

## The government teacher as mediator of a “superior” education in Colesberg, 1849–1858

*Helen Ludlow\**

Some eighteen or twenty years ago, the Government of this Colony introduced a scheme of public education ... which promised much for the future benefit of the country. The scheme was drafted by Sir John Herschel, one of the first men of the day; and in liberality and catholicity of range, it was perhaps as much ahead of existing systems, whether in Europe or elsewhere ... South Africa received the scheme with open arms, and cordially welcomed the introduction of the highly-educated gentlemen who were invited from Europe to carry it out ... A giant, verily, was born to South Africa; but ... his physical development was restrained and crushed in his infancy, his intellectual vigour and energy were cramped and paralysed (George Bremner, government teacher, Graaff-Reinet, 18 August 1858).<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In May 1849, the Scottish-born assistant teacher at the Stellenbosch Government School, James Rait, was promoted to the remote Karoo village of Colesberg. To be a government teacher at the Cape Colony in the mid-nineteenth century was to assume a position associated with high status and respectability within the colonial order.<sup>2</sup> Government schooling was, however, a novel project in the British Empire.<sup>3</sup> The failure of the metropolitan government to commit sufficient resources to make state schooling work meant that the ability of government teachers to sustain a respectable identity varied. It became local circumstances rather than colonial or metropolitan ambitions which set the parameters within which teachers established, defended and performed their own identity. This article provides a case study in which the career of James Rait at Colesberg is used to explore teacher identity in the context of a small northern frontier town.

An important document survives from Rait’s tenure; his “Report ... for the Quarter ending 30th September 1851”.<sup>4</sup> Its pages allow access to Colesberg pupils and particularly to the way in which the curriculum was implemented. This article thus investigates the teacher as mediator of a particular construction of knowledge, attitudes and dispositions in frontier Colesberg. It also examines his attempts to manage his growing incapacity to sustain a respectable and successful manly identity. This was because of the incommensurate demands of his career and family on his ailing body and limited income.

---

\* Helen Ludlow is head of History and of the Division of Social and Economic Sciences at the Wits School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand. Her research has focused on the nineteenth-century Cape Colony, including missions, slave emancipation, and teacher identity.

1. “The Karoo College”, *The Midland Province Banner*, Graaff-Reinet, 18 August 1858.
2. The first “New System” government teachers took up their posts in 1840, and the last resigned in 1874. Cape Archives (hereafter CA): Superintendent-General of Education (hereafter SGE), 13/1, General Register of Schools, 1838–1875; SGE 17/2, Schedule of the Establishment in the Department of the SGE, 1863–1875.
3. The first engagement of the British state with direct provision of education was in Ireland but was limited before the New System was introduced at the Cape. See J. Coolahan, *Irish Education: Its History and Structure* (Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, 1981), pp 3–5.
4. CA: SGE 1/4, Letters received by the Superintendent-General of Education, 1851–1859, from Humansdorp, Uitenhage, Port Elizabeth, Bathurst, Grahamstown, Cradock, Graaff-Reinet, Colesberg, etc.; J. Rait “Report of the School established by Government at Colesberg for the Quarter ending 30th September 1851”.

As Rait's illness advanced, he was granted permission to employ one of his senior pupils, Eliza Arnot, as a paid pupil-teacher. What makes her role significant is that she is one of very few young women to be given a formal, if junior, position within state education. In addition, the racial mix of her family was notable. This case study thus examines teacher identity within an important colonial project. At the same time it opens up a local view of the workings of race, gender and class in a more fluid social context than that of many of the contemporary government schools.

The launch of the "New System" or Established System of Schooling in 1839, was an attempt by local colonial officials to improve the quality of Cape education.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that this may be seen as part of an attempt to create greater government regularity in a relatively newly acquired British colony which was dealing with the consequences of the abolition of slavery.<sup>6</sup> Free primary education could be seen both as a way of regulating and uplifting the poor; its location in non-racial schoolrooms a reflection of post-emancipation humanitarian egalitarian discourses. The additional provision of a liberal secondary education (for a fee) could be used to develop an educated local leadership suited to a colony embracing a settler-led commercial future.<sup>7</sup>

The New System was the brainchild of the colonial secretary, John Bell, his fellow Scot John Fairbairn, and the visiting English astronomer, Sir John Herschel;<sup>8</sup> its conception liberal, utilitarian, moralising. As evident in the article's opening quotation, Herschel was regarded as the prime author of the system, and his construction of the ideal teacher of the New System was one which resonated with the Graaff-Reinet teacher and with James Rait, the subject of this article.

The efficiency of the system, Herschel argued, would hinge on having "talented", knowledgeable teachers, men of sound Christian character; men who would be rewarded financially and through promotion for seeking their own improvement.<sup>9</sup> His good teacher was eventually to be epitomised by the graduate of a Scottish university – with a classical or mathematical degree. This vision was reinforced by another Scot, James Rose Innes, who was appointed as the first superintendent-general of education (SGE) in 1839. In his selection and supervision of the first-class government teachers, it is evident that Innes demanded high levels of academic proficiency. Part of this was to ensure that they were able to pass a thorough examination on the curriculum to be delivered, which was based on the Edinburgh published *Chambers's Educational Course*.<sup>10</sup> He also steadfastly refused to promote any who failed to achieve this qualification.<sup>11</sup> James Rait clearly met the SGE's exacting criteria and was promoted to Colesberg in 1849.

- 
5. For an overview of earlier education provision, see G.24-'63, CGH, *Report of a Commission of Inquiry, in Accordance with Addresses of the Legislative Council and House of Assembly, to Inquire into the Government Educational System* (hereafter *Report of Watermeyer Commission*), 1861, pp xi–xxviii.
  6. E.H. Ludlow, "State Schooling and the Cultural Construction of Teacher Identity in the Cape Colony, 1839–1865", PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 2011, chapter 2.
  7. CGH, J. Fairbairn, A1SC–1857, *Report of the Select Committee Appointed to Consider the Subject of Education*, p v. There were eventually 21 government schools, of which 17 were first-class i.e. provided for the education of secondary as well as elementary pupils.
  8. *Report of Watermeyer Commission*, 1861, pp xxxii–xi; E.G. Malherbe, *Education in South Africa, Volume 1: 1652–1922* (Juta, Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1925), pp 86–87.
  9. J. Herschel, "Memorandum", 17 February 1838, in W.T. Ferguson and R.F.M. Immelman (comps), *Sir John Herschel and Education at the Cape, 1834–1840* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1961), pp 14–25.
  10. CA: Colonial Office (hereafter CO) 695, Memorial of J. McNaughton, 31 August 1857.
  11. For example, CA: CO 499, Innes – Acting Colonial Secretary, 9 August 1841.

## Colesberg

Colesberg was an arid frontier town shaped by complex connections between the interior and coast in ways that belie its remoteness and smallness. It lay 40 kilometres south of the Orange River, far from the centre of government in Cape Town and its closest port at Port Elizabeth (800 and 450 kilometres respectively). Its nearest neighbour was the humble Griqua village of Philippolis, 56 kilometres to the north “across the river”.<sup>12</sup>

Colesberg originated as a church centre, an offshoot of the Graaff-Reinet Dutch Reformed Church. In 1824 the northeast boundary of the Cape Colony was moved to the Orange River and the village of Colesberg was formally proclaimed in 1830.<sup>13</sup> The Colesberg Division was carved out of the Graaff-Reinet District in 1837, at which date Fleetwood Rawstorne was appointed as resident magistrate and civil commissioner (CC) of Colesberg.<sup>14</sup> The extension of the Cape’s northern frontier and increasing emigration of colonial farmers, especially after the Great Trek, created a connection between the Cape and Transorangia that would characterise Colesberg’s orientation throughout the period under examination.<sup>15</sup> By the late 1840s, British political authority was uncontested in the northern Cape Colony, although distant reverberations from eastern frontier conflict and Boer-Griqua and Boer-Basuto contestations across the Orange River occasionally disturbed Colesbergers’ equanimity.<sup>16</sup>

Its frontier position saw Colesberg host a variety of diplomatic, military and missionary delegations, but it was pre-eminently an economic connection that tied Colesberg to the interior. As in the Graaff-Reinet District, the Colesberg Division saw British, German and other settlers leaving the eastern frontier, buying up trekker farms and setting up businesses to service the northern frontier community. Colesberg’s economic life was sustained by provisioning farmers, hunters and various expeditions to the interior. Wagons, trek oxen, horses, general supplies, guns, and gunpowder in seemingly vast amounts were supplied by a growing number of local merchants, both independent and increasingly, off-shoots of larger national merchant houses. In return they purchased ivory, skins, cattle and provided a market for wool clips; at times, long lines of credit too.<sup>17</sup>

- 
12. The Khoisan (Nama) name for the river was the Gariëp, and the area to its north became known as the Transgariëp. Going “across the river” seems to have become shorthand for Colesbergers visiting anywhere in the Transgariëp. The end of 1853, for example, found the teacher James Rait “over the river” because it was the holidays. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – Innes, 1 February 1854.
  13. H. Fransén, *Old Towns and Villages of the Cape: A Survey of the Origin and Development of Towns, Villages and Hamlets of the Cape of Good Hope* (Jonathan Ball, Jeppestown, 2006), p 298.
  14. CA: 1/Colesberg (hereafter CBG), Inventory of the Archive of the Magistrate of Colesberg, “Introduction”, pp 1, 4.
  15. Governor Sir Harry Smith’s precipitous extension of the colonial boundaries within months of his appointment in 1847 incorporated the Colesberg Division in a colony which doubled in size. Thousands of acres of crown land were added as the boundaries of the colony were extended to the full length of the Orange River in 1848, marking a closure of the political frontier. See H. Gilimée and B. Mbenga (eds), *New History of South Africa* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2007), p 144.
  16. T. Gutsche, *The Microcosm* (Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1968), pp 85–90 and 101–105, for example.
  17. Gutsche’s *Microcosm* is the only detailed, though unreferenced, history of Colesberg. For many examples of gunpowder licences granted, see CA: 1/CBG/4/2/4, 5, 6, Letters received by the Resident Magistrate, Colesberg, December 1850–December 1853.

