

Gathering “Knowledge” in the Bay of Bengal: The Letters of John Adolphus Pope, 1785-1788

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Introduction:

In a path-breaking study, Christopher Bayly coined the term “information order” as a framework for analyzing the means by which British officials in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India sought to amass the “knowledge” considered necessary to support political and economic power. Lacking substantial numbers of mixed race landowners or a long-resident expatriate community, the British adopted strategies that resembled those of Indian rulers, whose regimes had long relied on locally-based informants, “overlapping groups of knowledge-rich communities” – clerks, revenue collectors, spies, physicians, astrologers. Nonetheless, Bayly also reminds us that there were a few areas, especially in relation to commercial intelligence, in which British “knowledge” was at least competent and at times competitive. In the eighteenth century this expertise was probably most evident in the seaports and coastal areas around the Bay of Bengal, where the British had a long history of commercial activity. A prime channel for information on virtually all matters was supplied by the “country traders”, or “free mariners”, as they were termed by the East India Company, the men who sailed independently-owned ships in port-to-port trade within Asia.

Indeed, George Miller has recently argued that “English country traders operating in the Malay Archipelago between 1750 and 1820 played as important a role in the accumulation of knowledge as did East India Company officials.”

Miller goes on to argue that in the late eighteenth century, as in India, private traders were critical to the expansion of British dominance in the Malay Archipelago. With years of sailing and trading experience behind them, and their extensive knowledge of areas rarely frequented by East India Company ships, they had developed an intimate understanding of Southeast Asia’s coastal world. While much of their information was acquired from local informants like assistants, clients, and suppliers, they themselves were fluent in Malay and other languages, and often had local kinsfolk acquired through temporary marriages. In the Bay of Bengal area several such men – Francis Light, James Scott, Thomas Forrest – gained a reputation as authorities on Malay societies, especially when their reports were read by officials or when they published accounts of their travels. Their selection and filtering of information was shaped by their judgments of what would be useful or interesting for their intended audiences, decisions that were made from the viewpoint of adult men. By contrast, this essay focuses on a more youthful country trader, John Adolphus Pope (1771-1821), who at the age of fourteen, was asked to collect “knowledge” about places he visited and to relay it back to interested parties in India.

Composed during a three-year voyage (1785- 1788), Pope’s letters to his friend “George” describe his experiences as a free mariner along the coasts of Burma, the Straits of Melaka and China. Though one-sided and incomplete, this correspondence comprises a veritable treasure trove, not merely because it provides contemporary descriptions of little-known places, but because it offers intriguing insights into the ways in which a younger mind determined the kind of knowledge that was useful and worthy of transmittal. The historical context is equally important, for these letters were written at a time when British ascendancy was an ambition rather than an actuality. In early 1786, Penang appeared uninhabited; the Dutch held Melaka and

other posts along the Straits; the Chulia (Muslim Tamil) trade network still dominated the Bay of Bengal. The opinions and attitudes expressed in Pope's writing highlight an environment where competition could reinforce European bigotry and prejudice, but where the need for commercial co-operation could also foster genuine cross-cultural communication.

From Plymouth to Penang

The son of a seaman who himself had considerable experience in Asian waters, John Pope was born in the British seaport of Plymouth. Although his formal education (possibly at the local grammar school) had already ended by the time he took to sea, it was clearly superior and he was quite scornful of a fellow officer who had received only "a marine education." Highly intelligent, intellectually curious, Pope was an avid reader with wide-ranging literary interests and was obviously frustrated by the lack of books available aboard ship. His French was sufficiently fluent for him to act as interpreter, and he was therefore delighted when he was given access to the library of a well-born Portuguese passenger when his ship was sailing to China. During this voyage discussions of Portuguese and British literature, and the reading aloud of works like the picaresque novels, *Le Diable Boîteux* (The Lame Devil, 1708) and *L'Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane* (1716) "served to pass away many a dull hour." Pope was also an accomplished writer, the product of a society well accustomed to the idea of recording of experiences through diaries and journals. Handwritten "commonplace" books, another popular genre, typically included personal notes, reflections, sketches and miscellaneous information that an individual might consider useful or interesting. Pope's letters further indicate that he was familiar with the idea that writing could merely consists of "fragments", a stylistic technique popularized by Anna Laetitia Aiken's *Sir Bertrand: A Fragment* (1773). This form of writing was well suited to shipboard life, when leisure time was easily interrupted, and was familiar to the "reporting style" of ship logbooks. Compiled at a later time, Pope's own Commonplace Book is as yet unpublished, but an extract about different methods of calling up a wind after a frustrating period of calm demonstrates the extent to which powers of observation were cultivated in an age when photography was in the distant future.

