

Hamilton College Library

“Home Notes”

Know Thyself! Lectures on Phrenology by Dr. J. P. M'Lean at [blank] on the Evening of [blank.] Subjects: How to Read Character Scientifically; Including the Physical, Social, Moral, and Intellectual Development of the Race. Public Examinations at the Close of Each Lecture.

[New York]: Office of the “Phrenological Journal,” 389 Broadway. S. R. Wells, Publisher, [c. 1870].

See the front cover of this issue of *ACSQ* for the large and impressive illustrated broadside measuring 42” x 28 3/4”; printed in black and red, with numerous portrait wood engravings. It was issued by one of the leading publishers of phrenological material, designed for the use of those organizing public lectures on the subject of phrenology and likely part of the publisher’s campaign to sell copies of a book on the subject.

Appearing at the top of the broadside is the ancient Greek maxim “Know Thyself,” intended here to give philosophical weight to phrenological theories and often employed by enterprising phrenologists appealing to a popular audience seeking enlightenment. Below this is a “Symbolical Head,” presenting the classic phrenological “map” of the brain, divided into modules representing faculties, most of which contain an image relating to its supposed function. A segment at the back of the head, for instance, includes an image of a mother and child, representing “philoprogenitiveness,” or the love of offspring. In another module a man standing proudly near a peacock represents self esteem.

A large panel at the center of the broadside advertises lectures on phrenology by a “Dr. J.P. M'Lean,” whose name is printed in black on one of three lines left blank on the initial printing. M'Lean seems to have been a member of the Aberdeen (Scotland) Phrenological Society, presumably on the lecture circuit in the United States. The other lines, for location and date, have not been filled out. The subjects of the lectures are said to be

“How to Read Character Scientifically,” and it is also noted that “public examinations” will be held “at the close of each lecture.”

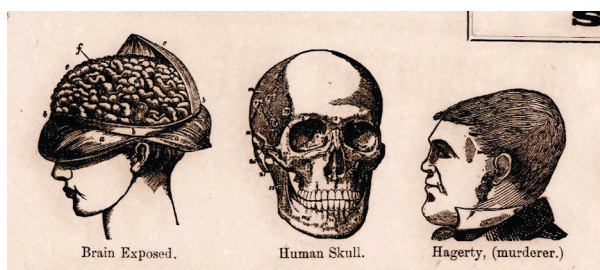
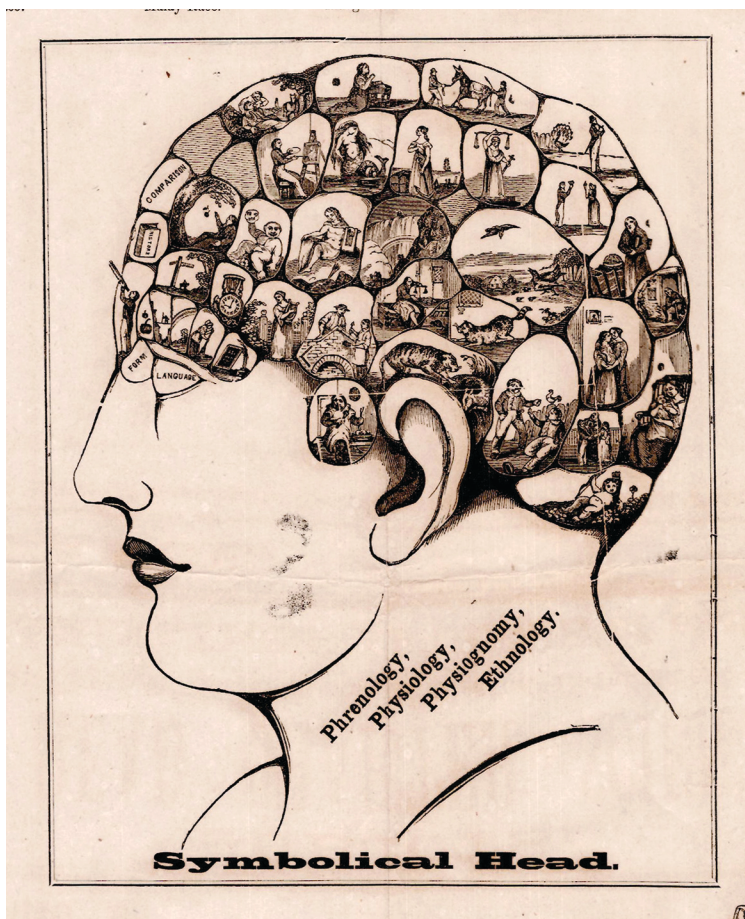
A series of heads arrayed across the top represent the “Caucasian Race,” “Malay Race,” “Mongolian Race,” “American Race,” and “African Race.” These are flanked by portraits of Lord Bacon and an “Idiot.” Among the many other portraits included are those of Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Florence Nightingale, Black Hawk, J. J. Audubon, Jenny Lind, General Grant, Brigham Young, Anna Cora Mowatt Ritchie, a “New Zealand Chief,” a “Feejee Chief,” and Noah Webster. A head showing the “brain exposed” is included as well as representations of “Hagerty, (murderer),” “Prison Bird,” a human skull, and two dogs. The figure of Spurzheim holding a symbolical head appears at center right and in the lower left corner is “A Phrenologist, Studying the Human Skull” and looking very much like Ben Franklin, apparently an attempt to lend an air of scientific respectability to phrenology.