From the 1840s, a “new era of imperial expansion” was evident in southern Africa, driven by the rise of local rural capital.<sup>18</sup> The market value of hitherto undesirable semi-desert Karoo land in the Colesberg area escalated rapidly with the introduction of merino sheep and the wool boom of the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>19</sup> As sheep farming flourished many Colesberg merchants also became landowners. Some farmed, others bought speculatively on both sides of the river.<sup>20</sup> Generally the 1850s (the time of Rait’s incumbency) were prosperous. This was until Colesberg, like much of the Cape Colony, was devastated by the drought and famine of the 1860s.

### James Rait and schooling in Colesberg

An 1841 census of the Colesberg District (“11 654 square miles”) recorded it as having one town, no schools and no missionaries. The population was 4 248 whites and 4 778 coloureds.<sup>21</sup> The 1840s saw moves made to correct the village’s lack of educational provision. By 1843 basic literacy was provided in a Dutch Reformed Church (later London Missionary Society-run) school for coloured congregants.<sup>22</sup> Colesberg was not originally granted a government school but by 1843, a government schoolroom was being hired in the village. By 1851 there were girls in Colesberg attending a “female school”.<sup>23</sup> Class sensibilities saw some of the more affluent send their children to private establishments in Cape Town and some wealthier farmers employed private tutors for their children.<sup>24</sup> Generally, however, it appears that the government school came to be regarded as an acceptable source of education for a wide spectrum of Colesberg residents.<sup>25</sup>

James Rait was a 26-year-old bachelor in 1849 when he became the third teacher to take up the first-class government post. He appears to have had a sense of vocation, referring to educating “the Rising generation” as entailing “important duties” and a “sacred responsibility”.<sup>26</sup> He was able both to deliver the higher branches,<sup>27</sup> and achieve good results with a large number of pupils ranged across the five classes of the elementary section of his school. Evidence of this was a rapid rise in enrolled scholars from 29 in September 1849 (five months after his arrival) to 101 a year later.<sup>28</sup> In carrying out his duties, he received gratifying support from the local authorities.

- 
18. M. Legassick and R. Ross, “From Slave Economy to Settler Capitalism: The Cape Colony and its Extensions, 1800–1854”, in C. Hamilton, B. Mbenga and R. Ross (eds), *Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume 1* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010), p 316.
  19. Giliomec and Mbenga (eds), *New History of South Africa*, p 145.
  20. Gutsche, *Microcosm*, p 84.
  21. “Return of the Extent, Population, and Stock, of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope for the year 1841”, cited in W.L. Nell, “James Rose Innes as Educationist at the Cape, 1822–1884”, DED thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1973, p 497.
  22. CA: CO 518, Revd T. Reid – Innes, 25 November 1843. Unusually for this time, the local DRC congregation played a limited role in the town’s education because it was riven by schism during much of the 1840s and 1850s; Gutsche, *Microcosm*, p 100.
  23. Rait, “Report of the School”, 30 September 1851, notes pupils withdrawn to attend a “Female School”.
  24. Gutsche, *Microcosm*, p 117; CA: SGE 1/4, A. Noble – Innes, 24 June 1858.
  25. Cape of Good Hope (hereafter CGH), “Answer from H. Green Esq., Colesberg”, 31 December 1861; *Report of Watermeyer Commission*, 1861, Appendix 1, p 39.
  26. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – President of School Commission, 12 March 1852; Rait – Innes, 21 April 1853.
  27. The higher branches were subjects like the classics and mathematics studied by secondary-level pupils. See for example, Eliza Arnot’s curriculum below.
  28. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – President of School Commission, 1 August 1854.

*Race and the government school*

Despite the stated intention that government schools should include children of all races, the fact that the Colesberg school did so was unusual. A number of coloured children attended it from at least 1850 through to its final dying days.<sup>29</sup> Specific details of the coloured families attending the government school are almost impossible to find, other than of the Arnot family discussed below. There may well have been coloured artisans in the village. There were many Khoisan labourers on Colesberg farms, the major decimation of indigenous (largely San) frontier communities having been completed by the 1790s.<sup>30</sup> There were also many “Hottentots and Bushmen ... squatting” on the 40 000 acres of Colesberg commonage in 1850, living off small flocks earned as shepherds and “occasional service in town”.<sup>31</sup>

The existence of the Dutch-medium London Missionary Society (LMS) mission school in the town has been noted, and its pupils, “chiefly ... children of Hottentots and Bushmen”<sup>32</sup> would have been given a basic 3R curriculum. Who chose to go to the government school and why is not spelt out, and the admission of coloured children to the Colesberg Government School seems to have happened amid unusual circumstances. The only reference to this is Rait’s comment on 16 August 1850:

[A] considerable number of the panes of the windows are broken / several of which were broken during the excitement consequent upon the introduction of the coloured children into the school/ & in consequence of exposure several of the children have caught colds. I trust that you will see to their being put in, as soon as possible.<sup>33</sup>

There are two clues as to the circumstances. A petition written by the deacons of the coloured congregation of the Union Chapel in Port Elizabeth on 22 February 1856, protested at their exclusion from the government school in that town, and pointed to a similar situation having occurred in Uitenhage and Colesberg: “it create there only Animosity stil there was Redress also in Colesberg an thare ofouse the same feeling stil thare.”<sup>34</sup> This petition importantly shows a bid by coloured Christian leaders for their inclusion in the educational dispensation that was theirs by right.

In the early 1860s, Innes engaged with LMS agent, the Revd W. Thompson on the subject of racial exclusion from state schools. Thompson argued strongly that colonial prejudices had largely excluded coloured children from government schools. Innes described how he had handled the situation in what might well have been Colesberg:

To show the working of the system: a coloured man in one of the country towns had his child first educated at the mission school, but, being able to pay for the higher branches, was anxious that his child should join the Government school. This created great

- 
29. CA: SGE 1/9, Miscellaneous letters received by the SGE, 1861 (all districts), J.B. Tennant – Dale, 23 and 27 March 1861.
30. J.S. Marais, *The Cape Coloured People, 1652–1937* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 1957), pp 20–22; M. Legassick, “The Northern Frontier to c. 1840: The Rise and Decline of the Griqua People”, in R. Elphick and H. Gilliomee (eds), *The Shaping of South African Society* (Maskew Miller Longman, Cape Town, 1989), pp 361–363.
31. J.M. Orpen, *Reminiscences of Life in South Africa from 1846 to the Present Day, Volume 1* (P. Davis, Durban, 1908; Struik reprint, Cape Town, 1964), p 39.
32. CA: G.16–57, CGH, *Report on Public Education for 1855 and First Half of 1856*, p 30.
33. CA: CO 594, Rait – President of School Commission, 16 August 1850.
34. CA: SGE 1/4, Deacons of Union Chapel – Innes, 22 February 1856.

excitement among the European population, and the matter was referred to me. **My reply was, that the parent could no more be deprived of the privileges of the Government school than of the court of justice when he had to plead his rights.** The child was, in consequence, at once admitted, and, in half an hour, twenty-eight of the European children left the school. This was subsequently thought better of, and the children returned, whilst the coloured child remained. Do you not think that if firmness were calmly exercised in every instance of this kind, objections would gradually give way, especially if the teacher were successful<sup>35</sup> (my emphasis).

The legal position was clear, but it took endurance to remain in a school where you were not wanted. As Revd Thompson said, “I believe that where something of the kind has been tried, the children themselves have been as like speckled birds; they have found themselves very uncomfortable ...”.<sup>36</sup> At Colesberg it was apparently possible to endure this, nonetheless.

