The Experience of Augustine Henry in Yunnan 1896-1900

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Abstract

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This dissertation is a study of Irish plant collector Augustine Henry's (1857-1930) work in Yunnan from 1896-1900 and an exploration of its effect on how he viewed himself in relation to the professionalisation of late-Victorian botany, and on how he viewed late-Qing Yunnan. Taking Henry's letters to the Director of Kew, William Thiselton-Dyer (1843–1928), and to his friend Evelyn Gleeson (1855–1944) as its principal source base, this dissertation argues that plant collection functioned as a way to transform the alienating experience of a colonial official in late-Imperial China into something imbued with a sense of higher purpose. Plant collecting gave Henry access to prominent botanists in Europe and America and these relationships significantly influenced how he perceived his own labours, and his own place within the scientific community. It also gave him a lens through which to view and interpret China. It was in either case, the labour of collection which created and maintained these relationships and ways of seeing. This dissertation is a case study of how Henry's life in Yunnan, his emotional life and his scientific life, were fundamentally shaped by these labours.

Contents

Introduction

> 'O Tiger-lily' said Alice, [...] 'I wish you could talk!' 'We can talk' said the Tiger-lily: 'when there's anybody worth talking to.' [...] At length, as the Tiger-lily only went on waving about, she spoke again, in a timid voice—almost in a whisper. 'And can all the flowers talk?' 'As well as you can,' said the Tiger-lily. 'And a great deal louder.'
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> *Through the Looking-Glass*
>
> *Lewis Carroll*

Many lilies have been called tiger lilies, and they come from the world over. The bright orange *Lilium bulbiferum* grows on mountainsides across Europe. The elegantly drooping *Lilium columbianum* is native to western North America. And the *Lilium henryi* is from the mountains of central China. The *Gardeners' Chronicle*, a popular Victorian gardening periodical, reported on the *Lilium henryi*, a dried specimen of which had just arrived from China to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, in December 1888 under the heading *New or Noteworthy Plants*.[1] Western China, the *Chronicle* reported, was one of the two parts of the world "from which new and interesting plants [were] pouring in at the most rapid rate".[2] This rapid inward flow of Chinese plants was largely the work of one man, the lily's namesake whom the *Chronicle* dubbed their "indefatigable correspondent", the Irish plant collector Augustine Henry (1857-1930).[3] Henry was, to borrow the phrase from Carroll's tiger lily, someone whom plants found it worth talking to, and his collection work

[1] The Gardeners' Chronicle :A Weekly Illustrated Journal of Horticulture and Allied Subjects. Vol.4. London. https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/26090005. p.660.

[2] ibid.

[3] ibid.

brought to the notice of Western botanical institutions tens of thousands of species.[4] This dissertation is, to take a little poetic licence, my attempt to eavesdrop on Henry's long conversation with the plants of China. Plants, as far as we know, cannot speak, at least not to humans, but 19th century botanists and plant collectors, despite this inconvenience, derived from their labours novel ways of understanding plant life, and novel ways of understanding themselves and their role within their society. This dissertation is, to take no poetic licence, a study of Henry's plant collection work in Yunnan from 1896-1900 and an exploration of its effect on how he viewed himself in relation to the professionalisation of late-Victorian botany, and on how he viewed late-Qing Yunnan. Before tackling these issues directly it is necessary to give some background on the development of botany as a science and its association with imperial expansion, provide a more detailed biography of Henry and explain how the approaches taken by this dissertation have been shaped by the primary sources available.

The engine of 19th century botanical discovery was European imperialism.[5] There is little historiographical debate about this fact and scholars agree that botany as a discipline grew in tandem with empire.[6] It had, of course, much deeper historical roots, especially in the various high and low culture medical traditions of Europe.[7] The 18th century, nonetheless, marked a significant break. The development of Linnean classification gave botany a new systematised common language, facilitating the growth of scientific literature and encouraging the collection of plants.[8] The journey of botanist Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820) with Captain Cook on his first voyage across the pacific was a significant early example of how botany and imperial expansion would move in tandem over the coming century, with botanists trailing close behind the economic and military incursion

[4]Seamus O'Brien, In the Footsteps of Augustine Henry and His Chinese Plant Collectors, with Internet Archive (Woodbridge, Suffolk : Garden Art Press, 2011), 16.

[5]Jim Endersby, Imperial Nature: Joseph Hooker and the Practices of Victorian Science (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.

[6]David C. Lindberg, Ronald L. Numbers, and Roy Porter, eds., The Modern Biological and Earth Sciences (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 100.

[7]Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston, Early Modern Science, The Cambridge History of Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 280.

[8]Roy Porter, ed., Eighteenth-Century Science, The Cambridge History of Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 152.

of empire.[9] A turn toward using botany as a method to rationalise agriculture, especially in the plantation of cash crops in colonies ensured that developments in botany were guided in large part by the needs of empire.[10] Significantly botany's rationalisation of agriculture was realised through the mustering of global maritime trade and information exchange, a good example of this process being the plantation of the quinine producing Cinchona tree native to the Andes in India and Sri Lanka, to produce anti-malarial medication.[11] In this example as in others, the hub which made the exchange possible was the royal gardens at Kew which Joseph Banks had updated from an early-modern medical garden to the quintessential botanical institution of the Victorian era.

Augustine Henry was an Irish official in the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, an agency of the Qing government operated by foreign nationals under the long-time inspectorgeneralship of the Ulsterman Robert Hart (1835–1911). Henry was an outstanding example of the imperial and commercial connections inherent to 19th century botany. During his career in China, he took up plant collecting and went on to become one of the most prolific plant collectors of 19th century China.[12] After leaving China in 1900, he went onto an equally successful career in Britain and Ireland, co-writing a definitive descriptive work on British and Irish trees, and pioneering the discipline of forestry in the newly-born Irish Free State. Henry's work in China began at Yichang in Hubei where he began to collect as a hobby. Over a decade later, after multiple transfers, personal tragedy and unceasing plant collection, he found himself in Mengzi, southeast Yunnan, working at a newly established and rather out-of-the-way customs station. It is this final stage in Henry's Chinese career, lasting from 1896 to 1900 that this dissertation covers. By focusing on his efforts within a defined area, and a narrowly defined period, the specifics of two topics can be brought to the fore; first the experience of viewing Yunnan can be isolated and explored, and second the significance of this transitional period in Henry's career can be discussed more clearly.

[9]David Philip Miller, ed., Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany, and Representations of Nature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 22.

[10]Lucile H. Brockway, Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 6.

[11]Lucile H. Brockway, Science and Colonial Expansion, 112.

[12]O'Brien, In the Footsteps of Augustine Henry, 17.

This dissertation works primarily from two source bases; Henry's letters to his friend Evelyn Gleeson (1855–1944), an artist of the Celtic revival who co-founded the Dun Emer Press, and Henry's letters to William Thiselton-Dyer (1843–1928), director of the royal botanic gardens at Kew from 1885 to 1905. While in either case the replies to Henry's letters are no longer extant, his writings to these two long-time friends and collaborators taken together give a well-rounded portrait of his experiences, outlook and state-of-mind during his time in Yunnan. Of particular importance is the contrastive character of these two source bases; one orientated toward his emotional life and personal impressions of Yunnan, the other toward his work as a plant collector, and aspirations as a then amateur botanist. Also consulted were Henry's field notes held in the National Botantical Gardens in Glasnevin, and some of his published works on botany.

The Dyer letters, as would be expected, largely discuss Henry's collecting work. Henry reports to Dyer his progress and is in constant discussion about the direction and goals of his work, adjusting his approaches and priorities based on Dyer's feedback. Although Henry corresponded with other botanists and collectors in Europe and further afield, his correspondence with Dyer appears to have been both his longest-running and most voluminous, starting in 1885 when Henry asked for plant collecting advice.[13] By the time Henry was relocated to Yunnan the two men had been in close contact for over ten years, and display a common sense of purpose, with Dyer wanting to make use of this experienced, prolific and capable collector working in a location that had previously only been the collecting grounds of French officials and Catholic missionaries, and Henry wanting to orient his collecting work to be as useful as possible to Kew, and to botanical science more generally. This dissertation hopes to cast light on the ambiguous position Henry had come to occupy late in his Chinese career, somewhere between amateur and professional, experienced and knowledgable about his subject, and yet often deferential and self-deprecating about the nature of his work.

