 1881.

<sup>54</sup> *The Lantern*, 4 Sept. 1886.

The other equally disastrous course of action Frere and Sprigg engaged in was to remove the right of African tribesmen (even if they were part of the Colony's own forces) to possess guns like anyone else. Sprigg got the Cape Parliament to pass the grossly mis-named Peace Preservation Act of 1878 which, in the process of enforcing the confiscation of guns, sparked a new war in 1880-81, this time against the Basuto who were at the time under the administrative oversight of the Cape Government. Frere, as British High Commissioner for the whole region, had already used British troops the previous year, 1879, to defeat Chief Sekhukhune and the Bapedi in the occupied Transvaal. And in the same year, he allowed British colonial officials in Natal to demand the disbanding of all Zulu military forces, no matter whether they carried spears or guns, which sparked yet another war. This costly series of wars decisively shifted the balance of power between the white-controlled states and African chiefdoms to the great disadvantage of Black South Africans. In the longer run their military defeats laid the basis for another political strand in South African politics – the emergence of modern African resistance to white domination.

### **John's response to his dismissal**

John Molteno had to decide how he would react to his dismissal and the disastrous course of action the Governor and Gordon Sprigg began to pursue, which was so contrary to all he stood for. Towards the end of the year he resigned from his Beaufort West seat in Parliament which he had held without a break for the past quarter of a century and withdrew from political engagement.

His daughter, Caroline, captured the emotional drama of what this decision meant to him. 'His character never shone out more grandly than at the time of his great defeat in Parliament which really closed his political career. He had been so conscious of the absolute right of his cause that he never had a doubt but that his friends would see it too and rally round him when the battle came. The way in which he bore the trial was characteristic of all his political life. There was no petty personal feeling in it, his anxiety was all for the failure of a good cause and the strong conviction of the evil consequences which must follow and which now ... he was powerless to influence. He was a true patriot; he placed his duty to his country – not in name alone, but in actual fact – highest among his earthly duties, and he scorned to take advantage of the trust reposed in him for the benefit either of himself or any belonging to him.' [PUT IN SOURCE]

On resigning, John received a moving letter from his old colleague, William Porter, who had turned down the offer to become Prime Minister in 1872. Porter wrote from Belfast in December 1878. Hoping John might reconsider his decision to retire from Parliament, he told him: 'No man has done more, no man in fact so much, to be remembered by than you have. To have been for 18 years a leading man in the Colonial Parliament, to have formed the first Responsible Ministry, and to have for six years administered the Government of the Colony as the head of that Ministry – these things go to make a memory (?) which the Cape colonists will not willingly let die.'<sup>55</sup>

John was now 64 years old and exhausted by the years spent resisting the deeply unwise policies Britain was determined to pursue in South Africa. His son, James, recalled how the family 'noted

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<sup>55</sup> Willam Porter to J. C. Molteno, 11 Dec. 1878.

with sorrow and dismay the break-up of his fine constitution upon the reversal of his policy and dismissal of his ministry by Sir Bartle Frere.<sup>56</sup> He spent a lot of time at the cottage in Kalk Bay and James described how he remembered 'Sir Garnet Wolseley, after the disaster in Zululand<sup>57</sup> and on his way to replace Lord Chelmsford, driving down to Kalk Bay in his four-in-hand to discuss the situation with my prematurely aged father.' John's eyesight was also giving him increasing trouble. He had long had to wear dark glasses and by the early 1880s James, still in his teens, was doing his correspondence for him, spending hours reading to him from the London magazines under the oak trees at Claremont House, and discussing the intellectual controversies of the day around William Gladstone, the great Liberal leader; Thomas Huxley, the exponent of Darwin's theories of evolution; and Herbert Spencer who tried to apply the theory of the survival of the fittest to social policy.<sup>58</sup>

