

Place, gender and the making of natural history: Hannah im Thurn in British Guiana, 1895–1897

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ABSTRACT

In 1895, the forty-year old Hannah im Thurn (née Lorimer) embarked on a new life as a colonial wife in the tropics, having just married the explorer and administrator Everard im Thurn. She accompanied her husband on a two-year sojourn in British Guiana, where they lived in Morawahanna, a remote settlement near the Venezuelan frontier. This paper contributes to a broader historical geography of the field sciences by providing a glimpse into relations across the porous boundaries between the private and the public, the domestic and the official, that shaped the production of natural history knowledge in the colonial context. By piecing together evidence from family letters, photographs, drawings and sculptures produced in British Guiana, we seek to make Hannah's presence in the historical record – and in Everard's scientific and administrative life – more visible. In particular, the paper contributes to the increasing body of work on gender and science which has begun to unravel the entangled histories of personal partnerships that have shaped modern science.

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The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew holds a unique set of historic photographs across its various collections, including the herbarium, economic botany collection and archives, most of which have never been catalogued, cited or reproduced. Amongst these, one photograph representing the palm genus *Euterpe* and dated 1897 is particularly poignant (Fig. 1). Mounted on card and framed in pen, the photograph is signed by the botanist G.S. Jenman, who was employed at the botanical gardens in Georgetown, British Guiana (now Guyana), between 1879 and 1902.¹ The image, with its minimal caption, was designed to illustrate a specimen of palm that, according to Jenman, was similar to *Oreodoxa regia*, one of two non-native species of palms introduced into British Guiana around 1800.²

To non-botanical eyes, however, the photograph contains evidence of another kind. Posed beneath the leaves of the palm, though still in the glare of the sun, stands an unidentified couple,

accompanied by a small dog (Fig. 2). An upright, bearded gentleman in a suit, wearing a top hat and holding a cigar, looks directly into the camera, while his companion – a woman wearing a hat garlanded with flowers – stands awkwardly alongside, her head tilted downwards. Nothing is known about the occasion on which the photograph was taken, and in the context of Kew's plant illustration collection the couple remain anonymous, simply providing a measure of the scale of the specimen. It is only by comparing the image with other portraits that the figures can be identified as Everard im Thurn, explorer, colonial administrator, botanist and anthropologist, and his wife Hannah, whom he had married in Scotland two years earlier. A rare portrait of the im Thurns together in British Guiana, the photograph prompts questions about the intertwining of their personal and professional lives on the colonial frontier, and specifically about Hannah's role in relation to her husband's professional career and scientific work. In

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¹ George Samuel Jenman was a British botanist and gardener born in Plymouth and trained at Kew between 1871 and 1873. See JSTOR Global Plants, Jenman, George Samuel (1845–1902), <http://plants.jstor.org/person/bm000004078> last accessed 21 February 2018.

² George Samuel Jenman to Sir William Thiselton-Dyer, 13 May 1897, Director's Correspondence 204/562, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew [hereafter RBG Kew], KLDC11788.

