

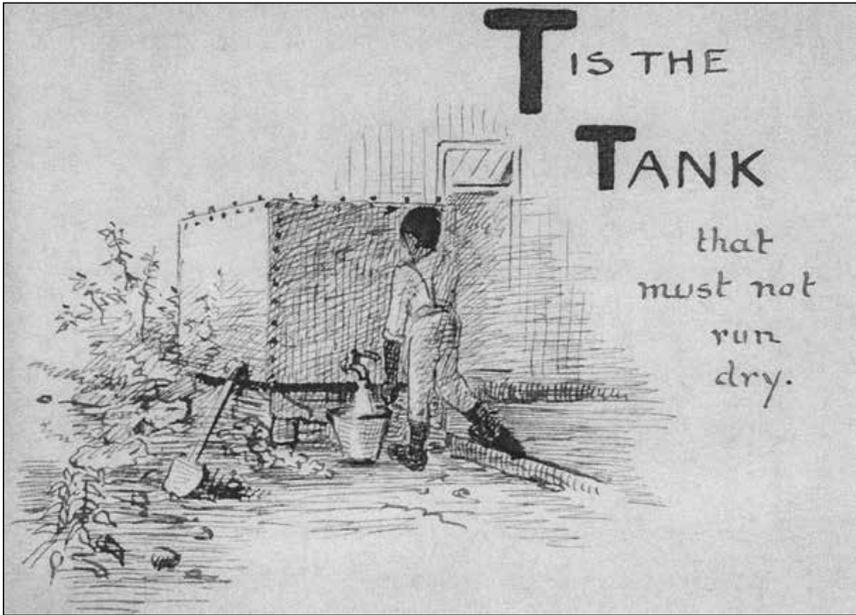
An early children's alphabet book from Nottingham Road¹

by Elwyn Jenkins

In 1901 Jeanie Conan, an Irish artist visiting relatives in Nottingham Road, passed her time by writing and illustrating a children's alphabet book, which she called 'An African ABC'.² She took the manuscript home and it eventually found its way to the Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books in the Toronto Public Library. It remained unknown in South Africa until I came across it and reported my discovery in 2002.³ In 2016 the Osborne Collection scanned the manuscript and placed it on its website, making it available for the first time to the general public.⁴ However, the Library will not allow the complete text to be reproduced in print without payment of a large licence fee, so this note must suffice.

Jeanie Chambers Conan (1858–1935)

came from a prosperous Dublin family whose members included artists, photographers and writers. She qualified as an art teacher at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art in 1885. In 1888 and 1889 she travelled to Italy, Gibraltar and Greece with her brother Arthur, a classical scholar.⁵ An album of her watercolour paintings and sketches made on her travels, with botanical drawings by Florence Conan, is held in the National Library of Ireland along with some other albums of hers,⁶ while an album of Arthur's photographs taken on their tour (including one of Jeanie riding a horse or mule 'going up to the temple of Aegina') is held in a private collection.⁷ The ABC is constructed in the traditional style of pages of pictures with a verse for each letter. The pictures



are ink sketches, a few with a colour wash.

A note on the manuscript records that it was exhibited at the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin, a venerable Irish institution which holds regular exhibitions. On the title page Conan wrote that she had made '00002 copies', but the whereabouts of the second copy is unknown. I have not been able to discover anything about the circumstances of Jeanie's visit to South Africa, or her subsequent life. She annotated some of the pictures, which may give a clue. One depicts birds' nests and has a pencilled note on the reverse in her hand, 'Peter Rainier brought these home', while the picture for T includes a boy who might be Peter; and two of the pictures include a little girl. These suggest that she had children as an audience when she drew and painted her book. It is likely that it was the presence of the children that suggested the choice of the traditional format of an alphabet book to her. Perhaps she left copy no. 00001

with them, and it is still somewhere in South Africa?

