

Maurice Vidal Portman and the Platinotype in India

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By the 1850s photography in India had reached comparable levels of achievement to work emanating from the metropolitan centers of Europe and America—despite handicaps imposed by distance, the difficulty of obtaining supplies, and a climate hostile to the medium. By the middle years of that decade photographic societies had been established in the three Presidency capitals of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras, and these were principal sources of information for residents on developing photographic technologies and processes. Amateur photographers in particular were heavily dependent on these societies for technical information and instruction. In addition to their role as conduits of information and forums for discussion, the societies also provided opportunities for the display of new work in their annual exhibitions.

Platinum Printing in South Asia

Information about the new platinum processes was thus principally made available to photographers through the meetings and journal of the Photographic Society of India—resuscitated in 1887 after a decade of inactivity—and a search through available issues reveals a growing interest in the process from around 1890, although it is difficult to find references or indeed surviving examples of platinotype work from before this period. As might be expected, the question of permanence tended to be the principal matter of interest, a preoccupation noted by a correspondent in 1891, who observed, “The battle between Platinotypes and Bromides has been generally admitted to be a draw. Neither side has been proved to be vanquished. It therefore remains for time alone to prove which will last the longest under ordinary circumstances.”¹

However, for those anxious to try the platinum process, George Ewing’s *A Handbook of Photography for Amateurs in India* (Calcutta, 1895) gave detailed chemical and procedural instructions, and it is clear that a number of amateurs were drawn to the process.² Prints produced in platinum and shown at the society’s exhibitions in Calcutta from this period have not survived in great quantity, but such exhibitions and their reviews indicate that the platinotype exerted some attraction for discerning amateurs and professionals alike (fig. 1).³

Photography in India was by no means an entirely European pursuit, and it was taken up as a fashionable hobby by a number of Indian princes, in some cases with impressive dedication and skill. Perhaps the most technically innovative and committed use of photography among the independent rulers of India is seen in the small state of Tripura—known during the period of British rule as Hill Tipperah—a mountainous monsoonal district to the east of Dacca, one of the smallest states in the subcontinent and now separated from most of the country by Bangladesh to its immediate west. Despite its modest size and relative seclusion, Tripura boasts an impressive photographic history. As a correspondent to the *Journal of the Photographic Society of India* wrote in 1899, “I should be very much inclined to place His Highness the late Maharajah Bahadur of Independent Tipperah, in the position of premier Amateur photographer among our native Princes, not only on account of the enthusiastic interest he took in the art, and the success with which he worked it, but also on account of his lengthened experience.”⁴

As an “enlightened ruler of a comparatively wild hill tribe,” Bir Chandra Manikya apparently became interested in photography during the calotype period “and could truly claim to be the first Native Ruler in India to take up the art of photography.” Before his

Figure 1. Maurice Vidal Portman, *The Chest and Stomach of a Man of the South Andaman Group of Tribes, Showing the Pattern of Tattooing, or Scarifying Common to This Group*, c. 1890–93. Platinum print, 18.8 × 15 cm. British Library, Photo 125/2 (44).



Figure 2. Shamarandra Chandra Deb Barman of Tripura, *Portrait of a Young Girl of Tripura*, 1890s. Platinum print, 25.4 × 20.2 cm. British Library, Photo 430/73 (35).

death in 1897 he had also installed equipment for printing in collotype and photogravure at the state press at Agartala.⁵ His photographic enthusiasms were inherited by his second son, the Bara Thakur, Shamarandra Chandra Deb Barman (life dates unknown) who, according to the *Practical Photographer*, took up photography from around the age of six, or at least “as soon as he could collodionise a plate and uncup a lens.”⁶ In his adulthood, the Bara Thakur took Peter Henry Emerson (1856–1936), “when he flashed meteorlike across the photographic world,” as an early model, though his admiration was tempered by Emerson’s “great renunciation,” in which he denied the artistic potential of the medium.⁷ Thenceforward he transferred his artistic allegiance to Henry Peach Robinson (1830–1901), “whose work he diligently studies and on whose precepts he bases his practice.”⁸ The article notes that in printing the Bara Thakur had moved with the times, from albumen to carbon and finally to the platinotype. This last switch was motivated by the difficulty of using carbon tissue in the Indian climate: “In Tippera it is almost always damp, and tissue hung up to dry after sensitizing has a tendency to become insoluble.”⁹

The prince found platinum “a less exacting though equally permanent and beautiful printing process,” although early experiments with both hot-bath platinum photography and imported supplies of Giuseppe Pizzighelli’s (1849–1912) printing-out paper were not successful. Eventually he found he could produce successful results by sensitizing his own paper using Pizzighelli’s

published formulas, making prints infinitely superior to anything that could be produced on imported paper.¹⁰

The Bara Thakur’s work was enthusiastically received by the flourishing Photographic Society of India, and in January 1892 he addressed an “unusually large meeting of members” in Calcutta, describing his experiences with the Pizzighelli process. Although he gave fewer technical details of his work than his audience would have liked, the pictures on display, “both figure and landscape, were excellent, and more than sustained the reputation of their author as perhaps the best worker of the Pizzighelli process in India. His portraits were praised as displaying a remarkable faculty for beauty of line and pose, while possessing a soft bloom-like quality, which was charming” (fig. 2).¹¹ Surviving examples of his work from around this time are no doubt representative of the prints that elicited such praise from the society. These and other studies by the Bara Thakur regularly won prizes at the Calcutta shows and also in England, where his prints were frequently exhibited.

