

IMIFANEKISO.

Photographic portraits in mid-nineteenth century Natal:
the work of Dr R.J.Mann

Jeff Guy
Programme of Historical Studies
University of Natal
Durban 4041
guy@nu.ac.za

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[The seminar will begin with a viewing of a selection of Mann's
photographic portraits after which I will present the final part of this
paper]

Robert James Mann – a short biography

Robert James Mann was born in Norwich in 1817 but the early death of his father led to his being brought up in a relative's home in London. Without any particular social or economic advantages he was largely self-educated, developing a great interest in the natural sciences. At the age of twenty he gained a place at University College London and in 1840 began to practice as a medical doctor in Norwich. His first publication – a list of flora in a Natural History periodical – dates from that year. The relatives who had brought him up died, and because of a late alteration in the will, he was excluded from the bequest, and for the rest of his life the manner in which he pursued his objectives was strongly influenced by financial necessity. But he was never to lose his early interest in science and education and it was at one of his lectures at the Norwich museum in 1847 – 'The Jaws and Teeth of Quadrupeds' – that he met the woman he was to marry and who was to publish (posthumously and privately) his biography¹. His low financial standing was an obstacle to their marriage but the objections of her family were eventually overcome and in 1850 they married and moved to Buxton where he practised as a country doctor.

His *The Planetary and Stellar Universe*, over 200 pages long, was published in 1845, and was based, he said in the Preface, on private lectures he had given to friends. It was dedicated to Sir John Herschel, Astronomer Royal, the subject of an iconic photograph by Julia Cameron - and it is said the man who coined the word 'photograph'.² It is an informative and clearly written book by a man confident in his grasp of the subject and enthusiastic in his attempt to pass on his knowledge. As in all Mann's work the Almighty is present, but not overbearingly so. It is by His presence however that scientific knowledge is able to escape a dry materialism, because it enables

.... each mighty world, with powers raging and foaming ceaselessly upon its surface to do the behests of God. In this we have no longer a barren, skeleton idea; it is a sublime and living picture enframed in space and hung before us, an awful tracing of the eternal finger that has called worlds, and law, and perceiving creatures into being.³

Robert Mann's health was never robust, and life in the north-east of England, and the work of a country doctor, proved to be onerous. In 1853 the Manns moved south, to the Isle of Wight, where Robert hoped to be able to make a living from his 'mind and the work of his pen'. Here at Ventnor he made a number of illustrious friends, including the Poet Laureate, Tennyson, who he defended

¹ [Caroline Mann] 'A sketch of the life and work of Robert James Mann M.D. F.R.C.S.', by his wife printed for private circulation.' 1888.

² Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 105.

³ Robert James Mann, *The planetary and stellar universe (A series of lectures)* (London, 1845) 87. My treatment of Mann's books is based on an examination of the holdings in the British Library. It is not complete, nor entirely compatible with information given in his wife's biography of her husband.

vigorously from his critics in a long article on the poem 'Maud'.⁴ He also wrote many articles on science (over thirty for *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal* between 1851 and 1859) and a number of books published of a practical, improving kind. There was *The Book of Health* which formed part of a series aimed at schools,⁵ followed by *The Guide to the Knowledge of Life*⁶ and then *The Philosophy of Reproduction*⁷ in which Mann hoped

to explain familiarly such points of physiological science as could not appropriately have been noticed in the "Guide to the Knowledge of Life," on account [of] that little work being designed for a very general circulation, and to a great extent for the use of the young.'

Again, Mann's approach is straightforward and accessible: he acknowledged both the achievements of the founders of biological science but also the difficulties for the general reader raised by scientific terminology. In *The Philosophy of Reproduction* he did not hazard an attempt to write about reproduction in terms of gross morphology and dealt with it at a microscopic level, introducing the reader to the cell, cell division, and inheritance, battling with the problems of heredity, as did Darwin in these pre-Mendelian times. Thus enlightened education was Mann's answer for the tendency (as he saw it) for the prolonged practice of vicious habits to become inherited traits.

