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COLLECTING WITH A CAMERA: PITT RIVERS MUSEUM PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS

Photographs I find are so important an adjunct to a museum that I try to beg all I can for a series I am making for the Museum.

In a letter to Baldwin Spencer, the Museum's first Curator, Henry Balfour, was making an important statement about collecting policy - that he recognised the immense value of photographic documentation in a museum collection. In this recognition he was ahead of his time. Until recently many museums have regarded photographs as rather inconvenient appendages to collections of objects, and as having little or no intrinsic value. The Museum's approach to photographs is part of its strong tradition in documentation. Through Balfour's policy, photographs have come in with collections of objects from the earliest days. Further, photographic material was collected for its own sake, beyond the demands of object documentation. Material was acquired from contacts in the field, colonial officers, servicemen, academic colleagues in Oxford and elsewhere. Balfour himself photographed in the field for the Museum whenever the opportunity arose. This deliberate policy and Balfour's position in the ethnographic circles of the time paid excellent dividends, resulting in a collection of late-nineteenth-century material of major importance and creating the impetus to collect ever since.

Although the photographic archive was originally intended to complement and document Museum specimens it has now assumed a further importance as a historical record in its own right, used not only with museum objects but in conjunction with other sources of information. The collection now comprises *circa* 45,000 images although the true extent will not be known until the present major cataloguing project is complete. The photographs date from *circa* 1850 onwards and are in various forms: prints, glass plates, film negatives and lantern slides. To attempt to refer to all the collections in

the space available would merely result in a recitation of names and places, so I intend to concern myself with the types of material in the collection and some of the problems relating to them, touching briefly on some collections of particular interest. Like all collections the Pitt Rivers Museum Photographic Archive has great strengths and great weaknesses. For example, the coverage of Oceania and the Assam region of India is probably of international importance, whereas the coverage of the Middle East is very poor and the Eskimo non-existent.

In general three broad groups of photographs can be discerned, although it should be said that they are not mutually exclusive. The first is that of the nineteenth-century academic 'arm-chair' anthropologists, made up mainly of commercially produced photographs, purchased from photographers, missionary societies etc. around the world. The second type comprises photographs taken not by anthropologists, but by colonial administrators, travellers, naval officers etc. Indeed, most collections of nineteenth-century field photographs fall into this category, given that the field-work tradition was not yet established as an integral part of the anthropological discipline. The third group is the large collection of field photographs taken by anthropologists, or indeed colonial administrators responsible for native affairs, in the course of their work specifically to document their field studies and/or collections of objects made for the Museum.

A considerable body of nineteenth-century material falls into the first category outlined above. In the early days of the discipline there was a lively market for photographs of non-European peoples and cultures, not only from a curious public but from academic anthropologists eager for visual evidence of the peoples whose cultures they analysed. Photographs, including commercial photographs, were an important source of ethnographical information, indeed they were hailed as a major information revolution in the subject. Professor E.B. Tylor wrote in a review article, in this case referring especially to physical anthropology,

The science of anthropology owes not a little to the art of photography. It is true that in previous times some few artists took the trouble to draw careful race-portraits.... but most engravings of race-types to be found in books were worthless.... Now-a-days little ethnographical value is attached to any but photographic portraits.¹

The Pitt Rivers Museum has sizeable collections of photographs from Professor Sir E.B. Tylor, Professor W. Sollas, Professor H.N. Moseley, a few from General Pitt Rivers' original bequest and, of course, Henry Balfour who was collecting both for the Museum and for his own research use. As in similar collections in other museums and institutions, the Pitt Rivers Museum has material from some of the best known ethnographic photographers of the mid-nineteenth century, for example, C.A. Woolley's photographs of some of the last surviving Tasmanians taken in the mid 1860s and photographs of Clarence River aborigines taken by J.W. Lindt in the early 1870s. Such

photographs are well known and research over the years has provided a considerable amount of supplementary information. However, a very great number of commercially-produced photographs remain to be identified and documented correctly, the information being in many cases poor, incorrect or non-existent. Research can often provide more information on a photograph eventually and investigation of this nature is at present an important part of the archive's work. Until more information is available there are severe constraints on the interpretation of some material.