It is not clear how many coloured children attended at Colesberg, but those on the roll who may have belonged to coloured families include M. Bloem, M. Jantjies, R. Sapphira and David Struis. The four Arnot children on the list had white parents but coloured half-siblings because their father, David Arnot snr’s, first marriage had been to a Bethelsdorp resident, Catharina (or Kaatje) van der Jeugd, daughter of Jacobus van der Jeugd and Mina Piet van de Kaap. Catharina van der Jeugd was mother of David Arnot jnr, born in 1821.<sup>37</sup> See Figure 1.

As important figures in Colesberg, it may have been the Arnots – the older Scottish blacksmith who had spent a number of years living and working at Bethelsdorp, and his half “Hottentot” son – whose influence made the entry of coloured children into the Colesberg School more acceptable to the wider community. Added to this, the paternalistic CC and school commissioner, Rawstorne, had been an assistant guardian to the slaves at Swellendam.<sup>38</sup> He may well have been committed, as was Rait, to the improving role of education. The fourth person who may have created the possibility for all local children to attend the government school was its other school commissioner, Charles Orpen. The Irish surgeon had arrived in Colesberg late in 1848 to serve as an Anglican priest. A philanthropist with an interest in deaf education,<sup>39</sup> he had attempted to implement the ideas of Pestalozzi on child-centred, activity-based learning while in England.<sup>40</sup> He appears to have brought that same concern for the needy to Colesberg and he supported Rait with a loan of maps and natural history plates, without which “the children would not possibly be well taught (as Mr James Rait the master wished) ...”<sup>41</sup>

---

35. CA: G.24-’63, *Report of Watermeyer Commission*, p 124; Innes for Commissioners, 4 December 1861.

36. CA: G.24-’63, *Report of Watermeyer Commission*, p 125; Revd W. Thompson, 4 December 1861.

37. J.A. Heese and R.J.J. Lombard, *South African Genealogies, Volume 1* (HSRC, Pretoria, 1986), p 84.

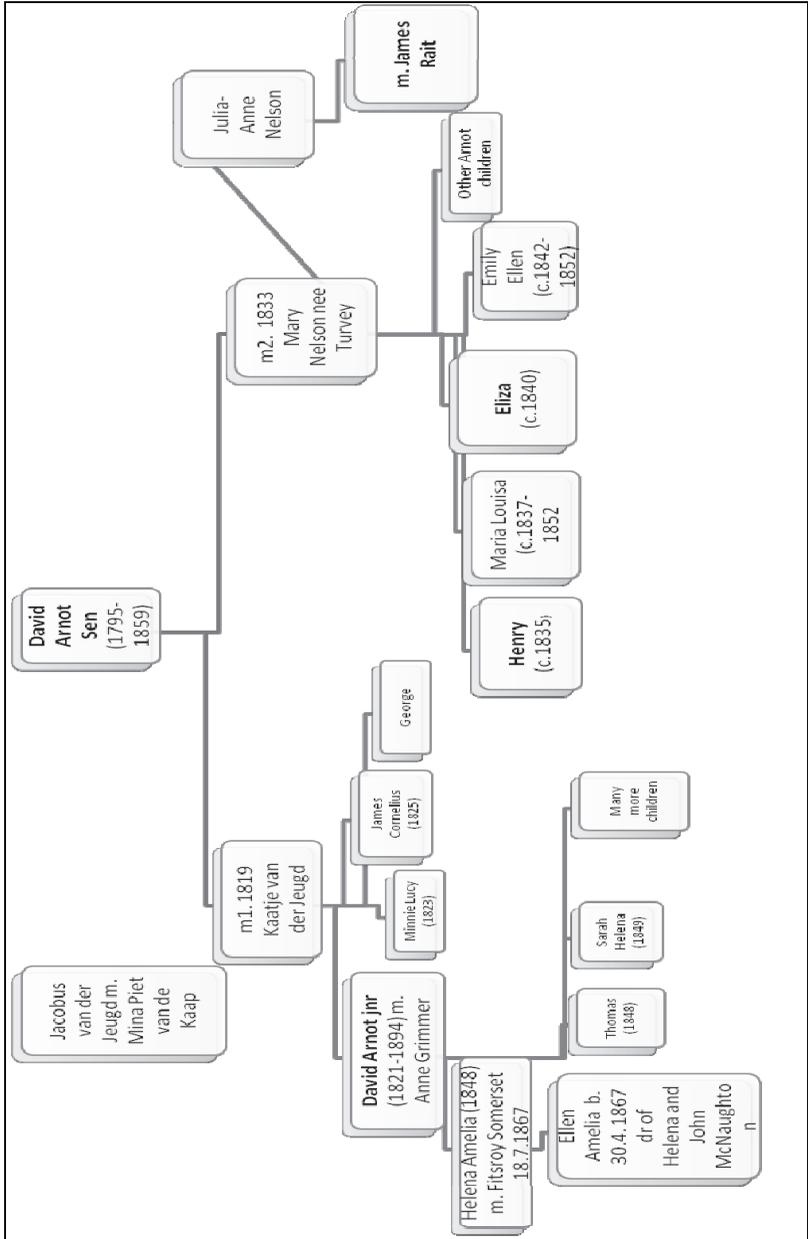
38. Gutsche, *Microcosm*, p70.

39. Orpen, *Reminiscences*, p 2.

40. ‘C.E.H. Orpen’, *Dictionary of South African Biography, Volume 4* (HSRC, Pretoria, 1981), p 437. Local school commissions had powers to inspect and report but not to regulate the teacher or manage financial matters.

41. CA: SGE 1/4, C. Orpen – Rawstorne, 12 November 1853.

Figure 1: The Arnot family tree.



*Pedagogy and pedagogic space*

From early on, Rait's classroom was filled to capacity with children, seemingly of all ages, genders and races. In his discussion of pedagogic space, Viñao points out the relationship between prevailing pedagogy and the organisation of this space. A school's space can be seen to perform three functions – productive, symbolic and disciplinary.<sup>42</sup> An overcrowded and ill furnished schoolroom would be unable to fill any of these roles satisfactorily. Thus, urged on by teacher and local school commission, the government approved the construction of a new schoolroom on the same site, erf 22 Ryneveld Street, in the centre of the village.<sup>43</sup> By October 1850, occupation was taken of one of the larger government schoolrooms: 7' by 25' and a lofty 20' in height.<sup>44</sup> Its interior was whitewashed, its floor made of stone, and it was furnished with writing desks around the periphery and forms across the room. This was an important if modest specialised space.

By the time Rait was teaching, the monitorial system employed in earlier forms of local schooling was no longer in favour. It was seen to have sacrificed real learning to mindless discipline. Instead, the teachers of the government schools engaged essentially in class teaching – “classification” resulting in five elementary classes, though there was no ascription of age to a particular level or rate of proceeding from one to the next. Advancement through the educational course was thus more flexible than in later systems of classroom based teaching. The Colesberg School had only one room, and continued the practice in preindustrial settings of placing all pupils in one space.<sup>45</sup> There was an integrated organisation of time and space where time was categorised as “Time under the Master”; “Time under the Assistant or Monitor”; and “Preparing at the Desk”<sup>46</sup> (see Figure 2). Activity would shift around the room in relation to this categorisation.

The inclusion of exterior pedagogic space in the form of playgrounds was to be emphasised by David Stow, the pioneer of Scottish teacher education.<sup>47</sup> This practice spread to the Cape and by 1855 the lessor of the Colesberg Schoolroom had been persuaded to construct separate, walled in boys' and girls' playgrounds.<sup>48</sup>

The school day, as in all government schools, was from 9am to 12 noon and 2pm to 4pm. In 1851, there were 101 pupils spread fairly evenly over the five classes of the elementary school. (In addition, there were five pupils taking the higher branches for which they would pay the quarterly fee of £1). Three classes made up the Junior Division, the 1st being the most junior; there were two classes in the Senior Division, where again the 1st was junior to the 2nd.

- 
42. A. Viñao, applying Foucault's three functions of work to a school, “History of Education”, in T.S. Popkewitz, B.M. Franklin and M.A. Pereyra (eds), *Cultural History and Education: Critical Essays on Knowing and Schooling* (Routledge and Falmer, London and New York, 2001), p 132.
43. CA: CO 594, Rait – Colesberg School Commission, 16 April 1850, 16 August 1850; President of School Board – Col Sec., 21 August 1850.
44. CA: CO 676, Innes – Col Sec., 7 March 1856; G.15–'60, CGH, *Report on Public Education for the Year 1859*, Table 1, p 11. The linear measurement presumably refers to feet. A foot is equivalent to 30.48 cm.
45. D. Tyack and W. Tobin, “The ‘Grammar’ of Schooling: Why has it been so Hard to Change?” *American Educational Research Journal*, 31, 3, 1994, p 458.
46. CA: SGE 1/4. See layout of “Report of the School established by Government at Colesberg for the Quarter ending 30 September 1851.”
47. I. Hunter, *Rethinking the School: Subjectivity, Bureaucracy, Criticism* (Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1994), p 73.
48. CA: SGE 1/4, CC Rawstorne – Innes, 16 April 1856.