One lovely thing he was able to do was take the train in October 1880 all the way from Cape Town to Beaufort West just a few months after the railway he had instigated finally reached there.<sup>59</sup> Dr Murray, his son-in-law, went with him to celebrate. And Percy wrote a description of what the journey was like at that time. 'The train is very comfortable, being so arranged that you may walk from end to end and take your meals at leisure. Its speed is about 18 miles an hour.... I well remember as a boy counting skeletons of thousands of oxen, horses and mules which had perished on this very journey taking about as many days as it now takes hours. The chief feature is a rapid ascent through splendid scenery ... past bold and jagged mountain ranges. As we rise higher and higher, the green grass and dark bush of the coast gives way to a dry, arid, stony land, meagrely clothed with low scrub.'<sup>60</sup>

Within 18 months of standing down as an M.P., the political situation had so deteriorated that there were repeated requests to him to re-enter politics. Various constituencies asked him to stand. A glorious cartoon, entitled 'What we may expect from the Lion of Beaufort and the flunkey who twists the Old Boy's Tail' shows John X. Merriman unleashing John Molteno and chasing the discredited Sprigg administration out of office.<sup>61</sup>

INSERT CARTOON.

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<sup>56</sup> James Tennant Molteno, *The Dominion of Afrikanerdom*, Methuen, London, 1923. p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> The Battle of Isandhlwana where almost an entire British regiment lost their lives.

<sup>58</sup> J. T. Molteno, *The Dominion of Afrikanerdom*, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> The railway reached its intended destination, Kimberley, in 1885, the year before John died. It was extended another 300 miles to Johannesburg in 1892 following the discovery of gold there. Hedley A. Chilvers, *The Seven Wonders of Southern Africa*, published by authority of the Administration of the South African Railways and Harbours, Johannesburg, 1929, p. 288.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in F. Hirst, *A Man of Principle*, op. cit.

<sup>61</sup> *The Lantern*, 15 May 1880.

In mid 1880, and only after the Governor Sir Bartle Frere's recall in disgrace,<sup>62</sup> John did decide to return to the fray and was elected unopposed for the seat of Victoria West, which was part of his old Beaufort West constituency. When Gordon Sprigg's administration collapsed the following year, however, he refused to consider serving as Prime Minister again. Instead he recommended Thomas Scanlen, the first Cape-born man to hold the post, and helped the new administration by taking up his old post of Colonial Secretary again. But a year later he recognised that he was too old for the burdens of ministerial office and retired in June 1882 for the final time.

It was shortly after this that the British Government belatedly offered him a knighthood and conferred the honour of K.C.M.G., Knight Commander of the most distinguished Order of St Michael and St George. The Agent General for the Cape Colony in London, Sir Charles Mills, immediately wrote to him: 'Few men know better than I do how eminently deserving you are of this, and indeed of any distinction with which thorough integrity, sterling honesty and unremitting zeal in the discharge of onerous and responsible public duties, can be rewarded.' And in a postscript he added that, when Lord Kimberley, the Liberal Colonial Secretary, told him the news over dinner, Mills had replied: 'I should have been better pleased, had it been a baronetcy'; to which Kimberley responded 'So should I.'<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, one source alleges that John initially turned down the honour – 'It was not until it had been thrice pressed upon him that he would accept it'.<sup>64</sup>

### **The significance of John Molteno in South African history**

John held office as Prime Minister of the Cape for over five years. This was a longer continuous period than any of his successors during the next 30 years before the Cape became part of the Union of South Africa. When one reviews the achievements of his administration, it is all the more extraordinary how totally forgotten he is today as a political figure in South African history.<sup>65</sup>

The irony is that well over a century after he became Prime Minister, many of the values he stood for are now enshrined in South Africa's democratic constitution. Those who drafted it in the 1990s were probably mostly unaware that they were giving modern expression to the Cape's largely forgotten tradition of – no racial discrimination in law, a colour-blind franchise and the democratic idea that the duty of government is to govern in the interests of *all* the people, not some ethnic or other arbitrary fraction of the population.

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<sup>62</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, entry for 'Molteno, Sir John Charles', by J. B. Atlay, rev. Christopher Saunders.

<sup>63</sup> Sir Charles Mills to J. C. Molteno, 19 Aug. 1882. A baronetcy would have meant the title being passed on to his descendants, eldest son by eldest son.

