

Halford, George Britton (1824 – 1910)

George Britton Halford (1824-1910), professor, was born on 26 November 1824 at Petworth, Sussex, England, the second son of James Halford, merchant of Haverstock Hill near London, and his wife Nancy, née Gadd. Privately educated, he studied medicine at St George's Hospital, London (M.R.C.S., 1852; L.S.A., 1854), and obtained the M.D. at St Andrews in 1854. He became a member of the Royal College of Physicians in 1859 and a fellow in July 1870 but was never formally admitted. In 1850 he had been house surgeon at the Westminster Hospital and in 1856 senior house surgeon to the Liverpool Royal Infirmary and Lunatic Asylum. He was also honorary surgeon to the Bridgnorth Infirmary and in 1857 physician to the Royal Hospital for Diseases of the Chest, London; he also had a private practice. In October he was appointed lecturer in anatomy at the Grosvenor Place School of Medicine adjoining St George's Hospital. There he investigated the physiology of the action and sounds of the heart in animals, birds and man, a work of first-rate importance.

In 1862 planning for the medical school at the University of Melbourne was well advanced and lectures to first-year students had begun under John Macadam. Professors James Paget and Richard Owen were invited to select a suitable candidate for the first chair of anatomy, physiology and pathology. Assisted by Sir Redmond Barry then in London, they chose Halford who had worked with Owen on the heart and whom Paget described as 'one of the most distinguished experimental physiologists of the day. His name would give distinction to any University'. Halford's appointment was endorsed and he gave up his practice to collect specimens for a museum and books for a library, for which the Council of the University of Melbourne had sent him £500. With his wife and family he left England on 6 September in the *Agincourt* and arrived at Melbourne on 23 December.

Halford lived at first in a rented house in Madeline Street, Carlton, and until the building for the medical school was completed in May 1864 held his lectures and practical classes in anatomy and physiology in the converted coach-house of his private residence in May 1863. In that year he was admitted M.D. (*ad eund.*) in the University of Melbourne. The curriculum for the medical course had been prepared by (Sir) Anthony Brownless and the Medical School Committee before Halford arrived. At the professorial board he protested against the poor scientific content of the first year, notably the absence of natural philosophy. For seven years he was the only full-time lecturer in the medical school and the sole lecturer in anatomy for which he was given a demonstrator in 1869. As well as teaching in three rapidly expanding disciplines Halford was examiner in French for matriculation and arts students. In 1871, as president of the professorial board, he fired an early shot in the long battle over the admission of women students by informing the council that he proposed to allow women who passed the relevant examinations to sign the matriculation book. This plan was quickly stopped by the council and women were not admitted to the university until 1880. Halford served on the council of the Royal Society of Victoria in 1864-67 and 1871 and was vice-president in 1868 and 1870. In 1871, also, he was President of the Medical Society of Victoria.

In 1876 the faculty of medicine was established and took over administration of courses from the Medical School Committee. Halford was elected dean and held office until 1886 and again in 1890-96. In 1880 he went on leave to England for a year to inspect and work in departments of physiology. On his return he presented plans to the council for expansion of the physiology laboratories and division

