"Fields of Vision": Photographs in the Missionary Collections at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London

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Missionary collections have been accumulating in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) Library since 1973 when the Council for World Mission[1] deposited its large and valuable archive and library. Since then, other no less valuable materials have been received, notably from the China Inland Mission, the Conference of British Missionary Societies, the Japan Evangelistic Band, the Melanesian Mission, the Methodist Missionary Society, and the Presbyterian Church of England. Many individual missionaries have also donated papers, books, and photographs.

Since that date SOAS archivists have been sorting and listing these vast quantities of materials, which comprise some 1,000,000 documents, 25,000 photographs, and many thousands of published works. The books have now all been cataloged in the library's online system (available at http://lib.soas.ac.uk). The archive's catalog is expected to go online in 2003.

Until recently, SOAS archivists have been unable to devote much time to cataloging and curating the photographic component of the SOAS missionary collections. Taken together, they present a formidable research resource for a wide range of academic disciplines. The geographic range of the photographic collections encompasses Africa (Southern, Central, East, and West), Madagascar, China and Taiwan, Japan, India, Malaysia, the Caribbean, Pacific islands in Melanesia and Polynesia, and also the home base in the United Kingdom. The subject range is also considerable. There are group and individual portraits of missionaries and converts, patients, pupils, and others. There are extensive views of buildings, including churches, houses, hospitals, schools, and nonmission buildings. There are topographical views and scenes of everyday life and work, customs, and traditions. Notable events such as revolutions, wars, proclamations, and famines are recorded. While the archives' holdings do not include very early photographs such as daguerreotypes, there are a number of photographs dating back to the 1860s. The date span of the collection is therefore about 100 years.

In 1999 a two-year project was begun to catalog the archives' holdings of missionary photographs through funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England. An initial projection of around 20,000 individual photographic prints in the SOAS missionary collections was subsequently discovered to be quite an underestimate! Most of the images were loose prints; some were mounted, some not. Others were in albums. It was decided not to include the archives' substantial collection of glass-plate negatives and lantern and other slides in this particular project, hoping to fund another project later on. The current project also has a preservation element. All loose photographs have been placed in inert polyester sleeves, while albums and large mounted prints have been carefully packaged. A further step will be to digitize about 100 images for placement on the SOAS archives' Web site (http://www2.soas.ac.uk/archives).

Developing the methodology for the project entailed considerable research and discussion. Colleagues such as Paul Jenkins in Basel and Elizabeth Edwards at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford generously gave advice based on their considerable experience and expertise. In the end the decision was made to catalog the photographs using an archive database that provides fields for title, reference, photographer (if known), level of description, description, dates, physical size and format, whether/where published, existence/location of copies, and so on, and also enables both keyword and free-text searching. Because of the short duration of the project, the ideal of item-by-item cataloging had to be sacrificed. Instead, each set or album of photographs has been described. By this approach a larger number of photographs have been opened up to scholarship than would have been possible had the photographs been dealt with on an individual basis.

Organizing Missionary Photographs

Photographs in the missionary collections at SOAS vary in their scope and nature but are united by one primary purpose.[2] Photographic images were acquired and collated for use in mission society publications and promotional material to educate and stimulate support for overseas missions. Therefore, although diverse in content, they form a coherent resource for mission studies.

The largest collection, that of the Council for World Mission (CWM), is also the most detailed in its original organization. These photographs from missionaries in the field were carefully collated by personnel at the London headquarters as a resource for publications, first as a basis for engravings, and from 1890 directly as photographic reproductions. The circulation figures of missionary journals, while certainly not comparable to general publications, were considerable. Copies of London Missionary Society (LMS) publications, including the LMS's *Chronicle*, the society's juvenile magazine, and supplements produced and circulated throughout the home and overseas divisions reached 680,000 in 1890, rising to 1.2 million in 1921.[3]

The CWM collection consists of a combination of commercially available prints, comprising largely albumen prints of topographical and travel scenes from the 1860s to the 1880s; personal records of missionary activities, largely in the form of printing-out paper prints from the 1880s to the 1920s; and gelatin silver prints from the 1920s to the 1960s. Many of the earlier images from missionary and nonmissionary photographers are pasted together onto numbered boards and captioned by hand, forming valuable records of how the society used its photographic resources. Many prints are marked up for multiple publication, as is verified by the published journals. Many of the later prints exist only as contact prints and were not used for publication, often because they are the missionaries' personal rather than official records, appearing in albums or on loose album pages.