It is fortunate that prints of the photographs are to be found in other collections e.g., the Royal Anthropological Institute. This does not detract from the value of the material, in fact it can be a positive advantage. A given image can survive in many forms: prints, negatives, lantern slides, photo-engravings etc. Apart from obvious differences between examples such as condition, there are other differences which are not immediately apparent, for example, prints cut down, backgrounds blacked out, stereo pair separated. Comparisons of different versions of the same image can yield a surprising amount of information about the photograph itself. The information accompanying different versions of the same image can vary enormously. Further, one version may have reasonable documentation whereas another has none or spurious data, complicating the process of accurate documentation.

Much of the mid-nineteenth-century material in the Pitt Rivers Museum archive reflects the contemporary interest in physical anthropology and evolution. The photographs range from the more scientific, including some photographed according to the Lambrey system,² to somewhat indeterminate studio portraits of 'typical natives' photographed against incongruous pastoral or neo-classical backgrounds. One suspects that the latter reveal more of the culture of the photographer than the photographed and that their value as a research tool is related more to the history of the discipline than in producing primary material. The photographs vary greatly in technical competence and some of them appear to have been printed from copy negatives. There were probably many hundreds of photographers throughout the world producing material of this nature and it is particularly difficult to ascribe work with any certainty as plagiarism was rife. One collection perhaps worthy of mention is a series of high quality studio portraits taken in Paris in the early 1860s, probably by a photographer named Rousseau. They are part of a collection which was transferred from Newbury Museum to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1956. It includes *circa* 250 portraits of Japanese, Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese men who were living in Paris on the staff of their countries' embassies. Nearly all of them are in traditional dress, which conveys a wealth of detail on clothing, textiles and in the Japanese photographs, samurai swords. Furthermore the documentation is unusually good for this type of collection; the name of the subject, place of birth, age, and often occupation is recorded. Where it has been possible to check the information, it appears to be accurate.

Generally speaking, by the mid 1870s and 1880s, the standard and range of

commercially-produced material had become more sophisticated and wide-ranging and possibly more valuable as an ethnographic source. Technological advances in photography such as the introduction of the dry-plate negative, shorter exposure time and less bulky equipment made it very much easier for a photographer to work away from the studio. Although the collection does include some field photographs dating from the 1860s, the bulk of commercially-produced field photographs date from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It includes work by such photographers as Dufty Bros. (Levuka, Fiji), Burton Bros. (Dunedin, New Zealand), Josiah Martin (Auckland, New Zealand) and Scowen and Co. (Colombo, Sri Lanka), to name but a few. The acquisition of good commercial photographs as supplementary material for Museum specimens was clearly part of Balfour's policy as late as the 1920s despite the growing tendency towards primary documentation in the form of large collections of fieldwork photographs. It appears that Balfour was particularly interested in acquiring photographs of objects which were difficult to collect and store in a museum, such as houses and large sailing craft. Many of these categories are represented in the Pitt Rivers Museum by models, consequently photographs were, and still are, an important source of explanation and interpretation. Balfour did not restrict the Museum's attention to the non-European material. In line with General Pitt Rivers' broad interpretation of ethnography, Balfour collected European material as well, hence the presence of prints from photographers such as Henry Taunt of Oxford and R.J. Welch of Belfast.

