

The Times Literary Supplement
April 30, 2016

After the fashion of their country
ED WEECH; NANCY; CARRIE ETTER | 3235 words

Thomas Manning (1772-1840) is in the first rank of early British sinologists and was one of Europe's first lay scholars of China. He was a contemporary of Sir George Staunton and Robert Morrison, serving with them as an interpreter on the Amherst Embassy to Peking in 1816, and his research and contribution to Britain's early understanding of China has hitherto been overlooked owing to a want of primary material. This will be remedied by the discovery, in late 2014, of a forgotten cache of Manning's papers. The collection includes a significant amount of correspondence with family and friends, notebooks and journals, and spans the majority of Manning's life.

Its appearance puts to rest the fear that most of Manning's papers were lost or destroyed. The archive was acquired by the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (RAS) last summer. This completely fresh and original collection is being catalogued by the Society's Archivist and is already available to scholars. Study of the collection will be of immense value in furthering our understanding of European political and cultural engagement with Asia in the early nineteenth century: a critical period of interaction between the West and the wider world.

Manning has traditionally been noted for his connection to the essayist Charles Lamb, on whom Manning had an influence second only to that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Manning was also acquainted with other major literary figures of the early 1800s, including Coleridge, Charles Lloyd and William Wordsworth.

Manning arrived in Canton in January 1807. Europeans were confined to a small stretch of land and for Manning his time there was chiefly an opportunity to improve his Chinese and make plans for excursions into China's interior. He wrote to his father that his progress with the language was good and he felt that he was making discoveries that were new among Europeans. Yet life in Canton was a challenge, and soon after his arrival Manning wrote back to a friend: You must consider me sitting alone in a room at the very extremity of the earth having nothing but the tones of a Chinese string instrument played on by a Chinese servant. . . . Surrounded on all sides by people whose thoughts, actions, dress and affections have nothing in common with Europe, and where the only people with whom I can have intercourse are a few men drawn here by commerce. . . . Yet for all that you are not to suppose me unhappy, quite the contrary. I have not undertaken what is beyond my strength. Manning recorded his observations on life and events in Canton. One episode which took place soon after his arrival was the riot that led to the death of a Chinese man and precipitated a diplomatic incident over the crew of the East Indiaman Neptune. Manning appears to have observed the events on the day and wrote an eyewitness account, as well as comments on the ensuing trial: The court is opened in a very striking manner - 1st Solemn & lofty words by a herald - then a lengthened resounding cry of hou. . . then a sonorous & awful clangor of Gongs - But what is the examination that succeeded - in one word Nonsense! Each man asked to say that he is guilty or to accuse some of his companions. Each man refuses. . . . To hear those

ragamuffins speak they were all as gentle as Lambs that day. .. would not hurt a Chinaman for the world. In late 1807 Manning tried to offer his services as a physician and astronomer to the Emperor, but was rebuffed on the ground that there was a sufficient retinue of European astronomers in the capital.

Then in early 1808 he set about a trip to enter China through Vietnam. He later wrote that the project failed owing to insufficient time and encountering a shipwreck which was rescued at his insistence. He wrote to Lamb: "I can hardly bear even now to think of it with patience". He continued to make progress with his Chinese, however: "I have discovered the nature of the tones. I can speak. I can read. I am sure of being able to pursue the study of Chinese books in Europe".

In 1810 Manning formed an alternative plan: to enter China via Tibet. He travelled to Bengal and arrived in Calcutta early in the year, writing to his father of dealings with European "missionaries in Calcutta who claim to know something of the Chinese language but they have it wrong. .. their translations of Confucius are a map of mistakes". (There are eight letters from Joshua Marshman in the archive thanking Manning for his help with Chinese translation.) Manning was delayed for over a year in India while he waited in vain for official support for his journey, finally leaving in August 1811. The route was to take him through Bhutan and into Tibet, travelling in the guise of a physician and hoping to keep his nationality vague and his time in Canton a secret.

The recent advance of British power in India was a cause of concern in China and Manning wanted to avoid arousing suspicion about his motives. He was accompanied by a single Chinese servant to act as interpreter. This is the only part of Manning's travels ever to have been published, appearing posthumously in 1876 in *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*.

A handwritten manuscript of this work is now in the RAS archive. The archive also contains Manning's Tibet notebooks, with his linguistic notes on the Tibetan language and the few field notes he could take without seeming suspicious, including details of medical treatments he administered to local people. Manning was frustrated by the absence of any official endorsement for his mission: I cannot help exclaiming, in my mind (as I often do), what fools the Company are to give me no commission, no authority, no instructions. What use are their embassies when their ambassador cannot speak to a soul, and can only make ordinary phrases pass through a stupid interpreter? No finesse, no tournure, no compliments. Fools, fools, fools to neglect an opportunity they may never have again!