<sup>64</sup> *The Lantern*, 4 Sept. 1886.

<sup>65</sup> General histories of South Africa often have only one or two references to John Molteno, and then of an entirely inconsequential nature with little or no reference to any significant issue he faced or policy pursued. See, for example, R. Davenport and C. Saunders, *South Africa: A Modern History*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn., 2000.

The reasons why John and the small circle of liberal Cape politicians he was a member of were so comprehensively forgotten are clear. They rejected both anti-Boer prejudice on the part of English-speaking whites and the notion that there was some inevitable divide between these two communities; and political and legal discrimination against their fellow citizens of colour. But powerful forces came into being in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that overwhelmed what they stood for in both these respects. The Cape's economic and political primacy gave way to the South African Republic (later the Transvaal) following the discovery of the world's richest deposits of gold in 1886. Afrikaner nationalism emerged in response to Britain's repeated attempts to eliminate the Boer Republics and was determined both to marginalise English-speaking whites politically and install a comprehensive system of discrimination against all South Africans of colour. These forces triumphed with the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, and in the process utterly displaced the Cape political tradition.

It is easy to feel there isn't much point thinking about what a political figure did who was influential in his country 150 years ago. Our world today is so different from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Or is it? We still face questions of sovereignty, not at the hands of colonial powers, but an era of over-mighty transnational corporations, the rules of regional trading blocs, and a host of international treaties states have signed up to since the Second World War. Ethnic prejudice and immigration policy are once again threatening to dominate politics in many countries. And the great democratic question never goes away: in whose interests should government be conducted – the people at large, or only some segment of the population? Indeed, are democratic institutions to be taken for granted, or must they still be fought for where they do not yet exist, and defended where they do? These are all questions John confronted in his time. They are still questions for us today. The specific *forms* of such questions may look different across the ages and from country to country. But the *underlying substance* of what is at stake is often very similar.

This is one reason why I have recounted the story of John Molteno's political life in such detail. For nearly 20 years, he fought for the people of the Cape Colony to be self-governing, free from the dominance of Whitehall decision-making and far off British interests. And when the struggle was won, he became Prime Minister of the new self-governing state and laid the foundations for it to be a modern, tolerant and gradually more democratic country.

He had two fundamental political issues to face. One was whether relations between Dutch and English-speaking people would remain harmonious, or descend into mutual antagonism. The other was whether relations between people of European origin and all other South Africans would continue on a basis of legal equality and tend towards a common society in which all individuals could share and prosper. The answers became abundantly – and tragically – clear in the generation after John. Fortunately for him, he did not live to see how comprehensively all that he stood for was overturned in the gathering maelstrom of Afrikaner nationalism and white South African racism. Historians ignore John in a way rightly, not because what he did was unimportant, but because the kind of South Africa he believed held out a future of democracy and increasing prosperity for all its people was swept aside utterly for a whole century following his time in politics.

**What manner of man – Conservative? Liberal? Radical? Modern?**

Journalists and historians often like to pin labels on political leaders. It leads to over-simplification. It can also be outright misleading, particularly when talking about politics long ago. Words change their meanings. And when we see a political label used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we cannot assume that it meant the same then as it might today. In John's time, Eastern Cape political figures like Gordon Sprigg described themselves as 'progressives'. They were of the view that it was progressive to support the expansion of the British Empire in Southern Africa, if need be by war, and progressive to curb the power of chiefs and replace communal rights over land with private tenure. John did not regard such steps as 'progressive'. He was suspicious of British imperial intentions to foist its Confederation scheme on Southern Africa and he was accused by some of his critics of preserving the power of chiefs in places like Basutoland and holding back white settlement on African land.

