

‘Fugitive images’: Penang and the Indian Ocean, c.1840-1867.

The title of my paper – *fugitive images* – has been appropriated from Elizabeth Eastlake’s famous treatise on photography, which first appeared in the London *Quarterly Review* in April 1857. It is a reference to the photosensitivity of ‘the whole scale of minerals and other simple substances’ – not least ‘juices of beautiful flowers’, such as *Corchorus japonicus* – which could generate ‘pictures of beauty and distinctive character’. These photographs were ‘fugitive’ because they were delicate and frequently ephemeral.

In this paper I will focus on ‘fugitive images’ in a wider sense. The earliest photographs of Penang might be considered ‘fugitive’ because: (i) they have been widely dispersed; (ii) they are often difficult to trace; (iii) they are often held in restricted-access collections; and (iv) there does not appear to be any evidence of photographic activity before 1861. To put this in perspective, the photographer Samuel Bourne wrote in 1863 that

As there is scarcely a nook or corner, a glen, a valley, or mountain, much less a country, on the face of the globe which the penetrating eye of the camera has not searched, or where the perfumes of poor Archer’s collodion have not risen through the hot or freezing atmosphere, *photography in India is, least of all, a new thing.* [Emphasis added] [*Fig. 1*]

So why did photography arrive in Penang so late *vis-à-vis* India? Why are there no extant photographs of Penang from before c.1863? How do the earliest photographs of Penang illustrate broader patterns of activity, such as the island’s connections with the East India Company’s other territories? I will begin with some comments on early photography in India in the 1850s before shifting my focus to the Malay Peninsula in the 1860s.

The East India Company’s formal empire in the 1850s and 1860s ranged from Aden to Singapore. Its territories in present-day Burma and Malaysia – Arakan, Pegu, Tenasserim, Penang, Province Wellesley, Malacca, Singapore – were marginalised in contemporary maps, which was both a symptom and cause of their administrative peripheralisation. For

instance, an inset of ‘the British possessions beyond the Ganges’ in *Stanford’s map of India* (1857) was reproduced at one-fifth scale [**Fig. 2**], while *Philips’ map of India* (1860) delineated ‘British Burmah and the Strait Settlements’ [*sic*] at half-scale [**Fig. 3**].

The first ‘photogenic drawings’ of the subcontinent were probably taken in Calcutta in 1839, while the earliest *surviving* photographs appear to be a series of 23 calotypes by an unknown female photographer that were taken in Uttar Pradesh during 1843-5. By the mid 1850s there were many amateur practitioners – in addition to studio daguerreotypists – and photography had been officially sanctioned in each of the presidencies of India as a means of systematically recording archaeological sites. In Britain, cadets at the East India Company’s Military Seminary at Addiscombe started to receive training in photography, while cameras were dispatched to army units in India. In Elizabeth Eastlake’s words, ‘British India has kept pace with the mother country’, since photographic societies had been founded in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, and ‘minor places’ such as Moulmein.

It is apparent that the existence of such societies contributed greatly to the early success of photography on paper in India. The foremost of these was the Photographic Society of Bombay, which was founded in October 1854 and enjoyed the patronage of the Governor of Bombay, Lord Elphinstone. The Bombay society claimed to be ‘second only on the list of Photographic Societies to that of London’, corresponded with equivalent ‘centres of union’ in England, published a regular journal, and boasted more than 250 members by late 1855. It is noteworthy that three of the thirteen founder members were Indian, while the pages of its journal aggregated photographic activity from elsewhere.

We now hear with satisfaction of Calcutta, Madras, and Moulmein following our example... and view with pleasure the number of amateur Photographers springing up in all parts of the country.

These societies facilitated photographic activity in various ways: they provided a forum for discussion about new processes and the results of experiments; made premises and equipment available for members; and assembled collections of images and publications. Many practitioners in India discovered that they needed to deviate sharply from the path

set out in manuals that were intended for practitioners in temperate locales. Therefore, a paper on the waxed-paper process – presented before the Bombay Photographic Society in January 1855 – was tailored instead for ‘the warm climate of India’. Needless to say, even more important was access to photographic materials, which were supplied by firms such as Merwanjee Bomanjee & Co., ‘Agents for the Bombay Photographic Society’, who advertised the fact that they could supply ‘Bolton’s Superior Collodion for Negatives and Positives’. Although the wet collodion process – introduced by Frederick Scott Archer in 1851 – produced sharper negatives (on glass) than the waxed-paper process, steamship companies sometimes refused to transport collodion, as it was highly explosive.