When he arrived in Lhasa he was worried that he would be recognized by someone who knew him from Canton and who would seek to stop him advancing further. He was granted an audience with the 9th Dalai Lama, six-year old Lungtok Gyatso, on December 17, 1811. Although not a particularly religious man in any conventional sense, Manning was greatly moved by the experience: [He] had the simple and unaffected manners of a well-educated princely child. His face was, I thought, poetically affecting and beautiful. He was of a gay and cheerful disposition; his beautiful mouth perpetually unbending into a graceful smile, which illuminated his

whole countenance. . . . I was extremely affected by this interview with the Lama. I could have wept through strangeness of sensation.

Manning stayed some months in Lhasa but his situation became increasingly stressful because of growing suspicions about his presence and his difficulties in conversing with anyone. His Chinese interpreter was arrested and eventually it became clear Manning must return the way he had come or risk serious consequences. The sense of foreboding and suppressed panic that is evident in his journal at this time was understandable. Not only did he feel powerless in strange surroundings, but the consciousness of what he had left behind to undertake this doomed journey was always with him. Indeed, Manning's father had died while he was in India. This put an end to the steady stream of correspondence Manning had sent during his travels over the past dozen years.

When he left Tibet he was in his fortieth year, and the end of this trip could be considered something of a watershed in his life. However, he returned to Canton and continued with his Chinese studies. Another opportunity arose to see more of China with the mission of the Amherst Embassy, which departed for Peking in 1816 with the aim of establishing better commercial relations between China and Britain. Manning enrolled with the Embassy as an interpreter. William, 1st Earl Amherst, the ambassador extraordinary, objected to Manning's beard and Chinese dress; George Staunton had to intervene to secure him a place. The presence of Manning, Staunton and Robert Morrison on the Embassy indicated the strides that had been made in the study of Chinese by British sinologists since the Macartney Embassy, undertaken twenty-five years earlier, and there was optimism about prospects for improved trade between the two countries. The Embassy ended in failure, however, partly because of the familiar disagreement over performing the "kowtow" ceremony as well as a perceived slight to the Emperor by Amherst when the Embassy arrived in Peking. In the event, the Embassy was only in Peking for a few hours before its members were ordered to depart. So Manning was not able to see and explore Peking, although he was able to observe some of the country along the journey. Having spent ten years in Asia, he decided to return to England with Amherst's Embassy, and left Canton aboard the *Alceste* in January 1817. The return trip was to prove eventful, with the *Alceste* suffering shipwreck in the Java Sea in February. Amherst and his Embassy (including Manning) then set off in a barge for Batavia, leaving the rest of the crew on the island of Pulau Liat, where they were rescued by the Ternate about two weeks later. The rest of the voyage was completed on board the *Caesar*. In June 1817 they stopped in St Helena and Manning met Napoleon. It appears Napoleon was deeply interested in Manning's travels in Tibet and his meeting with the Dalai Lama, and by all accounts was very pleased with the interview. For Manning, it must have been a curious thing to meet Bonaparte in circumstances so different from those of his first encounter in 1802. The archive contains rough notes Manning made after talking with Napoleon and Sir Hudson Lowe, Governor of St Helena. Manning finally returned to England in August 1817. He did not merely settle into retirement, however. He planned to continue his Chinese studies and there is also evidence to suggest he sought to promote the study of Chinese more broadly. Manning had brought with him two Chinese: one a literary man to help with his studies, the other a servant from Henan who he thought could teach men training for Canton at the East India Company College. Manning wrote to the Company asking for financial support for

his two companions, but received a reply to the effect that they would not oblige, as they had no need of them. Manning mentions one of the Chinese teachers, Mr Lee, residing with him until at least October 1818. As well as continuing his Chinese studies Manning struck up his old friendships with Lamb, Wordsworth and Coleridge. In 1824 he offered his services to the Royal Asiatic Society to care for a large donation of Chinese books from Sir George Staunton, and was appointed Honorary Chinese Librarian. He actively assisted Stanislas Julien in acquiring Chinese literature and nine of Julien's letters to Manning are in the archive. Manning's own collection of Chinese books was renowned as the best of its kind in Europe, and was bequeathed to the RAS after his death. Manning died in Bath in 1840. He did not publish any accounts of his discoveries, a fact generally attributed to a sense of disappointment or even failure over his Chinese travels. But he is said to have been generous in sharing his knowledge and learning, and his obituary in the Gentleman's Magazine recorded that in his "hermet-like retreat, buried in the finest Chinese library in Europe, he was visited by the greatest characters of the age, some of Her Majesty's ministers, and the most distinguished literati". His friend Samuel Ball noted that "I can say with great truth, what Fox said of Burke, that I have learned more from him in conversation than from books". Now at last Manning's archive, encompassing his philological, literary, philosophical and mathematical enquiries, may help to inspire new research and perhaps some reassessment of what we mean by "Orientalism". Although Manning has been viewed at times as a "hopeless eccentric", it is to be hoped that fresh discoveries will bear out T. H. Barrett's suggestion in *Singular Listlessness* that to the contrary "he was one of the most farsighted men of the age, and. .. his failure to publish the results of his researches into things Chinese stemmed perhaps from an awareness that 'all the world was drunk and he alone was sober'". The Manning Archive was acquired with assistance from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, Arts Council England/Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund, Friends of the National Libraries, and several private donations. Ortigia, Sicily