From such admittedly sporadic references, it is clear that the platinum print in India, as elsewhere, was seen principally as either an aesthetic preference for the self-consciously artistic photographer or as a means of creating images that might evade the silver print’s well-known vulnerability to fading. Several of the major studios made platinum prints available at a premium: the leading Indian studio of Bourne and Shepherd, for example, had facilities for printing in platinum (fig. 3), while Frederick Bremner’s



Figure 3. Bourne and Shepherd Studio, *Photographic Staff of Bourne and Shepherd, Official Photographers at the Delhi Durbar*, 1902. Platinum print, 21.4 × 28.8 cm. British Library, Photo 440/2 (45).

studio in Lahore also offered his work either in silver (at 1 rupee 8 annas per print) or in platinum (at 2 rupees 8 annas).¹² The photographs of one of the notable quasi-amateurs of the early twentieth century, John Claude White (1853–1918), taken in the course of the Young-husband Mission to Tibet in 1903–4, are seen printed in a number of processes. The finest of these sets are those that were printed in platinum by the Calcutta studio of Johnston and Hoffmann (fig. 4), a set of which was later presented to the Viceroy Lord Curzon. White also selected the platinum process for much of his other work.

For those concerned with photography as a professional tool in their official duties, however, there seems to have been only limited interest in platinum. James Waterhouse (1842–1922), in charge of the photographic and photo-lithographic departments of the Survey of India, experimented with almost every photographic and photo-mechanical process available during the course of his career in India and remains a major figure in the technical history of photography. His professional work in India was devoted largely to servicing the severely practical requirements of military and civil officials for maps and other documents, and for this purpose aesthetic considerations were not paramount, although he was a very accomplished photographer in his own right. Furthermore, much of the photographic work produced by his department was for immediate rather than long-term use, and the permanence of the results was of minor importance. In the work of the Indian surveys, he wrote, the “only methods of purely photographic printing in use are silver printing and blue printing.”¹³ His office had in fact been one of the earliest licensees in India of the platinotype process, but he had found it difficult to work in the humid climate of Calcutta, and as there was little demand for such prints in his line of work, the process was not much used. He did note, however, that the cold-bath papers worked well, but must be used fresh and stored with the greatest of care.¹⁴

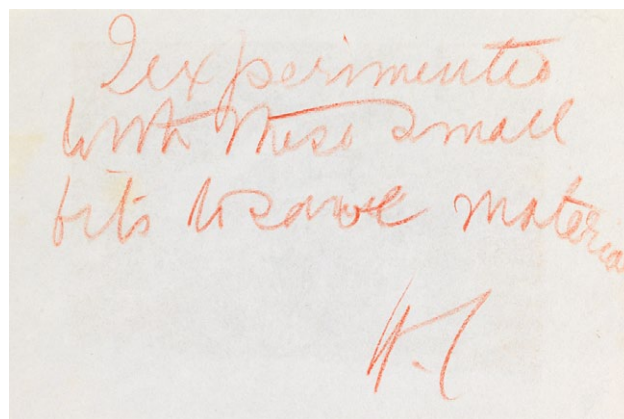
In the official sphere, it is also worth noting briefly the work of the archaeologist Henry Cousens (1854–1933), who was employed by the Archaeological Survey of India from 1875 until his retirement in 1910. In addition to a distinguished career as an archaeologist in India, Cousens was also a prolific and skilled photographer and clearly interested in the medium beyond it uses as a purely functional tool of record.¹⁵ Of the several thousand of his photographs of architecture in Western India that survive, a small portion was printed by him in platinum. These appear to be his own work, since none of the other survey photographs was printed in platinotype and the Indian



Figure 4. John Claude White, *Potola [Potala Palace] and Entrance Gate, Lhasa*, August 1904. Platinum print, 18.7 × 31.5 cm. British Library, Photo 430/53 (63).



5



5a

Figure 5. Henry Cousens, *Street Scene outside the Jami Masjid, Ahmadabad*, 1890s. Platinum print, 9.4 × 11.9 cm. British Library, Photo 40 (167).

5a. Verso of a different version (printed lighter), with note in Cousens's hand reading, “I experimented with these small bits to save material. H. C.” in red pencil on paper. British Library, Photo 40 (166).

administration would no doubt have baulked at the additional expense of the process. In fact a few surviving scraps do provide evidence of his personal investigations of the process, as examples printed from small-format negatives attest (fig. 5). There are also a number of examples in the



6a



6b

Figure 6. Henry Cousens, *Façade of Jain Cave XXXII (Indra Sabha)*, Ellora, 1880s.

6a. Albumen print, 18.6 × 24 cm. British Library, Photo 40 (142).

6b. Platinum print, 19.4 × 24.5 cm. British Library, Photo 1000/8 (877).

Archaeological Survey of India series in which Cousens made separate negatives of the same scene for printing in both albumen and platinum in order to match the tonal requirements of each process. The two almost identical views of the Indra Sabha cave at Ellora, seen in figure 6, for example, were clearly taken within a few moments of each other and can be distinguished only by a slight shift in the shadows.