In 1856 Mann published *Lessons in General Knowledge*, a reading book for young people in which he explicitly advanced his ideas on good educational practice.⁸ Effective learning for Mann demanded an integrated approach. Thus in this book the language was kept simple, although scientific terms were introduced when necessary, while the topics selected were 'suggestive and inciting rather than of an exhaustive character'. The various themes were introduced in a manner which carefully linked what went before with developments to come, and although interspersed with anecdotes and biographies of those individuals who had played a role in the field being discussed, care was taken not to disrupt the sequence. The book began with the globe itself, meteorology, natural phenomena, (lightning/Benjamin Franklin), climate, climatic zones, the people of different climatic zones, mountains, earthquakes, rivers, seas (explorers), animal life, basic physiology, reason, intellect (Sir Thomas More), sound, light, the ear, the eye, microscope, telescope, (Galileo), the moon, the planet, the stars, and (with a jump), the machine and the steam engine. Always practical, concerned about the application of knowledge,

⁴ Robert James Mann, *Tennyson's "Maud" Vindicated: an explanatory essay* (London: Jarrold & Sons).

⁵ Robert James Mann, *The Book of Health* (London: Gleig's School Series, 1854). Mann sold the copyright of this book for £200.

⁶ Longmans, 1855. I have not seen a copy of this book but it is referred in other of Mann's books and his biography.

⁷ Robert James Mann, *The Philosophy of Reproduction* (London, Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans 1855).

⁸ Robert James Mann, *Lessons in general knowledge. An elementary reading book intended to serve as a familiar and attractive introduction to the principles of natural science* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1856).

Mann's book on physiology was justified in terms of its impact on health.⁹ His views on science education are dealt with in his *Guide to astronomical science*.¹⁰ Mann believed that while mathematics was too abstract to stimulate the imagination of the young person, this was not true for the physical sciences through which information with a vital social role could be acquired. And of all the physical sciences the best was physiology where chemistry and physics can be perceived working within the body, and provide an immediate starting point for further scientific study. As far as abstract knowledge was concerned astronomy was the best introduction to mathematics, while at the same time making 'the mind tolerant of uncertainty and doubt, by keeping present to it the sense that there must always be much in so wide an Universe which the human intellect cannot grasp....'

Judgement of such books is difficult a century and a half later. However the search for a wide audience, the emphasis on the applied and socially relevant, the basic concern to utilise and confirm the interconnectedness of knowledge and the need to establish the social role of learning, outweigh the Victorian notions of improvement and progress. Mann's wife found her husband's educational work important because:

They were on sanitary subjects, as Fresh Air, Pure Water, Good, Wholesome Drink, Warm Clothing, and a Well-Trained Mind, the worth and importance of each being explained and insisted upon..... These tracts are worthy of remembrance as being one of the earliest attempts to bring a knowledge of sanitary matters under the notice of the labouring classes.¹¹

I have yet to establish how it was that John William Colenso, bishop of Natal, got to hear of Robert James Mann. It has been suggested that there were links in Norwich which was the home town of Colenso's wife's family.¹² But Colenso offered Mann a post as lay superintendent of the school at Ekukhanyeni, with the task of overseeing the mission's educational initiatives in Natal as a whole, with an emphasis on the teaching of science. Julia Cameron introduced Mann to the Astronomer Royal so that he could consult him on how best to continue his study of astronomy in South Africa. Herschel successfully persuaded Mann that the keeping of accurate meteorological records 'as entirely untouched ground in South Africa, and compassable without the expensive observatory arrangements' would be a more useful endeavor on which to concentrate.

⁹ Robert James Mann, *A guide to the knowledge of life, vegetable and animal; being a comprehensive Manual of Physiology, viewed in relation to the maintenance of health*. Second edition, London Jarrold and Sons, 1856.

¹⁰ Robert James Mann, *A guide to astronomical science* (London: Jarrold and sons) British Library copy stamped 24 Feb 58.

¹¹ 'Sketch', 36.

¹² A.M.P. Kiernan, 'The Work for Education in Natal of Robert James Mann (1857 – 1865)', M Ed University of Manchester.