The Gleeson letters are the only personal letters of Henry used in this dissertation, although he kept up many correspondences with friends. This is a matter of necessity not

[13]Augustine Henry to Sir William Thiselton-Dyer, September 7, 1885.

choice, as they are the only publicly available extant letters of his not directly connected to his plant collection. The letters to Gleeson are a freewheeling friendly sort, humorous and gossipy in tone, covering his period in Yunnan from 1896 to 1900, with a scattering from earlier years. The difficulties of life alone in China were a common topic but generally treated with a sardonic tone. He often asked after friends in Ireland and tried to stay up-to-date with society. He wrote character sketches of his coworkers and the other foreigners he met. He talked of his literary aspirations and asked for books, magazines and equipment for his botanical work to be sent to him. Quite often Henry complained about the Chinese, or about other foreigners. He despaired at times under the feeling that he has no talent for botany, and, generally speaking, opened his heart in the manner one does to a dear friend in front of whom one does not worry about embarrassment. These are not idle facts about Henry's character, or the character of his friendship with Gleeson. The intimacies of his writing, especially as regards his own mental state are the frame which surrounds his aesthetic judgements of Chinese plants and his view of Yunnan, the topic of Chapter 2. They also allowed for Henry to write more directly about his own interpretations of his plant collecting work, the topic of Chapter 1. In these respects, the letters to Gleeson balance the interpretation of Henry's writings to Dyer with a more intimate and personal perspective. The use of the Gleeson letters in an academic treatment of Henry is unusual. Major studies of imperial botany in China have tended to rely heavily on material held in Kew, which is both easily accessible from major British universities, and in the case of Henry's letters to Dyer, fully digitised. The Gleeson letters, on the other hand, while it could be hardly be said that they are hidden away, being held as they are in the National Library of Ireland, are not digitised, nor do they deal so directly and deeply with plant collecting and botany. These two facts appear to have put this worthwhile source collection beyond the scope of many researchers.

This dissertation is an attempt to incorporate this source base more fully into our understanding of Henry's work in China, and by extension plant collecting in 19th century China, by providing, in two chapters each mostly separate from each other in topic and approach, an exploration of significant themes in the historiography of imperial botany.

Each chapter is centred around a single work of secondary literature and attempts to comment upon and develop its theoretical models by studying their manifestation in Henry's letters to Gleeson and Dyer.

Chapter 1 is an exploration of Henry's self-conception as an amateur plant collector and its relation to the professionalisation of botany in the 19th century. Taking Jim Endersby's study of the life of Joseph Hooker, Dyer's direct predecessor as director of Kew, as its theoretical base, the chapter casts Henry as a transitional figure in the professionalisation of botany, placing, as many other scholars have done, amateur status in relation to the imperial periphery. The study of Henry's time in Yunnan shows that the dynamic whereby botanical novices could connect directly with scientific elites in the centre through collecting plants in far flung places was coming to an end, as the lands whose plants had not been subject to collection efforts of some sort dwindled. Chapter 1, then, is also an account of how Henry navigated the feeling that the work he had pursued tirelessly for over a decade was coming to an end.

Chapter 2 shifts its focus to questions of aesthetics and the experience of viewing in late Imperial China. It begins by analysing Henry's differing aesthetic judgements of high and low altitude plants in Yunnan, and uses this comparison to examine how altitude was associated in Henry's reading of Yunnan with a wide range of aesthetic, cultural, civilisational and scientific judgements. It takes as a base the concept of "temperate imagination" which Frances O'Morchoe theorised in her article on Henry's collecting work in China.[14] O'Morchoe mapped the climate types of China to the imagination of the collector, showing how Henry, and other collectors, found the familiar in temperate zones, and were jarred by the unfamiliarity of the sub-tropical or tropical zones. The chapter discusses the effect of altitude within O'Morchoe's emotional mapping and shows how the aesthetic judgements applied to Chinese plants spilled out beyond the botanical into the experience of viewing China generally, demonstrating how methods of scientific viewing could not be separated from other forms of observation.

[14]Frances O'Morchoe, "Botany, Informal Empire and the Colonial Roots of British Gardens," Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique. French Journal of British Studies, no. XXIX–1 (2024).

On the surface there might seem to be little connecting these two topics. However, as is discussed in the conclusion, both suggest the significance of how Westerners in late imperial China experienced and understood time. These figures burdened by the sense that the opportunity to observe China was something brief, significant and rare, saw the creation of accurate knowledge about China as their duty. And it is the interplay of duty and recreation peculiar to these foreign observers which is ultimately the unifying thread of this dissertation.

Chapter 1

Unprofessional Life

> Money is not what is wanted but time, oceans of time.[1]

This line is taken from a letter where Henry explains to Dyer why it was difficult to send Kew seed collections. Henry clearly felt that that there was an expectation upon him, and took pains to demonstrate that there was nothing he, a full-time customs official and botanical amateur, could do to meet it. His defence is thorough. He explains, not for the first time in his letters, the time consuming labour of organising specimens for shipping. He notes the significant time investment needed to procure one satisfactory bulb for shipment to Kew; "The [bulbs?] of a certain *Zanthoxylum* has cost me 3 visits to one spot and an expenditure of 6 hours time."[2] He even anticipates Dyers response that he could offload his labour to native hirees with a wearied citation of their laziness; "you don't know the Yunnanese- my muleteer who collects plants is the only man I know who could or would do the work- and even he only does about 1/10 of what I could do if I had [...] time. The other Chinese & aborigines are too lazy for seed collecting."[3] Although addressing issues specific to his own practice, by describing how the time pressure of his job limited his collecting he was also outlining an issue which had shaped significantly the trajectory of 19th century botany, and the trajectory of science as a whole, that is the tension between

[1] AH to TD, June 3, 1897.
[2] AH to TD, June 3, 1897.
[3] AH to TD, June 3, 1897.

the amateur and the professional practice of science. When Henry spoke of wanting time to Dyer, he was not asking for relief from his workload, something which Dyer had no power to provide since it was entirely self-imposed. Instead he was marking out the hard limits of what was in his power to achieve as a collector. It was a rueful admission, likely as disappointing to its author as its recipient, that there were goals he could not reach, nor expect himself to reach, as an amateur collector. Henry's dedication to his work cannot be doubted. Whatever he gained by way of limited fame among plant enthusiasts, and opportunities to network with the high-and-mighty of late-Victorian botany (few higher or mightier than Sir Dyer), he surely gave more in the drudgery of collecting, preparing, organising and shipping 1,000s upon 1,000s of plant specimens from inland China to London. Although there was no professional or contractual bind, Henry felt he owed Dyer seeds and specimens. The two men were instead bound by a web of expectation and desire, a relationship without clear hierarchy working toward the commonly-held but vague goal of scientific advancement. Such informal relationships between the imperial periphery and the centre were characteristic of the amateur botanists, who in the 19th century were scattered across the globe by European imperialism, and the forming professional scientific class which grew in the urban centres of empire where the world's scientific knowledge, sourced from all lands, converged.

The negotiation between amateurs on the periphery and professionals in the centre has been a key line of inquiry for scholarly work on imperial botany.[4] Lucile Brockway's 1979 *Science and colonial expansion* was a landmark study of the link between botany and British imperialism. Brockway takes Kew as the centre of her narrative, which, as if she were upon a hill surrounded by low country, gives her a panoramic view of the landscape of British imperialism, utilising Kew's extensive archive of letters from botanists stationed across the globe to give an account of Kew's significant role.[5] The breadth of Brockway's view and the use of Kew as central pillar means that she does not go into great detail about most of these correspondences, and such sources were naturally considered as so far as they fed back into the history of Kew. The following 46 years of study, as of time of

[4]Fa-ti Fan, British Naturalists in Qing China (Harvard University Press, 2004), 72.
[5]Lucile H. Brockway, Science and Colonial Expansion.

writing, about imperial botany can be described as scholars descending from the vantage point of Kew, and journeying from the centre to the periphery, writing studies which gave more weight to Kew's distant interlocutors, as in Donal McCracken's 1997 *Gardens of empire: botanical institutions of the Victorian British Empire* which while featuring Kew prominently, situated it with an empire-wide system of botanical gardens.[6]

The study of imperial botany in a Chinese context began in earnest with Fa-Ti Fan's 2004 *British Naturalists in Qing China* which, in a series of chapter-length case studies not limited to botany, surveyed the landscape of British scientific incursion and contribution in China.[7] Fan's scope is wide enough to suggest many themes and potential lines of further enquiry. He, like his predecessors, stresses information networks to be an essential aspect of imperial botany. But by studying a range of individuals and organisations, linked only by their connection to China, he is able to give due attention the system of intermediary networks of botanical knowledge, which formed locally between interested parties. As Fan notes, Henry's early interest in plant collecting was supported by advice from a British official in China, Henry Hance of the Consular Service, stationed near Hong Kong, with whom he corresponded.[8] Fan also outlined the importance of Chinese knowledge and labour in the process of botanical knowledge creation, posing it as a dual process of translation and discovery. Critical for the approach of this chapter is Fan's investigation into the wider culture of amateur botanists in China, which he notes was characterised by a cult of "muscular imperialism" and a need to stave off boredom that seemed to transform many of these Western transplants into outdoorsmen of various stripes who could pick from a set of commensurable hobbies to amuse themselves, of which plant collecting was just one.[9] Alongside this, Fan notes the lack of professionalisation in Chinese botany:

> [Dyer] promoted [...] botanical sciences that depended on laboratory research, ecological concepts, and agricultural application. This narrative of professionalization can be misleading if we stretch it to include British scientific research

[6]Donal McCracken, Gardens of Empire: Botanical Institutions of the Victorian British Empire (Leicester University Press, 1997).