Serving respectively as seaman and boatswain, in January 1785 John Pope and his father left Plymouth and sailed to India aboard an East India Company vessel, HCS (Honorable Company Ship) *Francis*, commanded by James Urmston, a respected member of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy and well-known in Calcutta, a man who was evidently supportive of youthful learning. During the seven-month voyage to Kolkatā, Pope, his close friend George, and about seventy other young men not only received training in seamanship, but were also given an orientation to Indian culture, which apparently included some exposure to Persian literature. In December, his father's connections with one of the owners were instrumental in the appointment of the fourteen-year-old Pope as Third Officer on a country ship, the Malabar-built *Princess Royal*. He did not return to Kolkatā until October 1788.

Pope was thus sailing through Bay of Bengal waters at a critical time in regional history. Penang was described as "an uninhabited island" when he first went ashore in May 1786, although he did see a "deserted hut" and was fearful of meeting Malays "who would not fail to murder us all." By December of the following year, Pope mentioned glowing reports about "our new settlement of Pulo Penang." Several country captains gave "a very flattering account of the fertility, population – people flocking to it from all quarters. Not less than 1000 Chinese have settled there it seems." He rightly predicted that in a few years that it would eclipse "the celebrated mart" of Melaka. Pope's story reveals other Penang connections: John Macintyre, one of the owners of the *Princess Royal*, provided capital to smuggle workmen from China to the

island and also advanced sums of money to help finance the settlement; Pope's father, who had sailed with Macintyre some years before, was boatswain on the HSC *Lascelles*, one of the first East India Company ships to drop anchor at Penang.

A Cog in the Orientalist Enterprise.

There are additional reasons to give attention to Pope's letters. Although the details of their meeting remain obscure, in the three months between his arrival in Kolkatā in September 1785 and his departure in December, Pope had been introduced to an influential figure, Sir William Jones (1746-94). With a strong interest in non-European languages and literature, Jones had come to Kolkatā two years earlier to take a position as associate judge in the Bengal Supreme Court. He found a kindred soul in the Bengal Governor-General, Warren Hastings (1732-1818), who had long been convinced that the key to maintaining British control in India was "information" rather than military technology. Jones quickly became a prominent figure in the so-called "Hastings Circle" of like-minded men who helped to maintain the vision of an active quest for knowledge about India after the Governor-General left for Britain in February 1785.

Held up by Edward Said as the quintessential Orientalist, Jones's great ambition was "to know India better than any other European ever knew it." He believed that the serious study of Asian cultures by Europeans could be furthered by establishing a group engaged in intellectual exchange, on the model of the Royal Society in England. In January 1784, under the patronage of Hastings, he had founded the Asiatic Society in Kolkatā. And acted as its first president; four years later the first issue of *Asiatick Researches* was published. In the society's initial meeting, however, Jones had stressed that professional men such as those he hoped would become members had very little time for study unconnected with their work or business. The compilation of "knowledge" about Asian societies would therefore require "assiduous and eager auxiliaries" who would relay information and gather samples and objects for research purposes. As these comments suggest, he was speaking at a time when attitudes towards the collection of rarities had changed. Unlike the "curiosity cabinets" that had previously graced noble houses as signifiers of discriminating connoisseurship, specimens from the "natural" world and objects produced by farmers, artisans and craftspeople should be viewed as "sources of knowledge" in their own right. Jones did not formerly propose a museum for Kolkatā until 1796, but by this time a collection of dried plants, stuffed birds, minerals, coins, sculptures and native artifacts was already in place, and formed the basis of India's National Museum collection.

This was the context in which connections were established between Jones and the eager young seaman, John Pope, perhaps through the medium of his friend George (who may have been the Honorable George Turner, son of the Earl Winterton). It is equally possible that this introduction resulted through the Asiatic Society connections of Pope's captain, James Urmston of the *Francis*. As a well-born and educated man, Urmston would have been naturally included in the meetings of the "Hastings circle." Indeed, an early member of the Asiatic Research Society, the artist Ozias Humphrey (1742-1810), who had arrived Kolkatā in August 1785 under Company auspices, produced a wash drawing of James Urmston that same year (presumably after the *Francis* anchored in September). But regardless of the circumstances of their meeting, Jones was apparently taken by Pope's precocity and enthusiasm, and perhaps saw some similarities in their own backgrounds. More particularly, Jones himself – like most "enlightened" men of the late eighteenth century – believed that collections of specimens of flora and fauna would provide a scientific basis for classifying knowledge about the natural world. The European enthusiasm for this type of inquiry was especially marked in Britain because of the

public excitement generated by the explorations of James Cook (1728-79) and the specimens of unfamiliar plants and animal species brought back by Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820). The large collections now being developed in London drew heavily on the assistance of ship captains, surgeons and educated crewmembers, and at times the services of the Royal Navy. In an environment where even a common sailor could come across a new form of marine life, it was not difficult to view a youthful officer as a potentially useful collector and plant hunter.