The criticism made today of material from the commercial studios, and indeed some other photographs, in the nineteenth century is that very often the photograph records the subject out of context, sometimes surrounded by objects which are out of context with each other and the subject. To a certain extent this is true. Much nineteenth-century material is notoriously treacherous to use, there being so little accurate information on which to build. However, as with any other historical source, photographs must be used critically; this applies equally to photographic material of the late twentieth century as of the nineteenth century. In addition to the obvious information such as where and when a photograph was taken and by whom, the serious user must consider the objectivity of the photographer: was he photographing a world as it is, or as he would like it to be? This is, of course, extremely difficult to assess in retrospect, but careful research into the historical background and context of a photograph can to some extent delineate the limitations. Once the restrictions are appreciated a photograph can be of some use, however posed and concocted. By the very nature of the medium, the camera records much more than the photographer ever intended. In some cases the unintended record is of more importance than the general content as far as the ethnographer is concerned. There is an almost infinite record of detail, such as the hafting of a tool or construction of a basket, which is particularly pertinent in a museum context.

The second of the three broad categories outlined above are those photographs taken by travellers, colonial administrators and the like. People

such as these have made a valuable contribution to the ethnographic record and some of the Museum's finest material falls into this category. Unlike the commercially-produced photographs, many of the photographs from this category are unique to the Pitt Rivers Museum collection. As has been said, Balfour was actively acquiring photographic material and it is probably due to his foresight and interest in documentation that many of these photographs have survived. In some cases there are copies of contemporary prints of photographs in other collections such as the Royal Anthropological Institute or the Museum of Mankind because the photographers donated prints to interested institutions, but in general there is surprisingly little duplication.

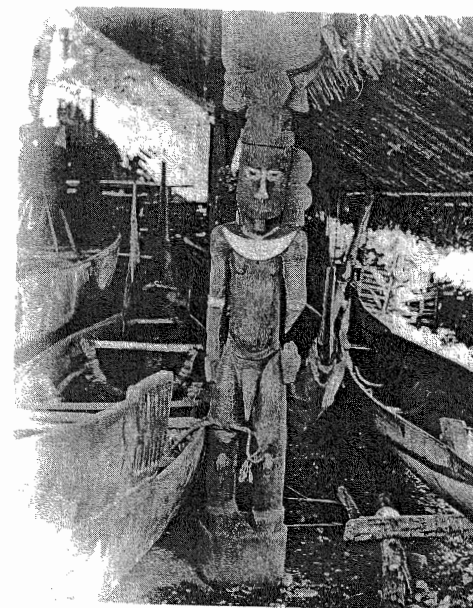
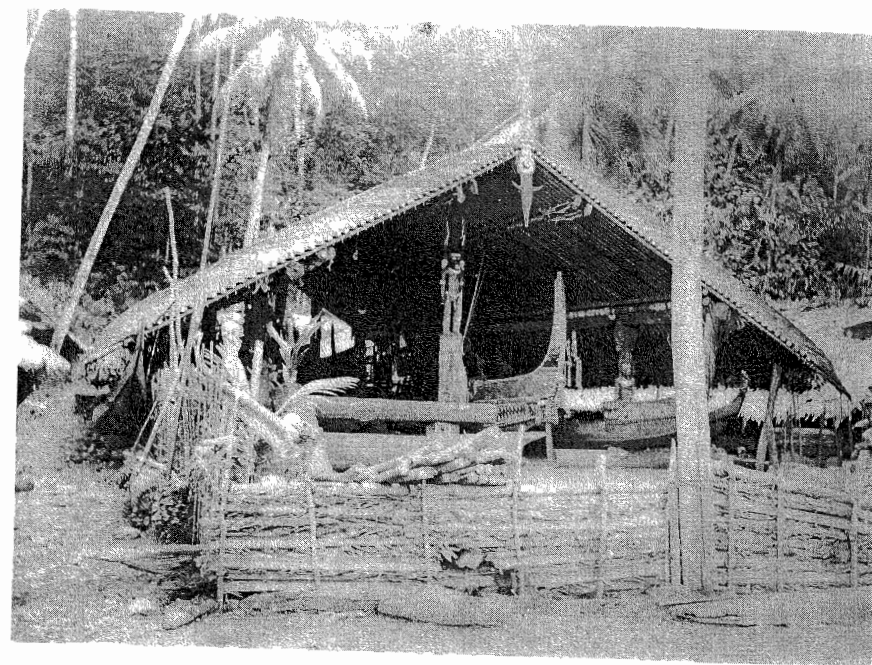
The subject matter tends to vary somewhat from the commercial photographs, the photographer being on the whole more objective in his recording, rather than wishing to produce a marketable product. There are numerous photographs of villages, vegetation, groups of people, etc. rather than carefully-arranged portraits or photographs of 'activities' designed to illustrate material culture or whatever. The photographs are an important historical record in their own right, but many of them are of particular value to the Pitt Rivers Museum because they relate directly to objects now in the collections. Unlike the fieldwork photographs from anthropologists, photographs of this type very rarely show the objects in use but relate to them in a complementary capacity, extending the information beyond the object itself by placing it in its environment. Furthermore, the documentation is, generally speaking, more plentiful, reasonably accurate and in some cases it can be checked against the bibliographic record.