Although alphabet books were such a popular genre, there is no trace of any other alphabet book in English set in South Africa for at least the next half century. Conan followed the general style, which is to write the captions in pairs, with the rhyme run over to the second picture, as in

S is the Southern Cross
in
the
sky.

T is the tank
That must not run dry.

In one case, the rhyme extends over three letters:

A is the Arab
Who stands at his store.

B is the Basket
That heaved us ashore.

C is the Candle
The heat doubled o'er.

Conan's subject matter extended beyond the sights she observed on her travels. For the letter U she wrote:

And U Uncle Arthur
Who says what is true
That for this troublesome letter U
ULTIMATUM will also do.

It is illustrated by a scroll dated 11 October 1899 indicating that it refers to the ultimatum issued by Paul Kruger to the British which triggered the hostilities of the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). This is one of three pages related to the war, which was still in progress at the time and must have been a hot topic in adult conversation. The other two pages show clearly where Jeanie's sympathies as an Irishwoman stood. A cluster of portraits of Boer fighters is accompanied by the verse, 'D for the Dutch/who are fighting so well,' and the other is a hand-drawn copy of the well-known photograph of a pompous-looking General Sir Redvers Buller,⁸ cap over his eyes and neck bursting from his tunic, with the lines,

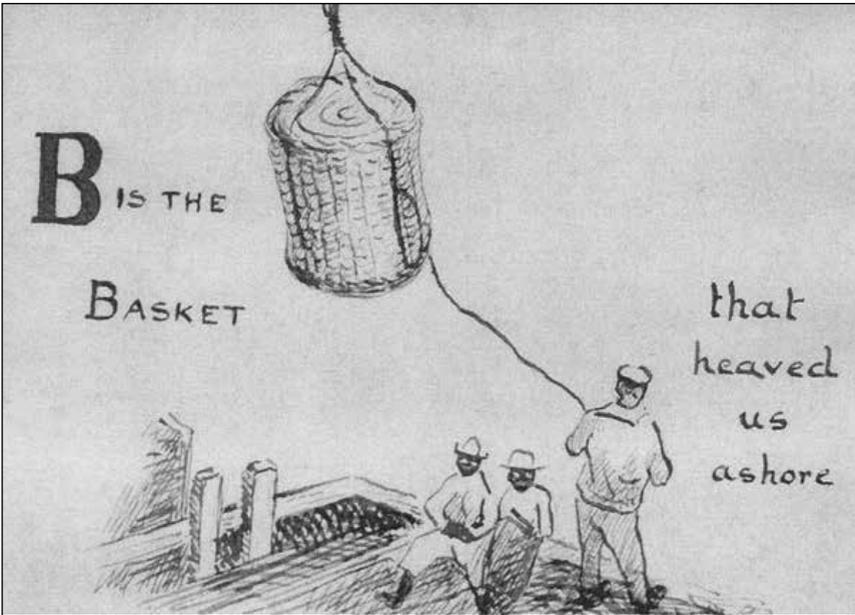
E is an ENGLISHMAN
as
you
may
tell.

These three pages are the most intriguing in the album. What prompted Conan to venture pro-Boer comment and pictures? Her Irish background must partly explain it. The Irish played a paradoxical role in the war, as Emanoel Lee notes:

It must be remembered that a considerable part of the British army consisted of Irish regiments ... Before the war, Irish Members of Parliament had spoken strongly against the South African policies of Chamberlain and Milner,

and the mood amongst the nationalist parties in Ireland was strongly pro-Boer. When war became inevitable, several hundred men volunteered to fight against the British.⁹