The Work of Maurice Vidal Portman

This brief survey of the use of platinum in South Asia in the last decades of the nineteenth century serves as an introduction to the work of Maurice Vidal Portman (1860–1935), who made perhaps the most extensive use of the platinum process in India. His work was directed toward very specific—purportedly scientific—ends, which

are by no means representative of the generally aesthetic motives of most users of platinum. Yet his work remains an intriguing example of the ways in which the process's artistic and technical properties were utilized in the service of a colonial project of information gathering.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, stretching in a north-south line across the Bay of Bengal between Burma (modern Myanmar) and Sumatra, were first taken into formal possession by the Government of India in 1789 for use as a penal colony. They also proved to be a rich and virgin ethnological laboratory, peopled by shy, aboriginal tribes largely untainted by European contact. After the Indian Uprising of 1857–58, the penal colony was enlarged for use as a secure and isolated prison for sentenced mutineers, and in the following decades administrators posted there began the first detailed studies of the original inhabitants. Andamanese were regularly taken to Calcutta to be displayed and studied like laboratory specimens or wild animals. A photograph from 1865 is typical of the many groups subjected to such treatment who, we learn, were measured, displayed to interested citizens, and photographed “in groups, clothed, and in a naked state” (fig. 7).¹⁶ Here photography might reconcile the necessarily conflicting aims of science and the colonial state, the former seeking man at his most “uncivilized,” the latter attempting to lead him into social intercourse and administrative control as swiftly as possible: photography could record the details of eroding material and physical cultures before they disappeared or were irrevocably transformed by cultural contact.

Maurice Vidal Portman (fig. 8), a young man of aristocratic background, had briefly served in the Royal Indian Marine before being appointed to the Andaman Islands in 1879, as officer in charge of the Andaman Homes. Among other administrative tasks, this position involved introducing the Andamanese to European culture, in the hope that they would return to their people and spread a “civilizing” Western influence. During his time in the Andamans, Portman also collected artifacts for the British Museum and compiled a still-valuable work, *A History of Our Relations with the Andamanese* (Calcutta, 1899). But his most important claim to posterity's interest lies in his ambitious attempt to use photography as a data-gathering tool.

During a visit to England in late 1887 Portman met Sir Wollaston Franks, keeper of ethnography at the British Museum, and subsequently wrote to him in November 1889, “offering to make for the British Museum a series of photographs of the Andamanese aborigines, in their different occupations and modes of life, the photographs



Figure 7. Saché and Westfield, *Andaman Group with Their Keeper, Mr Homfray, Photographed at Calcutta, September 1865*. Albumen print, 19.3 × 13.7 cm. British Library, Photo 1000/42 (4337). As the proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal noted, “At the studio of Messrs. Saché and Westfield, where several gentlemen—strangers to the Andamanese, were present when the photographs were taken,—we encountered positive difficulty, in inducing them to group themselves, stripped of their European clothes. That difficulty overcome, however, it was remarkable to observe how quickly they appreciated the fact that they were required to keep steady, and how willingly they did the best they could, when undergoing an ordeal, which is disagreeable even to those whose vanity it is pleasing.” *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, January to December 1865*, edited by the General Secretary (Calcutta, 1866), 186.

to be in platinotype, and, as far as possible, on 15" × 12" plates.”¹⁷ Portman offered to underwrite the expense of producing this work, and it was agreed, after representations had been made to the secretary of state for India, that additional sets would be produced for the use of the Indian authorities, who would pay for their photographs. The comprehensive ambitions of the project are summarized by Portman himself:

So far as possible a complete record in imperishable platinotype will be made of the Andaman Islander in every action of his life, showing how the tribes differ among themselves, as well as their general peculiarities; and my object, in the photographic part, is to show every step in the making of a weapon, etc., so clearly, that, with the assistance of the finished articles now in the British Museum, it would be possible for a European workman to imitate the mode of work. Attention is always drawn in the letterpress

to any notable peculiarity which cannot be expressed photographically.¹⁸

It seems clear from his own writings and other contemporary accounts that Portman became obsessed with this photographic project, which in time appears to have occupied a disproportionate amount of his working life—a fact regularly commented on by his superiors. He spent large sums of his own money on cameras of all formats and other equipment and regularly corresponded with the Photographic Society of India, both on photographic matters and with general accounts of life in the Andaman Islands.

Work progressed swiftly once the project had been officially sanctioned. The urgency of the task was acknowledged by the editor of the *Journal of the Photographic Society of India*, when he referred to the “unique value” that Portman’s photographs would possess for future anthropologists, “when the race itself has disappeared

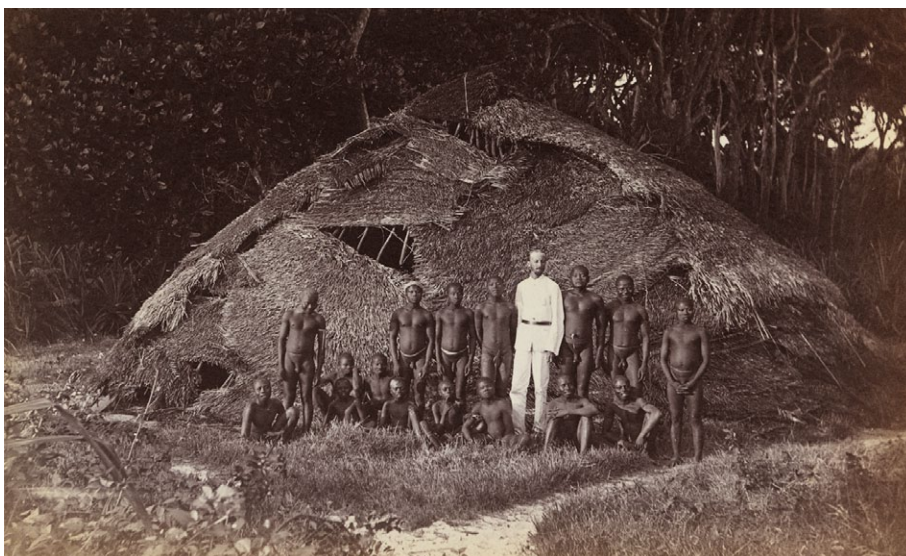


Figure 8. Photographer unknown, *Huts and Natives at Little Andaman [with Maurice Vidal Portman]*, 1880s. Albumen print, 11.1 × 18 cm. British Library, Photo 125/2 (25).