Some of the photographers of this type of material, particularly colonial administrators, had a deep interest in and sympathy for the indigenous peoples with whom they came in contact. The Museum had both objects and photographs from E.H.Man (Andaman and Nicobar Islands, 1875-1900) and Charles Hose (Borneo, circa 1880-1900) both of whom exemplify this point. The ethnographies they produced are still acknowledged as being of major importance.³ Most collectors, although clearly interested in the subject, were not first and foremost ethnographers and did not become so intensely involved with the indigenous population. However, their interest was sufficient for them to attempt a fairly scientific approach to their collecting and photography, recording places, native names of objects and their uses, etc. We know that one of them, Lt H.B.T. Somerville, used *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* as a guide for his observations and collecting in the Solomon Islands.⁴

A collection of major importance is that of C.F.Wood who went on a yachting cruise in the Pacific in 1872-3 accompanied by a photographer, Mr George Smith. Wood appreciated the changes which Pacific cultures were undergoing, an awareness in the mind of others photographing and recording non-European cultures in the field towards the end of the nineteenth century. Wood states in the *Preface* to an account of his cruise that

facts relating to the manners and customs of these islanders, should not be allowed to perish.... the opportunity of taking

Two views of the canoe sheds, Makira, San Cristoval, 1872-1873. Photographer: George Smith.



portraits of these peoples in primitive condition will soon be lost, so rapid is the advance of so-called civilisation.⁵

The majority of the collection (which comprises about 250 images, some of which are duplicated in various forms) is either portraits or views of landscape or vegetation, many of which are excellent. However, perhaps the most important are a magnificent series of photographs of the canoe sheds at Makira, San Cristoval. Not only are these photographs aesthetically and technically of high quality, but they record a vast amount of information on building construction, decoration of the shed, the canoe, and the storage of ceremonial objects. The photographs also record the traditional relationship between objects *in situ*: this is a most important function of the well-documented photograph in museum research as this type of information cannot be ascertained from the object itself, especially once it is removed to a museum, and cannot easily be recorded by any other means, written reports and drawings being inherently exclusive in their record. Wood's collection is just one of a number of excellent collections dating from the last quarter of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century which complement Museum specimens. Others include photographs of ethnographic interest from the Challenger Expedition (1872-76) including North America, Oceania and S.E. Asia, photographs from two Royal Navy hydrographic survey ships *H.M.S. Alert* (Tierra del Fuego, Australia, Oceania, 1879-1882) and *H.M.S. Flying Fish* (Indonesia and Islands of China and Arafura Seas, 1883-87) donated by Admiral J.P. M'clear, and material from Sir James Buckingham (Assam, 1875-80), W.A. Robertson (Burma, *circa* 1910) and G.A. Turner (Mozambique, *circa* 1905). There is also a considerable number of photographs in the archive which are not directly related to other classes of material in the Museum but are nonetheless of great importance because they are well documented and contemporary with many of the collections of both objects and photographs which were made for the Museum between about 1885 and 1915. These include photograph collections from G. Dobson (Andaman Islands, 1872), Captain P. Laver (China and Japan, 1909-12), Captain W. Acland (Oceania, 1880s), and E. Whymper (South America, Andes, 1879). Such collections as these have considerable potential as a comparative and complementary source of information for museum research.