Was Conan risking being accused of poisoning the minds of the young while being hosted in the heart of British settler Natal? By 1901, she would have been aware of the growing opposition to the war in England that was marked by a massive outcry by women, as well as the support for the Boer cause in Europe and America. One can only assume that her hosts in Nottingham Road were sympathetic to the international outlook that their sophisticated guest brought with her. In any case, she included a placatory postscript to her war pages: for the letter Q she drew a copy of a picture of Queen Victoria with the verse 'Q is for the Queen: the Queen she is dead' and the dates 1837–1901. Conan's verse on the page for the letter U contains an intriguing mystery. Who is this 'Uncle Arthur' whom she quotes? Somebody has pencilled in next to 'Uncle Arthur' the name Rackham, and for a long time the Osborne catalogue listed Jeanie as a niece of Arthur Rackham, the famous book illustrator. However, the Osborne has now concluded that there is no connection. Instead, I can offer two conjectures as to his identity. The first is the famous author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was related to Jeanie's father through his paternal grandmother, Marianne Conan.¹⁰ In keeping with the family's interests, Arthur's father was a moderately successful artist. Arthur was so proud of the Conan connection that as a young adult he incorporated his middle name in the style by which he wished to be known.¹¹ By the time Jeanie visited the country he had served as a doctor at a military hospital in



Bloemfontein in 1900 and had already written a history, *The Great Boer War* (1900), so she could have been quoting him. However, he later wrote *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* (1902), which strongly supported Britain's involvement in the war and earned him a knighthood – which rather disqualifies him from Jeanie's reference. The more likely identification is her brother Arthur, who had already accompanied her on her travels. She appears in the alphabet as 'Aunt Jeanie, a-making this book', so it is not impossible that Uncle Arthur was also present in Nottingham Road. In her verse about 'the basket that heaved us ashore' the reference to 'us' might mean her and her brother, although it could also simply mean the passengers in general.

Three pages depict scenes from Jeanie's journey to Durban. For the rest, it is interesting to see what captured her attention. She sketches scenes and cameos of the countryside and life in her hosts' home in Nottingham Road.

Her choice of subjects, and the charm of her accompanying verses, show how much she was enjoying herself. We see the verandah, a candle melted in the heat, and the water tank ('My door in the distance'). The store of Haffajee and Ismail, with a row of three-legged pots ranged in size outside, is annotated 'The only shop'.

She illustrates arum lilies and outdoor scenes – wattle trees ('which keep out the blast'), hemispherical Zulu huts, roads ('so rough and so red'), a wagon with a span of sixteen oxen, and the Southern Cross.

Of unusual interest is the page for what today we would call a tornado:

W for WATERSPOUT
A sight somewhat rare
But today we all saw one
High up in the air.

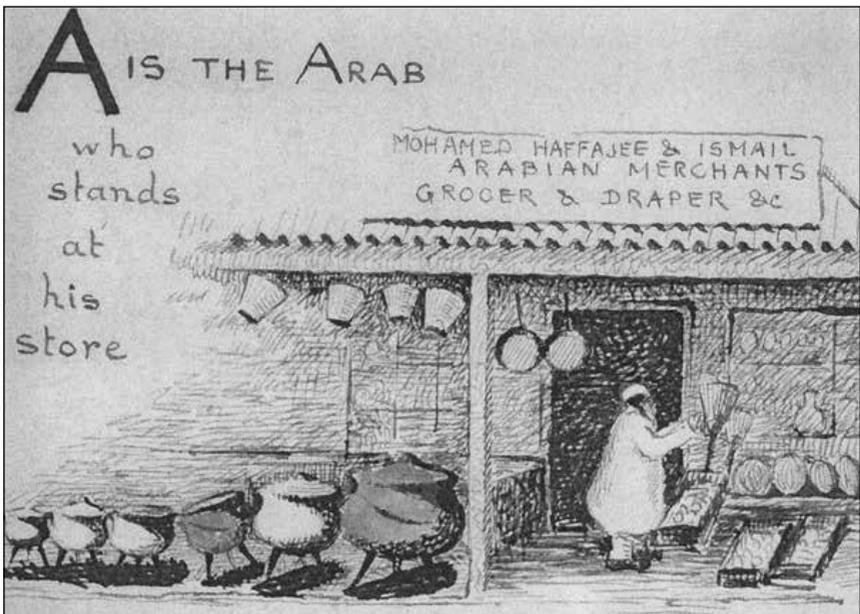
Not surprisingly, Conan was interested in the Zulu people she encountered and noted some of their names: Induku, a domestic worker, features twice, while



the name of a male member of the household, a teenager whose portrait appears on an extra leaf separate from the alphabet, is pencilled in but is illegible. The laundress is not given a name (possible because, as the annotation

says, 'She comes for the day, once a week if fine'). Under P appear three Zulu children, selling their wares:

P such big Pumpkins
You never have seen!