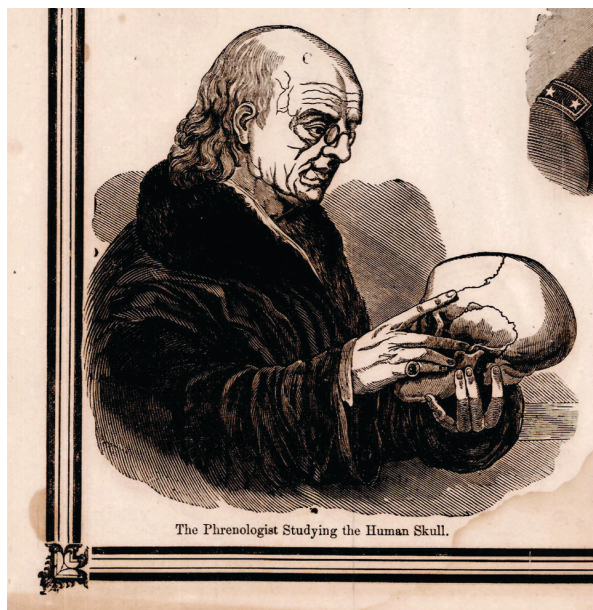
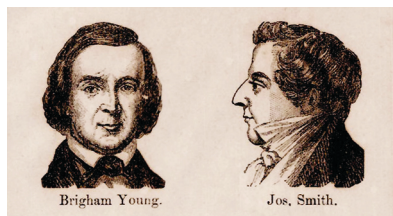
First developed in the late 1790s by German physician Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828), phrenology gained wide acceptance as a scientific explanation of character, in part due to the efforts of Gall’s disciples Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1776-1832), who brought word of phrenology to America, and George Combe (1788-1858), who founded the Edinburgh Phrenological Society. Gall’s central notion that various character traits and emotions are each governed by specific portions of the brain has been credited as an early contribution to neuropsychology. However, his idea that the brain comprises twenty-seven personality organs and that the skull can be read to determine the degree to which a person possesses a particular characteristic was, of course, ultimately rejected as arbitrary and lacking any genuine empirical basis.

Although phrenology was discredited as early as the 1840s, publisher and author Samuel R. Wells and his erstwhile partners, the Fowler brothers, did much to maintain interest in the subject, publishing the *American Phrenological Journal* (which lasted until 1911), numerous books, almanacs, and phrenological charts. Wells seems to have issued this broadside at least in part as a way of promoting his book, *How to Read Character: A New Illustrated Hand-book of Phrenology and Physiognomy for Students and Examiners*, which appeared in 1868 and was likely sold at the lectures.

— Boston Rare Maps and James E. Arsenault & Company

Details from Know Thyself!





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