The archive also contains a considerable and important sub-category of photographs: those from missionary sources. Although most of these are field photographs, they were often available commercially to provide funds for the mission effort. Most mission photographs came into the Pitt Rivers Museum through direct purchase or with the collections such as that of Professor Tylor, although others form part of object collections donated to the Museum, for example, photographs of the Chaco Indians, Paraguay, by Andrew Pride of the South American Missionary Society. Many mission photographs were taken by men who were well acquainted with their subject cultures, indeed the mission contribution to ethnographic studies is well known. The Pitt Rivers Museum had two such collections of considerable interest. The first is a series of field photographs from the German Trappist

Mission at Mariannhill, Natal, of Zulu and other South African peoples. Dating from the early 1890s the photographs contain a vast amount of information ranging from dress to land use. The series is carefully documented and appears to have been taken specifically as a record of contemporary Zulu culture. Of equally high quality are a group of photographs taken by Rev. W.G. Lawes, of the London Missionary Society in Port Moresby, New Guinea. Included are photographs of villages, boats, pottery-making and other activities dating from the 1880s. At the other extreme the Museum has a few photographs which can only be described as propaganda, intended to encourage donations to the mission work, by showing the 'before and after' of their influence in rather dramatic terms. Clearly some mission photographs should be viewed with caution *vis à vis* objectivity; the missions were agents of deliberate social and technological change and in some cases this purpose has coloured the photographic images they produced.

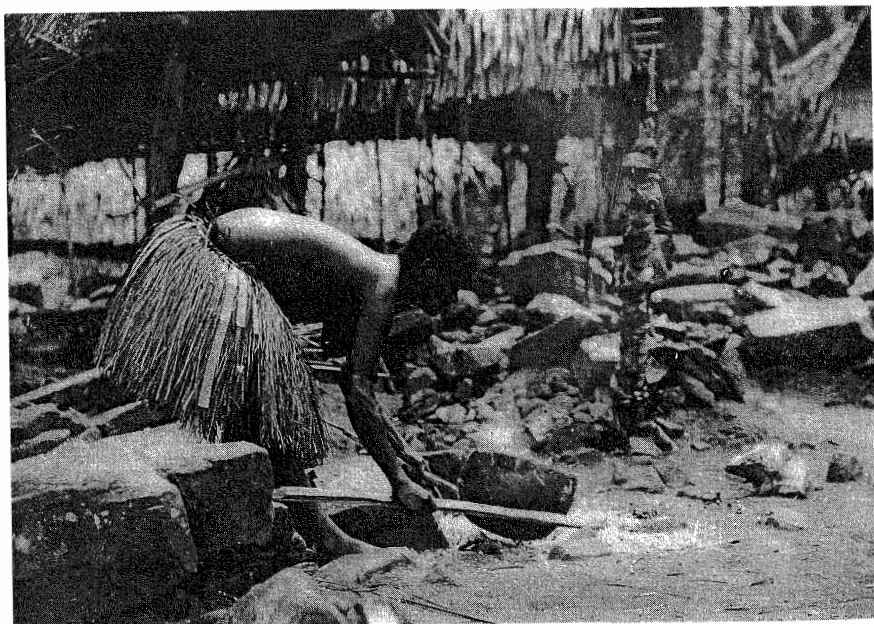
Although the Museum continued to collect commercial material and colonial field photographs of ethnographical interest well into the twentieth