It was in this spirit that Jones asked Pope to provide written information about places he visited during his voyage and to collect any specimens he thought worthy of interest. Several references in the letters indicate that Pope enthusiastically embraced the notion that he was an “auxiliary” in a larger enterprise, and that he expected the information in his letters would be passed on. “Tell [Sir William],” he wrote to George in May 1786, “the task he imposed on me is rather a hard one, yet I shall not despair of accomplishing it.” There can be little doubt that his continuing commitment provided Pope with credentials that in after years allowed him to become more closely associated with Jones and with Asiatic Society activities. When Jones died in 1794, six years after the last letter in this collection, Pope wrote in his *Commonplace Book*, “In him India has lost her greatest ornament and in the private circle of his friends his loss can never be replaced.”

Collecting Knowledge in the Bay of Bengal

This paper thus identifies John Pope as one of the minor but nonetheless “assiduous” auxiliaries whom Jones envisaged as supporters of the orientalist exercise. What then provided the basis of his “intelligence gathering”? On the one hand, Pope had been schooled at time when the inclusion of “science” had not been fully accepted as a necessary part of education. On the other, his text-oriented upbringing meant that he regarded books, the repository of written knowledge, as a fundamental tool for understanding the world. It is also useful to remember that he was not mixing with uneducated men. John Forrest, captain of the *Princess Royal*, read plays and novels, while another officer was “a language master” and yet another, a poet. Country captains could possess books that provided guides for legal operations, like the *Lex Mercatoria*, “the Merchants’ Companion, containing all the laws and statutes relating to merchandise.” Previously belonging to a shadowy “poor Captain Bayne”, a copy of the *Lex Mercatoria* eventually passed into Pope’s hands.

It is obvious, however, that the written material to which Pope had access provided little information about the remarkable botanical and animal life for which the countries surrounding the Bay of Bengal are so renowned. He himself was no Joseph Banks, and his claim that there were only two types of trees on Penang, “dammer and the oil tree” was not only wrong but would have been singularly unhelpful to anyone interested in detailed information about local flora and fauna, despite his dispatch of “a box of shells and fungus” he had collected on the island. Identifying such specimens was virtually impossible, because as Pope wrote in May 1786, “We are horriedly off for books – that dictionary of mine, 4 volumes, *Le Spectacle de la Nature* and Boyle’s chemical works are the only books of science we have on board.” The “dictionary” was probably the “Universal Dictionary” or *Cylclopedia*, published by Ephraim Chambers (1680-1740) in 1728, since Pope later refers to his own illustrated copy of Chambers *Encyclopedia*. The “chemical works” of Robert Boyle (1627-91), regarded as the father of modern chemistry, may have been *The Skeptical Chemist* (1661) which, though well-known at the time, would have been hard going for a schoolboy.

By contrast, Pope probably found the *Spectacle de la Nature* more appealing, since it had been written with younger readers in mind. First published in 1732, this multi-volume work by the French priest, Noël-Antoine Pluche had been translated into English and reprinted several times under the title *Spectacle de la Nature. Nature display'd. Being discourses on such particulars of natural history as were thought most proper to excite the curiosity, and form the minds of youth*. Unlikely dialogues between a count, a countess, a chevalier and a vicar, all apparently amateur naturalists, were hardly scientific and the information provided was at times misleading if not downright incorrect. Nonetheless, it probably provided Pope with the first written introduction to many local products with which he would later become more familiar. In the first volume, for instance, the count vehemently proclaimed the virtues of *kalambak* (*Aquilaria malaccensis*, better known as “eaglewood”, but here mistakenly given Chinese origins), saying that no other aloewood in the world was comparable; in the second volume the nature-loving vicar gives a long disquisition intended to differentiate the “exceedingly useful cocoa-nut tree” from the similar-sounding “cacao.”