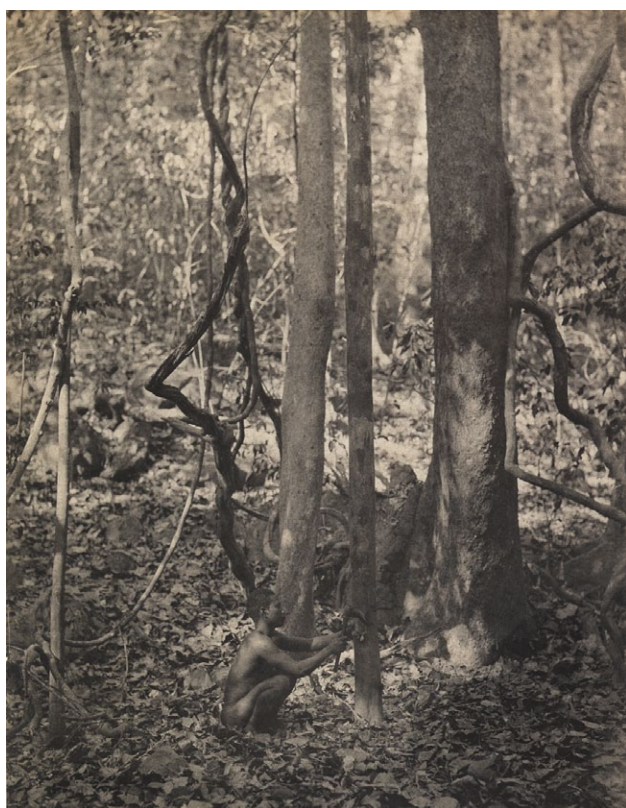


Figure 9. Maurice Vidal Portman, *Bow Manufacture of the North Andaman Tribes: The “Bádama” tree is then cut close to the ground, as shown, c. 1893*. Platinum print, 34.5 × 26.9 cm. British Library, Photo 188/3 (6).



Figure 10. Maurice Vidal Portman, *Bow Manufacture of the North Andaman Tribes: The centre is then roughly cut out, c. 1893*. Platinum print, 35.1 × 26.9 cm. British Library, Photo 188/3 (16).

from the earth.”¹⁹ An example of the approach can be seen in this part of a series devoted to illustrating the Andamanese method of making a bow (figs. 9–11), the photographs themselves accompanied by letterpress labels amplifying the visual account. A similar approach was taken to recording in detail the manufacture of adzes and other tools, rope-making and hut-building, the packing of bundles, eating, drinking, methods of greeting and other social activities, and close-up studies such as the extraordinary platinotype depiction of tattooing shown in figure 1. Nearly one hundred 15 × 12 inch prints illustrating the making of an adze, “from the cutting of the branch of the tree for the handle down to the finished article,” all printed in platinum using William Willis’s (1841–1923) cold-bath process, were shown to an appreciative audience of the Photographic Society of India in February 1893 (figs. 12, 13).²⁰

An additional requirement became part of the project in 1893 when Portman learned that the ethnological community now recommended that subjects also be photographed against a chequered grid of 2 inch squares. This system, first suggested by J. H. Lamprey of the Royal Geographical Society in 1868, was intended to facilitate the accurate comparison of physical types across a wide range

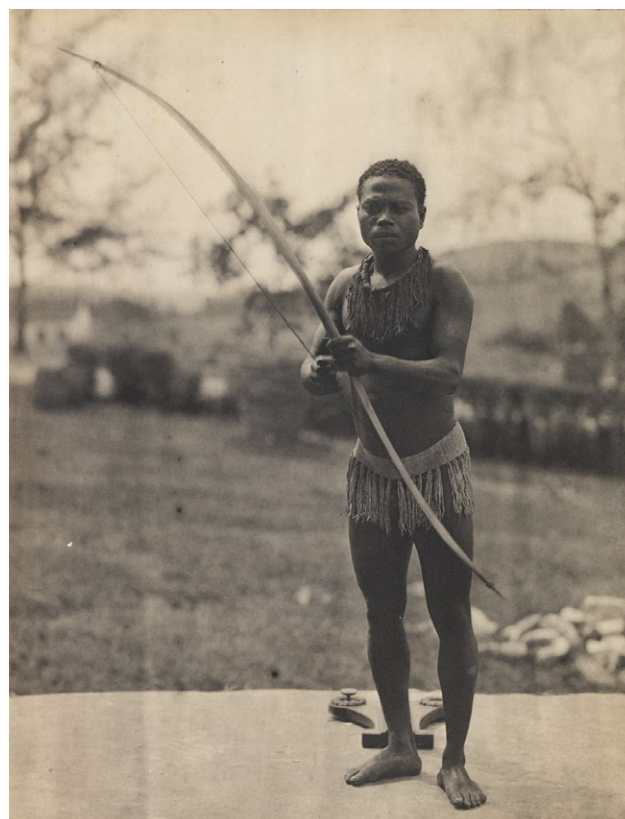


Figure 11. Maurice Vidal Portman, *Bow Manufacture of the North Andaman Tribes: Unstringing the bow, c. 1893*. Platinum print, 34.9 × 26.8 cm. British Library, Photo 188/3 (25).