Before he left England Mann decided that he should learn another skill:

From the first anticipation of life in a new country, he had bethought himself of Photography, a scientific art in which he had always been greatly interested as a valuable means of showing what the land and its people were like.¹³

A grateful patient gave Mann a camera and the equipment needed for developing and printing, and an amateur photographer instructed him on how to use them. He arrived in Natal in October 1857 and within months Colenso was sending photographic portraits back to England.¹⁴ It was difficult work. Constance Mann called it laborious

I say laborious, because such it always seemed to me from the many circumstances difficult to command that were requisite for success, and the oft-repeated trials and failures that had in consequence to be made, and made good. Almost every mail some views or portraits were sent home by ourselves and the Colensos: and on counting up the numbers that had gone within a few months, we found, on one occasion, that they amounted to nearly a hundred.

But Mann found that work at the mission station did not suit him and by the beginning of 1859 he had decided to leave the mission and, with the assistance of Governor Scott, who sympathised with 'practical' Mann's vocational approach to education, took up the post of Superintendent of Education. There was no particular disagreement between the Manns and the Colensos but they were not compatible. Robert Mann found the work being carried out Ekukhanyeni impractical and physically difficult, and Sarah Frances Colenso did not think much of Mann's standard of education, nor his idea that a teacher's talent as a communicator was more important than scholarship. Nonetheless no historian has ever recognised the influence of Mann's popular science books on some of Colenso's most interesting readers – Colenso's book on science in simple English for Zulu learners, and his Zulu book on hygiene and the body.¹⁵

Mann was to play an important part in the intellectual life of the colony, giving lectures, presiding over the Natal Society, taking meteorological records. He also wrote a number of works on Natal to promote the colony as a place of immigration. He went on to organise the Natal exhibit at the 1862 Imperial and Colonial exhibition in London in which photographs, including his own, were a prominent feature.

At Photography he worked indefatigably from first to last of his life in Natal. The practice of this art was often rendered difficult from chemicals spoiling with the heat of the climate and very laborious from the additional personal fatigue produced by the same cause. He amassed by degrees a large collection both of views and portraits, and of the last formed a very interesting and important series in connection with the Natal contribution to the great Exhibition of 1862. In preparation for, and to form a portion of this, he took portraits of all natives from whom he could obtain sittings, whose feature or dress illustrated any peculiarity of tribe or race and thus secured a large number of Zulu's and other Kafir's portraits.¹⁶

¹³ 'Sketch' 47

¹⁴ Killie Campbell Library: Colenso collection, file 6. J.W.Colenso to Allnut, 6 February 1858

¹⁵ This writer included – although I haven't had the opportunity to compare them closely the connections are clearly there.

¹⁶ 'Sketch', 41.

Mann left Natal in 1866 after nine years, was Natal's Emigration Agent in London for two years, before Natal's financial circumstances forced his retrenchment. He lived in London on his own careful investments, continuing his work on science education, organising exhibitions, promoting the interest in Natal, participating in civic affairs and playing an active role in learned societies including the Photographic Society. He died in 1880.

In the Exhibition of 1862 Dr Mann showed some 16 views he had taken of Pietermaritzburg and its environs, and 34 portraits of Africans. But we have only the catalogue descriptions of these not the prints themselves. Working from the style of photographs in the Pietermaritzburg Archive Repository, the Campbell Collections, the British Library, the nature of the prints, and the context in which they are held I have traced about 60 portraits, more than half of them of settlers, I believe to have been taken by Mann. Only a very small proportion of these can definitely be attributed to him. It is quite possible that more exist in other collections, perhaps with the diaries his wife used in the writing of her biographical sketch, probably in England.

For this seminar I have selected 20 photographs taken by Mann. They are all photographic portraits, taken by an amateur photographer in a make-shift studio I assume in Pietermaritzburg. They date from about 1860 and at the time the most likely method to be used would have been the wet-plate or collodion process and the print made on paper soaked in egg albumen and sodium chloride. They are therefore amongst the earliest to have been taken and preserved in South Africa – and they have not been systematically studied and reproduced before.