[7]Fan, British Naturalists in Qing China.

[8]Fan, British Naturalists in Qing China, 76.

[9]Fan, British Naturalists in Qing China, 74.

> in nineteenth-century China. […] The British lacked the kind of intellectual and institutional support needed to expand certain areas of research in China. The ambition of imperial botany had to come to terms with the political reality and institutional constraints in a territory not directly ruled by the British government.[10]

He then goes on to note how the institutional gap was filled by sinology, writing;

> British natural history in China did develop new research provinces that drew strength from the increasing professionalization of [sinology].[11]

In essence, what Fan provides is a map for understanding the plant collector in China at the scale of their own life, placing concerns like boredom on the same plane as scientific pursuit, and showing how the range of resources they drew from, while including those of central botanical institutions, was, by reason of necessity, wide and varied. He similarly highlights the relationship between two important axes utilised in the history of botany, the centre-periphery axis and the amateur-professional axis, and by placing these two in relation is able to comprehend the conditions underlying the plant collector's practice.

The other key work underpinning this chapter is Jim Endersby's 2008 *Imperial nature: Joseph Hooker and the practices of Victorian science* which through a study of the life of Joseph Hooker, an eminent Victorian botanist, best known for his friendship with Darwin and being the long-time director of Kew, assesses the development and practice of professional botany over the 19th century, focusing on how botanists tried to carve out a space as a serious philosophical and professional discipline within the Victorian discourse of gentlemanly science, that is to say science untainted by the need to sell one's labour. Endersby describes this discourse from its prominence in the 1830s to its gradual decline in significance by the late 1800s. Its relation to Henry's practice is significant. Because professionalisation progressed slower further from the centre, we can see him negotiate with the same contrasts of gentlemanly and professional science, with the caveat that unlike similar dialogues in the 1830s, Henry could consider respectable pathways into

[10]Fan, British Naturalists in Qing China, 91.
[11]Fan, British Naturalists in Qing China, 92.

professional science, a topic which I will return to later in the chapter. Similar to Fan, Endersby relates the dynamics of centre-periphery with the progress of professionalisation in botany. Of particular relevance is Endersby's treatment of Hooker's correspondence with William Colenso, a missionary and plant hunter in New Zealand. The two men's long friendship-by-letter was interspersed with quarrels over species definition, and a mutual belief that they were uniquely positioned to understand the plants they were both studying. Hooker believing this because of his expertise and institutional backing, and Colenso because of his local knowledge and proximity to the living specimens.[12] Although no such tension appeared to exist between Henry and Dyer, Endersby nonetheless provides the most comprehensive account of how centre-periphery relationships functioned and a model for how to understand them.

This chapter, then, is an attempt to take the approaches of Fan's and Endersby's research, their recognition of the subtle dynamics of centre-periphery interactions, the importance of professional and non-professional botany, and awareness of how the Chinese context specifically altered these two aspects, and apply them to Henry's plant collecting in Yunnan. Of particular interest is Henry's self-conception of what it meant to be a plant collector in China, and how he related this practice to the wider world of late-Victorian botany, especially in the context of the professionalisation of science and Henry's decision to study and work in forestry after his time in China. Applying these approaches to the sources brought two themes to the fore, that of the unique experience of time in China, broached lightly in this chapter and developed further in the conclusion, and that of the interface of pleasure and duty, further developed in Chapter 2.

Henry's early work in China was at a customs station in Yichang, an upriver Yangtze treaty port in Hubei. Here his work involved recording the cargo that flowed from upstream, through Yichang, and onward to the trading cities of the Jiangnan. What sparked his interest in botany, aside from the isolation and boredom of life in China, was the need to catalogue the various *Materia medica*, much of it unknown to Europeans, that came

[12] Jim Endersby, "'From Having No Herbarium.' Local Knowledge versus Metropolitan Expertise: Joseph Hooker's Australasian Correspondence with William Colenso and Ronald Gunn," Pacific Science 55 (October 2001), https://doi.org/10.1353/psc.2001.0032, 356.

through his station, this he did by consulting Chinese classics of medicinal plant description like the *Běncǎo Gāngmù*.[13] Work of this kind suited Henry's background. He had trained in Belfast as a doctor before being encouraged by Sir Robert Hart, head of the customs service, to apply to work as a medical officer for the service in China.[14] The association of medical and plant studies was fundamental to the development of botany. To understand and apply the medicinal properties of plants had been the basis of most pre-18th century study of plants. Botany, since being more fully delineated as one of the natural sciences in the 18th century, had remained somewhat in the shadow of medicine.[15] Botanical study was, in early 19th century Britain, a requirement for standard courses of medicine, a reminder that in popular conception botany remained apart from the philosophically minded abstract sciences and retained the unwelcome odour of professional work, of the drugs, powders and tonics sold by pharmacists of varying quality up-and-down the country.[16] It was not a welcome association to the burgeoning class of botanists who wanted to take their place as respected gentlemen of the scientific community, and, as Endersby has shown, this caused a sensitivity among botanists to how they were perceived, and the need to assert the seriousness of their scientific project.[17] Neither did it help that plant collecting had the reputation as a suitable recreation for women and children, a hobbyist pursuit ennobling to the spirit, not too strenuous to the body, and associated with pretty flowers.[18] It should be noted that botanists did not want to extricate themselves from the association with commercial ends, only to change their relation to them. The development of the science balanced the desire for abstract philosophical heft, the kind exemplified in studies of plant origin, geographic surveys and theorising on plant development, with the practical understanding that institutions of science, universities, professorial positions and botanical gardens, all justified themselves to their sponsors in

[13]Fan, British Naturalists in Qing China, 102.

[14]O'Brien, In the Footsteps of Augustine Henry, 19.

[15]David C. Lindberg et al., eds., The Modern Biological and Earth Sciences, The Cambridge History of Science (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 16.

[16]Endersby, Imperial Nature, 10.

[17]Endersby, Imperial Nature, 38.

[18]Brad Scott, "A Family Moss Craze: Learning, Reading and Skill Development in a Botanical and Domestic Network in Early Nineteenth-Century England and Wales," The British Journal for the History of Science, 2025, 2.

practical terms, by proving that botany could add the vegetable kingdom to the map of imperial possessions. The relationship, then, was not adversarial, but neither was it entirely harmonious, and the issue at hand was not whether botany would serve commercial or imperial ends, it was self-evident and agreeable that they would, but how botanists were to be fit into Victorian social order.[19] Preferred was the model of the gentlemen scientist, of which Darwin remains the most famous example, a man who freed from the need for money by ample inheritance was not subject to those worldly compulsions which pushed young scientifically-minded Victorian men like Henry into the professions.

In Henry's letters to Dyer, we see how these discourses played out in the self-conception of one man, sometimes bringing angst, sometimes pride. The letters are an interesting contribution to this topic as while Henry was an amateur, his long and studied encounter with botany left him with a theoretical botanist's condescension toward the collector, an impulse which naturally led to self-deprecation and doubt. His relationship to commercial ends was quite direct and Henry seems to have felt it was perfectly natural that he should, for example, provide advice on the properties and growing conditions of Chinese medical plants and produce a small book on economic botany.[20] This was not at all dissimilar from the efforts of Kew to promote economic botany which took many forms including a museum.[21] The work of commercial plant hunters hired by plant nurseries and collectors generally, while not explicitly disrespected, Henry undoubtedly saw as occupying an inferior position in the world of botany. See, for example, the following excerpt from a letter where Henry described for Dyer what the pedigree of an ideal candidate to do botanical work in China should be:

> what I would recommend is that a man be selected, who had just finished his botanical studies at Cambridge, I mean don't send a collector; but a gentleman, a student, & an enthusiast.[22]

That Henry ranked the trained gentleman above the "collector" is to be expected. It was

[19] Endersby, Imperial Nature, 42.
[20] AH to TD, 5 September 1896.
[21] Brockway, Science and Colonial Expansion, 83.
[22] AH to TD, July 19, 1897.

a role which he tended to slight in his own writing, as is in this letter to Gleeson:

> I am glad you liked the [writing illegible] of myself as a collector. I am indeed the ideal collector with the savant left out. I have no talents for observation at all: and will never do anything in botany beyond the drudgery and mechanical part.[23]