Figure 2: Report of the school established by the government at Colesberg for the quarter ending 30 September 1851.

REPORT of the SCHOOL established by GOVERNMENT (105)

at Colesberg

for the Quarter ending 30<sup>th</sup> September 1851

**1. PUPILS ENROLLED, AVERAGE ATTENDANCE, &c.**

In the Month of	No. of days School was open.	No. of days School was closed.	No. of Pupils on the Roll.	Of whom were admitted.	Of whom were withdrawn.	Average Attendance.					Monthly Average.	Reasons for the School being closed for the No. of Days reported.
						First Week.	Second Week.	Third Week.	Fourth Week.	Old Days.		
<i>July</i>	21	10	50	5	2	74	75	76	70		73.75	<i>Holidays</i> Attendance during the Quarter, compared with that of the preceding: Increase— 12 Decrease— 14
<i>August</i>	21	0	53	5	4	70	74	75	74		73.25	
<i>September</i>	20	2	56	1	8	70	68	70	73		70.75	

*To SGE 1/4*

**2. APPROPRIATION OF TIME to the Subjects of the Elementary Course.**

Hours set apart weekly to the following Subjects.	Senior Division.						Junior Division.								
	Second Class.		First Class.		Third Class.		Second Class.		First Class.						
	Under the Master.	Under Assistant or Monitor.	Under the Master.	Under Assistant or Monitor.	Under the Master.	Under Assistant or Monitor.	Under the Master.	Under Assistant or Monitor.	Under the Master.	Under Assistant or Monitor.					
Religious Instruction.	2 1/2	0	0	2 1/2	2 1/2	0	2 1/2	2 1/2	0	1	3	0	1	3	0
English Language, Reading.				1	7/16		1	7/16		1	8	7/16	1	9	1/2
Etymology.				1	1/2										
Grammar.	2			1	1/2	3									
Composition.															
Arithmetic.—Theoretical.	5 1/2				6 1/2			6 1/2			6 1/2			6 1/2	
Practical.															
Geography.—Physics.	1 1/2		1		2 1/2			2 1/2			2 1/2			2 1/2	
Description.															
History	1				1										
Analysis and Illustration of Text Books on Chemistry.—															
Hydrostatics.	2		2 1/2												
Mechanics.															
Matter and Motion.	1		1/2												
Introduction to the Sciences.	1		2 1/2	5											
Dutch Language.—Reading.															
Translation.															
Writing	1 1/2				2 1/2			2 1/2			2 1/2			2 1/2	
Drawing	1														
Music															

*26. 5. 1851*

For most of his career in Colesberg, Rait conducted his school on his own, with the periodic assistance of a senior pupil acting as a pupil-teacher. The lack of assistance was to become a widespread cause for complaint by government teachers, but finances for these were not part of the initial budgeting of the New System and it took many years and the virtual (literal) collapse of the teachers before the situation was improved. It appears that in 1851 most of the teaching of the younger children was done by a pupil-teacher with Rait's role in the first three classes confined to a combined daily lesson in Religious Instruction and some teaching of reading and writing. In February 1856, however, he wrote:

The progress of the more advanced classes has been considerably retarded for want of an Assistant. I have no confidence in Monitors, and have therefore arranged my time as to give each class the advantage of my immediate tuition. The result is on a given day, one part of it I devote to teaching the A,B,C; another to teaching children beginning to master small words, and so on. The progress of the more advanced scholars cannot, consequently be such as if I devoted my whole time to them; and an estimate of my deserts must be formed from the state of the whole school.<sup>49</sup>

Children were not obliged to be at school, however, a frustrating source of irregularity that most schoolmasters bemoaned. As the years passed, the school seems to have increased proportionately in younger children, mostly Dutch-speaking, and from families less committed than his original intake to obtaining more than a basic education.<sup>50</sup> With continuing large numbers and his declining health, Rait was hard-pressed to continue with provision of the higher branches, although he had three pupils engaged in these studies in 1855.<sup>51</sup> It was only as his illness became critical by 1856, that Rait acquired the formal services of Eliza Arnot as a paid pupil-teacher.

#### *Discourses in and of the Colesberg classroom*

Rait's itemisation in his 1851 report of the subjects studied and the *Chambers* texts used in his classes, provides an opportunity to engage with the discourses these represent. It offers a glimpse at the intriguing interplay between the Scottish context and worldview in which they were constructed and the children of the town and district, Colesberg, that has been presented thus far.

Drawing on the literary culture of Scotland, and writing and publishing on matters as diverse as Scottish folklore, English literature and new ideas in science, William and Robert Chambers "helped feed the growing taste for popularizations of science and culture".<sup>52</sup> *The Chambers's Educational Course* was published in Edinburgh as one branch of the burgeoning Chambers publishing empire. The educational series was eventually used throughout Britain and introduced to the Cape by Innes. The significance of the course, argues Sondra Cooney, was this: "Partly inspired by an unconventional philosophy, it advocated a broad moral, intellectual secularity at a time when educational institutions and practices were infused with the worst in narrow, anti-intellectual sectarianism."<sup>53</sup>

49. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – Innes, 1 February 1856.

50. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – Innes, 1 February 1856.

51. CA: G.16–57, *Report on Public Education for 1855 and the First Half of 1856*, p xxii.

52. B. Waggoner, "Robert Chambers (1802–1871)" (University of Berkeley Palaeontology Museum) at <http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/history/chambers.html>, accessed 15 December 2010.

53. S.M. Cooney, "Publishers for the People: W. and R. Chambers: The Early Years, 1832–1850", PhD thesis, Ohio State University, 1970, pp 153 ff.

The Chambers educational approach was directly influenced by the Scottish phrenologist, George Combe, and indirectly by European educational philosophers such as Pestalozzi and Froebel.<sup>54</sup> It followed a theory of learning that saw children as possessing innate potential that needed to be unfurled. Phrenology emphasised the role of the brain as seat of the mind and it provided (a later discredited) “scientific” backing for the Chambers belief in human improvability through education.<sup>55</sup> A good environment in which the brain could develop became an important part of education. Diet, play, exercise and, importantly, learning that related to children’s developmental stages informed the design of these educational texts. Authors for the series included experienced teachers, while Robert Chambers himself wrote some of the most popular books. The emphasis was on quality texts which were both practical and cheap.<sup>56</sup>

The introduction of the *Chambers’s Course* into Cape classrooms, as the defining way in which the curriculum of the New System was implemented, brought with it “rules and standards by which to ‘reason’ about [the] world”; a vocabulary, subject matter and a frame of reference that was Scottish and British. Not only were subjects taught, but also “dispositions, awareness and sensibilities”.<sup>57</sup> To the extent that they acquired the educational discourses in the limited time they stayed at school, the children of Colesberg were absorbing the knowledge and social rules to shape their identities as male or female subjects of the British Empire. In the books Rait used and the content he taught, there were messages that cohered with a rational and inclusive identity. At the same time there was much that naturalised acceptance of a gendered, hierarchical social order, British civilisation and imperial power.

The pedagogy used is not recorded, but a teacher or assistant might follow the guidelines supplied at the beginning of each of the Chambers texts. Thus the Colesberg beginner reading class of over 20 children might learn to form their letters by copying the teacher in inscribing them in chalk on their boards. Following a phonic rather than alphabetical system, they would also learn to sound these by using them in words. “Let the vowels be sounded boldly, and the consonants with a considerable emission of breath.” Pronunciation was important, and in order to help children “really understand the idea represented by the word employed”, they should be provided a mental image through “object, experiment, drawing, pantomime, anecdote” and the like.<sup>58</sup> Words were generally learnt in isolation and only put together meaningfully at the end of the book as “Lessons of Mixed Words”. The second story below typifies those in the Chambers readers; an engraved illustration is accompanied by a text relating in part to the world of children while at the same time conveying a moral message which positions them as either “good” or “bad”. See Figure 3.

The *Second Book of Reading* has a similar methodology though denser texts. In the stories, “God is good, and great, and wise”; “We should be kind to animals”; “Sheep are pretty and innocent animals”. The stories are gendered and straddle respectable working class and middle class discourses. A “pretty little girl” feeds chickens in one story, in

---

54. Cooney, “Publishers for the People”, pp 153 ff.

55. Cooney, “Publishers for the People”, p 162.

56. Cooney, “Publishers for the People”, pp 172 and 208.

57. T.S. Popkewitz, “The Production of Reason and Power”, in T.S. Popkewitz et al (eds), *Cultural History and Education*, pp 152–164.