In *The Art of Photography* (1854), Dr G. C. Hermann Halleur sought to map the ‘entire domain of the photographic art’, which he demarcated into five ‘chief provinces’, namely the daguerreotype (on metallic plates), calotype (on paper), vitrotype (on glass), anthotype (with vegetable juices), and photo-lithography (on stone). Eastlake also sought to locate photography. For her, however, it was ‘a kind of republic, where it needs apparently but to be a photographer to be a brother’. Eastlake’s account of the early history of photography (‘of the wide dissemination of the new agent, and of the various modes of its reception’) was remarkably inclusive and universalist. Photography was ostensibly a great leveller, which gave common cause to zealous adherents from every walk of life; these adherents were, nonetheless, in her view, almost exclusively European and American men.

Their style is made up of the driest facts, the longest words, and the most high-flown rhapsodies. Slight improvements in processes, and slight varieties in conclusions, are discussed as if they involved the welfare of mankind. [i.e. John Murray – see *Fig. 4*]

The three major photographic societies in the subcontinent had prominent Indian members from the outset, but relations with the European members – and between participants more generally – were not always amicable and mutually beneficial. For instance, Rajendralal

Mitra, one of the founding members of the Bengal Photographic Society, was expelled in November 1857 following his public comments about the ‘ruin and devastation’ wrought by Indigo planters in Bengal. In Bombay, Dr Narayan Daji, a prominent member of the photographic society, wrote an open letter to the editor of the *Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce* in August 1856 – on the activities of ‘photographic pirates’ – in which he lamented the ‘defective state of the law of copyright’ in relation to photography. Daji expounded upon ‘one gross instance’ of photographic piracy, as a result of which he had been ‘injured in pocket’ and ‘in character’ by William Johnson, who was an experienced practitioner and a fellow council member of the Bombay Photographic Society.

It is unclear why Daji’s first recourse was to the press. Although Daji was the incumbent Sheriff of Bombay, his letter reads like a desperate appeal to British justice: an attempt to equate the unauthorised copying of photographs with maritime predation. Since the Bombay Marine protected merchants’ interests on the high seas, why were photographers subjected to ‘piracy’ and ‘plunder’ without legal recourse? A series of photographs of Islamic and Jain architecture and ‘portraits of eminent native and Europe gentlemen’ in Gujarat [*Fig. 5*] were exhibited at Bombay Town Hall in April 1857 and were praised for ‘the softness of their tone, their clearness of color, and sharpness of detail’. Many of the prints were deemed to be ‘fully equal in execution to the best of those from Europe’. Johnson’s unauthorised copies – or ‘fugitive images’ – have not survived but they were sent to the *Illustrated London News* to be used as raw material for lithographs.

The citizens of Eastlake’s photographic ‘republic’ – regardless of background, ethnicity, materials, and practices – were readily identifiable on account of their blackened fingers, which was a result of their exposure to silver nitrate, a toxic and corrosive compound. Amateur practitioners, in Manchester or Madras, were often more interested in the action of light and mechanisms of visual technologies than financial considerations. For some, including one photographer in Manchester in the 1850s, even the *subjects* were relatively

unimportant: ‘any thing satisfied him provided it was a good photograph’. In one issue of the *Journal of the Photographic Society of Bombay*, reference is made to a facetious characterisation of the amateur photographer in India as a ‘Knight of the black tips’, due to the peripatetic questing and chemical meddling associated with such individuals.

In the 1850s and 1860s photographers traversed territories that were administered by the East India Company (and later the India Office) in addition to various Crown colonies and ‘extra-imperial’ polities, which were increasingly connected to India and one another through travel and communications networks. Nonetheless, the earliest photographs taken in Penang were by itinerant commercial photographers, who advertised their services in advance of their arrival, in local newspapers such as *The Straits Times*. In August 1861, Thomas Hermitage, who had a studio on Queen Street in Singapore, offered ‘portraits on glass or paper’ and ‘views of Penang and Singapore’. This appears to be the earliest reference to photographic activity in Penang, while the earliest extant photographs of the island are almost certainly those by John Thomson, which date from 1863-4. [*Figs 6, 7*]

There are clearly many different reasons for the lack of photographers in Penang in the 1850s. In contrast to photographic ‘radials’ such as Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, there was not an established support network and infrastructure of dedicated societies; there had not been any official endorsement of photography in the Straits Settlements, nor were any photographers commissioned by government to document Penang’s architectural heritage; the population of the island was only about 40,000 in 1855, which meant the potential market was relatively small; and photographic materials and journals were scarce. The island was also far more familiar to Europeans than more recent acquisitions, since it had been ceded to the East India Company in 1786. If Penang had been subsumed into British

India much later, would photography have arrived earlier? The Madras Army officer and photographer Linnaeus Tripe described his 1855 photographs of Konbaung and Company Burma as ‘a series of views of subjects interesting on account of their novelty’.