Singapore fisherman, from the cruise of *H.M.S. Alert*, 1881-1882. M'clear Collection.

century, the tendency over the last 50 or 60 years has been for accessions to comprise large collections of photographs taken by anthropologists in the field (some colonial officers responsible for native affairs should be included in this definition). Among notable collections are those from D.Jenness, (D'Entrecasteaux Islands, 1911-12). C.E.Meek (Northern Nigeria, 1920s), Miss B.Blackwood (North America, southwest and northwest coast, 1926; Solomon Islands and Melanesia, mid 1930s), J.H.Hutton and J.P.Mills (Naga Hills, Assam, 1920s and 1930s), Professor E.Evans-Pritchard (Nuer and Azande, Nilotic Africa, 1920s and 1930s), W.Skeat (Malaya, 1899), A.C.Hocart (Fiji, 1912), Miss M.Czaplicka (Siberia, 1914), R.S.Rattray (Ghana, 1920s), R.W.Townsend (North America, southwest, 1906) and Sir Charles Bell (Tibet, 1920s). Generally, such collections include a much wider range of cultural activities than had been the case hitherto. As anthropologists, photographers were closely involved with their subjects over a considerable period; some had the opportunity to photograph ritual and other activities usually closed to outsiders. Furthermore, great advances in photographic technology made it possible to record under difficult conditions.

Collections such as these present fewer problems to the user than those described earlier, because the necessity of adequate and accurate documentat-



Making a pot, Miavaina, D'Entrecasteaux Islands, 1911-1912. Jenness Collection.

ion of data had become generally accepted as essential. In addition, detailed information can often be checked and expanded by reference to the donor's published work. Perhaps most important, photographs from a considerable number of donors (e.g. Rattray, Blackwood, Czaplicka, Hutton and Mills) form an important part of large and well-documented collections of objects in the Museum. In fact, the photographs themselves are part of the documentation of objects, showing specimens of the type collected being made, used and occasionally rituals and ceremonies associated with them. As an integral part of documentation of objects such photographs are an important primary source of research information. Photographs continue to enter the collections allied to objects but at the same time the Museum continues to collect photographic material of ethnographic interest which, like earlier material, is related to the work of the Museum, improving the understanding of objects in the Museum or the peoples who made them. Thus Balfour's original policy of 100 years ago is still of fundamental importance.

The practicalities of using photographic material have yet to be worked out fully. At input various ways are being considered of how best to manage the documentation and indexing of the vast amount of information contained in a photographic image to be useful both within the Museum context and in the wider demands of ethnohistorical interest. At output, the problem remains how to interpret this daunting amount of data within the scientific framework of anthropological enquiry. Nevertheless the photographic archives provide the raw material for a first-class research tool. The present aim of the photographic archive is to provide material for scholarly use in and outside the Museum which is as accurately documented and therefore as useful as possible. An immense amount of work remains to be done on the collection but the close inter-relationship between the Museum's object collections and its photographic archive should make the result particularly rewarding.

NOTES

1. E.B.Tylor, 'Dammann's Race-Photographs', *Nature*, Volume XIII (1876), pp. 184-185.
2. J.Lambrey, 'On a Method of Measuring Human Form for the Use of Students of Ethnology', *Journal of the Ethnological Society*, N.S. Volume I (1869), pp.84-85.
3. E.H.Man, *On the Aboriginal Inhabitants of the Andaman Islands*, London: Royal Anthropological Institute 1885 and *The Nicobar Islands and Their People*, London: Royal Anthropological Institute 1932; C.Hose and W. McDougall, *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*, London: Macmillan 1912.
4. H.B.T.Somerville, 'Ethnographical Notes on New Georgia, Solomon Islands', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, Volume XXVI (1897), pp. 357-413.
5. C.F.Wood, *A Yachting Cruise in the South Seas*, London: Henry S.King 1875, at pp.[iii-iv].