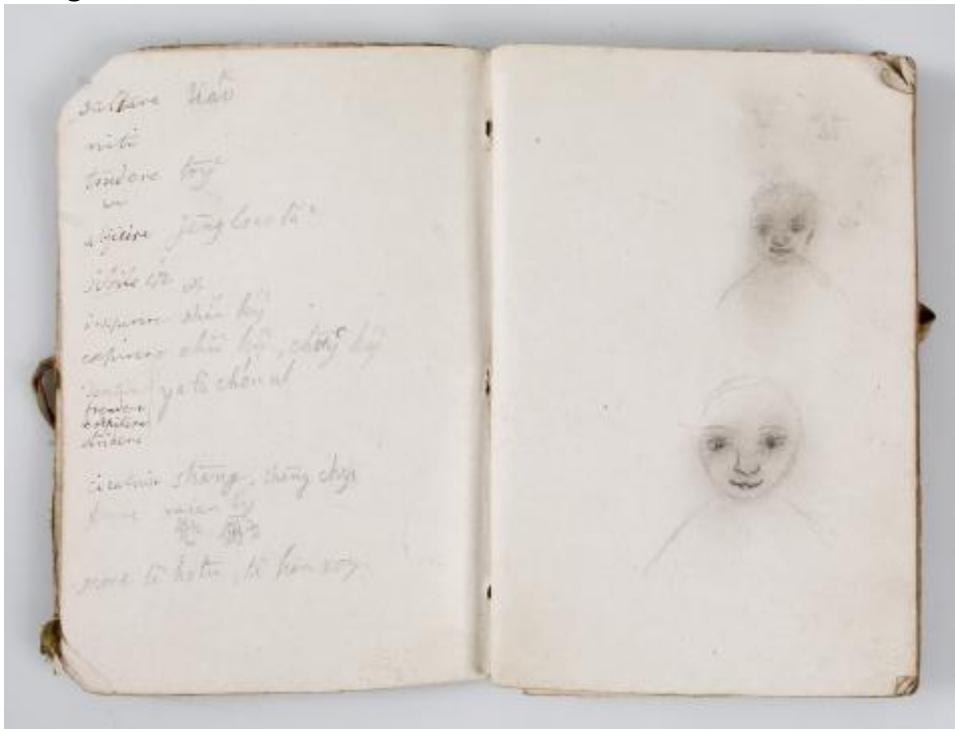


Saved for the nation: Archive of Thomas Manning, first Briton to meet the Dalai Lama

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The Royal Asiatic Society has acquired the archive of sinologist Thomas Manning (1772-1840), one of Britain's first scholars of Chinese language and culture.

Image



Pencil sketches of the five-year-old Dalai Lama, by Thomas Manning

Image



Letters and notes from one of the notebooks Manning kept in China

The archive consists of over 400 letters to and from Manning, papers, diaries, and notebooks detailing Manning's unpublished researches, as well as the manuscript of *Narrative of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*, which was published posthumously in 1876.

The Thomas Manning Archive has been acquired for £98,000 with £51,000 from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) and further support from the Arts Council England/Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund; the Friends of the National Libraries; and numerous private donations.

The son of Rev. William Manning, Rector of Diss in Norfolk, Thomas Manning was a gifted mathematician and was admitted to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge in 1790. From an early age he developed a fascination with Chinese history and culture, and his life's ambition was to visit and explore China. To that end he travelled to Paris in 1800 to learn the Chinese language, after which he returned to England to study medicine, so he would have a useful trade to offer when he arrived in China.

Manning was given permission by the East India Company (EIC) to reside in Canton in a private capacity, arriving there in 1807. The interior of China was strictly off-limits to Europeans at the time, and Manning planned several trips to explore China properly, eventually embarking on a mission to enter China via Tibet. Together with one servant he travelled from Calcutta overland into Tibet where he finally reached Lhasa, the holy city of Tibet, in December 1811. There he was allowed to meet the 9th Dalai Lama who was only five years old. However, he was refused permission to go on to China and returned to India five months later.

In 1816 Manning joined the ill-fated Amherst embassy as a Chinese interpreter. Along with the embassy he suffered shipwreck during the return journey. He eventually returned to England via St. Helena, where he met Napoleon. Manning did not publish his research or findings after his return, although he shared his experiences with a wide literary acquaintance and had one of the best libraries of Chinese books in Europe. He was Honorary Chinese Librarian of the Royal Asiatic Society, and his bust and portrait are on display in their premises in Euston.