On one occasion at least it seems that the *Encyclopedia* did provide Pope with the information he sought. In March 1786 he was sent to “Pulo Trocton” (presumably one of the uninhabited Langkawi Islands) about a day from Kedah, to collect fresh water. The crew members were about to fill their casks from a small pool when suddenly a giant snake fell from the opposite bank into the stream. When it was killed, Pope claimed it measured 22 feet in length, and its body, distended with water, small frogs and grass was fully six feet in diameter. For some time thereafter Pope was under the impression that he had discovered “a new genus” (which would indeed have attracted the attention of the Asiatic Society), but two years later, fulfilling his promise to investigate the situation more thoroughly and relying on a description in his copy of the *Chambers Encyclopedia*, he identified the snake as “a Boa.”

A second source of knowledge was his fellow traders. Unfortunately, Pope was often at odds with the captain and mate of the *Princess Royal*, who were clearly impatient when the boy spent time sketching or writing. Even measuring the local temperature had to be done “by stealth,” since he had no instruments of his own and had to use those on board ship. However, a number of free mariners who appear in his correspondence were sympathetic to the Pope’s desire to collect material and learn more about the objects he had accumulated. In carrying letters, notes and specimens back to India Pope relied on this network of captains and officers with whom he re-connected in different ports and who proved willing and reliable couriers as well as sources of information. For instance, Pope first encountered Captain Bailes of the *Industry*, “a genteel, well-bred man,” in Sumatra in July 1786. When they met again in the same area nearly two years later, Bailes was again supportive, supplying information about Pope’s shell collection, and giving him a much valued gift, an edition of *Plutarch’s Lives*. Because of his high regard for Bailes, “I shall consign my packets [of samples] to his care, with the confidence that they will be delivered according to the addresses.”

Of course, country trader knowledge of the region was by no means a British monopoly. Despite the enmity between their national governments, the officers on board the *Princess Royal* frequently fraternized socially with their Dutch counterparts (who could be an “old friend”), and received generous hospitality from Dutch burghers in Melaka. In these convivial meetings the free mariners exchanged information about a range of matters related to trade, such as the nature of local governments, the availability of products, and climatic conditions. Yet they were not necessarily the most knowledgeable about political developments. Fraternization with independent Dutch traders probably explains why the men aboard the *Princess Royal* had

relatively little knowledge about the restrictive contracts negotiated or imposed by the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Reaching Perak in May 1786, Pope noted that it “belongs to the Dutch” (in fact, of course, Perak was a sovereign state), but Captain Forrest apparently did not appreciate that the VOC treaty dictated a monopoly of tin. After a trip to the Dutch post upriver he therefore returned “without being able to effect anything.” Forrest was also unaware of the changing relationships between the VOC and local rulers. Over a month afterwards, in late June, the *Princess Royal* dropped anchor in Selangor to buy tin, only to find that it was already blockaded by a Dutch fleet. Furthermore, the “knowledge” passed on by country traders, Pope included, could itself be based on long-standing inaccuracies. Presumably recounting information received from Portuguese informants, perhaps Don Pedro de Ribeiro, ex-vice-roy of Goa and a fellow passenger in the voyage to China, Pope reported that Melaka had fallen to the Dutch in 1641 because of the treachery of the Portuguese governor. This story had been accepted as “true” for over a century, but recent research has demonstrated that it has no basis in fact. A similar observation could be made about the British possession of Penang. According to Pope, the Sultan of Kedah had given the island as a dowry for a slave girl Francis Light had married, with the understanding that Light remain governor for life.

As Pope noted, published accounts of voyages in exotic places, sometimes by country traders, had to be approached with care. After three years at sea, he wrote scathingly about superficial writings that catered to the popularity of the “travel genre”. Speaking of Burma, for instance, he wrote:

I am not for those travelers who think a few months residence in a place qualifies them for authors and think they must write something, let it be ever so unimportant. The manner and customs of such a nation as this would be the work of years and a residence in the Kingdom would be the only proper means of obtaining a true picture. Perhaps the Missionaries may in time give us a detail of this interesting nation, whose most trivial customs are a matter of real importance to our taste for the Arts and Literature of the East. How much more interesting would be the history of a rich and powerful nation than to the lengthened details (which now overflow our periodical publications) with Capt. Cook’s account of the islanders of Owhzhee, Othaiete, etc., yet many of them are not only ill-written, but have been actually magnified by the help of a lively imagination till they possess nothing of the original but a harsh caricature. Among the rest I must not omit that narrative of Capt. Wilson which the truly ingenious Mr. Keate (who even rivals Dr. Kippis or Defoe in the art of book making) has certainly embellished and enlarged to such a degree that I may justly say there is nothing of the picture left but the frame.