Figure 12. Maurice Vidal Portman, *Adze Making: Selecting a mangrove tree with a projecting branch at the angle and of the proper thickness for a handle*, c. 1893. Platinum print, 34.9 × 26.9 cm. British Library, Photo 188/2 (3).



Figure 13. Maurice Vidal Portman, *Adze Making: A long wedge of wood is then taken, pushed in between the strips of “Chaura” bark, which were placed there to prevent the wedge touching either the blade or the cane fastening, and . . . is hammered home*, c. 1893. Platinum print, 33.8 × 27 cm. British Library, Photo 188/2 (18).

of ethnic groups (fig. 14).²¹ In addition to photographs recording the physical characteristics of the Andamanese, Portman also produced, with the assistance of William Molesworth of the Indian Medical Service, sets of anthropometric measurements and physical information relating to his subjects. The production of such data forms part of a wider colonial project, which also saw the compilation of such information in India in prisons and asylums. Photographically, it involved retaking a good deal of previously completed work, but by 1894 fifteen large volumes—eleven of photographs and four of physical details and measurements—had been completed. Wollaston Franks at the British Museum was unstinting in his praise of the work: “You, however, have worked upon such a comprehensive scale, and have carried out your plans so entirely in accordance with the requirements of science, as to place your work far in advance of anything of the kind that has hitherto been done.”²²

In response to an invitation from the Photographic Society of India in 1891, Portman contributed an article to its journal that includes a useful synopsis of his working methods.²³ He had been fortunate in securing official

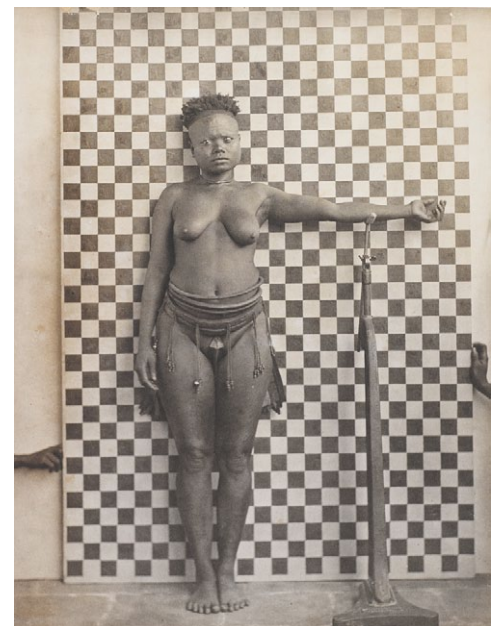


Figure 14. Maurice Vidal Portman, *Woicha, Woman of the Puchik-Wár Tribe, Age about 42 Years, No. 12 of the Female Series of Measurements*, June 1893. Platinum print, 34.9 × 26.7 cm. British Library, Photo 188/11 (18).



15a



15b

Figure 15. Maurice Vidal Portman, *Andaman Island Seascape*, c. 1890–93.

15a. Eastman stripping film negative, image 27×35.5 cm. British Museum, AS/PPN Misc B/1.

15b. Digitally generated positive image.

backing for his project, support that led to the commissioner setting up a studio and darkroom for him. These facilities, Portman said, “would delight some of our Indian photographers, and in which it is really a pleasure to work,” being cool and well-ventilated to withstand the humid tropical environment.²⁴ For work in the field he also recommended the use of a Wratten and Wainwright developing tent and, in order to prepare for a project that he unrealistically envisaged would take him three years to complete, he stated, “I was obliged to experiment with most of the principal apparatus, plates, and printing processes in the market.”²⁵ With regard to cameras, Portman recommended substantial apparatus able to withstand the rigors of the Indian climate, preferably made of seasoned mahogany bound with brass or aluminum: the products of Meagher of London were particularly praised. Portman

used a range of instruments, generally with square backs so that dark slides could be inserted in either vertical or landscape orientation, and carried out most of his work in the Andamans with either a 5×5 inch Newton studio camera with portrait lens or a 15×15 inch Meagher camera with double extension bellows. He also mentioned the use of a Meagher 8×5 inch camera for stereoscopic views, but examples of this format have not been found in his surviving work. Concerns about the bulk of equipment were of little importance, since “in India weight is a minor matter, as coolies are always procurable, and it should not be considered by a purchaser of photographic apparatus.”²⁶

Turning his attention to printing, Portman was scathing about amateurs undertaking such work, considering it “quite out of the question in this climate,” although this statement does not accord with the great quantity of amateur work successfully undertaken in India. Instead he advises the beginner to have his work printed by a professional firm. For his own work, he noted that platinotype paper, for use with Willis’s cold-bath process, would not keep for any length of time once opened and must be used swiftly: “I have it sent to me in hermetically sealed tins by the Platinotype Co., by parcel post, and so arrange my work as to print off the whole batch of paper on the day following its arrival.”²⁷ And as an example, he noted in 1893: “I gave some cold bath platinotype paper a good test the other day. It was manufactured on February the 14th, and was used by me on May the 15th, when it gave excellent prints. This is the paper for India, no doubt.”²⁸