Or as on another occasion, also writing to Gleeson, when he referred tongue-in-cheek to his collecting as "my fooling after plants", all of which speaks to an awareness that the work he was doing, although certainly contributing significantly to the understanding of China's plants was not of the most prestigious type or even the type which most conformed to his own values regarding botany.[24] This is not to say that Henry disrespected commercial plant hunters as individuals. He wrote quite positively of Ernest Henry Wilson, who would become the most famous of the Chinese plant hunters, when he came to stay with Henry in Yunnan at the beginning of his career in China, providing him with a hand drawn map to track down a *Davidia involucrata* or ghost-handkerchief tree he had seen in Hubei years ago and believed would be of immense horticultural value if imported to Britain.[25] Neither should we infer from Henry's wish for "a gentleman, a student, & an enthusiast" that this ideal candidate was without self-interest nor divorced from commercial interests, as the plan he proposed was for "a horticulturalist" and "a private gentleman or two" to provide £1000 to cover two years of this gentleman collector's expenses.[26] Henry's plan was no doubt the kind of opportunity he had wished was available to him, as he had previously applied for a year's reprieve from his regular work to collect full time in China, a request which had been denied.[27] His formulation of a gentlemen who was not a collector is made more curious by the fact that the whole purpose of the proposal was to take advantage of the suitability of Chinese flora for European climates, a prospect made more enticing because of "the variety and beauty of the Chinese flora".[28] In other words, the goal of the

[23]Augustine Henry to Evelyn Gleeson, November 14, 1896.
[24]AH to EG, June 15, 1897.
[25]AH to TD, June 8, 1897.
[26]AH to TD, July 19, 1897.
[27]Fan, British Naturalists in Qing China, 85.
[28]AH to TD, July 19, 1897.

project was essentially horticultural, to collect beautiful plants and bring them to Britain where they would grow well and presumably become the next generation of garden exotics, grown by plant nurseries and listed in advertisements in gardening periodicals like *The Gardeners' Chronicle* to which Henry was himself a frequent contributor.[29] When Henry wrote "don't send a collector" to do work that was obviously collection, he seems to be tracing the borders between the scientific and the commercial ends of such work, conceding that the project was spurred by the beauty and garden-readiness of the plants, and that these interests could not be ignored, but also carving out a space for the philosophical side of the work in the mind of the individual, who would presumably, thanks to their training, be able to simultaneously derive a higher scientific value from a commercial expedition.

We can see in Henry's own practice that he, like his ideal candidate, tried to balance these forces. Botany was, from one angle, a diversion for him. He did not need to spend his weekends rambling on slopes by the Yangtze or on peaks in Yunnan, he did so because it was pleasurable. It is also true that some botanical knowledge was a professional obligation. Plants and their products were commercial objects to be taxed. So too was it his duty as a medical practitioner to understand their medicinal properties. His letters to Dyer show care for the abstract issues of botany, and he would regularly supply theories of plant development or distribution based on his observations in the field and botanical literature. In 1893 he published *Notes on the Economic Botany of China* a short book which listed various endemic plants with their Chinese and Latin names, and glossed each plant with a brief description of it uses and economic potential.[30] What unifies these varied interpretations of his practice and differentiates it from hobbyist collecting, was an insistence on being useful. Henry undeniably got a lot of pleasure from his work, and wrote both to Dyer and Gleeson about it, yet pleasure was something that was realised through purposeful labour, and the purpose of his labour was the advancement of science, advancement of empire, and the general sense that his work was not pursued for himself alone, but sublimated to a higher aim. This does not imply that the reward of botanical work lay solely in the knowledge that somehow, somewhere, one's labours were

[29] O'Morchoe, "Botany, Informal Empire and the Colonial Roots of British Gardens," 7.
[30] Augustine Henry, Notes on Economic Botany of China, ed. E. Charles Nelson (Boethius, 1986).

contributing to something noble. Although Henry did not take money for his work, he, like so many collectors in the periphery, was nurtured by praise and recognition from botanical institutions in the centre. His long correspondence and friendship with Dyer was itself one such form of recognition. What mattered was to be useful and to be recognised, respected and rewarded for being useful, all of which taken together transformed leisure into labour. With this transformation complete, Henry, who suffered from the limited and often stultifying society of Westerners in China, which he often commented on when passing through Shanghai[31], could inoculate himself from some of the boredom and malaise that afflicted so many foreigners.[32], and instead of counting the days till the end of his posting, found himself wistfully asking for "oceans of time" to complete his labours.[33]

As has been noted, this sense of usefulness was sourced in large part through correspondences with the centres of botanical science, primarily Kew. It is worth, then, discussing the dynamics of this relationship in more detail, with an eye to the ambiguities of power, and the effects of distance and time upon them. Also important to further our understanding of the position of collectors like Henry within the networks of botany, is an appreciation of the malleability of these networks. In the words of Endersby, "analyses of imperial centres and peripheries still tend to assume that these are static categories—they were not. The location and definition of the empire's centre and its periphery were being continuously redefined and negotiated through the practices of collecting and classifying".[34] It is worthwhile to think about how the collector can be understood if instead of posing them as one small node among many feeding into large centre, or even as an equal partner in a constantly negotiated relationship as in the above quote, they are posed as being the centre of their own network, with institutions like Kew competing for attention against the collector's other personal and profession interests. This approach is by no means novel and has been broached by other scholars. For example, Frances O'Morchoe,

[31]AH to EG, 13 April, 1896.

[32]W Somerset Maugham, On a Chinese Screen (Vintage, 2000). This is a likely semi-fictionalised account, but it paints a vivid portrait of the atmosphere.

[33]AH to TD, June 3, 1897

[34]Endersby, Imperial Nature, 315.

in her study of Henry, describes his scientific world as "clearly polycentric".[35] It nonetheless deserves further attention since it can be easy to understate, especially in research on botanical institutions, that, despite the reach and influence of these institutions, they were not only the centres of their own systems, drawing in plants and information, but also distant stars on the sometimes crowded horizon visible to the collector, who although always conscious of the institution's significance, did not always afford them a dominant role in their own imagination.

Key to understanding this is the role of distance from the centre in the collector's experience. This is how Henry described his position in relation to Europe in a letter to Gleeson:

> I live as far away as the [...] stars, so far as communication is concerned, you are nearer to mars or to the moon than to me.[36]

Despite being separated from the centre by great distances, Henry, and collectors in a similar position, were natural points of concentration upon which all manner of individuals and institutions focused their interests. Henry, in particular, had a wide array of correspondents.[37] He was in contact with his sister in India, who asked him for bulbs of his namesake *Lilium henryi* for her garden,[38] and with a Mr. Bulley of Liverpool, a merchant with a passion to provide the gardens of urban workers beautiful exotics,[39] and with an unnamed British company trying to source information on soap trees for their latest patent,[40] and with other plant enthusiasts in China looking for advice, and with a young American women he met on a boat[41], and, of course, with Evelyn Gleeson. This list is not even exhaustive. None of this, however, should be taken to imply that he held these other correspondences as equal to Dyer's, who was unique in his stature and expertise, rather it lets us comprehend the significance of Henry's position. He had valuable information about Chinese plants that he was uniquely placed to distribute, and this made

[35] O'Morchoe, "Botany, Informal Empire and the Colonial Roots of British Gardens," 5.
[36] AH to EG, April 2, 1898.
[37] If only I could find these letters!
[38] AH to TD, September 19, 1899.
[39] AH to EG, November 14, 1896.
[40] AH to TD, 5 September 1896.
[41] AH to EG, January 28, 1897.

him interesting to a wide range of people and organisations.

The centre, although the principle creator and guardian of systematic forms of botanical knowledge and the possessor of institutional power, was nonetheless beholden to the individual amateur, working in the imperial periphery. Amateurs like Henry were necessary to provide the raw material needed for the production of knowledge, dried plant specimens for herbarium storage. Because of this, centres of botanical learning were anxious to keep collectors happy. The professionalisation of botany had sidelined the hobbyist collector in Europe, but outside the direct reach of scientific institutions the amateur remained indispensable and this meant competing for attention against other interests and parties. In Henry's case there never appears to have been a serious competition for interest. Plant collecting and the preparing of specimens took up as much free time as he could afford to give it, but he was, it should not be forgotten, an exceptionally prolific and consistent collector, and Kew's overseas helpers were not all so diligent.[42] And yet, Henry's letters show evidence of the ease with which interests in one area could shift into another, and the breadth of worthy pursuits available to a curious mind in China.