Given these comments and the impressive example of the polyglot Sir William, it is notable that the young Pope placed a high premium on language skills and personal observation as another source of “knowledge.” This does not necessarily mean that his reports were necessarily correct. During his first run down the Melaka Straits, for instance, he estimated that Pulau Penang (285 sq. km) and Pulau Dinding (Pangkor, 8 sq. km) were “nearly” the same size. While this misrepresentation is understandable in view of the fact that Pope had no access to charts and was viewing the islands from the deck, his letters often provide detailed observations of local life and information that are not elsewhere available. In describing Kedah in April 1786 he remarked on the “pretty large” river and the lanes lined with coconut trees and wooden houses, mostly built on piles “about three feet from the ground” inhabited by Malays, Chulias from Coromandel, and by Chinese. The latter, he said, were already so mixed with Malays that

they could not be distinguished except by their queues and religious practices. Held along a long lane, the market (“bazaar”) provided virtually everything one could need, although the quantities were not large. Most of the shops were owned by Chulias or Chinese, and the farmers in the surrounding fields where rice, sugarcane and vegetables were grown, were also all Chinese. The development of Georgetown was still a month away, but even at this stage Pope made a telling comment about Kedah’s population: “This country belongs to the Malays, but they seem to form but a small proportion of its inhabitants.” Perhaps sensing British interest in this area, he also gave a careful description of local defenses. There was a brick fort at the mouth of the river, but the cannon were small (“nothing larger than a six pounder”); when the water level is unusually high, at spring tide, vessels of 200 and 300 tons could navigate the river, but “a jolly boat often can’t get on shore till half flood.” Drawings of the surrounding area accompanied his letters including one of Pulau Bunting, just off the Kedah coast (since 2004 connected to the mainland via a bridge), which he asked George to have colored and framed.

Although in Kedah Pope frequently refers to the kinds of goods sold and purchased -- the British exchanged opium for tin in Kedah, but were uninterested in purchasing elephants for sale in India -- he was not particularly engaged with the actual practice of trade. At one point he even complained that commercial matters dominated dinner conversation, and that “no subject is broached at table but ship or ships – passages – trade and suchlike talk – which to me are Hebrew.” This did not mean, however, that he was ignorant of commercial matters, especially the complexities of one of the most important trade items in the Bay of Bengal, the betelnut.

The tree that produces [betel] is a species of palm about six inches in diameter, straight as an arrow of about 20 feet to 30 feet high – when it branches similar to all other palms – its fruit hanging in clusters round the body of the tree. The fruit when arrived to maturity is enveloped in a fibrous covering of yellowish color, which is stripped off to come to the nut. And when it in its state of full maturity is gathered and dried under the denomination of white betel nut, for its other preparations are known under the name of red and Chicane nut. They are gathered when in a more immature state and thrown into a solution of lime and some other strong astringent mixture which shrivels them up into three pieces and is fit for the Coromandel markets, the red for Pegu, the white for China and Malabar coast. On this coast (i.e. Pedir) the inhabitants use a great deal of the green nut in which state it is very pleasant, having only a pleasant sweet taste and but a small degree of astringency. The wood of the betel tree is only fit for upright posts for houses and such like. It is extremely hard and is much in use for lances.

This kind of knowledge was essential because a ship’s arrival had to be finely timed to coincide with the appropriate harvest; for instance, in the Pedir region the red betel nut that commanded the best prices in Pegu was only ready in April. A late arrival could mean that the entire harvest had been bought up by competitors like the Chulia, and that all that remained was the weevil-ridden residue from the previous year’s harvest.

While verbal descriptions of this nature had their value, Pope was aware that they were only part of his charge. From the time he stepped aboard the *Princess Royal* he was serious about collecting objects that he thought might interest Sir William and his friends. During his visit to Kedah in 1786 he acquired a “lump of gold” from a Malay friend. This was taken back to Kolkatā by a Mr. Beard of the country ship *Industry*, together with a letter to George asking that it be passed on to Sir William. One can even speculate that receipt of

this specimen lay behind the inclusion of a 1788 article on the gold of Sumatra, published in the first issue of *Asiatick Researches*.

Pope was also busy amassing a large collection of shells, “both single and bivalved . . . some of which will astonish ye”, which he valued the more because he had collected them himself “with considerable toil, I may say.” Periodically such samples were sent back to India, and in 1788 his associate, Captain Bailes, was entrusted with “a deal box containing four partitions.” The first held Pope’s shell collection, arranged according to a list; a second contained rice and pepper; a third included specimens of wood, again following a list; and the last comprised “a bow of the mountaineers” (presumably Batak), a spear and three arrows “As they are all particularly directed you will not be at a loss as to their disposal.”