The impact of the introduction of the wet collodion process in 1851 was not immediately felt, but ultimately contributed greatly to the proliferation of commercial photographers in Penang and elsewhere. It combined the main advantages of the daguerreotype and calotype: prints from glass-plate negatives could rival the former in terms of precision and detail, and could also be reproduced *ad infinitum*. The calotype – notwithstanding the many achievements of practitioners ‘under an Indian sky’ – was seen as capricious and unreliable. Many practitioners became obsessed with obtaining a perfect negative and with the impermanence of photographs (‘Do photographs fade more frequently in London or out of it?’). The collodion process dramatically reduced the costs and risks for prospective photographers – and there was a marked increase in architectural and topographical ‘views’ produced for commercial purposes – but it did not reduce their loads or their reliance on porters and assistants. John Thomson, for instance, travelled with a custom-built darkroom-tent, while his camera measured a full cubic metre.

Although Thomson is probably better known for his photographs of Canton, Angkor, and the Siamese royal court, his photographs of Penang were the first he took in Asia. Thomson’s recollections about his photographic activities in Penang – from *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China and China* (1875) – are worth quoting at length. He wrote:

During the two months I spent in Penang and Province Wellesley, I was chiefly engaged in photography – a congenial, profitable, and instructive operation, enabling me to gratify my taste for travel and to fill my portfolio, as I wandered over Penang settlement and the mainland hard by, with an attractive series of characteristic scenes and types, which were in constant demand among the resident European population.

This ‘constant demand’ was partly fuelled by plantation owners in Province Wellesley, a number of whom were fellow Scots. It is worth noting that he dismissed Malacca, by contrast, as ‘neither an interesting nor a profitable field for a photographer’.

In his writings Thomson recycled some of the clichés concerning ‘characteristic scenes and types’, which found a peculiarly photographic expression in his description of the unnamed assistants he recruited for his photographic excursions in Penang. [**Fig. 8**]

I trained two Madras men, or boys as they were called here, to act as my printers and assistants, the Chinese having, at that time, refused to lend themselves to such devilry as taking likenesses of objects without the touch of human hands. Moreover they, as ‘Orang puti’, or ‘White men’, shrunk from having their fingers and much-prized long nails stained black, like those of the blackest ‘Orang etam’ or black men. My Klings, on the other hand, were of the colour of a well-sunned nitrate of silver stain all over; and had they, who even pride themselves on their fairness of skin, objected to the discoloration of their fingers, I should have no difficulty in obtaining negroes of an ivory black in this small island, as a wonderful mixture of races is to be found, and ‘phases of faith’ as multiform as the nationalities are diverse.

Thomson did not consider hiring Malays; he noted that ‘on the whole, the Malays do as little work as possible’, and one of his prints was entitled ‘Malays resting’ [**Fig. 9**].

There are number of photographs that illustrate Penang’s Indian Ocean connections, such as *Buddhist Temple, Penang* [**Fig. 10**] and *22nd Native Infantry, Penang* [**Fig. 11**]. In instances such as these, it is interesting to speculate about the precise nature of the involvement of the ‘Madras men’ that Thomson had hired as assistants. Did they help to select sites for photographs, liaise with the subjects, or in other respects influence the photographer’s activities? Were ‘Klings’ sometimes chosen as assistants because Indians in the subcontinent had long been exposed to photography, and employed as assistants and printers there? Similar questions might also be asked in relation to the work of the Danish photographer Kristen Feilberg – i.e. *Klings, Penang* (1867) [**Fig. 12**]

– who was co-founder of Penang’s first photographic studio c.1864. Feilberg was active as a photographer in Penang at the time of the separation of the Straits Settlements from

India in 1867, while his photographs taken during riots in Penang in the same year have been anachronistically described as the first 'war photographs' taken in Malaysia.

It is interesting to note that *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China and China* begins with a description of an unrealised photographic journey to the interior of Sri Lanka, which Thomson intended to carry out during 1865 – to compare its 'ancient Hindoo or Buddhist stone buildings' with what he had seen and photographed in Cambodia and elsewhere – but illness prevented him from doing so. Instead, his experiences of the island were

confined to the narrow limits of Galle harbour and to the adjacent hills – such indeed as fall to the lot of all who travel by the steamers of the Peninsular and Oriental line.

He proceeds to draw the attention of the reader to 'the Malayan islands and the mainland of Indo-China... [and] to people and places with which he may still be unfamiliar'. The journeys that he made between Galle and the Straits were simultaneously being made by many without the means to document their passage: Penang and Malacca were common destinations for convicts from Ceylon during the mid nineteenth century and officials in the Straits Settlements and Ceylon exchanged intelligence regarding the whereabouts of fugitives, whom, not infrequently, would 'succeed in making their way to Ceylon'.