Often when writing to Gleeson, short descriptions of botanical work were crowded out by political commentary, cultural observations and other miscellaneous points of interest regarding life in China. Naturally, how Henry divided his letters was no measure of how he divided his time and his being taciturn about the specifics of plant collecting to Gleeson may speak more to a polite consideration that he might bore his friend, a possibility to which he would sometimes allude. If Henry was consciously trying to vary the contents of his letters for Gleeson's sake, the attempt nonetheless revealed his wide interests and reading. Henry's linguistic talents allowed him to dabble in Sinology by reading Chinese classic texts and *Materia Medica*. He also studied Chinese art, once recommending a book on the subject to Gleeson.[43] However, his consistent interest in the ethnographic and linguistic study of ethnic minorities was by far the largest non-botanical interest of his Yunnan period. Henry's letters and field notes reveal a passion that ran parallel to

[42]Endersby, " 'From Having No Herbarium.' Local Knowledge versus Metropolitan Expertise," 439.
[43]AH to EG, January 28, 1897.

his collecting. In his field notes, he would record the towns and villages his party passed through and at each location he would interview the locals, having them recite, in their own dialect, a set of numbers and nouns. At first the set was extremely small but as he collected data, it grew.[44] He conducted at least 27 of these interviews over two expeditions. The purpose of this collection was likely to serve as groundwork for the dictionary of the Yi language which he intended to write.[45] He also wrote periodically of faltering attempts to recruit an Yi teacher, which he did eventually achieve after false starts.[46] These efforts were not necessary diversions from his collecting work. He did, after all, rely on the hospitality of native chiefs and hired Chinese collectors despite sometimes disparaging their abilities.[47] If there was ever any possibility of botany being sidelined to make room for what would have certainly been the long and involved process of writing a dictionary, Henry left China too soon after coming to Yunnan for it to ever be realised. However, Henry's consistent detours into linguistic topics, in letters and in his own private notes, are reminders that botany, for all the time he had dedicated to it, was not his profession and there were no compulsions beyond social connections, his own interest and the momentum of years of labour, to keep him from wandering into other fields.

There is an illustrative episode of power dynamics in one of Henry's letters to Dyer. Henry on this occasion appears to have been chastised by Dyer for sending a shipment of specimens to another European botanist before Kew.[48] Henry's response is apologetic, explaining that the whole issue was a mix-up, writing that he "hadn't the faintest intention of furnishing [Hermann Christ] at the expense of Kew" and that this would not happen again.[49] The issue is not mentioned thereafter, so it appears that he kept his word. But the significance of the action is clear, Henry had, by simple mistake, taken away the scientific prerogative from Kew, and casually handed it to another. Although we do not know what Dyer wrote to Henry, there was little action he could have taken against him. Likely it was his established connection with Dyer and to a lesser extent the prestige of Kew which

[44] Augustine Henry, Chinese Field Notebook, 1898; Augustine Henry, Chinese Field Notebook, 1899.
[45] AH to EG, July 17, 1899.
[46] AH to TD, September 5, 1896.
[47] AH to TD, January 29, 1897.
[48] AH to TD, 20 June 1899
[49] AH to TD, 20 June 1899.

inspired his deference, and extracted, it appears with little difficulty, a promise that Kew deserved the first look at his collections. The implicit trade between the two men was of material for meaning. Although he asked Dyer for advice and professional publications, the assistance of Kew was not necessary for Henry's work to continue. Rather it was the sense that there was a worthy destination for his samples, a place where they could be woven into a scientific system of identification and taxonomy and was integrated into the British imperial project which Kew provided. Henry had joked early in his time in Yunnan, that he had to beat the number of specimens collected by a French missionary as a matter of national pride, and in letters to Gleeson he regularly expressed his belief in the goals and methods of British imperialism.[50] It is reasonable, then, to think that Henry might have favoured Kew because of its prominent association with empire.

By the late 1890s Henry was reaching the end of his career in the Chinese customs service and was planning for his life outside China. A major decision on the horizon was whether he would continue his work in botany, something which Dyer had suggested.[51] Henry would go on to a notable post-China career, studying forestry in Europe, compiling a compendium of British and Irish trees and advising the both the British and Irish governments on their forestry programs.[52] The potential of a turn to professional science was forming in Henry's mind while he was in Yunnan and perhaps even earlier. This adds another dimension to his correspondence with Dyer. The clear professional-amateur dynamic was muddled by the potential, noted by both men, that Henry could slip into the realm of professional botany if he desired. That Dyer mentioned this potential to Henry was a show of respect for Henry's labour, marking him as a step above the average collector. Henry did not match Dyer's positivity and took some time to settle the question. In 1897 he wrote this to Dyer:

> If you ever again come across a budding collector like me what I was when we began correspondence some years ago. Please insist on him being more than

[50] O'Morchoe, "Botany, Informal Empire and the Colonial Roots of British Gardens." 6.
[51] AH to EG, July 17, 1899.
[52] O'Brien, In the Footsteps of Augustine Henry, 311.

a mere collector and perhaps you will help to develop a naturalist.[53]

His tone implies that to his mind, he never turned from a "budding collector" into a naturalist in full flower and does not suggest the possibility of a confident transition to professional plant science. But two years later, he entertains the thought with an easier but not wholly confident sense that he could find a place there, writing: "If I thought I should succeed at botany. I would go on with that, as it is a big field, and there is room for one."[54] Henry's move into academic forestry shows that he had leveraged the connections and experience made available from his time in China successfully. Ironically, Henry's distance from Britain brought him into much closer contact with its botanical institutions than proximity would have, as a "mere collector" in Britain would not have been able to open the same doors as one in China did. Henry was perhaps among the last cohort of amateur collectors to whom this pathway into professional work was open. Henry acknowledged that "after the exploration of western China there are no such rich districts in the rest of the world unexplored".[55] The information asymmetry which had brought him into professional botany was being slowly equalised as few lands left untouched by large scale plant collection remained, and thus the significance of untrained collectors dwindled. This combined with the laboratory replacing the herbarium as the site of cutting edge research in 20th century botany[56] to mean that Henry really was, as he put it, "the last man or near the last man in its line."[57]

This chapter has explored how Henry understood his plant collecting in the context of the professionalisation of late Victorian botany, and how the professionalisation of botany interacted with centre-periphery relationships. I return again to the motivating question. If botany, as Endersby argues, is best understood not through the development of theory but as the product of practice, one subject to those various and unavoidable exigencies of life; the need for money, professional fulfilment and social pressure,[58] then how can the

[53]AH to TD, July 19, 1897.
[54]AH to EG, July 17, 1899.
[55]AH to EG, July 17, 1899.
[56]Lindberg et al., The Modern Biological and Earth Sciences, 225.
[57]AH to EG, July 17, 1899.
[58]Endersby, Imperial Nature, 313.

practice of amateurs like Henry, who were essential for the functioning of 19th century botany, be understood without weighing their botanical commitments against a fuller picture of their life. That is to say, considering them as whole persons rather then as conduits through which science advanced. This chapter, I hope, has further justified the value of this question as a line of enquiry into the history of botany, and supports and corroborates the work of scholars who have taken pleasure and amateurism seriously by furnishing them with another case study, and by showing how the zenith of European imperial power in the 1890s provoked a sense that the golden age of amateur botany was truly coming to an end.

Chapter 2

Visions of Altitude

> The common [*Melastoma candidum*] looks as if it were a rose at a distance and here is almost everywhere. The difference between this shrub and a rose explains exactly the difference between sub tropical and temperate vegetation. The latter is in some mysterious way much more beautiful and satisfactory to the eye.[1]

This chapter takes as its starting point the above comment taken from a letter to Dyer, and uses it as a way to understand how altitude and climate type influenced Henry's interpretation of Yunnan. It is an attempt to locate and describe that "mysterious" quality which, in Henry's view, divided subtropical (and tropical)[2] from temperate flora. The question is best answered, not by a study of the physical forms of the plants, but by the close reading of Henry's writings, and by treating the sharp division he drew between the subtropical and the temperate not solely as a scientific observation, but also as a discourse through which he understood China and interpreted the meaning of his own actions. This chapter was inspired by Frances O'Morchoe's 2024 article on Henry "Botany, Informal Empire and the Colonial Roots of British Gardens", specifically by her concept of a *temperate imagination*, a "homely imagination of temperate regions" which rendered

[1] AH to TD, June 8, 1898.

[2] Henry will in his letters tend to group his judgements subtropical and tropical beauty together in opposition to the temperate. They are not, in scientific use, alike, but as used in Henry's letters they serve the same function.

all temperate flora, no matter where it was on earth, essentially familiar, to the European observer.[3] The concept of the temperate imagination can help us understand one side of the question, the appeal of the rose, but it does not grant any immediate insight into the aversion toward the *candidum*. There is, as O'Morchoe notes, an ample literature on the imperial imagining of the tropics, and Henry's writings can be understood within such studies.[4] Neither approach taken on its own, however, would fully capture the shifting qualities of Henry's description. Certainly he tends, as in the above quote, to contrast the subtropic and the temperate. But these contrasts, quite often, existed within the same physical space.

The issue of the rose and the *candidum*, we can see as a way to create a vantage point into both Henry's botanical practice and his personal experience in Yunnan, accessed via the issue of aesthetics. To begin, it is curious that Henry would include this brief aside comparing subtropic and temperate beauty. It is an idle sort of comment, unscientific in its vague hint at this "mysterious" form which elevated the temperate rose above the subtropical *candidum*. And it is difficult, in the absence of his replies to Henry, to judge whether Dyer paid much attention to these comments. Henry's letters rarely discussed work alone. It was, as one correspondent of Henry's, Mr. Bulley, wrote "extraordinary that [Henry] should take an interest in so many things".[5] True to this description, slipped between the regular business of botany are commentaries on Chinese politics, the indigenous groups of Yunnan, linguistics, climate, geography, trade and an array of aesthetic judgements on the plants of China. Items of the last category are most often found nestled in his letters alongside general descriptions of a plant's form, often appearing as positive adjectives: beautiful, splendid, grand, magnificent, captivating, curious, lovely, satisfactory, pretty, elegant, chaste. Or conversely: ugly, ugly-looking, wretched. Pejoratives, he levelled with precision at the flora of the subtropical river valleys, and praise was given most generously to the plants of Yunnan's temperate peaks.