Despite his enthusiasm, Pope was not always able to locate objects that were sufficiently “rare.” During a visit to Melaka in July 1786 he described the parties and entertainment in “the celebrated emporium of the east” in some detail, but his courier, Captain Welsh, took back merely a few rattan canes “the only curious thing they have here. Six months later, however, when he was in Sumatra he gave a certain Captain Baird a larger and more varied assortment that consisted of “two curious mats” as well as fungus, mosses, shells, a kris from Lampung in South Sumatra, and a stuffed pheasant from the Malay Peninsula, obtained from a man who frequently crossed the Straits to Kedah and Perak. Pope regretted that he had not been able to send a living specimen, especially since the bird had been poorly preserved, but it was nonetheless “of a curious and rare species, its plumage very beautiful.” In addition, he included some drawings of a Malay *perahu* by the first mate on another ship, as well as an illustration of an Acehnese man and woman and some sea views.

Although most of the information Pope provided related to the Bay of Bengal, he also described his Chinese experiences in some detail. Though the expansion of maritime trade to China was not itself a new issue, it was not until the eighteenth century that British scholars began to think seriously about Chinese culture. Sir William Jones had himself studied Chinese prior to his arrival in India, and the information Pope provides about his visit was presumably compiled with an eye to his patron’s interests. While he found Chinese religious beliefs to be “quite incomprehensible,” the collection of 57 pictures of fish varieties and 94 of available fruit in China, as well as 113 paintings of “all the different trades in China” which he dispatched to India must surely have been well received.

By the same token, Pope was also aware that orientalist scholars had given some thought to Burmese connections with India as well as to “Burma books” on law and religion, although as yet relatively little was known about the country as a whole. During his last visit to Yangon in August 1788, Pope therefore compiled a detailed description of the “superb and magnificent” Shwezigon pagoda, together with a ground plan, a drawing of the principal buildings, the monastery and an adjoining labyrinth. Pope was naturally unaware that this maze would have been erected for the festival associated with the recitation of the Vessantara Jataka, the story of the Buddha’s penultimate life, at the end of the rainy season. In finding their way through the maze, participants could re-enact the journey of Vessantara and his family in the forest. However, he did specifically mention the inscriptions he had seen, including nine that appeared to be old, with inscriptions written “in an unknown character” (presumably not Burmese, with which he would have been familiar). “If Sir William knew the circumstances,” he wrote, “his active mind would suggest some method of getting at their meaning and perhaps origin.” Displaying a boyish enthusiasm, he noted that the “most wonderful thing” he had seen in Yangon was the labyrinth, and speculated about connections with Sri Lanka. As an intriguing postscript,

a modern study indicates that Pope's suggestion regarding these links – “an enquiry into these facts would richly repay anybody who would enter into it” – was not misplaced. He did not, however, forget his commission: together with his letter he sent several cloth samples, “some specimens of their arts, three slate books, some pieces of their soapy stone which they use to write with, a large lacquered betel box” and finally, “an account of a large sea worm, found in a large piece of wood off the Andamans, by a Capt. Elliot.”

Cultivating Local Informants

Above all, the information that Pope intended to be passed on to interested parties in India necessitated access to local informants, key elements in the “information order” that supported country trade. The most obvious means of bridging the cultural gap was the acquisition of language, and Pope spoke pityingly of another officer who “only knows his mother tongue – his embarrassments for want of language – he tries, but no talent.” Pope had grown up in a household where talk of “foreign lands” must have been common, and he would have been well prepared to enter the multi-lingual environment that characterized any country ship. For instance, a list of the crew members on the *Princess Royal* includes men from China, Bengal, Madras, Mumbai, Surat, Chittagong, Lucknow, Mozambique, France, Malta and Spain. From the beginning of his voyage Pope would have been introduced to the distinctive shipboard vocabulary that had already incorporated many Anglo-Indian terms in common use, such as the generic term “Lascar” used for Indian sailors serving on board British ships, “seacunny”, specifically a Lascar helmsman, or quartermaster and “serang,” the Indian boatswain or chief of a Lascar crew.