The geographic arrangement of CWM mission fields is the primary basis for the organization of the CWM photograph archive. Within these geographic divisions, many photographs were allocated to one of nine subject areas: "Missionaries and Church Work," "Educational," "General Types," "Home Life

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Motu Water Carriers.
Photograph by William George Lawes (1839–1907). Papua New Guinea; mounted albumen print, ca. 1885. Courtesy of the SOAS Library. Reference: CWM/LMS, Papua, Photographs, box 3, file 10, item 26.

and Occupations," "Manners and Customs," "Landscape," "Crafts," "Documentary," and "Impact of Civilization." Categorization of images within these subject areas and their recategorization subsequent to reproduction can usefully be compared with written documentation relating to the same subjects to be found elsewhere in the archives. Such comparison provides valuable insight into the society's perception and use of its photographic resources.

Recording Mission Work

One recurrent request by researchers using the SOAS archive is for images of missionaries at work. While there are some fine examples of this subject matter, they are certainly not as widespread as might be expected. The primary function of mission photography is that of recording events, particularly the meeting of mission workers in a particular district in the ever-present group photo. Similar to many other photographic records, the images produced by missionaries in the field reflect people and occasions that were deemed to be significant. Meetings of normally disparate mission personnel for centenary celebrations, deputation visits, and similar events are therefore represented more frequently than many day-to-day mission practices.

A large number of the images, however, document missionary work by implication by portraying indigenous groups either in their pre-evangelized daily practices or in the performance of standard activities of the mission compound. Here the missionary is not just the unseen observer. Unlike the commercial production of carte-de-visite studio portraits for colonial consumption, for which representatives of indigenous cultures were brought into the largely city-based studios, the missionary in the field is participating in this other world, not on an equal level with his or her indigenous subjects but in an altogether more complex relationship of power and influence. The missionary's control is far wider reaching than merely setting up a studio backdrop or choosing ephemera. The missionary has decided not merely how the photography subjects should dress but how they should live their lives. As a result, a significant proportion of the photographs either taken or acquired by missionary personnel portrays indigenous populations engaged in an aspect of approved mission compound life. Often such records show the pursuit of education, literacy, handicrafts, mothercraft, or nursing. The missionary, when pleased with the results of his or her work, records it in a letter and a photograph to be sent home for publication. Missionaries themselves are not visible but are ever present.

Pioneer Photographer

William Lawes, missionary of the LMS and father figure of mission and Western presence in Papua New Guinea for over thirty years from 1874, is interesting as an example of a pioneer

Queen Ranavalona III of Madagascar speaking at a **kabary** *(public address) in the square at Andohalo, Antananarivo, just after the French occupation.* **Photographer unknown; printing-out paper print, circa 1895. Courtesy of the SOAS Library. Reference: CWM/LMS, Madagascar, Photographs, box 5, file 16, item 2.**

missionary. As the first photographs of Papua New Guinea, Lawes' images were valued outside the missionary sphere as much as within. His own photographs were distributed commercially through Henry King of Sydney and appear in various nonmissionary archives.[4] Lawes played a significant role in the early photography of Papua New Guinea not only as a photographer himself but also because his knowledge of, and role in, Papuan life was of paramount importance to other photographers, particularly those of colonial government and expeditionary parties. Lawes understood the importance of gradual acceptance into a different society and had earlier achieved some success on Niue Island. His description of his missionary methods reveals the level of trust required in his work: "The normal idea of the missionary, as a man wearing a black coat and standing up with an open Bible in his hand preaching to a crowd of gaping savages, is very far from the truth. All we can do often on a first visit is to let the natives handle us, feel us, give them a little present, and come away."[5]

William Ellis's photography gained royal trust and support for the mission in Madagascar.

In his *Picturesque New Guinea*, the Australia-based professional photographer J. W. Lindt acknowledges the decisive role that Lawes played in facilitating Lindt's visit to Papua New Guinea and the photographic work he was able to carry out.[6] There are examples within the SOAS collections of Lawes and Lindt photographing subjects simultaneously, such as H. O. Forbes's expedition party en route to Mount Owen Stanley in 1885. The two photographers also favored certain subjects and styles. Their many single and group portraits of female Motu water carriers are an example. (See photo on page 165.)

Beyond its ethnographic interest, the scene in this first photo has immediate appeal as a reference to classical and biblical themes. Like many of Lawes's images, this albumen print from the 1880s reappears frequently throughout the files of the CWM collection, both in bound albums and mounted individually, often captioned with varying degrees of information and instructions on how it should be used for each specific purpose.