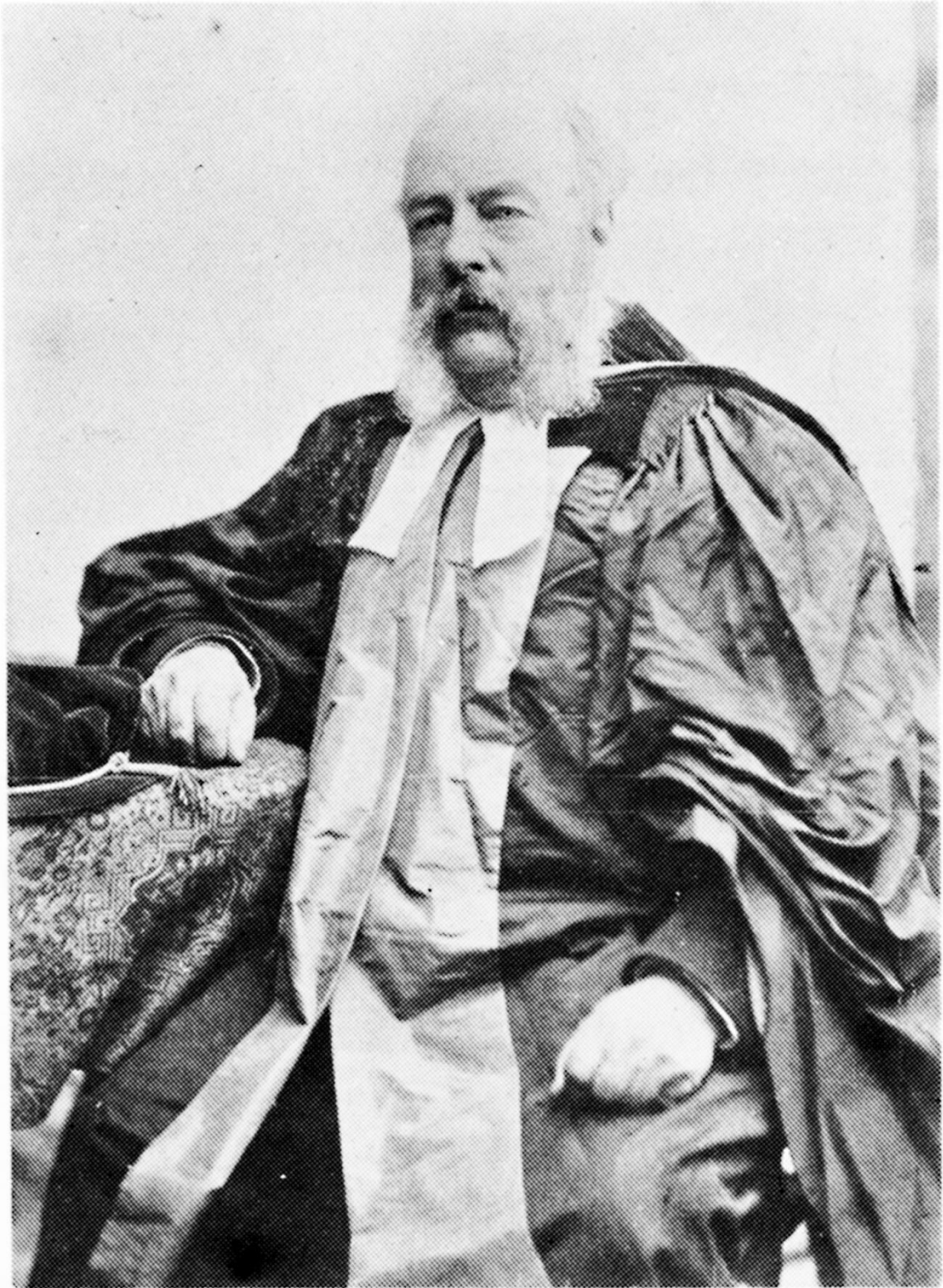
of his chair so that he would be responsible only for physiology; the proposals were accepted and in 1882 Halford became professor of physiology and (Sir) Harry Brookes Allen professor of anatomy. From three students in 1862 the school had 180 by 1882 and 240 by 1896.

Halford was instrumental in shaping the medical curriculum at the university and was deeply involved in research, particularly in comparative anatomy and treatments for snakebite. He was known for his opposition to Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories, which he vocally challenged. Of some thirty papers and pamphlets, his most important were published in London before he came to Melbourne. The best, *The Action and Sounds of the Heart; A Physiological Essay* (London, 1860), deserves reprinting.

At Hanover Square, London, in 1857 Halford had married Louisa Henrietta, eldest daughter of the late Thomas Millar; they had twelve children. He died at Inverloch on 27 May 1910, survived by his widow, six sons and three daughters. He was buried in the Inverloch cemetery. By then he had been forgotten, and no substantial obituary appeared in the journals. His family established the Halford Oration in his memory in 1928. In 1928-47 the lectures were delivered at the Institute of Anatomy, Canberra, but in 1948 by agreement with the family the fund was transferred to the University of Melbourne and the orations have since been delivered in Melbourne.

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Sources: Russell, KF., *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 1972, Vol.4.; and *Encyclopaedia of Australian Science and Innovation*.



George Britton Halford in 1886, professor of anatomy, physiology and pathology.