Although their relationship was very close, and John Snow is described as having been devotedly attached to him, Charles Empson has remained a shadowy figure in the life of his nephew.

As regards their kinship (Figure), it is known that John Snow's mother, Frances, or Fanny, was the illegitimate daughter of Mary Askham. In 1792 Mary married John Empson, a weaver of York. Four children resulted from this marriage: Hannah; Charles, baptised 1st February 1795; John and William. Frances Askham married William Snow in May 1812. They were the parents of John Snow. Since Frances did not change her surname after her mother's marriage, it may be assumed that John Empson was not her father, and hence that Charles Empson was her half-brother. Leaman, mistakenly states that Mary married Charles, rather than that she was his mother, and conjectured that Charles may have funded the children's education.

We know nothing of Charles Empson's early years, except that at some time during his teens he worked in the neighbourhood of Stockton, and visited many local places distinguished for picturesque scenery. Years later he described how, one morning before sunrise, he had ascended Roseberry Topping, Yorkshire's highest hill. He waited until, in his own words: 'the glorious sun, rising in sublime grandeur ... dispersed the dense and fleecy clouds that rolled beneath me ... and I thought ... what ecstasy should I not feel ... if I could tread the lofty steps of the Andean range, and ascend the yet untrodden summits of the Cordilleras!' No sooner was he free to choose his own course in life than he set about accomplishing this wish.

This last paragraph, in which is a fair example of his prose style, is paraphrased from the preface to the book, published in 1836, in which Empson described some of his experiences in South America, and it poses a number of questions. He tells us that he spent four years, probably during the early 1820's, in what is now Colombia. But how he was able to finance his voyage and stay, how he got there and under whose auspices, and what was the real purposes of his visit, remain
complete mysteries. For the book itself is essentially a companion to a series of twelve coloured drawings elaborated from sketches from Colombian life, and published as a separate volume. Each of the twelve chapters first describes, then illustrates by means of one or more stories or character sketches, the subject of one of the illustrations.

South America during the early 1820's was just emerging from the throes of its revolt against the rule of Spain, during which it received much British support. I did wonder whether Empson might have enrolled in the British Legion some 8000 strong, that enlisted in London, mainly veterans from the Napoleonic Wars, but have been advised by an authority on the subject that this is most unlikely. Great Britain recognised Colombian independence in 1825, and the Foreign Secretary, Canning, appointed consuls, two of whom, Commander Cochrane and Colonel Hamilton, later published accounts of their stay that can still be read with pleasure. American diplomats and army officers also described their experiences and one remarked upon the power and ubiquity of the British in Colombia, and complained that the country was filled with agents of English speculating companies.

But Empson appears to have had neither diplomatic nor commercial interests. Frustratingly, he provides us with no dates and no itinerary, and although he mentions companions, and that he had met many Europeans, he tells us nothing about them. His account is impressionistic, in the sense that it is made up of little patches of colour from which one has to work out a picture. However, from the place names, and from some of the geographical descriptions, it is possible to reconstruct his travels at least in outline.

The whole of Empson's wanderings seem to have been restricted to an area that extended from the coast to beyond Bogota, and perhaps fifty miles each side of the River Magdalena, and followed what had already become a recognised tourist route. He didn't actually illustrate his journey as such, so to get some idea of the conditions of travel, Humboldt's 'Views of the Cordilleras' may be consulted. Empson must have landed, perhaps in 1822 or 1823, at Cartagena, the main port at the mouth of the River Magdalena. He describes the river, and almost certainly travelled up it by boat to Honda, about 600 miles inland on the left bank. Travel was by oar-propelled boats of different sizes, but several of the writers, Cochrane, Hamilton and others, mention the forthcoming introduction of a steamboat service, the concession for which had just been granted to a German entrepreneur. Honda was the farthest navigable point, and the town served as the port for the capital, Bogota. It was shut in by mountains on all sides, and the heat was stifling; from there Empson continued overland. He describes his travels. The standard beast of burden was the mule; and a good mule, very sagacious and loyal, was twenty times as valuable as a horse. Indian guides were licensed by the Government to convey passengers across the Cordilleras. After reaching the highest point accessible to mules, one either walked, or was carried on a light cane chair suspended from a man's shoulders. Empson dilates on the beauty of the scenery, the mountains, the plains and the rivers. All the river beds were rich with gold. Ravines were crossed dangerously by primitive cane suspension bridges constructed by the natives in a single day.
The natives mainly wore the 'poncho', an oblong piece of cloth with a slit in the centre for the head. They celebrated Empson's arrival at one place by a fiesta that lasted three days. He describes the cook at this establishment, Senora Manuela: she was a considerable character, a freed slave, who had obtained her liberty by working as a nurse in the hospital during the siege of Cartagena. She could provide a dinner of three complete courses for two hundred guests, and among her repertoire were some pythonesque dishes - roast parrot and roast armadillo, for example. Manuela also had a reputation as a healer, and took a great professional interest in the set of cupping glasses which were part of Empson's luggage.