Dyer likely had some interest in these aesthetic judgments. He appears to have been

[3]O'Morchoe, "Botany, Informal Empire and the Colonial Roots of British Gardens," 7.
[4]ibid.
[5]AH to EG, June 29, 1897

asking after roses, as Henry on two occassions mentions, apropos of nothing, his inability to find them and offers, as if by way of compensation, a description of another ornamental flower.

> I haven't seen a Rose: but as usual I have 2 or 3 very new-looking [plant name illegible] very largely represented: and very curiously all occur together and the flower is really at the same time. So there does not seem to be any competition amongst them, They are very pretty in flower: and the fruits remain on for several months, red or black as the case may be.[6]

Roses, Henry felt, were "wonderfully beautiful in every way" and an exception to his general tendency toward plants with "beautiful foliage and neat little flowers". Chrysanthemums, he found ugly on account of their "wretched leaves" and as to Geraniums, he could not "understand anyone liking them".[7] This succession of praise and criticism came rapid-fire in a letter to Gleeson and is representative of his habit of providing sudden judgements on various plants.

It was an altitudinal division between subtropical and temperate which guided Henry's experience in Yunnan and informed his judgements at a fundamental level. His travel journals from 1898 and 1899, accounts of weeks-long plant hunting excursions, record with minute-level accuracy the changes in his travelling party's altitude, calculated with a barometer, as they ascended, descended and ascended once more the wooded mountains.[8] Upon many of Henry's herbarium specimens from this period in Yunnan, there is, neatly marked next to the location and the latin name, the altitude at which the plant was found.[9] His fastidiousness in this direction was a new development in his habits. The herbarium specimens of contemporaneous plant hunters in China, like those of the German Sinologist Emil Bretschneider do not often note the altitude of collection, at most mentioning whether it was taken on a mountain or not.[10] Neither do the specimens taken

[6] AH to TD, November 29, 1898

[7] AH to EG, November 14, 1896

[8] Augustine Henry, Chinese Field Notebook, 1898.

[9] Augustine Henry, "Ardisia Conspersa Walker [Family MYRSINACEAE]" (1900), https://plants.jstor.org/stable/10.5555/al.ap.specimen.k000756627.

[10] Emil Bretschneider, "Holotype of Abelia Davidii Hance [Family CAPRIFOLIACEAE]" (1894),

by Ernest Henry Wilson, a commercial plant hunter working for Veitch Nurseries who had met with Henry and collected with him in Yunnan.[11] Samples taken during Henry's earlier botanising work in Hubei likewise do not note altitude.[12] Which is not to say that Henry was alone among his contemporaries in recording altitude on his specimens, but he appears to have done so in his Yunnan collection with greater regularity and care than most. What prompted this adjustment in his regular practice was clearly the topography of Yunnan.

His attention to altitude was a result of his theories about plant development which, although probably in no way particularly novel, had, as he recounted to Dyer, since arriving in Yunnan become attuned to how the isolation of one peak from another "must play a great part in the invention of new species", after which he continued "the study of the flora of this province will [...] enable some one hereafter to get at important factors in the evolution of species."[13] This thought he brought to an extreme in another moment of theorising, commenting that Yunnan, so geographically amenable to the proliferation of species, might have been an origin point of the world's temperate flora.[14] The veracity of the theory is not so important as the effect it would have on his interpretation of temperate plants, which would, following this logic to its conclusion, be the living representatives of an origin point, an origin whose significance was not limited to Yunnan but, in fact, spanned Eurasia. Neither is this the only indication that Henry could, at times, conceive of his work, which he was more likely to describe as drudgery, in grandiose terms. In 1899, near the end of his time in China, he wrote this about his work in Yunnan:

> These present collections of mine are the last good collections possible in the world, it seems: for after the exploration of western China there are no such rich districts in the rest of the world unexplored. So I am as it were the last

https://plants.jstor.org/stable/10.5555/al.ap.specimen.bm000945019.

[11] AH to TD, November 6, 1899; Ernest Henry Wilson, "Abutilon Sinense Oliv. [Family MALVACEAE]" (1907), https://plants.jstor.org/stable/10.5555/al.ap.specimen.k000659541.

[12] Augustine Henry, "Isolectotype of Abutilon Sinense Oliver. [Family MALVACEAE]" (1885), https://plants.jstor.org/stable/10.5555/al.ap.specimen.us01049914.

[13] AH to TD, April 30, 1897.

[14] AH to TD, April 30, 1897.

man or near the last man in its line.[15]

Yunnan, in this light, gains a new height of significance. It was at once a beginning, an engine of species creation, and an end, the last frontier of western botanical exploration.

The province's virgin mountain forests which Henry called expressions "of nature in its highest form"[16] are where these two dimensions meet, and they are, certainly not coincidentally, also the subject of Henry's most rapturous accounts of aesthetic experience. The virginity of the forest, its lack of despoiling by humanity, is expressed in the terms "chaste" and "pure". The association of purity and altitude is expressed even in the colours of the flowers. Henry writes, "higher up the flowers are mostly blue, white is commonest in the shade of [the] woods, as it is most conspicuous", to contrast Henry wrote this of the flora on the lower levels of the slopes: "the vegetation is tropical and the flowers are so big and take on such magenta-glowing hues."[17] Size and colour are the objects of dislike. Henry's aversion to magenta was strong enough that even a passing comment on a handsome acquaintance's "cardinal colored blouse" was followed quasi *non sequitur* by the line "you see I like the delicate hues. There is a certain colour, common in tropical flowers, a kind of magenta with blue in it, which is my aversion", as if his dislike of tropical colour could be triggered by the glimpse of a dyed blouse.[18]

The appeal of the temperate to Henry, however, was largely not scientific, nor did it come from a desire to enrich the gardens of England with suitable plants, or to have his name engraved in Latin on plant identification plaques at Kew gardens. Rather, in the temperate forests he could momentarily find the familiar, and escape the loneliness which tormented him. Soon after his arrival in Yunnan, Henry wrote to Gleeson that "the climate in [Yunnan] would have been ideal for Caroline".[19] It was a rare mention of his late wife. Caroline had married Henry in 1891 while he was on leave in England. The pair, impelled by Henry's professional obligations soon decamped to China. There Caroline, although hampered by the tuberculosis she had contracted on the journey, would, when

[15] AH to EG, July 17, 1899.
[16] AH to EG, July 31, 1899.
[17] AH to EG, July 31, 1899.
[18] AH to EG, January 28, 1897.
[19] AH to EG, August 29, 1896.

her health allowed, help with Henry's plant collecting. In an effort to find a climate suitable for his ailing wife, the newlyweds moved, to Japan, then to Taiwan, and finally to Colorado, where Caroline and Henry's sister Mary waited alone for Henry's arrival, collecting plants together on the slopes of the Rocky mountains. Caroline died before he could arrive, and the widower, after a years leave, was transferred to Yunnan, his previous station in Taiwan now defunct with the island having fallen to the Japanese.[20]

The death of Caroline, almost never mentioned explicitly in his letters, nonetheless coloured his experience of Yunnan significantly. He was acutely lonely there, afflicted seasonly by attacks of what he called "the blues", and contemplating leaving China.[21] After almost two decades in China he had come to consider life among the Chinese a trial of "dull monotony and dreariness".[22] In an extended flight of fancy written to Gleeson, he tried to express the alienation he felt from others:

> I suppose the life here is interesting, and with one's fellows to take part in it (one's friend or friends or lover) it would be enjoyable. The life of home is only interesting I believe because one's friends are there. I can imagine if one were suddenly (by some accident say to a dynamite gun) transported to the moon- that the solitude,-once the wonderful view of the mountains & craters & the earth shining in the sky were seen for some time- would be insupportable. And if you found triangular moon-air breathing creatures hopping about,- it wouldn't mend matters. Now the Chinese are really as far removed as that. It is useless to imagine that they could be friends of the delightful kind.[23]

The lunar metaphor is telling in that while diagnosing the problem, it also suggests a solution. If one was indeed stuck on the moon, without human society, then surely the only way to retain your sanity would be to find solace in curiosity, and to engage that alien world, capable of offering no other comforts, as an object of study. And indeed it was his botanical work alone which transformed Henry's painful experience of solitude

[20] O'Brien, In the Footsteps of Augustine Henry, 212.
[21] AH to TD, November 29, 1898.
[22] AH to EG, August 29, 1896.
[23] AH to EG, November 3, 1896.

into a comfort:

> I always live in China in a Chinese town, with a population around me whom I can't take any interest in. And the solitude comes in there. Once away on trips it is another matter: then one enjoys to the full the solitude of nature.[24]

Henry's lowest moments in Yunnan were during the rainy season when plant hunting was impossible and there was no distraction to keep him from thinking "of [his] loneliness and the folly of being an exile".[25] On such occassions, "the grand climate, the wonderful scenery, the splendid field for botanical work" would "all fade away from [his] mind" and leave him with little else to consider but solitude itself.[26] It was in his words the "jaunts to the mountains which [kept him] alive".[27]

Attraction to temperate high-altitude flora, then, was an aesthetic escape which mirrored the physical escape from humanity he undertook on his trips into the mountains, which lasted sometimes for weeks but more often in the late 1890s he could only escape the obligations of work on Sunday. Here, he could enjoy the silence of the forest, except for the singing of the birds, the austere hues of its flowers, and the majesty of its trees. Here, he was surrounded by a "solitude of natures making" which Henry felt transformed him into "a primitive man let loose in his animal haunts" and freed him, on those precious Sundays, to "dream dreams".[28] In these expeditions, tropical life, stood for the fecund, the grotesque and the evils of human civilisation, as in this passage:

> Then on the Red River such queer fruits- one tree has long pods, 2 feet or more, covered with thick brown hairs for all the world like the tail of an animal. Such horrid red ants, myriads of them, building huge nests in the trees, by locking and glueing leaves together- horrid habitations like human cities in ugliness and life uncanny. But I don't care for Red River vegetation: it is tropical, often very gay, much magenta colouring- but there is not the

[24] AH to TD, November 11, 1899.
[25] AH to EG, November 3, 1896.
[26] AH to EG, November 3, 1896.
[27] AH to EG, November 14, 1896.
[28] AH to EG, April 2, 1898.

chaste beauty of the temperate mountain forests.[29]

Temperate flora was, unlike tropical and subtropical counterparts, at once strange and familiar, evoking a mysterious beauty. The division of the world into climate types, suggested that the possibilities of life in disparate locations were fundamentally linked. All temperate zones held a common resemblance. In theory, what could thrive in Yunnan's temperate zone, could thrive alike in the cottage gardens of England. It was a simple mapping of like to like which brought a sustained interest upon temperate flora from collectors, enthusiasts and scientists. Henry often noted the hardiness or suitability of certain plants for English gardens and sent over the seeds of likely candidates; "[*Koelreuteria bipinnata*] is a beautiful tree, when in bloom, laden with masses of small yellow flowers. […] The tree occurs in Formosa, Hupei (collected both places by me) and in Yunnan. Here I met it at 5,500' altitude and it ought to be hardy in England."[30] This was a temperate imagination in its most straightforward form, a "homely imagination of temperate regions" which to further quote O'Morchoe "enabled popular gardening writers to cultivate an image of empire as something familiar, making it easier to incorporate Yunnan's plants into the canon of 'natural' British plants."[31] But as the above extract shows, the temperate imagination was often complimented by a negative form, the tropic. O'Morchoe, in her article, goes on to quote Frank Kingdon Ward, a plant hunter, who like Henry invoked the temperate and the tropic in side-by-side opposition, writing: "As we dive deeper into the pine forests of Yunnan, we leave the squealing jungle behind us, and the familiar call of the cuckoo, and the harsh cry of the pheasant, jar pleasantly on our ears."[32] Ward's use of familiar is significant, as the terms temperate and subtropic or tropic can just as easily be expressed as familiar and unfamiliar. Seen in this light, the experience of the forest to both men was the respite from the foreign, from their own alienation and, to a lesser extent, from time itself, through the illusion of the ancient forest.

[29] AH to EG, February 20, 1897.
[30] AH to TD, January 28, 1897.
[31] O'Morchoe, "Botany, Informal Empire and the Colonial Roots of British Gardens," 7.
[32] ibid.

Yet, the promise of escape from the unknown to the familiar was never fully realised in Yunnan. Temperate flora in Yunnan took on the quality of a mirage. Referring back once more to the contrast Henry drew between the *candidum* and the rose, we see Henry's experience of the *candidum* was as an optical illusion, an almost-rose, occurring everywhere and tricking the subconscious mind.[33] Of course, it was by no means trying to mimic the rose, but the searching eye, intent on finding, created its own illusions, as does the mind of the collector, constantly focused on an imagined object, judge all its findings against it. Which is to say temperate forests, however familiar they appeared, were incapable of fully satisfying such restless minds for long:

> The delights of great woods, the summits of high peaks are wonderfully exhilarating in different ways. In the woods the trees are so close together […] all of them vying with each other in tallness and slimness all trying to reach the sun above. Beneath ferns and certain kinds of blooming plants occur, the latter always with beautiful flowers to attract the bees and uncertain insects and butterflies that occur. There is not a sound in the wood […] on the other the great wood on the more slanting slope- one can see so far -range upon range- here and there in its valleys a village or two, with blue smoke- so far away one cannot notice the unpleasantness of those human insects, that grub away from year to year, from generation to generation spoiling as much as they can the face of nature.[34]

This account, like others quoted in this chapter, places the temperate forest and its foil, in this case human settlement, butting against one another in contrastive fashion. Henry, having ascended the mountain side and entered into the forest, can find momentary peace, a peace which which lasts only until he turns his head and the horizon reveals to him signs of human civilisation. It was in these key moments of juxtaposition that Henry's most misanthropic side appears, when he, still surrounded by the forest, is reminded of human life. Notice as well that Henry has inverted a metaphor he used elsewhere; Whereas before

[33] AH to TD, 8 June 1898.
[34] AH to EG, September 22, 1896.

the nests of red ants were "like human cities in ugliness and life uncanny"[35], here rather than insects becoming human, it is humans that become insects. His only solace in their distance from him. In either case ugliness and despoilment lay in the valley, and he is temporarily safe in his mountain respite.

It would be easy to interpret this insect metaphor as the sole product of the racism typical of his period and background. And Henry was, of course, racist. Of the Chinese he wrote; "[They] - to tell you the great secret - have an inferior intellect. They have never found out anything with their intellect comparable to ancient greek or modern European."[36] Although capable of seeing merit in aspects of Chinese culture, Henry ultimately did not trust Chinese people and never took a Chinese person into his confidence writing: "As for the Chinese they have many virtues, solid respectable virtues: but one can never trust them in the end. I do not really like unless I can give my trust".[37] Even his most capable collector, a man he called Old Ho, about whom he wrote "nearly all the good things of the Yunnan collection must be attributed to" did not reach this familiarity.[38] Yet, an undercurrent of dislike for human civilisation and its effect on nature as well as class prejudice stretched beyond the scope of China. He described London, for example, in terms in no-less harsh than he would describe a Chinese city, writing "there is something unspeakably repulsive about certain London neighbourhoods, they actually often made me shudder, the want of air, sameness, ugliness, vileness was too dreadful".[39] It is more difficult, however, from these sources to properly assess how his descriptions of China compare generally with his descriptions of elsewhere, as he rarely discusses other places.

More clear is that Henry associated China's political and social condition with its ecology. Take this line for further example: "here in this land of decay there is no life in man and he has destroyed so much as his vile requirements demanded, the life

[35]AH to EG, February 20, 1897.
[36]AH to EG, May 25, 1897.
[37]AH to EG, May 30, 1898.
[38]AH to TD, May 1, 1899.
[39]AH to EG, May 25, 1897.

in nature."[40] Its first clause is only ambiguously related to ecology, as decay could be interpreted in many ways and indeed when western observers spoke of decay in China they usually were referring to political or social decay. The second narrows the scope of interpretation, focusing on the destruction of nature, while mirroring "life in man" with "life in nature", the former nourishing itself at the latter's expense. This critique of the rampant destruction of nature to serve "vile requirements" brings to mind public and scholarly critiques of industrialisation and imperialism though in this case the rapacious villain is not the western imperialist but the Chinese people. Not surprising considering that Henry believed totally in European superiority and thus the morality of their rule over others:

> It is a great burden how to deal with the enormous mess of superstition, ignorance and prejudice embodied in the 600,000,000 people of India and China. European rule and influence brings peace and trade and prosperity [...] To Asia we owe little but the bloodthirsty bend of our religious bigotry. Empire is the fair and white sister, morally and intellectually.[41]

This is followed shortly after by a droll comment anthropomorphising plant life:

> It is very curious to note how even European weeds seem to be prepotent and vigorous. They are ousting native weeds in many parts of the world.[42]

Nature, however, could be saved by the right stewardship, that is to say, the stewardship of European or American empires.[43] It was not that he felt China would always remain in its weakened state, in fact he thought it was inevitable it would change, but the process was too slow; "The Chinese are just as clever as the Japanese: they are wonderfully homogenous: there are no class or race hatreds as in India. Waking up is slow, very slow: but it must come."[44] And when that change came, the native people of Yunnan would, he felt, with the same inevitability be wiped out by the Chinese.[45]

[40] AH to EG, June 15, 1897.
[41] AH to EG, November 20, 1897.
[42] AH to EG, November 20, 1897.
[43] AH to EG, November 20, 1897.
[44] AH to TD, June 8, 1898.
[45] AH to TD, June 8, 1898.