As a consequence of the missionaries' extended knowledge of local peoples, languages, and customs, the relationship between the missionary photographer and his or her subject is more complex than that of expeditionary personnel and other "outsider" photographers. Though many of the mission photographs contain anthropologically significant subject matter, the intention in creating them and the use made of them was specifically to propagate the faith by educating the church at home regarding the work overseas and gaining support for its continuation and growth. Alongside their relationship with their indigenous subjects, the relationship between missionaries and the overseas colonial administration is also a significant issue for interpretation of photographic records missionaries produced.

While Lawes's role as part of the early colonial presence in Papua New Guinea gives his images particular value, the relationship between the missionary in the field and the fortunes of the British Empire was often complex. Though the success of the one did not necessarily reflect that of the other, political considerations influenced the missionaries' work and their role in society. Missionary influence was increased as much as threatened by times of political upheaval.

LMS presence in Madagascar began in 1818, and following a period of persecution and expulsion, Christian influence increased greatly during the reign of Queen Ranavalona II (1868–83). However, growing French control of the domestic and foreign affairs of the country limited LMS influence, as did the growing importance of the French-sponsored Roman Catholic missions.

In the 1860s LMS missionary and photographer William Ellis used photography in gaining royal trust and support for the success of the mission, in direct rivalry with the French Catholic missionary Father Marc Finaz, who sought to gain influence through the introduction of daguerreotypes.[7] John Parrett, LMS printer and missionary from 1862 to 1885, photographed widely in Madagascar until 1895, including royal and political events, and played an important role in representing the Malagasy prime minister at negotiations with the French in August 1885. The photographs produced in Madagascar by mission photographers are therefore central to the social, political, and religious

history of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, and this area is one of the CWM archive's particular strengths. (See photo on page 166.)

Photographer and Editor

The Methodist Missionary Society collection contains largely original and unique photographs. These are often more personal "snapshot" views, often still in the (amateur) photographer's original albums. Consisting of over 2,000 photographs, they depict all of the Methodists' main overseas fields: Africa, the West Indies, China, India, Burma, and Ceylon. The majority of the photographs were created by the missionaries themselves in the field rather than collected. They provide a valuable firsthand visual record, made by persons directly involved in the life and work of the mission stations, of people and events the missionaries considered of value and importance. Many of the photographs are captioned on the reverse with information, not only with details about the photograph's subject and when and where it was taken, but also giving the photographer's own attitude toward the person, place, or event represented.

The individual who contributed most to the creation and dissemination of visual propaganda concerning the activities and intentions of Methodist overseas missions during the interwar period was Frank Deaville Walker, editor of both the *Foreign Field* (1914–32) and its successor, the *Kingdom Overseas* (1933–45).

Walker visited all of the society's mission fields between 1920 and 1937, including India, Burma, Ceylon, West Africa and the Ivory Coast, the West Indies, and China. His first photographs from India appear in April 1921 in an article entitled simply "Pictures and Jottings," giving an overview of Walker's journey and experiences and introducing the illustrated articles that were to follow. As both photographer and editor, Walker often referred, in captions printed in the mission publications, to the process of photography as well as the subject. On photographing the Kali temple, he remarks, "It was difficult to place the camera so that nothing unpleasant would appear in the picture."[8] As editor of the mission society's official publications, Walker censored his own camera so as to preclude any scene that he felt would offend his readers. With this caption, Walker highlights both the perceived power of the photographic image and his role in determining the images that his readers saw. As editor he selects the images to be reproduced from those sent in from the field, but as photographer himself he is already making these decisions before the camera shutter is released. Detailed articles on specific aspects of Walker's trip appear in almost every issue, and he also devised a photographically illustrated page for children about a missionary's daughter entitled "When Helen Went to India," with photographs by "Uncle Camera."

By the late 1930s Walker had a wide choice of his own photographs as "stock" to be used when formulating ideas and illustrating articles for the *Kingdom Overseas*. His own photographs are reproduced in full more often than those submitted by missionaries in the field, as he used his knowledge of photographic composition and page layout in his selection of subject matter and style. With his aesthetic conventions in mind, Walker's photographs of the indigenous populations encountered by the Methodist Missionary Society in the field pose many questions. He often chose to take close-cropped portraits of his subjects mainly, but certainly not always, with their approval. His emphasis on the individual as "type" is shared by many mission photographs held in the SOAS archives. This emphasis is often reflected in the captions given when the images were reproduced. In many instances an individual's name and personal details, such as profession or role in the community, are noted on the reverse of the original print, yet the reproduced image is captioned simply as "A Chinese Doctor" or "West Indian Schoolgirl." (See photo below.)