For much of his work, Portman used 15×12 inch plates, and while bemoaning the weight of this size of glass negative (notwithstanding his comments on the ready availability of Indian labor noted above), he considered it essential for large studies and group portraits. For speed of use Portman recommended Eastman’s stripping film, an early flexible film that could be stripped from its paper support and transferred to a transparent gelatin support. He had all his cameras fitted with the company’s roller slides (also known as roll holders), which were made for use with the long rolls of stripping film.²⁹ The large collection of Portman’s negatives in the British Museum range from small format glass negatives up to 15×12 inches. There is also a fine series of 15×12 inch negatives made on Eastman stripping film, from which some of his platinum prints were subsequently produced. As Portman noted: “If scientific work is undertaken, and many exposures are to be made in one day, the Eastman Stripping Film, in one of that Company’s Roller Slides, is excellent. All my cameras are fitted with these roller slides.”³⁰

Careful account of the damp tropical climate was critical for success in the use of this material: an opened tin of film had to be used within two days in the rainy season and development undertaken on the same day as exposure. Stripping and transferring the films were considered out of the question in the humid environment of the Andamans, as the gelatin supports would not keep. The paper backing of the stripping film was therefore retained and the film printed as ordinary paper negatives. Oiling these paper negatives before printing (a practice familiar to calotypists from the early days of photography) improved their translucency and yielded prints indistinguishable, in Portman's opinion, from those made from glass negatives.³¹

Portman considered Eastman's transparent celluloid roll film, introduced in 1889, unsuitable because, while producing good negatives, its lack of an anticurl layer made it impossible to keep flat in a humid tropical environment, even when held in the roller slide. And for the serious photographer, the new range of hand cameras coming onto the market was not worthy of serious consideration. Referring to the Kodak, he noted, "I pressed the button, and the sink and the waste paper basket did the rest. The rollable film does not suit this climate."³²

It seems clear that while Portman certainly had artistic pretensions for his photography, the use of platinum was chiefly based on its much-publicized qualities of permanence compared with silver prints. For instance, he asked in 1892, through the pages of the *Journal of the Photographic Society of India*:

Will Colonel Waterhouse [a figure generally considered the fountainhead of technical expertise in India] kindly give me his opinion on the following:—Are prints in carbon as permanent as platinotypes? In order to do justice artistically to some of my photos for the British Museum, I would like to use several of the carbon tints, but at the same time have to consider permanency to be of the first importance.³³

This passage hints at Portman's view of the potential conflict between photography's use as an objective recording tool and its expressive function. The articles he contributed to the *Journal of the Photographic Society of India* gave him some opportunity to air these tensions and to step outside the rigorous demands of the ethnographical record, which were, he confessed, "largely monoto-



Figure 16. Maurice Vidal Portman, *Andaman Jungle Scenery*, c. 1890–93. Platinum print, 10.1 × 7.6 cm. British Library, Photo 125/2 (55).

nous."³⁴ In these writings he made passing mention of the landscape potential of the islands for the photographer ("the rocks here are quaintly shaped, and there is a good deal of work for a small camera")³⁵ and described taking cameras on his travels by pilot boat through the islands, photographing "a shoal of porpoises, Andamanese sky-larking, or anything that looks promising" (fig. 15).³⁶ The topography of the islands also provided subjects for his camera (figs. 16, 17). The distinction between the demands of "science" and "art" is underlined in his remark that when photographing for his own pleasure, "or endeavouring to compete for your medals," he generally used a

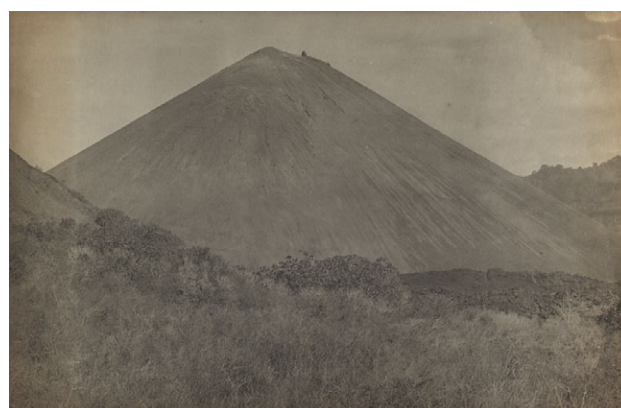


Figure 17. Maurice Vidal Portman, *Volcanic Hill in the Andaman Islands*, c. 1890–93. Platinum print, 13.9 × 19.1 cm. British Library, Photo 125/2 (38).



Figure 18. Maurice Vidal Portman, *Rope-Making: Andamanese Cutting a Branch of "Alaba-da" (Melochia velutina)*, A branch of the tree is cut off, as shown in the picture, and taken away, c. 1890–93. Platinum print, 33.1 × 25.4 cm. British Library, Photo 188/5 (4).

Dallmeyer wide-angle rectilinear lens: “One may not get an absolutely true photograph, but one often makes a lovely picture.” But, as he stresses, “I am not an Impressionist,”³⁷ and while clearly eager to gain the respect of the Indian photographic community, he always placed his main focus on documenting the shifting culture of the Andamans.