The ethnically non-Chinese peoples of Yunnan, of whom Henry mostly encountered the Yi[46] and Miao groups, he tended to view more favourably than the Han Chinese, applying the division of temperate and tropic, familiar and unfamiliar, to people as well as plants:

> There is a certain look, which one sees on girls and women's faces in Ireland and in England, a look of frankness, openness, innocence- which I have never seen but once in a Chinese- and she was a girl in tatters who lived on a mountain with her mother, twenty miles away from the nearest house. It is the look that I saw on the faces of the Lolo girls at the village of Tachuang.[47]

In the expressions of women, Henry finds something akin to the "mysterious" quality which divided the flower of *candidum* from the rose, a temperate essence. The Yi (Lolo) girls he meets are a step removed from the society of the plains Chinese, and thus, by virtue of not being Han Chinese and by living closer to the forests, become familiar. And the Chinese girl, the only he had ever seen with this look, is the exception who proves the rule. It was as if the girl, shorn of society's trappings and spirited to the mountain, far from other humans, was inoculated against what he termed the "dishonest Chinese spirit", and in this way protected, could flower with the honest, open look of a stock Irish colleen, poor, simple and good.[48]

Rural people are not free of corruption in his eyes, remember here that it was the invisible villagers whose smoke he saw rising in a distant valley, that he likened to insects. The confused nature of his musing is immediately apparent, perhaps even to him as he goes on to write:

> I very seldom pitied the poor of home in Ireland. There was so much real beauty scattered here and there in character, in look. it seemed as if these wonderful flowers would fade away if riches and prosperity came in a rude boisterous way. Of course I was wrong, as riches don't do any harm. Prosperity

[46]He refers to them as Lolo.
[47]AH to EG, May 25, 1897.
[48]AH to EG, June 15, 1897.

is a great civiliser.[49]

Any tension between an idyllic view of rural poverty and a belief in prosperity's ability to civilise is resolved soundly on the side of prosperity when Ireland is discussed, the inverse is true for his Chinese example where seemingly the little girl in tatters, who could not be misinterpreted as living an idyllic poverty, is saved by lack of civilisation, her "wonderful flower" preserved from the decay of China. It is evident that the familiarity he found in these mountainous places, whether in flowers or the eyes of urchins was as much a measure of perceived distance from the Chinese as it was a measure of closeness to Western modes. This leaves us with a more complicated view of the temperate imagination which was, in Henry's case, not only a way of imagining a link between colony (or semi-colony in China's case) and metropole, but also a psychological state which transformed the landscape and its people into an imperfect mirror of the familiar, the imperfections of which became immediately apparent on inspection, since any "wonderful flower" of a girl he found in Yunnan, well she was not a rose but merely a *candidum* pretending.

[49] AH to EG, May 25, 1897.

Conclusion

In late 1896, the customs station in Mengzi had a visitor. George Ernest Morrison, an Australian author and traveller, stopped there briefly while travelling up from Siam. Morrison had, a year previous, completed a long overland journey from Shanghai to South-East Asia. This journey was the basis of his book *An Australian in China*. Here is what Henry remarked about the professional traveller to Gleeson:

> He is a pleasant enough person; but neither very learned nor very clever. Yet as a traveller, he is a great success: and his book, the "Australian in China" must sell very well. He is rather down on Colquhoun for inaccuracies: and I think with justice.[50]

Henry was not particularly impressed by his visitor's learning, Morrison had barely a word of Chinese, and both men were "down on" another adventurer's account of China. Archibald Colquhoun had by 1896 written two books about south China, 1883's *Across Chrysê* and 1885's *Amongst the Shans*. Both Henry and Morrison appear to have read Colquhoun's works and neither approved. This short comment from Henry is revealing of the kinds of rivalries and judgements Westerners in China reserved for one another. The object of disapproval was the quality of one's *China knowledge* and one's ability to gather this knowledge. Colquhoun failed on the former, he did not *know* China, at least not in the way that Henry and Morrison believed they knew China. Morrison failed on the latter. He, in Henry's view, lacked the wits to really understand what he saw. Henry's comments amount to a kind of posturing, a way to place himself above those dilettantes

[50] AH to EG, September 22, 1896.

who came and went and wrote their books, and then went elsewhere along the imperial periphery and wrote their books about those places too. It is understandable that Henry would want to make such a distinction clear. To start, he undoubtedly did know more about the history, culture and politics of China, having worked his full professional life there, and he could actually read and speak Chinese. Henry, although quite open with his political and cultural commentary in his letters, did largely did not see these musings as fit for a mass audience. About writings like Colquhoun's and Morrison's, Henry wrote "I hate superficial work of this kind: it is hardly worthwhile coming so far to see so little and to spin out one's story with padding."[51] In other words, these were abuses of an audience eager to learn about China, who could not, as Henry could, tell the bad from the good. Henry's disappointment speaks to the understanding that one of the greatest and most easily exploitable resources China offered to its foreign residents was that almost everything related to it held some interest to audiences in Europe and America.

Knowledge in China was like the sparkling flecks in a stream which fuel a gold rush. One did not have to know anything, or do anything much to go panning. One simply had to be in China, keeping their eyes open and sieve-like to gather observations, or objects, or plants which could be exploited for gain, be it monetary or otherwise. When China was first opened to foreigners, it had been enough to hang around the treaty ports[52], but as foreign incursion increased, the value of what they could provide decreased and to find things worth knowing it was necessary to go inland. If Henry had been stationed his whole career in Shanghai, his collections would have been nothing of note, and it is possible, lacking the encouragement of Dyer and the knowledge that his work was novel and useful, that he would not have collected at all. Much of what this dissertation has discussed has been the product of this particular economy of knowledge. Whether it was by sending specimens to Dyer, writing anecdotes to Gleeson, explaining Chinese *materia medica* to an English speaking audience, or writing essays on ethnography, Henry's experience in Yunnan and China was filtered through the sense that everything had a hidden significance by virtue of being Chinese. And this significance obliged the Westerner in China to

[51] AH to EG, September 22, 1896.
[52] Fan, British Naturalists in Qing China, 12.

produce knowledge, and this obligation appears to have simultaneously exerted a pressure on Henry to form himself into the kind of person capable of receiving and unlocking the full meaning of being in China, of exploring as much as he was capable all his avenues of interest, so as to not squander his opportunity to *know* China even if he did not particularly like it. And it was this process of trying to know that, as we have seen, made the experience of his alienated life in China bearable, as the quest for knowledge transformed the lot of a bored semi-colonial official, into something of a minor martyr for science and empire.

For Henry knowledge of China was hard won, and it was difficult to assess its value:

> I find it very difficult to gain enough news and ideas on a trip to make it worth recording: yet I speak Chinese and do a [commendable] amount of talk with everyone that I meet. Yet to get at real facts, to see into the life of the people, is very difficult, even when one stays in a place: and while moving it seems impossible.[53]

This is the root of his dislike for the easy garrulousness of the travel writers. His experience told him that they had not spent long enough in China, nor spent long enough considering their observations, to write things that were, in his view, capable of reaching the "real facts" which he tried to grasp. The above applies to knowledge of China generally but knowledge of plants was similarly coloured by an acceptance of epistemic uncertainty. As Henry showed when he wrote the following about the mysterious character of the mountain forests:

> On the high green mountains the lark sings as sweetly as at home; and in the woods there are many beautiful notes. In our anthropomorphic way we look on the world as ours, and forget even the existence of the fellow dwellers. The world is so wonderful. I know nothing real of it. Shall we ever know? We know enough however to be happy and make others happy[54]

[53] AH to EG, September 22, 1896.
[54] AH to EG, February 19, 1898.

Henry obviously was not too troubled by acknowledging the limits of what could be known. Perhaps then, it is better to understand his plant collection in the terms he would, in self-deprecating moments, describe it, as a form of drudgery, a task without clear end, albeit a drudgery imbued with higher purpose through its connection the wider world of scientific endeavour.

It is from these considerations that the importance of time returns to our discussion. Faced with the immense task of knowing China and its flora, it becomes clear that one would never have enough time to follow these paths to satisfaction. There is obviously nothing particular to being a Westerner in late-Imperial China that brings about the realisation that one does not have enough time in their life to achieve all they would like to achieve, a thought common to all conscious mortal beings. But it is clear that the experience of the overwhelming foreignness and exoticness in his surroundings had an effect on his experience of time, either by dragging it out in prolonged bouts of boredom when collection was impossible, or by concentrating it through efforts to apprehend his surroundings. Henry focused his efforts on plants, but had he pursued ethnography, history or any other topic of study, his labours could be understood in the same way, that is as methods to create and maintain structure and meaning in a land that, at times, must have seemed hostile to both.

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