Although he did not suffer from false modesty (“they say I have a knack in acquiring languages”), his linguistic talents were clearly above average but were certainly fostered by a range of friendships. For instance, during his visit to Kedah in 1786 Pope spent a good deal of time in the company of the son of the royal merchant, a youth of about his own age. “My new friend Dul Baddul wishes much that I should stay here, promises me everything that I can wish and has been praising to me the excellence of the Mahomatan religion. . . . Well, I told them all that I could translate, about my own and told them all the bad of theirs. And at my request we dropped the subject and went to sleep very comfortably, nor did my situation at all disturb me.” On Pope's departure Dul gave him a kris “inlaid with gold,” in return, Pope gave his friend his silver buckles and a pencil case, “the only things of any value in my possession,” and promised to learn Arabic so that they could exchange letters. “We parted,” he wrote, “not without many tears on both sides.” Perhaps because he was usually accompanied by a young lascar, Nizam, Pope learned Malay fast “and can chatter away with some satisfaction”. By May of 1786 he claimed that he was “quite an adept”, but complained that he had been unable to learn to write or read Jawi because no Malay speaker aboard the *Princess Royal* was literate. With an understanding beyond his years, Pope was also appreciative of the stylistic elegancies that were admired in oral presentations and the protocol associated with formal speech.

Most of the eastern nations are good orators, the Malay more especially – the meanest of them have redundancy of language which strikes a European very forcibly. In debates, all are orators, no interruptions, no unmannerly clamor, everyone delivered his sentiments with freedom and ease – how unlike some of our popular assembles, where freedom of debate often gives way to invectives individual squabbling.

In a very different context, Pope learned his Burmese from the “temporary wife” of one of the *Princess Royal* officers, Mr. Jones. “The girl that Jones has is extremely handsome but quite a *virago* - wearing the breeches most completely. . . . I quarrel with her every day, but by her help I have become pretty good and proficient in the language.”

Pope’s ability to make friends was undoubtedly due to his understanding of the importance of gifts in establishing close relationships. A year or so after their first meeting when Pope was in Melaka he asked about the possibility of sending a few small things to his friend Dul Baddul at Alor Setar in Kedah. His captain, however, called him a fool and “told me that if he ever heard me mention [Dul’s] name again he would give me a sound banging. . . . I told him I would undergo a thrashing for my friend any time” Although he considered the Raja of Pedir to have “a black heart”, Pope still observed the traditional courtesies; when the Raja gave him a betel set, Pope returned the favor by presenting a sketch of the *Princess Royal* that he had framed in China, “with which he was much pleased.” In his interactions with village heads and local traders, such exchanges are a recurring theme, and help explain the hospitality he received from men like the Chulia trader Pir Saib, “a very good facetious fellow,” who became “an old friend.” As a sign of their relationship Pir Saib even allowed Pope to address his new wife as sister, indicating that the youth had been adopted as a younger brother. “I always sent my salaam to her.”

For one so young, Pope also showed an admirable ability for cross-cultural empathy, well-illustrated in the case of Tunku Muda, the thirteen-year-old son of a Malay chief in the Pedir region. Taken hostage on the *Princess Royal* because of his father’s debt, he was forced to accompany the ship on the voyage to China and was only returned to his family some months later. Pope would have remembered his own feelings on leaving England, and had his own sense of broken ties; he must have sensed that a brief meeting in China with his own father would be their last, since the latter “would never come East again.” Real understanding thus underlies his sympathy for a boy “separated from his parents by force and by people of a different religion and whom he no doubt has been taught to despise and to hate”. Yet, perhaps once more recalling his own experiences, he felt that Tunku Muda could well benefit from the trip to China. Pope himself took the opportunity to use a long journal (unfortunately lost) with the Malay boy as its subject and which he intended to send to Sir William. The two youths evidently grew close during this time, for when the *Princess Royal* docked in Pedir the following year Tunku Muda and his father met them with a substantial array of gifts -- buffalo, goats, fruit, a kris belt, silk and cotton cloth. “In return I gave him a few common fans and some piece of coarse China ware which the Captain gave me. He is grown much; it is nearly twelve months since we parted and he seems to have assumed a different character from having been put in possession of a considerable property by his father so he is now an independent prince.”

No Longer a Child, not yet an Adult

As one might expect, in that liminal space between child and adult, Pope sometimes writes in a self-consciousness manner that suggests he is envisaging his letters reaching an audience beyond his friend George. He thus virtuously notes that “I detest the paltry coin and would ever wish to see it if it were not that I could cause it to circulate – that I could feed the hungry, clothe the Poor and relieve the indigent would be one of my highest pleasures and yet to how many this pleasure is denied. For my own part a little would satisfy my wants yet I should like to dispense it to thousands.” Yet he can also follow such remarks with a disarming ingenuousness. “Thoughts of this kind seldom trouble me long.” Perhaps more disconcerting is the occasional evidence of

Pope's self-identification with a "superior" culture. Following the repulse of the Kedah attack on Penang in 1788, he wrote, "I always congratulate myself on being a Briton and always think an Englishman could beat at least a dozen blacks. How fortunate it is for our country that this idea pervades the greatest parts of its subjects – happy – happy England." At other times he shows a remarkable lack of cultural sensitivity, readily admitting, for instance to stealing the bamboo fish pots of local fishermen. "I dare say the proprietors have cursed us most heartily." On another occasion in Rangoon "I unfortunately called one of my own lascars by the opprobrious epithet of 'hog'. A man who had stood at my elbow the whole time immediately told me in Moors that I must not abuse people in this country. I told him, when I abused him, he had liberty to resent it but in the present case he could have, nay should have, none."

