

Curran Fellowship 2022 Report

“Preparing the Child for Science”:

Victorian Children’s Periodicals and Scientific Literacy

I am writing with immense gratitude to report on my research trip to the British Library and University of London SOAS Library special collections in October 2022 made possible by the Curran Fellowship. My project investigates how children’s periodicals mediated scientific knowledge for a young audience and helped them gain scientific literacy during the long nineteenth century. It aims to track the role that the British periodical press had in the transnational circulation of scientific knowledge from Britain to formal (Australia) and informal (China) parts of the British Empire through children’s periodicals. My aim was to investigate how popularisers of science, children’s writers, missionary authors, translators, and educators used children’s periodicals to position young people to respond to scientific advancements and new scientific ideas.

I began with a list of materials in the SOAS archives that I wished to examine and emailed the reading room a month before my arrival to make sure that they could be retrieved and ready for me to consult when I arrived. I was informed that due to refurbishment works in the library, the reading room was only open on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and only for twelve readers. I was worried that I might not have enough time to go through all the materials, but fortunately some of the missionary letters and reports that I wanted to read were available on microfiche, so I was able to access them in the main reading room. In addition to reading missionary correspondence on microfiche, I looked through 22 boxes of materials from the London Missionary Society, Religious Tract Society, Christian Literature Society for China, and Methodist Missionary Society. Because of the limited opening hours at the special collections reading room, I spent most of my time taking photos of materials that might be relevant to the project, but I have not yet had time to examine them all in detail. Some highlights include finding a few copies of *Happy Childhood Magazine* as well as some photos of students from David Hill Girls’ School in Hanyang who were doing chemistry experiments, physics experiments, and engaged in learning activities in a biology lab. I also found catalogue lists of missionary publications for children that were useful.

At the British library, I examined two important children’s periodicals with substantial natural history and science content which are not available in the Nineteenth Century UK Periodicals Database. The first was *The Children’s Prize* (1863-1937) (also known as *The Prize* and *The Prize for Boys and Girls*), published by W. Wells Gardner (later Wells Gardener, Darton & Co.). It was founded by Anglican clergyman J. Erskine Clarke (1827-90), who subsequently began *Chatterbox* (1866-1953) for older readers, and edited several religious periodicals, such as *Our Happy Home Union*, *Parish Magazine*, and *Church Bells*. *The Children’s Prize*’s younger readership is a comparatively neglected area of research on the periodical press and its significant print run enables research that considers transformations in the periodical over time, as well as changing conceptions of childhood and children’s publishing, and examination of specific thematic issues across the period, such as the science focus of my project. The periodical features many natural history articles, animal

stories, and poetry. The British Library's holdings of *The Children's Prize* are nearly complete (except for 1935 and 1936). I created an Excel spreadsheet to help categorise articles and I paid close attention to the periodical covers and illustrations because the monthly was known for its colourful artwork. The spreadsheet has over 1000 entries and I took thousands of photos. I was excited to find two illustrations in *The Children's Prize* of a camel and a squirrel that were reproduced in the Chinese periodical *Xiaohai yuebao* (*The Child's Paper*, 1875-1915) and I think that I should be able to find more after doing a thorough comparison of the two periodicals. These reproductions are useful evidence for the transnational circulation of print culture. I also discovered a regular contributor named Ethel M. Barlow. Barlow's serialised articles on plants are distinct for their detailed illustrations and use of scientific terminology. Her writing and illustrations are more complex than the other content in *The Children's Prize*, which implies an older audience. I am interested in doing more research on Barlow, who was also a regular contributor to *Chatterbox*. I also examined the entire print run of *The Boys' Journal: A Magazine of Literature, Science, Adventure and Amusement* (1863-71) whose target audience was "the keenest and most impartial of all critics—intelligent boys" (vol. 1. no. 1, p. 37). It was published by Henry Vickers and edited by Charles Perry Brown. This monthly includes articles on astronomy, geology, optics, chemistry, geometry, electricity, horticulture, and other scientific topics. Many of the articles directed their young readers to conduct experiments and explained concepts by asking boys to draw diagrams and be hands on with their learning.

It will take me several months to go through and analyse all of the material I gathered on my research trip, but I am currently planning to submit two journal article manuscripts based on my findings in 2023/2024 and hope that the editorial board of *Victorian Periodicals Review* will consider one of them for publication. I would like to reiterate how extremely grateful I am to the Curran Fellowship Committee and to RSVP for supporting my project.

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