On the reverse is the note, 'They carried them on their heads, put them on the steps, and squatted.'

The line 'Z stands for Zulu and Zinc' raises the question why, since 'Zulu' is such a good word for Z, she added the second word, 'zinc', when 'zebra' might have been an obvious African choice if a second word was needed. It must have had some peculiar local flavour that struck her as worthy of record. There is a clue in a corner of the picture that illustrates 'L is our Laundress/who washes so well,' where Conan gives us a glimpse of what appears to be a zinc bath of a kind familiar in South Africa in the earlier years of the twentieth century. Such a bath features in a near-contemporary children's story also set in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, *The Chronicles of Peach Grove Farm* by Nellie Fincher,¹² where the girls record in their family newspaper how they play with their dolls: 'Our ladies of the homestead decided yesterday to go for a sail on the lake – Lake Zinco, a huge bath.' Conan's child audience must have been thrilled and intrigued to see familiar objects materialising in sketches and words in Aunt Jeanie's album.

Jeanie Conan's *An African ABC* is the first record of children's verses written in English in South Africa.¹³ This gives it an important place in the history of South African literature.

NOTES

- 1 This note is based on my article, 'Jeanie Conan's African ABC', *English in Africa*, 2017 (in press).
- 2 Conan, Jeanie, 'An African ABC' (Nottingham Road, unpublished manuscript, 1901), Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books, Toronto Public Library, call no. NR CON (Manuscript drawer, MSB16).
- 3 Jenkins, Elwyn, *South Africa in English-language Children's Literature, 1814–1912* (Jefferson, N. Carolina and London, McFarland, 2002) p. 217.
- 4 <http://static.torontopubliclibrary.ca/dapdfs/37131053604930d.pdf>.
- 5 Conan Kennedy Photograph Collection, cat. no. CK114, academia.edu/9136792/CONAN_KENNEDY_PHOTOGRAPH_COLLECTION.
- 6 National Library of Ireland, cat. no. PD 4188TX.
- 7 Conan Kennedy Photograph Collection, cat. no. CK114.
- 8 See, for example, the reproduction of the photograph in 'General Sir Redvers Buller VC', <http://www.creditonparishchurch.org.uk/history/general-sir-redvers-buller-vc/>.
- 9 Lee, Emanoil, *To the Bitter End: A Photographic History of the Boer War 1899–1902* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985) p. 52.
- 10 Conan Kennedy Photograph Collection, cat. no. CK114; The Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia, www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php?title=Sir_Arthur_Conan_Doyle:Biography.
- 11 Sir Arthur Conan Doyle Literary Estate, 'Arthur Conan Doyle: Biography', <http://www.arthurconandoyle.com/biography.html>.
- 12 Fincher, Nellie, *The Chronicles of Peach Grove Farm* (Pietermaritzburg, The Times Printing and Publishing Company, 1910) p. 10. See Elwyn Jenkins, 'The Chronicles of Peach Grove Farm by Nellie Fincher', *Natalia*, 45, Dec. 2015, pp. 1–13.
- 13 Thomas Pringle wrote a ballad, 'The honey-bird and the woodpecker', published in 1834, which he addressed to 'juvenile readers', but it is a satire on the massacre of Xhosas by British and Boers that cannot have been aimed at child readers (*African Poems of Thomas Pringle*, ed. E. Pereira and M. Chapman (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1989) pp. 89–91).