For the most part, however, Pope's letters reveal a genuine pleasure in his local contacts and informants and a loyalty to those he had befriended. He deplors the "iniquitous and dastardly" trading methods employed aboard the *Princess Royal* whereby Pope and a fellow officer were ordered to forcibly commandeer local boats laden with betelnut and pepper, for which the captain paid a low price "and sends them off not very well pleased." Sometime later, detained by a Sumatran villagers when crewmembers gone ashore for water, he criticised the "acrimony" of his Captain: "Could I venture to tell him my opinion I should say that you are more at fault than they. I should like to see those haughty spirits filling water from a gentleman's estate in England, without asking his permission and when asked for dues threatened to blow his estate about his ears." Perceptively, Pope noted that a small gift would have been sufficient compensation.

For a modern historian, ultimately more revealing than the specimens of fungus and the collections of shells that Pope so painstakingly gathered are the vignettes that speak to the different ways in which "knowledge" of all kinds was exchanged across cultures. In east Sumatra he discussed illustrations from his *Chambers Encyclopedia* with local villagers; in Melaka he and his Eurasian partner dance to music played by an orchestra of Ambonese slaves led by a New Guinea man "with hair frizzled out 6-8 inches from his head"; seeking to please Malay buyers, he notes the preference for Chinese dishes with perpendicular strokes around the rim because these resembled "alif", the first letter in the word "Allah"; he reports that the King of Aceh, captured by the French on the way to perform the pilgrimage, had been employed as a common sepoy for more than eight years; he notes that Muslims comprise around a fifth of Yangon's residents, and some hold high officers in the Burmese government; he describes the speed with which "natives" can stow a cargo of timber, with ten accomplishing what it would take a gang of thirty Europeans to complete. The understanding that this was an environment in which there were many "knowledge-rich" communities generated a healthy respect for indigenous cultures, convincingly conveyed in Pope's comments on his interactions with local communities. On his initial arrival on Pulau Penang he had been afraid of meeting Malays "who would not fail to murder us all," but after three years he wrote otherwise.

Those . . . who accuse them of moroseness and selfishness and a long catalogue of other vices are wrong and have never lived among them. I have been received by them as a child and domesticated, I may say in their families as far as the prejudices of religion would allow, universally treated with kindness and generosity I formed a very different opinion from the general one, always serene, temperate to an excess in their living and in their passions. Their unclouded countenances say they are happy. I owe this to the inhabitants of this spot of whom I shall always think of with complacency and pleasure.

Conclusion

Only a limited range of contemporary sources are accessible to historians of premodern Southeast Asia, and it is therefore exciting when new material is discovered or made available through translation. Just a few years ago, for instance, a cache of seventeen Thai maps dating from the third Chakri reign were discovered in Bangkok's Grand Palace. The letters of John Adolphus Pope are another remarkable find, not least because they present the views of someone who is still negotiating the pathway to adulthood. Educated in a society where book learning was valued as the primary source of information, Pope entered an environment where the acquisition of "knowledge" was heavily dependent on personal experience and the guidance, advice and support of others. Accepting his role as a conduit for information about a largely unfamiliar world, Pope became a small cog in an expanding "information order" that contributed to the growth of British economic and political power. Never intended for publication, the letters that have survived over a three-year period sometimes display a thoughtlessness and cultural indifference that is a bleak reminder of attitudes all too common among many of his compatriots. More frequently, however, they project an appealing honesty, tolerance and openness that provided a strong basis for Pope's later career as a "steady and blameless" country captain. After retiring from the sea he remained in India, where he continued to pursue his interest in Persian literature but also became Sheriff of Mumbai and respected editor of the *Mumbai Gazette*. Although in the final analysis Pope fits the profile of an "orientalist," that problematic term conveys little of the pleasure he derived from his interactions with Asian friends and his lifelong interest in Asian societies. More than two hundred years have passed, but something of these emotions is captured in his youthful description of the "beautiful" Sumatran coast, the distant hills, the small villages with their minarets, the coconut trees, the fleets of fishing boats and merchant *perahu*, all of which "make you pleased and happy with everyone around you."