In addition to his Chinese studies and wide travels, Manning is also known for his youthful friendships with literary figures such as Charles Lamb, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Charles Lloyd. Manning was a particularly close friend of Charles Lamb, and Manning's letters are among the few Lamb received which he did not

destroy. Indeed, until recently, the only Manning letters known to have survived were his letters to Lamb and other literary figures which can be found in collections in the United States. Thus the archive acquired by the RAS contains a great deal of completely fresh material, and promises to reveal much about the contributions of this exceptional figure to Great Britain's intellectual engagement with the East.

The collection includes a number of letters Manning sent to his father William, the Rector of Diss in Norfolk, spanning most of the important stages of his career. There are letters sent from Cambridge, where Manning remained coaching students for the Mathematical examinations, publishing a popular text book on arithmetic and algebra in 1796; from Paris, in which he discusses his efforts to learn Chinese as well as meeting prominent English radicals such as Thomas Paine; letters from Canton detailing life alongside the EIC traders, and observations on the interactions between Europeans and Chinese; and letters sent from Calcutta as he prepared his arduous journey on foot into Tibet.

The collection also includes Manning's diaries and notebooks. These highly concentrated volumes demonstrate the wide range of Manning's research and speculations on the Chinese language, as well as his thoughts on philosophy, mathematics, and religion. One notebook details medical treatments Manning administered during his travels in Tibet, as well as two touching pencil sketches of the five-year-old Dalai Lama, who was to die just a few years later. By the standards of his day Manning was not a particularly religious man, though he was deeply sympathetic and tolerant of different faiths and viewpoints; and he described his meeting with the Dalai Lama as follows:

"The lama's beautiful and interesting face engrossed all my attention. He had the simple, unaffected manners of a well-educated princely child. His face was, I thought, affectingly beautiful. He was of a gay and cheerful disposition. I was extremely affected by this interview with the lama. I could have wept through strangeness of sensation."

Dr Gordon Johnson, President of the Royal Asiatic Society, says: "I am delighted that the Society has acquired this important collection to add to its fine library and archival holdings. As the Society approaches its 200th Anniversary, I have no doubt that new study of this collection will be of tremendous value in furthering our understanding of European political and cultural engagement with Asia at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: a critical period of interaction between the West and the wider world.'

Sir Peter Luff, Chair of NHMF, said: “Whilst Thomas Manning is an unusual and little known figure, his papers provide a vital new perspective on the nature of Western intellectual engagement with Asia in the early nineteenth century. Until now, few sources of Manning’s material had been available for research. This National Heritage Memorial Fund investment means more people can now view and study this incredibly rich archive.”

Notes to editors

The Arts Council England/Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund is a government fund that helps regional museums, record offices and specialist libraries in England and Wales to acquire objects relating to the arts, literature and history. It was established at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in 1881 and continues to be part of its nationwide work. The annual grants budget, currently £750,000, is provided by Arts Council England (ACE). Each year, the Purchase Grant Fund considers some 200 applications and awards grants to around 100 organisations, enabling acquisitions of over £ million to go ahead. More information is available at www.vam.ac.uk/purchasegrantfund.

The Friends of the National Libraries is a registered charity that was founded in 1931. Its purpose is to help libraries in the United Kingdom acquire books, manuscripts and archives, in particular those that might otherwise leave this country. Since then, the Friends have helped in the purchase of printed books, manuscripts, records and archives of historical, literary, artistic, architectural, musical or suchlike interest. Libraries which can receive grants include the British Library, the National Libraries of Scotland and Wales and any university, county, local authority and other library, record office, museum or gallery to which the public has access, and which in the opinion of the Trustees, constitutes a proper repository for a proposed acquisition. More information is available at www.friendsofnationallibraries.org.uk.

The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland was founded in 1823. Its mission is to promote public understanding and scholarly research and exchange into the languages, histories, cultures, and arts of Asia. It realizes this by making available to the public its extensive collections of books, manuscripts, archives and artworks, as well as through series of lectures and events, and by publishing its journal and academic monographs. The Society has Fellows from all over the world. More information is available at www.royalasiaticsociety.org.