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## Historical Note on *Pseudosphinx tetrio* (L.) (Lepidoptera: Sphingidae) in Trinidad, West Indies

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## **A Historical Note on *Pseudosphinx tetrio* (L.) (Lepidoptera: Sphingidae) in Trinidad, West Indies**

Members of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club will be familiar with the reputation and art of Michel Jean Cazabon (1813-1888). A number may know of Margaret Mann, the young British lady from the island of Guernsey who was taught water-colour painting by Cazabon during the four years (1847-1851) that she lived in Trinidad. Some of Margaret Mann's paintings were recently acquired by and exhibited at the City Museum

in Port-of-Spain.

Last year saw the appearance of the book "The Letters of Margaret Mann" by Danielle Delon (2008). In it are reproduced letters penned by Margaret Mann to her family in Guernsey. Much of what she writes home describes everyday, rather routine, aspects of her family life in Trinidad, together with some valuable social comment. In addition, there are a few interesting observations

on local animals and plants. One of these, from page 148, follows:-

“The hibiscus and Barbadoes pride are handsome flowers and there is one small, pink, sweet scented blossom of a large shrub, whose name I do not know that is very pretty. By the by, this shrub is now covered with the most singular and magnificent caterpillars you ever saw! They are longer and thicker than a man’s finger with rings of scarlet and yellow on a black body, scarlet heads, and thick scarlet legs with black specks on the scarlet ground. Their hindmost legs are very much like an elephant and their manner of moving also!

But the most singular feature in their construction is the tail they have. They actually have little thin black tails half as long as their body which they wave about in the funniest way you can imagine. They are in numbers on three trees of this species and will remain there, our black servants tell us, till they have eaten all the leaves and then they will turn into butterflies! This is rather a digression from my subject but I do not think I need apologise for it.”

The caterpillars that Margaret Mann describes are, one assumes, those of *Pseudosphinx tetrio* (L.) and this opinion is confirmed by Matthew Cock who recently discussed the species in detail in *Living World* (Cock 2008). There is one error in Margaret Mann’s description in that she writes of “scarlet bands”. *P. tetrio* larvae have yellow rings on an otherwise black surface but it is probable that the red head and legs of the larvae gave the impression of there being both red and yellow bands. In analysing the species’ apparent dependence in Trinidad on ornamental frangipani (*Plumeria* spp), Cock made the interesting final comment “...it may well be that *Pseudosphinx tetrio* has only established breeding populations in historical times”. It was clearly present – and presumably reproducing – when Margaret Mann was writing 160 years ago and was well-recognised then by local people.

An interesting point, however, is the identity of the shrub with “small, pink, sweet scented blossom” on which

the larvae were feeding. Was this another colour-form of frangipani or some other plant?

Hawk moths (family Sphingidae) have always attracted the attention of naturalists and members of the public on account of their size and often spectacular appearance. It is apparent from Danielle Delon’s book that Margaret Mann was not a naturalist but she was observant and recorded what she saw. It is perhaps surprising that she did not deduce that the horned caterpillars she observed in Trinidad might be related to the hawk moth larvae that she would almost certainly have seen as a child on Guernsey. Cock (personal communication) surmises that this may have been on account of the long fine tail on *P. tetrio*, which is only a feature of the first instar of European sphingids and therefore rarely seen by the casual observer.

We are grateful to Matthew Cock for permitting us to refer to his comments on Margaret Mann’s observations and for his helpful advice on this Note.

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