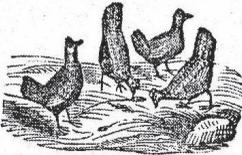
58. W. Chambers and R. Chambers (eds), Preface to *First Book of Reading* (William & Robert Chambers, Edinburgh, 1845).

another a girl stands by “in a clean white frock”, ready to water the garden which is being tended by a man and a boy.

Figure 3:

16

FIRST BOOK.



I can see four nice Hens. Let me give them some fresh corn. They lay nice eggs. Do not let the dog run at the poor Hens. A Hen has two wings and two legs.



Do you see this Boy? He is good, and tells no lies. He loves a hoop, but he will not take a hoop, or a top, or a ball, if it is not his. He will not push, or hit, or cuff. He is too kind to do so. He likes fun, but he is not rude. He is at the top of his class, and all the boys love him. He will not hurt a worm, or a fly. God loves good boys and girls.

EDINBURGH: PRINTED BY W. AND R. CHAMBERS.

The second class of the Junior Division of Colesberg Government School was engaged, in 1851, in reading from the third reader in the *Chambers's Educational Course*. It was called *Simple Lessons in Reading*, and continued in the same vein as the earlier readers. Its preface states that developing the art of reading and spelling is intended to prepare the child “for methodic intellectual culture in the books which follow”.

At the same time, in order to *amuse*, and induce reading *for the pleasure it communicates*, the subjects of the lessons are of that species of narrative which uniformly delights the infant mind, bearing in each case a reference to the moral perceptions of the pupil, or tending to encourage in him a love of the beautiful in nature ...<sup>59</sup>

Its authors recommend not cramming the child with too much explanation, but that the teacher should ask good questions, make constant use of illustrations and objects, and raise simple ideas that will “interest and encourage the dawning faculties.”<sup>60</sup>

There is a vibrant and unrelenting moral purpose in these writings. But the authors manage to imbue their tales with a sense of affection, enthusiasm for the God-given beauty of the world, and occasional humour. “The Milk-Maid” forgets the pail of milk balanced on her head as she imagines herself clad in “Green – let me consider – yes, green becomes my complexion best, and green it shall be”. Tossing her head at the thought of her ability to refuse her many suitors, she proves the moral: “When we dwell much on distant and un-cer-tain pleasures, we neglect our present bu-si-ness, and are exposed to real mis-for-tunes.”<sup>61</sup>

The third class of the Junior Division used *Rudiments of Knowledge* as a “Reading-book which aimed ‘strictly at an explanation of *external appearances* in the natural and social world’”. (“Principles” were to be dealt with in the sequel: *An Introduction to the Sciences*.) The text normalises the authority of God, parents and government. It is a world in which children are ignorant and need to learn in order to prosper. “Mankind” is treated as one “human species” endowed with reason, an ability to work, and to live together in society.

As for race,

some people have white skins, with blue or gray eyes and light hair on their heads. Other people have dark skins, with black eyes and black hair. But all people are human beings, and are the same way made; and it is no matter what the colour of their skins or their outward appearance. We should never hate or ill-use any persons because the colour of their skins is different from ours, or because their outward appearance is not beautiful, but be equally kind to all ...<sup>62</sup>

Some people live in the country in “cottages”, but most people live in houses near each other in “villages, towns”, and “cities”. Family and nationality are explained. Hard work and property ownership are to be valued without sacrificing modesty, humility and an understanding that poverty comes from misfortune, old age or illness and not only as a consequence of idleness.

---

59. W. Chambers and R. Chambers, Preface to *Simple Lessons in Reading* (William & Robert Chambers, Edinburgh, 1845).

60. Chambers and Chambers, Preface to *Simple Lessons in Reading*.

61. Chambers and Chambers, Preface to *Simple Lessons in Reading*, p 38.

62. W. Chambers and R. Chambers, *Rudiments of Knowledge* (William & Robert Chambers, Edinburgh, 1848), p 14.

While a common humanity is claimed, societies are not the same. “We belong to the British nation ... There are two kinds of nations – those which are *barbarous*, and those which are *civilized*.” It would be easy for Colesberg pupils to think of the squatters on their commonage and classify them in the light of the following description:

In barbarous nations, the people have not comfortable houses, food, or clothing, and they live almost like beasts of the field. In civilized nations, there is a regular form of government; there are comfortable houses, and well-built towns; there are trades, commerce, and an abundance of everything that can make life agreeable; the lands are well cultivated; and there are churches, schools, hospitals for the poor, and other valuable institutions. We live in a civilized society.<sup>63</sup>

The topics dealing with the natural world move pupils towards some elementary categorisation, and include animals, wood and trees, water and “objects”.

Arithmetic formed part of each day’s schedule for all five elementary classes, and Chambers’s *Introduction to Arithmetic* appears to have been written for the teacher rather than pupils.<sup>64</sup> It sets out a rule-based methodology with detailed, wordy instructions and explanations on addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Tables and exercises are included, the latter showing the application of arithmetic to daily life and a mercantile future. All five classes spent some time doing Geography, mostly with the monitor – capitals, in the case of the second class, and principal lakes, rivers, mountains and “the World” in the third.

Focusing his efforts on the two senior classes of the elementary school, Rait appears to have taught them the same (unidentified) sections of grammar, and focused heavily on teaching “Natural History and Physical Science”. It appears that most science was taught without apparatus (the absence of which was lamented by a number of the teachers), knowledge being developed through “conversational lectures”. These were based on the widely used and very popular *Introduction to the Sciences* which, claimed its author Robert Chambers, “presents a connected and systematic view of Nature ...” His intention was to present information as

a chain of principles, calculated, in combination, to impress a distinct and comprehensive idea, and to make it possible that even those who leave school at the early age of ten, shall not go into the world without some knowledge of the parts of which it is composed, and the laws by which it is regulated.<sup>65</sup>

It was at this stage, therefore, that government school pupils were introduced to the analytical thinking that the scientists of the era were engaged in. While the senior class paid attention to “Matter and Motion”, and “Hydrostatics”, there was a particular emphasis, in the September 1851 examination, on “Cuvier’s Arrangement of the Animal Kingdom”.<sup>66</sup> Chambers (who was to undertake an anonymous investigation of his own

---

63. Chambers and Chambers, *Radiments of Knowledge*, pp 73–74.

64. W. Chambers and R. Chambers, *Introduction to Arithmetic* (William & Robert Chambers, Edinburgh, 1843).

65. W. Chambers and R. Chambers, Preface to *Introduction to the Sciences* (William & Robert Chambers, Edinburgh, 1843). Cooney identifies Robert Chambers as the author of this book, as well as *The History of the British Empire*. See Cooney, “Publishers for the People”, p 201.

66. Cuvier was a pre-Darwinian animal anatomist and palaeontologist whose work on classification was current at the time Chambers wrote the textbook. He challenged Lamarck’s work on gradual evolution but believed hard evidence to show that extinctions had occurred. This was a challenge to those who felt that God had made everything perfect and if a species no longer existed in

into the evolution of species)<sup>67</sup> entitled the section, “The Animal Creation”. The introductory paragraph would surely have stymied most ten-year olds, particularly those for whom English was used only at school. It nevertheless demonstrates the movement into evolutionary thinking.

All parts of the earth’s surface, except those exposed to intolerable degrees of cold, are peopled by *Animals* – that is, by beings which not only possess an organised structure, as the plants do, and, like them, are capable of being nourished by assimilating various other substances, but are animated by an *internal principle*, which can be traced in many very remarkable results, particularly motion from place to place, a selection of advantageous circumstances, and a power of adapting means to ends. At the head of this class of beings stands *Man*.<sup>68</sup>

Rair’s pupils were introduced to the divisions of Cuvier’s classification of the animal kingdom with the aid of Orpen’s four “coloured and varnished large plates of Natural History”.<sup>69</sup>

Also itemised on the report as part of the Natural Science curriculum is the section on “The History of Man”. Having classified “man” with the vertebrates, it is now noted that he is distinctive for his intelligence and moral nature. Then, in a shift from the presentation in *Rudiments of Knowledge* of all “mankind” as essentially the same, although living in differing state of civilisation, there appears an exposition akin to later social Darwinism:

He is not, however, in every country the same creature. Europe, the western part of Asia, and the north of Africa, have been possessed since the dawn of authentic history by a white-skinned race, the highest in intelligence, and the most elegant in form, named the Caucasian variety, ... The remainder of Asia has been at the same time occupied by an olive-coloured race, of less intelligence and vigour of character, named the Mongolian variety, from Mongolia ... A third race, of black skin, coarse features, and small intelligence, have inhabited the greater part of Africa: they are denominated the Negro or Ethiopian variety. In America, when it was discovered three hundred years ago, a fourth race of a copper-colour, and of no great intelligence, was found in a generally barbarous condition. The white-skinned variety are remarkable for their cultivation of letters and science, and as the only race amongst which any considerable progress is made in intelligence from age to age.<sup>70</sup>

We close our time in the Colesberg school with a taste of the history lesson that the first class of the Senior Division was having. Another widely used text was Robert Chambers’s *History and Present State of the British Empire*,<sup>71</sup> which tracks British history through the reigns of various monarchs. This time, the pupils were studying the “concluding portion of the Reign of George IV, Commencement of the Reign of William IV”. The textbook mentions the passing of the Reform bills, and other improving measures, though very briefly. “The most important of these, in a moral point

---

Europe it must exist elsewhere. See B. Waggoner, “Georges Cuvier (1789–1832)”, at <http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/history/cuvier.html> accessed 1 May 2010.