On occasion, however, documentary accuracy also offered the opportunity to create a striking image (fig. 18). The most comprehensive account of this photographic agenda is set out in a paper published by the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1896. Here the photographer’s task is the production of “facts about which there can be no question,” and for this “delicate lighting and picturesque photography are not wanted.” Subjects “should be stark naked, a full face and profile view should be taken of each,” either against the recommended checked grid or, if in the field, against a dull or gray background, preferably out of focus (fig. 19). Once more, the Platinotype Company’s cold-bath paper was

recommended, both for ease of use and for permanence.³⁸

The costs of Portman’s ambitions—in both extent and technique—soon began to have an impact on the project, and it became clear that in his enthusiasm he had overreached himself. In 1890, he wrote to his superiors that his intention of supplying the India Office with six complete sets of prints at no cost—a total of 6,595 prints of various sizes from 15 × 12 inches down to 5 × 4 inches—was no longer feasible, and now proposed a fee of nearly 40,000 rupees for the complete series. This was a significant charge, but the change of terms was justified on a number of grounds. The first of these was that the price of platinum had recently doubled within a three-month period, and he had not initially realized how quickly photographic materials became spoiled and wasted in the Andaman climate. The other costs of photographing in the tropics that Portman enumerates are also illuminating: his 15 × 12 inch Wratten glass

plates cost £1 16s. a dozen in England (i.e., 3s. each), but with transport costs and breakages he estimated that they cost him around 5s. each by the time they reached him in India. In addition, he wrote: “No less than four batches of platinotype paper, valued at £14 in England, have gone bad since arriving here. From these examples, and the facts that I am obliged to keep a stock of platinum salt, value £22, in order to keep pace with the British Museum requirements, and that I have spent over £300 in apparatus, &c., it will be seen that the work is a very costly one, much more so, indeed, than I expected.”³⁹

In arguing his case, while acknowledging the additional expense of the platinotype—two-and-one-half times that of an albumen print—Portman once more stressed the platinotype’s virtue of permanency: a point of inestimable value in a unique record of a people who would in a few years be extinct. He also emphasized the fact that given the isolated location of the islands, “No professional photographer would undertake the work except at a very high

price, as I found when in asking Messrs. Bourne and Shepherd's agent who was here in January 1889, to make some lantern slides for me, size 3" × 3", he wanted R[upees]10 each for them, and he would not have the facilities for going amongst the Andamanese, or the special knowledge of their habits that I have." In short, given the "extreme scientific interest . . . taken in these people, the photographs will become in a few years worth more pounds than I am charging rupees."⁴⁰

The Government of India, while acknowledging the importance of Portman's work and happy to offer some support, remained unimpressed by his arguments. It was pointed out that many of Portman's original expenses were due to his own inexperience and suggested that he might follow the common practice of sending his negatives for printing in Calcutta or England: "In this way he would escape the losses due to the spoiling of costly platinotype paper in the climate of Port Blair." The photographs might also initially be printed in silver, in order to assess whether they justified the costly platinum process. In any event, a compromise appears to have been reached, in which Portman supplied a smaller, single series of photographs for the India Office, and not the six sets originally envisaged. Furthermore, the Government of India, if it was required to pay for the series, would be interested only in the photographs of ethnographical interest: "Photographs of scenery are not required."⁴¹ Indeed, the series of surviving paper negatives in the British Museum contains a number of landscape studies from which no prints appear to have been made (see fig. 15).

As with many such impossibly ambitious projects—in this case the photographic record of a complete culture—Portman's work was never completed. In fact, after the productive period up to 1894, his photographic work appears to have tailed off. In 1897 a visitor to the Islands reported: "Mr Portman has a magnificent collection of cameras of all sorts, all arranged with great care in a fine large studio. I doubt if the Survey office here has such a complete battery of appliances for taking pictures, but unfortunately they are lying there almost untouched. With his official duties, and literary work, Mr Portman now finds the days all too short to work at photography."⁴²

Conclusions

In 1899, Portman's long record of ill-health led to his final retirement. His work provides perhaps the most extensive body of work produced in platinum in India, but it must be acknowledged that in terms of both its isolated location and its specialized subject matter, it was somewhat outside

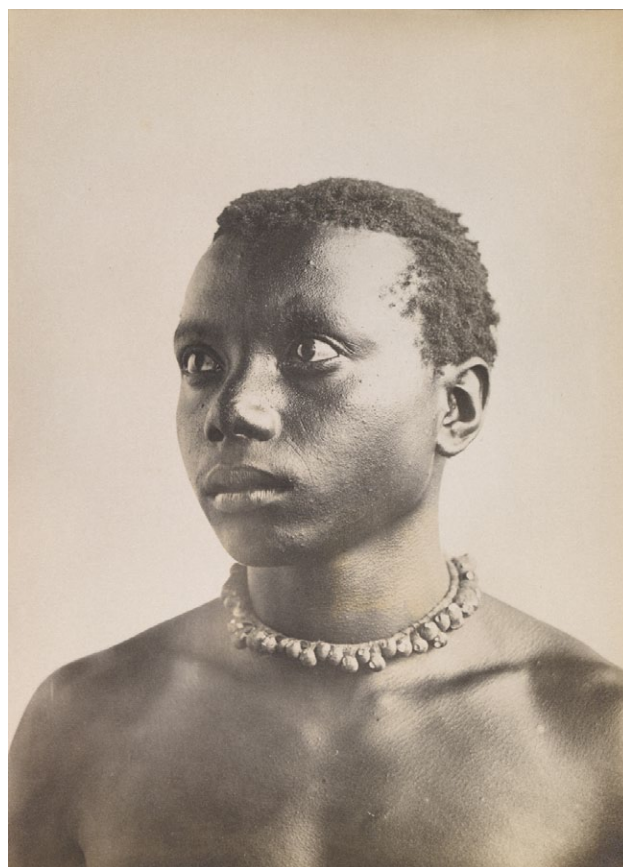


Figure 19. Maurice Vidal Portman, *Portrait of an Andaman Islander*, c. 1890–93. Platinum print, 20.3 × 15.1 cm. British Library, Photo 125/2 (80).