Particular confusion attaches to the label 'liberal'. Historians might describe John as a liberal. And so he was in certain ways. But Americans today might then misunderstand his politics because, in the United States, the term 'liberal' is used by right-wing politicians to decry 'big government' and state-provided social welfare. John was not a liberal in those senses. But when liberal means unprejudiced, open-minded, a believer in the equality of all men before the law, and committed to a democratic system built on the right of people to participate regardless of ethnicity, then indeed he was a liberal. Of all the white political leaders who held supreme office in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa, he was the only one who stuck firmly in his actions to the vision of South Africa's future as a common society in which all its inhabitants, regardless of ethnicity or colour or language, should have equal rights.

John X Merriman, who served in John's Cabinet as a young man and eventually became the last Prime Minister of the Cape, described his mentor as a conservative, and in a way correctly so. He wrote: 'John Molteno's bent of mind was certainly conservative, slow to snatch at change for the sake of change, and determined to weigh carefully every argument before he committed himself to any given course.' And conservative in another very different sense too: 'No one before or since has so completely obtained the confidence of the ... colonists of Dutch descent. As a large landowner, a conservative, and at the same time an ardent believer in the right of self-government..., Mr Molteno was looked up to as the natural leader of the country party, whose policy he guided without pandering to their prejudices.'<sup>66</sup> No wonder he was called 'the Beaufort Boer'.

I suggest, however, John was also a radical in his day. He was no respecter of persons just because they might be aristocrats in England. He believed in social mobility for everyone who worked hard and he saw the importance of education in making personal advancement possible. He was uncompromising in his belief that the people of the Cape should govern themselves and determined that the British authorities, whether the Colonial Secretary in London or the Governor in Cape Town, should fully respect the autonomy of the Cape's government.<sup>67</sup> He was critical of British imperialism when it resorted to war and annexation, be this of the Boer republics or African chiefdoms. He was firm in asserting the rights of all persons, regardless of ethnicity, to buy land and to bear arms – even

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<sup>66</sup> P. A. Molteno, *The Life and Times of Sir J.C.Molteno*, op cit., Vol. 2, p. 454.

<sup>67</sup> Mona Macmillan, *Sir Henry Barkly*, op. cit., makes clear that Sir Henry Barkly thought John 'took what I considered an extreme view' in rejecting 'Imperial interference in the affairs of the Cape Colony'. H. Barkly to P. A. Molteno, 6 Jan. 1894.

when this was unpopular among some whites. And he proved bold in using the state as an instrument to foster development. All these stances were radical for the age he lived in.

And lastly he was an old-fashioned man, but also a modern man. A patriarch within his family, no doubt. And a man who preferred to ride the 700 miles to Nelspoort and back on horseback rather than travel less strenuously by coach – something his political opponents mocked him for. But he also revelled in debating the scientific and political issues of the day with his children. He applied a business perspective to his farming. And as Prime Minister he embraced the new technologies of telegraph and steam.

It is always misleading to use one or two adjectives to sum up a public figure. In John's case, it is all the more foolish. In the end, there is only one test: examine what he did, issue by issue, and form your own judgement on the facts. And remember that, with everything he did in his political life, he brought to bear certain personal qualities. Unremitting energy, never sparing himself in the task at hand. Courage, refusing to be intimidated or bullied. Principled; once he believed in a course of action, he stuck to it. Passionate in his manner and his commitment. And incorruptible.

In his personal life, he was demanding of his wife and children; but he was also intensely interested in them and affectionate. 'Life with Papa could never be dull,' said Caroline. With other people, he was often shy and not naturally gregarious, although he could rise to the occasion and be great company. Catherine Glass, Uncle Charles Dominic Molteno's stepdaughter, saw John during his visits to Scotland. She wrote to Percy how struck she was by his father's 'clear insight, integrity, unswerving resolution, with a kindly interest in others, [they] made a character rarely to be met with, so just and honourable. I had a great liking and admiration for all I knew or had seen of your Father.'<sup>68</sup>

That John Molteno should be a forgotten figure in his country's history reflects only one fact – that every other white South African politician who became a Prime Minister or President in the century that followed his expulsion from office lacked the courage, political wisdom and moral commitment to building a country in which all South Africans could share that John Molteno held to throughout his life.

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<sup>68</sup> Catherine Glass to Percy Molteno, 28 Feb. 1899.