67. R. Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844; Reprinted by J. Secord (ed.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994).

68. Chambers and Chambers, *Introduction to Sciences*, p 97.

69. CA: SGE 1/4, Orpen – Rawstorne, 12 November 1853.

70. Chambers and Chambers, *Introduction to Sciences*, pp 117–118.

71. Published in 1847.

of view, was the abolition of slavery in the colonies ... which had long been a disgrace to humanity.”<sup>72</sup>

It is likely that the pupils would have been far more entertained by the section on Queen Elizabeth, which begins with the statement that “while Elizabeth increased in power and resources, she became more noted for feminine weaknesses”. This included volatility, susceptibility to bad influence, hypochondria, melancholy and agitation.<sup>73</sup> Despite a concern to amuse and entertain that the Chambers brothers seem always to have borne in mind, the presentation of the foibles of certain (English) monarchs did not prevent Robert Chambers from concluding that:

The British Empire ... is universally acknowledged to be one of the greatest which exists, or ever existed on the face of the globe ... [The] extension of the English tongue, and with it English literature and habits of thought, as also Christianity, over so large a portion of the earth's surface, is perhaps the most extraordinary fact connected with the history of modern civilization.<sup>74</sup>

Thus might the Colesberg children be disposed to interpret disruptive events on the not too distant frontiers of their own colony – the Kat River Rebellion and the War of Mlanjeni (8th Frontier War of 1850) – as unwarranted resistance to the inevitable expansion of British civilisation?

### **The challenges of maintaining a respectable status if/when a married teacher**

In common with his colleagues elsewhere, James Rait very soon took up the theme of sustained respectability requiring a better income. His initial salary at Colesberg was a meagre £100 per annum (plus house rent) in line with the school's humble location. While a bachelor, this did not concern him unduly. His agitation for a raise to £150 p/a seems to have coincided with his decision to marry and in March 1852 he wrote at length to the local school commission asking them to support him on the strength of their acknowledged high satisfaction with his services.<sup>75</sup>

Rait provided a clear statement of his entitlement, claiming his achievements to equal those of “Schools to which Two Hundred pounds per annum is attached” – in other words the best remunerated schools at which the teachers initially selected by Herschel himself had been placed. These included Stellenbosch (Rait's own school) and nearby Graaff-Reinet. He justified an increase in salary through his high numbers (95–100) and by the progress of his pupils. His third point was that the cost of living in Colesberg would make it impossible, “were I married, to maintain that status in society which my situation entitles me to hold”.

Rait harnessed Herschel to his cause, citing Sir John's founding memorandum of the New System as authority for his own position:

The salaries of Civil servants ... mark to a considerable extent their status, ... it is not in human nature, that a service should carry with it any show of **public respect**, which is

---

72. R. Chambers, *History and Present State of the British Empire* (William & Robert Chambers, Edinburgh, 1874), p 246.

73. Chambers, *History of the British Empire*, pp 77–78.

74. Chambers, *History of the British Empire*, pp 256 and 263.

75. CA: CO 594, Rait – President and members of the Local School Commission, Colesberg, 12 March 1852.

considered inadequately remunerated by a salary barely sufficient to maintain an individual, insufficient for a family, and **accompanied by no power, no privilege, no honorary circumstance whatever of any description, but on the contrary associated with proverbial drudgery**<sup>76</sup> (my emphasis).

Rait was demonstrating a familiarity with the origins of the New System and, surely, hoping to show up “government” if it failed in its own commitments.

Rait was assured of appreciative support from the school commission<sup>77</sup> and Innes’ endorsement of “the very efficient & successful manner” in which he conducted his school. The SGE was, nonetheless, unwilling in 1852 to depart from the principle that increased salary came with promotion to a superior school. He did, however, recommend a “Special Gratuity in acknowledgement of past services” and said he would decide on this when inspecting the school later in the year.<sup>78</sup>

The inspection came and went. It was one of only two visits made to this most remote of his schools by Innes (himself constantly unwell after 1853<sup>79</sup>) in the eight years that Rait was government teacher. Satisfaction was expressed and a gratuity accordingly recommended. Yet two years later the gratuity had yet to be received – an act of administrative neglect that created in Rait a sense of abandonment. Rait re-sent his 1852 letter, changing only the phrase, “if he were married” to “now since I am married”. The cost of living in Colesberg precluded a comfortable and respectable life for his family unless his salary was raised. This time he promoted the earnestness of his cause through statistics, listing the large pupil enrolment at his school for every quarter since he had arrived.<sup>80</sup>

James Rait’s identity as a married man, with responsibilities to support his family in a matter fitting for his situation and status sat heavily with him all the time. The theme of financial stress continued throughout his career, although somewhat alleviated by increases in 1855 and 1857 which left him with an annual salary of £150.<sup>81</sup> The sense existed that respectability was a precarious status to maintain given the financial demands on a small salary. The granting of a gratuity as a result of persuasive performance in a public examination, or through convincing statistical information, could help to promote short-term security. The loss of pupils if parents did not bother to send them to school could imperil his enterprise. Rait was sure that his performance was equal to that of any other teacher in the New System but it was a status that would be further threatened by poor health, as we shall see.

In the period between his two major letters on record concerning his salary, Rait’s correspondence shows him to have become intensely anxious about a drop in attendance at his school (from a peak of 107 in March 1851 to 60 in March 1853) and the impression this would make on the SGE.<sup>82</sup> He became very critical of irregular

---

76. Rait was citing the “Memorandum” dated 17 February 1838, in Ferguson and Immelman (comps), *Sir John Herschel*, pp 14–25.

77. CA: CO 594, President of School Commission – Col Sec., 1 April 1852.

78. CA: CO 594, Innes’s “Report” on President of School Commission – Col Sec., 1 April 1852.

79. CA: CO 695, Innes – Col Sec., 19 March 1857, attached Dr James Abercrombie, 19 March 1857; John Laing, Surgeon, 19 March 1857.

80. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – President of the Local School Commission, Colesberg, 1 August 1854.

81. AISC–1857, *Report on Subject of Education*, p 34; Innes – Select Committee, 12 May 1857; CA: CO 695, Innes – Col Sec., 29 August, 1857.

82. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – Colesberg School Commission, 1 August 1854.

attendance which he felt was condoned by apathetic and indifferent parents. Rait echoed other teachers in his characterisation of a “Boer” education which required limited time in school: “The boer idea of education is ... very low. Generally, their standard is a knowledge of the Dutch catechism, to be able to sign the name, and to read the Bible.”<sup>83</sup>

Rait made no differentiation on the basis of race but generally seems to have found the children of lower classes least conditioned to attend school with serious regularity. Linking his frustration with irregular attendance to his support for the purposes of a first-class education, he commented further:

[T]o render the School what, I am sure, you [Innes] intend it to be, an efficient instrument for elevating and improving the youth of this Community – the Humbler classes in particular – I must again take the liberty of expressing my unaltered conviction that regularity of attendance must be strictly enforced.<sup>84</sup>

Asked by Innes to account for poor attendances in the quarter ending March 1853, the school commissioners reported that it was due largely to illness of the children or members of their families.<sup>85</sup> Rait’s letter to Innes shows him to be less persuaded of his misinterpretation than Rawstorne believed, but his high levels of frustration and irritability may also have been due to the onset of illness. This was to plague the next five years of his career.<sup>86</sup>

#### *The failing body of the married teacher*

In April 1855, Rait “deemed it [his] duty to make [Innes] acquainted” with the state of his health for the first time. He requested to be moved to a less taxing position in the civil service as he had “been subject for some months past to an irritating cough, accompanied, at times, by the spitting of blood, and by loss of appetite”. He clearly understood the possible seriousness of his condition, expressing the “fear that the continued pulmonary irritation caused by the amount of speaking requisite for the efficient teaching of from 80 to 100 children, may develop in my system the insidious malady, ‘consumption’.”<sup>87</sup>

An accompanying medical certificate from the Colesberg district surgeon confirmed deterioration in the teacher’s health over the previous three years. Despite improvements to the school’s infrastructure, it was not a healthy environment for a teacher with chronic respiratory problems:

I should strongly advise [Mr James Rait] to discontinue, or change his occupation which confines him to considerable and sudden alterations of temperature, being obliged to pass many hours a day in a highly heated and dry atmosphere of the schoolroom and the immense amount of labour and incessant talking to scholars – mostly children under ten years of age – numbering from eighty to one hundred, has increased his ailment considerably.<sup>88</sup>

---

83. A1SC–1857, CGH, *Appendix to the Report of the Select Committee on Education, November 1857*, pp 7–8; Rait, “Report of Colesberg School”, September 1851.

84. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – Innes, 21 April 1853.

85. CA: SGE 1/4, President of School Commission, Colesberg – Innes, 10 May 1853.

86. Irritability was expressed, for example, with Innes’s rather surprised clerk, a Mr Jarvis, for sending a request for information in a way that Rait interpreted as uncivil and abrupt. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – Clerk to the SGE, 7 December 1853.

87. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – Innes, 18 April 1855.

88. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – Innes, 18 April 1855. Attached copy.

The rest of James Rait's career was beset with the management of his illness, and it is this illness that invites us to engage with the health of the government teachers as a significant theme. Christopher Forth describes a model of nineteenth-century manliness which drew on notions of a bounded and naturally robust male body. Physical strength, associated as it was with both work and war, was generally necessary if a man was to claim moral strength.<sup>89</sup> In the case of scholarly men, middle class intellectuals, however, there was some ground for claiming to be manly if one's health was sacrificed in a noble cause – war – and by implication the war on ignorance and savagery that education represented. 'Like battle wounds borne by warriors, health problems could be embraced as proof of a man's willingness to endure physical distress in the name of some higher ideal.'<sup>90</sup> Though never explicitly claiming this consideration of his illness, Rait's setting out of his claims to financial recognition was based on such a construction of his efforts as nobly sacrificial. There is little information on how Rait was received by other men, but Rawstone and Innes appear to have showed nothing but sympathy for him. Likewise, the parliamentarians discussing his case in an 1857 inquiry perceived him to be among the most oppressed of government servants, "breaking down from excessive labour".<sup>91</sup>

Historian of the British Raj, E.M.Collingham notes that the British experience of India was intensely physical, assailing all senses. Values, attitudes and ideologies were literally embodied.<sup>92</sup> It is "clear ... that the body was central to the colonial experience ... as the site where social structures are experienced, transmuted and projected back on society ..."<sup>93</sup> How, then, might Rait, with his sickening body be seen? Collingham demonstrates the "burden on the physique" of the British official in India, resultant from long hours of bureaucratic duties<sup>94</sup> and Rait may likewise be seen to carry in his body the demands of the educational state. While he could convince everyone – pupils, parents, school commissioners, SGE – of his moral reputation and conscientiousness, the large numbers of pupils of differing ages, the huge range of subjects to be taught, and the lack of effective assistance weakened his resistance such that the random occurrence of a TB bacillus was able to take hold and sap his vitality. Rait's illness ended in his death in 1858, but was arguably just an intensification of the malaise that affected many government teachers, and the SGE himself. The complaints of fatigue and bodily ailments resulting from the arduous duties of teaching and supervising in the New System are too many to be glossed over.

Rait also came to carry in his body the impact of the environment and the temporal and spatial separation of the town from adequate medical care. This is most poignantly conveyed in the image of the weakened teacher being jolted to and from Port Elizabeth in Mr Grant's cart in December 1856 "to secure a change of air and scene for a short time, and to obtain better medical aid than can be got in Colesberg". It is captured, too, in his final journey to Queenstown in November 1857, from which the CC Rawstone feared there was "very faint hope of his return or recovery".<sup>95</sup> His illness

---

89. C.E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York, 2008), pp 72–73.

90. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West*, p 81.

91. Fairbairn, "Report of Select Committee on Education, 1857", 12 May 1857, pp 33–34.

92. E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, c. 1800–1947* (Polity, Cambridge, 2001), p 3.

93. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p 2.

94. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, pp 124 and 142.

95. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – Innes, 1 December 1856; Rawstone – Innes, 10 November 1857.

weakened him and affected his ability to deliver – to the point where two women stepped in to provide what he was expected to provide – education for his charges and support for his family. Disease can be seen to feminise the body, and while illness increasingly confined Rait to a private space, his female assistant and his wife, Julia-Anne (née Nelson), were to bridge the domestic and working worlds.<sup>96</sup> As his illness progressed, “Mrs Rait, by teaching at a female school, contribute[d] considerably to the support of the family”.<sup>97</sup> Sixteen-year-old Eliza became a paid pupil-teacher in the government school in 1856.

### Eliza Arnot – the (limited) space for women teachers in the government schools

The rationale for Eliza Arnot’s appointment was “the very considerable number of Girls as well as Young Children” at the school.<sup>98</sup> The appointment of a senior pupil, one of only three engaged in the higher branches in 1855, offers an opportunity to reflect on a different teacher identity at Colesberg; that of the woman teacher.

Writing about nineteenth-century Australia, Marjorie Theobald makes the point that women teachers were often present but invisible, teaching in the seclusion of private homes, and later in ladies academies.<sup>99</sup> She also notes the opacity of sources about them and the need for the historian to work with very little in trying to construct their lives.<sup>100</sup> This is true for Eliza Arnot, from whom no word is heard in the ten years that she acted as pupil-teacher and assistant teacher at Colesberg. Her career is pieced together from the limited references of the men who supervised her, at home and in the school system. What we do know is that Eliza was not only Rait’s assistant teacher, but also his step-sister-in-law. Figure 1 sets this out diagrammatically.

It is possible to gain a fair sense of Eliza’s own education because she was for at least six years a pupil in the government school. In 1851 she was listed as a pupil, along with three of her siblings.<sup>101</sup> What is interesting about Eliza Arnot is the unusual trajectory of her educational career. As daughter of an independent artisan, she would perhaps have been expected to acquire a basic level of literacy, marry young and run her own home. The existence of a free government school, mixed because it was located in a small town, created unusual opportunities for her to be taught, not simply trained. (This was a distinction Innes made). This, and the financial contribution of her older half-brother.

In the male negotiation that took place to secure her services, Rait first approached David Arnot jnr. He was at this time a “general agent” and a local dignitary, although his fortunes fluctuated somewhat.<sup>102</sup> David Arnot did not object to Eliza becoming a teacher but argued for a higher salary than the £15 offered, as his father was

96. Rait married Julia-Anne Nelson in 1851.

97. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – Innes, 15 May 1857.

98. CA: CO 676, Innes – Col Sec., 23 April 1856.

99. M. Theobald, *Knowing Women: Origins of Women’s Education in Nineteenth-century Australia* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp 2–3.

100. Theobald, *Knowing Women*, p 4.

101. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait, “Report of Colesberg School”, September 1851.

102. He was an affluent general agent, keeper of the town’s gunpowder store, sometime school commissioner, J.P., musician, collector of botanical specimens, and eventually father of twelve. See Gutsche, *Microcosm*, pp 85, 91, 95, 117–119, 137–138; CA: 1/CBG/4/2/6, Letters Received by Resident Magistrate of Colesberg, 1854, David Arnot – Clerk to Resident Magistrate, 15 November 1854.

poor and his own circumstances not as good as formerly. Eliza would need “in a manner to support herself.” Rait reported that Arnot “had always taken a great interest” in his half-sister (some nineteen years his junior). Significantly it was David Arnot who had paid for her to study the higher branches and to be given music lessons – that great marker of a female accomplishment.<sup>103</sup>

Innes met Eliza himself in February 1856 while in Colesberg to carry out an examination of the school. She had, he reported, “passed a creditable examination in Latin, the Elements of Euclid and Algebra”. The texts from which she was examined along with two male pupils, were “Caesar’s Commentaries, Main’s Syntax, Euclid, Chambers’ Algebra, and Valpy’s Delectus”.<sup>104</sup> Eliza Arnot was thus unusual for her time; a young woman who had been given the classical education essentially regarded as suited to more able boys. This was instead of what Marjorie Theobald refers to as the “female accomplishments curriculum” offered by female academies – the choice, by contrast, of David Arnot jnr for his eldest daughter, Helen.<sup>105</sup>

Innes immediately appointed Eliza at a salary of £20 per annum, subject to government approval. She was to teach the junior classes, allowing Rait more time for the senior section of his school.<sup>106</sup> While Eliza’s classical education was unusual, her move into caring for the young children in the school was less so – although it took central government authorities some time to adjust to the thought of any women staff in government schools.<sup>107</sup> Those in charge of Cape education appear to have reflected the commonly held view that although acceptable as carers of small children, women were endowed with intuitive strength but delicacy rather than rationality of mind.<sup>108</sup> The grounds for exclusion, or at best a junior role for women teachers, were mental incapability and an accompanying lack of moral authority.<sup>109</sup> This would naturally exclude them from leadership roles in the more prestigious schools which the authorities regarded as the domain of male teachers. How strongly Innes felt about the matter is evident in his argument against the permanent appointment of Miss Read as head teacher of the humbler aided mission school at Phillipton. They were sentiments with which both Rawson, the colonial secretary, and the governor, Sir George Grey, concurred: “Juvenile Schools which are to provide for the instruction of both sexes between the ages of five and fifteen cannot be solely in charge of a Female Teacher, with any reasonable hope of efficiency and success.”<sup>110</sup>

The moral influence and helping presence, first of female pupil-teachers and later women teachers under male leadership, gradually came to be regarded as desirable,

---

103. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – Innes, 1 February 1856.