Walker was a tireless propagandist on behalf of the mission society, using speeches, books, pamphlets, and journals as well

Portrait of girl looking into mirror, showing her hairstyle. **Photograph by Frank Deaville Walker (1878–1945). Gold Coast (now Ghana); gelatin silver print, 1926. Courtesy of the SOAS Library. Reference: MMS, West Africa, Photographs, file 10, item 38.**

as photography. His pamphlet *Hints for Missionary Speakers* (ca. 1911) emphasizes that the object of a missionary speech, as with any publicity or propaganda work on behalf of the society, must be clear but specific: "The object should be, not just to impart information, but to impart information that will lead to service. The aim must be service, not mere information."[9] Missionary photographers created their pictures with a purpose, which is central to the value of these archives for researchers and historians.

As a result of his own travels, Walker realized the difficulties involved in photography in the climates encountered by the majority of missionaries overseas, noting:

> Often I start out before daybreak, and I am frequently developing plates till after midnight. . . . I am doing my level best to see everything I can, photograph all I can, learn all I can. And in the intense heat of India it is a pretty exhausting task. I'll never again blame missionaries for not sending us good photos. And those who do shall be reverenced as heroes and saints. The exhaustion of photographic work, often in the full blaze of the sun, is terrific. Sometimes I've stood trying to catch a picture till I could scarcely hold myself up. It is *so* trying to struggle with crowds of people who *will* stand right before your lens and others who will fly from you the moment they see your camera. Anybody can get snapshots here, but *the pictures you want* are so difficult to get. You see splendid groups sitting by the roadside, but the moment you approach they jump up, and it is nearly impossible to get them right again. They are *so* graceful in a natural posture, but as wooden as images before a camera.[10]

Despite these difficulties, Walker believed that the resulting images would serve the purposes of the publication best from an information and propagandist point of view. He encouraged the missionaries in the field to take photographs and send them in for publication, arranging for photographic materials to be sent out at cost price for this purpose. As a result of Walker's passion for the photographic image, mission personnel often produced unique images of people and places previously unphotographed. Walker's own photographs excel as a result of the combination of his privileged position, visiting lesser-known regions of the world as part of the trusted mission community, and his editor's eye.

Continuing Vitality

Missionary presence around the globe sometimes reflected and sometimes challenged colonial and anthropological experience of indigenous societies. Study of missionary photographs is therefore significant both within mission studies itself and for the wider historical, political, and anthropological interpretation of photographic artifacts. In terms of the history of photography, the preservation of such a large collection of largely amateur photography, produced in challenging circumstances, is a distinctively significant resource. Cataloging has now made this resource, enhanced and contextualized through cross-comparison with written archives and materials published contemporaneously, fully accessible both physically and intellectually.

Notes

1. Formerly known as the London Missionary Society and, since 1966, as the Congregational Council for World Mission. In 1973 its name was shortened to Council for World Mission.
2. In October 2001 Samantha Johnson, formerly of the Royal Photographic Society, took over the post of photographs cataloguer. She is the author of the rest of this article.
3. London Missionary Society, "Report," 1891, p. clx, and "Report," 1921–22, p. cxx.
4. See Virginia-Lee Webb, "Missionary Photographers in the Pacific Islands: Divine Light," *History of Photography* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 12–22.
5. Joseph King, *W. G. Lawes of Savage Island and New Guinea* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1909), p. 143.
6. J. W. Lindt, *Picturesque New Guinea* (London: Longmans, 1887), preface.
7. Simon Peers and the British Council, *The Working of Miracles. William Ellis. Photography in Madagascar, 1853–1865 (Ny Fiansan'ny Fahagagana. William Ellis. NyFakan-Tsary Teto Madagasikara)* (London: British Council, 1995), parallel English and Malagasy text.
8. Frank Deaville Walker, "Pictures and Jottings," *Foreign Field*, April 1921, p. 140.
9. Frank Deaville Walker, *Hints for Missionary Speakers* ([London]: Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, [ca. 1911], p. 3.
10. Frank Deaville Walker, "Letter," quoted in Stanley Sowton, "Live Wires," *Foreign Field*, March 1921, p. 128.