Although the other writers only mention it in passing, Empson devotes several pages to an account of the goitre that was endemic in a large area of the country, and he is the only one to connect it with cretinism: 'The disease is called in South America El Goto, and in some areas many hundreds of miles across, it is a matter of surprise to find a single person without this deformity. Custom reconciles one to everything. When the inhabitants of Berania saw for the first time a party of Englishmen, their surprise broke out in the exclamation: 'Mira que hombres feos sin goteras', literally: 'Look at these ugly men; they have no goitres'. Far from trying to conceal these disgusting deformities, they take a pride in displaying them ... and embellish them with chains of gold, coral, amber and jet. 'Unhappily, imbecility and idiocy result from it to such a alarming extent, that the government has decreed a very handsome reward for the discovery of a cure. The natives have certain antidotes, such as burnt sponge, which reduces the frightful development of the thyroid gland. But sometimes the goto becomes so large, that its weight becomes oppressive, and they are afraid to sleep in any but one position, lest they should die of suffocation.'

In a recent collection of early watercolours of the region, Empson was somewhat unfairly described as a 'poetic and slightly mad botanist and collector', and more justly as someone from whose writings it is not easy to extract any useful information.16 Certainly he had a great interest in both plant and animal life, and describes many different species, embellishing his descriptions with appropriate tales. On the plains there were cocoa and coffee plantations, and chocolate was another product, but only palatable if prepared with cinnamon - 'The common chocolate is vile stuff'. Parrots were plentiful, and easy to domesticate, but soon learned 'those very objectionable terms with which the Spanish language abounds...'.

Of special interest to us is the following: 'The Indians of the desert possess a poison called curare, so potent that the quantity which can be concealed beneath the thumb-nail will cause certain death'. Whether crude curare was among the many botanical specimens that Empson embarked with on his return to England we shall never know.

His ship was wrecked on Sandy Hook, at the entrance to New York harbour owing, he said, to the captain having a greater interest in chess than navigation. He was rescued, after some eighteen hours of anxiety, and landed at Staten Island, but of his possessions he managed to save only some precious objects of pre-Colombian art. We know that Empson was back in England before 1628 because, on the
6th February that year he exhibited a number of gold artefacts at a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. This gives us the one fixed date that we have during this decade, but several factors suggest that he was in Colombia from about 1823 to 1827. That the items were exhibited in Newcastle may indicate that Empson had returned initially to the North. It will be remembered that John Snow was at that time articled to a surgeon in that city.

A description of the gold figurines was published in 1837. There were twelve in all. Empson obtained the first five in Bogota, and was assured that they had been found in Lake Quataveta, into which the Indians annually threw many such images as sacrifices to the Gods. Also it was believed that much treasure had been sunk in this lake at the approach of the Spanish conquerors. A number of schemes to drain it had been launched over the years, and many speculators had been ruined by failure to find anything of great value. The largest item, a breastplate, when it came to be auctioned after Empson's death, was described in the catalogue as part of the sacred armour of Montezuma, presented to Mr Empson by General Bolivar, but this may be regarded as 'auctioneers' hyperbole, because Empson himself did not make that claim in his own description of the artefacts.

Some time before 1836 Empson moved to Bath, and was living at 9 Cleveland Place when John Snow visited him in the late summer of that year during his long walk from Yorkshire to medical school in London. In most of the Bath directories he is described as a museum keeper, but in one, more accurately, as a picture dealer. He was very active in the social life of Bath, and was instrumental in the purchase and erection of the celebrated statue of Jupiter that stands in Victoria Park. In 1838 Empson published a more detailed account of the gold artefacts that he had brought back from Colombia. By this time his 'Narratives of South America' was already out of print.

Empson was a friend and confidante of several Bath residents, including the poet and essayist Walter Savage Landor, who bought several paintings from him, and the Reverend Kilvert, uncle of the more famous diarist. He became acquainted with Louis Napoleon, later Emperor Napoleon III of France, who lived during 1846 at 55 Great Pulteney Street. Benjamin Ward Richardson described how, when Empson and Snow visited Paris in 1856, Empson had 'special imperial favours shown to him, in which the nephew participated'.