the main run of amateur activity in the subcontinent. The project is also replete with irony: this great scientific project, lauded and supported by contemporary academic authorities, has subsequently been put to no scientific use. It has, however, been the subject of considerable attention as an intriguing if often repellent example of photography's complicity in the service of colonial control. Much of the work is distinctly disturbing to the modern eye: the implicit violence and violation of subjects pinned and restrained against a scale, reduced to data in the service of colonial knowledge, are unarguable. Portman himself saw the Andamanese as little more than undisciplined and recalcitrant children, having the "nature of an English schoolboy of the lower classes, allied to the passions of the mature savage."⁴³ From a purely photographic point of view, however, Portman's work in platinum in a difficult environment remains a remarkable achievement.

These contradictions—paternalist concern allied to undercurrents of violence—are perhaps best summed up by the attitude of one of his charges, an Andamanese named Luke: "He had lived for many years with . . . Portman, and had learnt the Christian theology, the English language,

Hindustani and the sciences of photography and piloting. He told me he had not liked his time in the settlement—‘No fun, and always sickness,’ he said—yet Portman had made pets of the Andamanese, and given them bicycles and champagne, relieved by occasional beatings.”⁴⁴

Acknowledgments

A brief version of this paper was presented at the conference “Platinum and Palladium Photographs” held in Washington, D.C., October 22–23, 2014. The opportunity to examine Portman’s work within the larger context of photography in platinum in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was an eye-opening and inspiring experience, and I am grateful to the distinguished range of speakers who enlarged immeasurably my technical and aesthetic appreciation of the use of this noble metal in photography. But in particular I must express my appreciation of the indefatigable work of Constance McCabe, without whose enthusiasm and determination both the conference and this publication would not have seen the light of day.

Notes

1. “Permanent Prints” 1891, 121. This correspondent also noted that when bromide prints and platinotypes were mounted in an album facing each other, the bromide “turned quite brown and was vanishing into clear white paper.”
2. Much of the book had first appeared over the course of many issues of the *Journal of the Photographic Society of India*. The platinum process was described in Ewing 1894.
3. Among them was Surgeon-Major E. P. Youngerman, whose landscape views and portraits in platinum won the amateurs’ gold medal at the 1898 exhibition of the Photographic Society of India. “Press Notices” 1898, 58.
4. “Our Native Princes” 1899, 162. For a brief account of early photography in Tripura, see Gutman 1982, 90–91.
5. “Our Native Princes” 1899, 162.
6. “Indian Photographers” 1895, 170.
7. “Indian Photographers” 1895, 170. See also Philippa Wright and John Taylor, “P. H. Emerson’s Platinum Prints and Photogravures,” in this volume.
8. “Indian Photographers” 1895, 170.
9. “Indian Photographers” 1895, 170.
10. “Indian Photographers” 1895, 171.
11. “Proceedings” 1892, 30.
12. Frederick Bremner Studio advertisement in an album of Kashmir views issued by Bremner’s studio around 1900.
13. Waterhouse 1898, 104.
14. Waterhouse 1898, 104.

15. Cousens’s interest and skill in photography may have been the result of his father’s profession as a photozincographer.
16. *Proceedings* 1866, 186.
17. Quoted in *Report on the Administration* 1894, 115–16.
18. Quoted in *Report on the Administration* 1894, 115–16.
19. “Notes” 1893, 213.
20. “21st February” 1893, 50.
21. Lamprey 1869, 84–85.
22. Quoted in *Report on the Administration* 1893, 129.
23. Portman 1891, 115–21.
24. Portman 1891, 116.
25. Portman 1891, 116.
26. Portman 1891, 116.
27. Portman 1891, 119.
28. Portman 1893, 125.
29. For a description of the use of the stripping film and roller slide, see “New Model” 1887, 802–3.
30. Portman 1891, 117.
31. Portman 1893, 125.
32. Portman 1894, 213.
33. Portman 1892c, 192–93. For a full account of the career of James Waterhouse, see Falconer et al. 2009, 11–97.
34. Portman 1892c, 191.
35. Portman 1892a, 167.
36. Portman 1892a, 167.
37. Portman 1893, 125.
38. Portman 1896, 76.
39. Maurice V. Portman to Chief Commissioner, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Port Blair, August 30, 1890, Government of India, Home Department Proceedings for October 1890, British Library, shelfmark IOR/P/3685.
40. Portman to Chief Commissioner, August 30, 1890.
41. C. J. Lyall, Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, to the Superintendent, Port Blair, Simla, October 3, 1890, Government of India, Home Department Proceedings for October 1890, British Library, shelfmark IOR/P/3685.
42. “Notes” 1897, 219.
43. Portman 1892b, 152.
44. Quoted in Clifton 1911, 149–50. For a further analysis of Portman’s work within the context of colonial control, and some discussion of the homo-erotic element of Portman’s involvement with the Andamanese, see Sen 2009, 364–79.

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