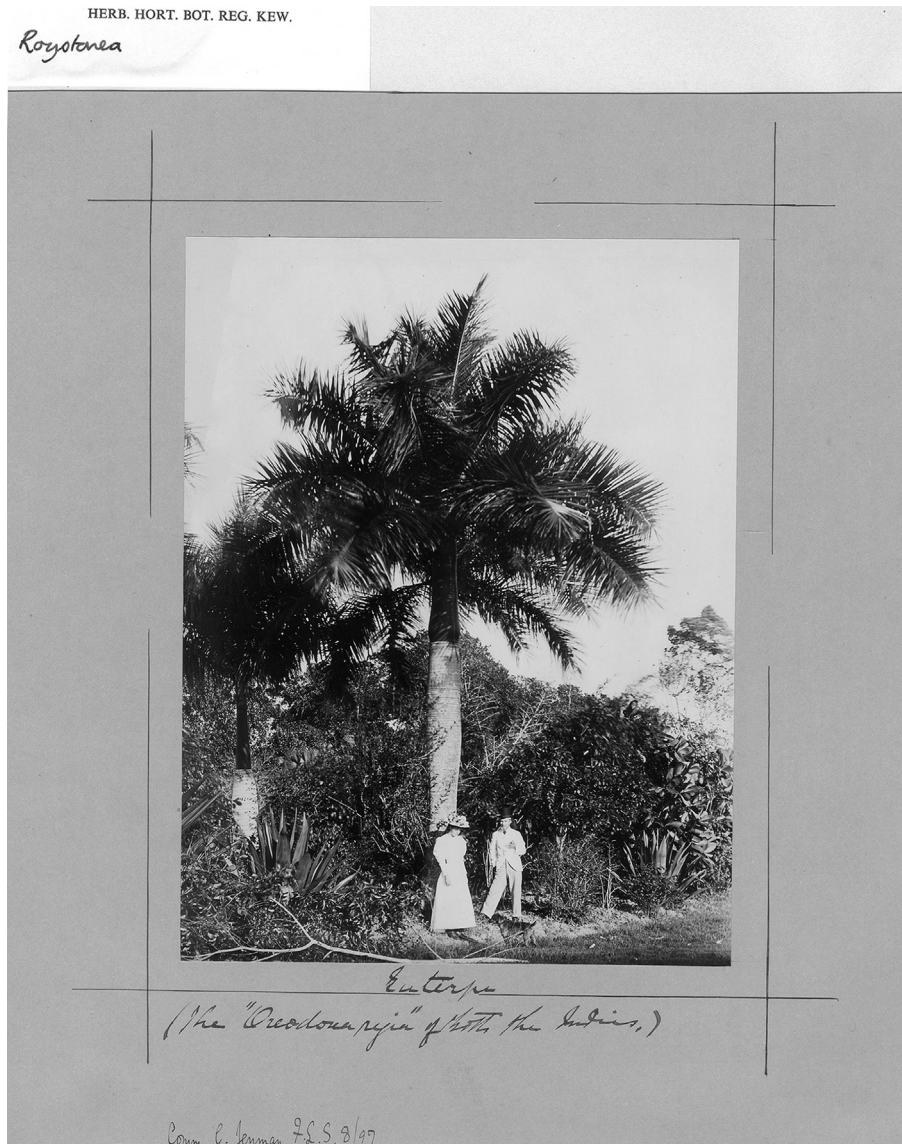


Fig. 1. Euterpe (the "Oreodoxa regia" of both the Indies). Photograph signed by G.S. Jenman and dated 1897, British Guiana. From the Palm Illustration Collection, Box: 187 PALMAE: Genus 90 © The Board of Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

what follows, we are concerned with the ways in which a specific geographical location – in this case, a colonial site – shaped the gendering of scientific biographies and scientific practice in terms of roles, division of labour, and the actual products of that work. As David Livingstone suggests, 'greater sensitivity to the *spaces of a life*' has the potential to 'enrich our understanding of the mutual making of science and scientist'.³ In this paper we discuss not one life, but two, bringing Hannah im Thurn back into the frame of history alongside her more famous husband.

Everard im Thurn's contributions to exploration, science and colonial administration have been appraised in a number of biographical studies since his death in 1932.⁴ During his lifetime he achieved a degree of fame for his 1884 ascent of Mount Roraima in

British Guiana, which secured him a place in the annals of geographical exploration.⁵ A keen collector of tropical plants and ethno-botanical artefacts, im Thurn also established a reputation as a discerning naturalist and received the support of successive directors of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.⁶ In more recent years,

³ See R.R. Marett, Sir Everard im Thurn, K.C.M.G., K.B.E., C.B., in: R.R. Marett (Ed.), *Thoughts, Talks and Tramps: A Collection of Papers by Sir Everard im Thurn*, London, 1934; R. Dalziell, The curious case of Sir Everard im Thurn and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: exploration and the imperial adventure novel, *The Lost World, English Literature in Transition (1880–1920)* 45 (2002) 131–157.

⁴ E. im Thurn, The botany of the Roraima expedition of 1884: being notes on the plants observed (communicated by Sir J.D. Hooker), *The Transactions of the Linnean Society of London* 2 (1887) 249–270; New orchids: decades XLVIII–XLIX, *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew)* 2 (1921) 52–56; New orchids: decades XLVIII–XLIX, *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew)* 3 (1921) 131–135; C.H. Wright, Ferns collected in Fiji by Sir Everard im Thurn, K.C.M.G., *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew)* 8 (1930) 343–348; T.A. Sprague and N.Y. Sandwith, Contributions to the flora of tropical America: X, *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew)* 2 (1932) 81–93.

³ D.N. Livingstone, *Putting Science in its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge*, Chicago, 2013, 183, emphasis in original.

⁴ See A. Aspinall, Sir Everard im Thurn: born 1852; died 7 October, 1932, *Man* 33 (1933) 36–37; R. Dalziell, Everard im Thurn in British Guiana and the Western Pacific, in: P. Hulme and R. McDougall (Eds), *Writing, Travel, and Empire: In the Margins of Anthropology*, New York, 2007, 97–118.

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