Empson moved to 7 Terrace Walks, close to the Abbey, in 1843. This is now a video shop, but the remains of a fine interior can be seen. He was very active in advancing the interests of local artists; among his other good works he was the prime mover in establishing a library for the patients of the Mineral Water Hospital. He seems to have travelled fairly frequently in connection with his business affairs. One can imagine him visiting John Snow in Frith Street, and later in Sackville Street, and can see how the company of this adventurous, romantic, artistic extrovert, who had been to foreign parts, must have appealed to the rather austere, self-contained Snow and, equally, how Empson must have appreciated that Snow, in his own way, was exploring completely new territory. It is conceivable that he provided Snow with financial support during his difficult early days in general practice.
In mid June 1861 Empson was in London again. He was staying at 60 Doughty Street, a lodging house close to Charles Dickens's old home, No.48, now the Dickens museum, and near the present Great Ormond Street Hospital, when he was taken ill with what sounds like pneumonia, and after an illness of three days he died. He is buried in the Brompton Cemetery. His grave is next to that of John Snow; he must have reserved the plot when John Snow died.

His will is dated August 1858, so presumably he made it after Snow's death. His effects were valued at under £8000. He left some legacies to friends, and to charities in Bath, including the General Hospital, but most of his assets, including some land that he had bought near the family home, went to members of the family still resident in Yorkshire. Among the legatees were John Snow's mother, Frances, and several of Snow's brothers and sisters. Empson's death was marked by a lengthy, but not too informative obituary notice in the 'Bath and Cheltenham Gazette'.

Empson's estate was sold at auction; the sale lasted five days. According to a newspaper report 3000 people turned up, and the property fetched excellent prices. The Bath Record Library still has a copy of the sale catalogue. This lists a number of gold artefacts from South America, which would be those exhibited in 1828. Several of these, according to Professor Warwick Bray, are now in the possession of the British Museum. There was also a silver dish and stand, said to have been presented to Empson by General Bolivar. There were many books on South America, including those by Cochrane, Hamilton and Waterton, many paintings and much antique furniture, and a copy of John Snow's 'On Cholera', and one described as 'Snow on Anaesthetics', which I take to have been his 'On Chloroform'. Also in the Bath Reference Library there are several of Empson's minor writings, poems and his original sketchbook, with the pencil drawings, presumably made in Colombia, from which the published plates were prepared. They show evidence of considerable artistic skill.

One can get some idea of the regard in which Empson was held, from the fact that his friends set up a fund to provide a memorial window in the Abbey, and this was installed about a year after his death. It is located immediately over the north-west door, which is the usual entrance to the Abbey. The inscription, at the base of the window, with a disconcerting disregard of the subjunctive, reads: 'In affectionate remembrance of Charles Empson, of this city, born 1795, died 1861. Erected by public subscription, that the memory of a good and estimable citizen is perpetuated.'
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REFERENCES

24. Bath and Cheltenham Gazette. 3 July 1861.
ADDENDUM

Continuing research has filled in certain gaps in the above narrative. Charles Empson set sail from Liverpool, on board the 'Sir William Congreve', bound for South America, on June 18th 1824. He was accompanying Robert Stephenson, son of George Stephenson, who had signed a three year contract with the Colombian Mining Association, with the purpose of reopening the silver mines at Mariquita. Empson was Stephenson's constant associate during his time in South America.

They left Colombia for home towards the end of July 1827; yellow fever was raging in Cartagena, and since no suitable ship was leaving for England they took a passage for New York, and suffered ship wreck almost at the end of the voyage. Nearly all their luggage was lost. The name of the ship and the exact dates are not known, but it is recorded that Stephenson was inducted as a freemason in the St Andrew's Lodge, New York, on 21st September 1827. After this he and Empson went on a walking tour of New York State, visiting the Niagara Falls, and crossing into Canada as far as Montreal.

They arrived back in Liverpool towards the end of November 1827. Hence Empson spent three years, not four, in South America. He settled in Newcastle, where he started a business as a fine art bookseller in Collingwood Street. His shop was the resort of artists, scientists and literary men. It is said that at Christmas 1833 he printed on the back of his address cards the message: 'To wish you a Happy Christmas', and this is thought to be the origin of Christmas cards. In 1834 he was 'driven from Newcastle by a foul slander, which is said to have had no foundation', and went to reside in Bath. Shortly before his death he made available to Robert Stephenson's biographer, Jeaffreson, Stephenson's early journals, and nearly all his correspondence during his stay in South America.

Obviously, further questions remain, including the present whereabouts of Stephenson's South American log.

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REFERENCES