104. CA: CO 676, Innes – Col Sec., 23 April 1856; G.16–1857.*Report on Public Education for 1855 and First Half of 1856*, p xxii.

105. Theobald, *Knowing Women*, pp 15–16. Helen (also called Ellen) was born in 1848 and so eight years younger than Eliza. Granddaughter of Kaatje van der Jeugd of Bethelsdorp, she was sent at the age of five to Miss Wilmot’s Select Academy for Young Ladies in Wynberg. She returned to Colesberg as a fine musician and eventually married the effete grandson of Lord Charles Somerset, sealing her status as a lady. See Gutsche, *Misereosom*, p 147.

106. CA: SGE 1/4, Innes – Rait, 4 February 1856.

107. When it was suggested that “the most advanced pupil” at the Beaufort West Government School, Margaret McNaughton, be employed as a pupil-teacher, Lieut-Governor Darling vetoed the idea on the grounds of her gender. See CA: CO 622, Margin note, CAD, on Office of SGE – Acting Sec. to Gov., 19 March 1853.

108. Theobald, *Knowing Women*, pp 19–20.

109. Theobald, *Knowing Women*, p 26.

110. CA: CO 676, Innes – Col Sec., 11 September 1856.

however. Eliza Arnot clearly had the academic skills which would have been accepted in any aspiring male pupil-teacher and we have noted the urgent need of assistance for the government teachers. Innes seems not to have hesitated to recommend senior girl pupils to such assistant posts when the need and opportunity arose. Regarding it an economic necessity in smaller centres to continue with co-educational or “mixed” schooling, Innes and his successor, Langham Dale, were both nervous of its moral implications when teachers were men alone.<sup>111</sup> Although the Colesberg school remained too small to develop separate boys’ and girls’ sections, the appointment of Eliza Arnot under Rait and subsequent male head teachers was in line with Stow’s moralising “family model” of schooling<sup>112</sup> emerging both in Scotland and at the Cape from the end of the 1850s.

Little was subsequently written of Eliza Arnot’s career, but the evidence of Rait’s periodic absences from the school in late 1856 and early 1857 suggests that she may have had to compensate a great deal for his frailty.<sup>113</sup> When Rait left Colesberg in November 1857, Eliza temporarily assumed the responsibilities of a head teacher, by implication a male teacher. This was permitted at moments of crisis but she was never paid more than the allowance given a female teacher who was assumed to have family support.

Eliza Arnot remained in government employ through the three-and-a-half year tenure of another Scot, the unpopular John Tennant.<sup>114</sup> For a good part of 1862, until the appointment of Peter McNaughton, Eliza again kept the school going on her own.<sup>115</sup> They then taught together until, following the pattern of the other government schools, the Colesberg Government School was closed in March 1866 and replaced by a less costly aided First-Class Public School.<sup>116</sup> The new mixed public school, managed by the residents of the town, was headed by “a superior teacher ... specially introduced from Europe.”<sup>117</sup>

At this point twenty-six-year old Miss Eliza Arnot was awarded a small government gratuity in appreciation of her services and disappeared from the records of the colonial education department.<sup>118</sup> She then embraced a more conventional role as wife and mother after marrying John Bradfield, the son of an 1820 Settler.<sup>119</sup>

- 
111. CA: A1SC-1857; CGH, *Report of the Select Committee Appointed to Consider the Subject of Education*, June 1857, p 30; Innes – Select Committee, 12 May 1857; G.15-’60. *Report on Education for 1860*.
112. D. Jones, “The Genealogy of the Urban Schoolteacher”, in S. Ball (ed.), *Foucault and Education: Disciplines and Knowledge* (Routledge, London, 1990), p 65 ff.
113. CA: SGE 1/4, Rait – Innes, 1 December 1856; Secretary to Divisional Council to Office of SGE, 15 April 1857; Rait – Innes, 15 May 1857.
114. CA: CO 775, Dale – Acting Col Sec., 12 October 1861.
115. CA: CO 791, Office of SGE – Col Sec., 23 August, 17 October 1862.
116. CA: CO 853, Office of SGE – Col Sec., 10 April 1866.
117. CA: CO 870, Office of SGE – Col Sec., 30 November 1867. From 1 October 1871, an additional schoolroom was erected and a female teacher employed to teach the girls. The “Girls School” was awarded a grant of £50 per annum. The headmaster of the Boys School was (remained?) Dr John Shaw. See CA: CO 944, Office of SGE – Col Sec., 5 December 1871.
118. CA: SGE 13/1.
119. N. da Silva, SA Genealogical Society, personal communication. By contrast the profile of her more famous half-brother, David, was to be raised in the context of the early stages of the southern African mineral revolution. This was as a legal agent successfully defending the claims of the Griqua of Nicolaas Waterboer to the newly found diamond fields.

## Conclusion

This article has offered a cameo of a young male teacher with the self-image of a respectable and dedicated improver of minds. In attempting to carry out the full requirements of the New System, he was backed by school commissioners who similarly valued the educational improvement of all races and classes in Colesberg. Judged by the numbers in his school and the respect he earned, Rait achieved periods of success in this socially fluid setting. The strain, however, placed by his duties and financial insecurity on his emotions and physique demonstrate a feminisation of a manly middle class married man. At the same time the affordance of the New System in this small town was a liberal education for a young woman. The illness, death and dismissal of her male superiors and the general shortage of qualified teachers in the Cape Colony provided a contingent opportunity for her to step into the bounded world of first-class school teaching. But despite her academic and moral credentials, the dominant discourses of quality education did not allow a woman to head a school with boys in it – in other words to do permanently what she was permitted to do periodically. Eliza Arnot's teaching career appears to have then ended but it had nevertheless presaged the move from one-man schools to those which catered for children of all ages and genders in a more complex establishment.

## Abstract

This article is set in the socially fluid context of a northern frontier town in the nineteenth-century Cape Colony. It examines the identity of James Rait, the young teacher at Colesberg Government School from 1849–1858. Rait was charged with implementing the complex curriculum of the New System of state education which had been introduced to the colony in 1839. Both the curriculum and textbooks were strongly rooted in Scottish educational discourses and this article investigates the teacher as mediator of a particular construction of knowledge and dispositions. It reflects on this role as the teacher who taught over 100 children of diverse cultural, class and racial backgrounds. It also examines the teacher's attempts to manage his growing incapacity to sustain a respectable manly identity. This was because of the incommensurate demands of his career and family on his ailing body and limited income. Disease can be seen to feminise the body; and while illness increasingly removed Rait from his classroom, his wife and particularly his female assistant were to bridge the domestic and working worlds and make up for his deficiency.

**Keywords:** liberal education; state education; colonial project; government teachers; nineteenth-century Cape Colony; Colesberg; race; gender; health.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel is 'n ondersoek na die sosiaal vloeibare konteks van 'n noordelike Kaapkolonie grensdorp in die midde-negentiende eeu. Daar word ondersoek ingestel na die identiteit van die jeugdige James Rait, wat tussen 1849 en 1858 onderwyser by Colesberg se Staatskool was. Rait is belas met die implementering van die "New System" van staatsonderrig se komplekse leerplan wat in 1839 in die kolonie ingestel is. Sowel die leerplan as die handboeke is sterk binne Skotse opvoedkundige diskoerse gewortel. En dus is daar 'n ondersoek in hierdie artikel van hoe die onderwyser as bemiddelaar van 'n besondere samestelling van kennis en geaardhede optree. Daar word gereflekteer oor die

rol van die onderwyser wat aan 100 kinders van uiteenlopende kulturele, klas- en ras-agtergronde moes onderrig gee. Die artikel stel ondersoek in na die onderwyser se groeiende onbekwaamheid in sy pogings om 'n ordentlike manlike identiteit te handhaaf as gevolg van die oneweredige eise van sy loopbaan en familie op sy liggaamlike ongesteldheid en beperkte inkomste. Siekte word hier beskou as die vervrouliking van die liggaam. Terwyl siekte toenemend Rait van sy klaskamer weggehou het, het sy vrou en in besonder sy vroulike assistent die wêreld tussen die huislike en die werkende oorbrug om sodoende vir sy gebrek te kompenseer.

**Sleutelwoorde:** liberale opvoedkunde; staatsonderrig; koloniale projek; regeringsonderwysers; negentiende-eeuse Kaapkolonie; Colesberg; ras; geslag; gesondheid.