

TRUE COLOUR OF BLACK AND WHITE

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Images of British Ceylon: 19th Century Photography of Sri Lanka, by Ismeth Raheem and Percy Colin Thome'. Produced for Ismeth Raheem by Times Editions Singapore: March 2000, 155 pp, Rs 3,950.00, ISBN 981 204 778 6

Regeneration: A Reappraisal of Photography in Ceylon 1850-1900, by John Falconer and Ismeth Raheem. Published by the British Council, London: January 2000, 95 pp, Rs 1,000.00, ISBN 0 86355 444 X

I am exceedingly grateful that a master photographer took my wedding photographs using black-and-white film. They nestle in the wedding album in their sharp and contrasting black-and-white glory, while the colour photographs of the conventional photographer affixed alongside have already begun to lose their vitality after less than two decades.

It is a problem that has begun to alarm not only those who want to cherish memories, but curators, archivists and art investors as well. *The London Times* of 11 July 1998 reported in an article titled "Why the past is looking just a little too rosy" that: "Millions of images taken since the invention of modern colour photography are changing because of the way their dyes break down. Just as the 19th century is now viewed in tones of sepia, so future generations may look back on the last three decades of the 20th as the era of purple lawns and red skies."

Such degradation can happen to colour cine film too, as a class of journalism students found out recently when I showed them a blurry, rose-tinted copy of Paul Zils' docu-drama, *Meditation*, made in Ceylon in 1960. In contrast to this almost unwatchable film, the earlier 1950s black-and-white documentaries screened with it, such as Ralph Keene's *Heritage of Lanka*, looked sharp and appealing.

This destructive process takes place because the three dyes used to create a picture fade at different rates, which results in a shift in colour. Not unsurprisingly, the conditions in which a photograph is kept determine how quickly the dyes degrade. For instance, light, heat and humidity – conditions all too apparent in Sri Lanka – are a deadly cocktail for a colour

photograph. Hanging on to negatives is no guarantee either, as they use similar dyes. Little wonder, then, that David Hockney remarked in the introduction to an exhibition of Polaroid photographs several years ago that "colour is fugitive in life, like it is in pictures" and labelled the pictures: 'Not Recommended for Investment.'

For reasons aesthetic as well as practical, black-and-white is still the 'colour' of photography. This thought first struck me years ago on experiencing an exhibition in London by Bill Brandt, the photographer described as "a poet of darkness, who wielded the colour black so successfully that his work should properly be called photography noir." The most recent occasion, however, was on viewing the consequential British Council exhibition of 19th-century photographs of Ceylon entitled "Regeneration."

How fortunate it is that the 19th-century photographer had no option but to work in the black-and-white medium. Never mind the odd resultant sepia-toned photograph. Imagine the frustration of future researchers and historians who wish to examine through photography the social, economic and cultural conditions of the period from the early 1960s, when colour photography became widespread, and a few years from now, when digital photographic processes become more prevalent. They will need to wade through mountains of red-hued photos of the Mahaweli scheme, Gam Udawa projects and the like before coming to a small core of more decipherable and perhaps more representative black-and-white pictures.

The organizers of "Regeneration" had no such limitations to contend with, although they did have to cope with a poorly documented and archived period of photography. Because of the pioneering nature of their research, compilation and presentation, it is apt that this exhibition is recorded – in fact almost reproduced – in a lavish catalogue.

Many catalogues are so limited and adjunct that their existence cannot be justified, other than as a mere annotated list. A precious few, though, are so informative on their subject matter and so extensive in their scope that they are independent publications in their own right. The

"Regeneration" catalogue without doubt falls into the latter category.

Why "Regeneration"? Brett Rogers, deputy director of Visual Arts at the British Council, explains in the Preface: "The title has been chosen to suggest not only the reproductive nature inherent within the medium of photography itself but to underline the scope provided by this unique body of historical images for reassessment by a new generation of Sri Lankan viewers."

So it was encouraging to see at the exhibition Sri Lankans young and old, taking in the landscapes, street scenes, portrayals of industry, and, most importantly, the figures in the landscapes and the subjects of the studio portraiture—their forebears. In doing so, they no doubt wished to connect with the past, but as Rogers remarks:

"Ironically, the power of these photographs is the reverse of what they seem — we may think we approach them for knowledge and understanding of the past, but it is the knowledge we bring to them that makes them relevant today. Whether drawn from official archives, as many of the images in the show are, or from family albums, it is those things which often remain unseen by their original makers which give these images their particular power as historical artefacts."

Looking through the photographs after reading these words, I could not help but seek examples to illustrate this intriguing school of thought. So it is that I suppose the photographer(s) of Charles Scowen & Co. who took the pictures titled 'Study of a Girl with a Vase' and 'Nude Study' (both 1880s) could not have foreseen that, a century later, they would come to epitomize the exploitation of the indigenous female in Ceylon — especially Rudi women — in order to provide Victorian men with pictures of exotic, bare-breasted natives.

On the subject of exploitation, the photographer of W.H. Skeen & Co. who took 'General Sifting of Small Pieces of Pambago' (c. 1880s) likewise could not have foreseen that his picture of children labouring under the gaze of vigilant adult supervisors would come to epitomize the plight of the native child worker at the end of the 19th century.

Then there is the unknown photographer of 'Tea Plantation, Looking towards Adam's Peak' (1870s), who could not have anticipated that his portrayal of the early years of a plantation, when the horrific scars of its destructive making were still all-too-clearly visible, would not come to be regarded as a striking example of economic development, but one of unparalleled environmental disaster.

One further example is 'Cuttings Nos. 180 and 181 with ballast train, Mutara railway.' It was taken in November 1895 by an unknown photographer, who no doubt thought it reflected the industriousness of the colony and the advances in transportation. But to many at the dawn of the 21st century this image is a perfect metaphor for the condition of native workers during the colonial era. Mostly sullen-faced, they are crammed in small numbers in open wagons and only able to travel in one direction.

"There is no doubt that one can read into these images a set of cultural attitudes, beliefs and practices that were shaped by an imperialist mission," Rogers comments. "From the construction of intimate portraits to the framing of grand narrative spectacles, we can see how particular social and aesthetic conventions were inscribed onto their subjects and the way in which the imaginative psycho-geography of the European mind was projected through the practice of photography. Landscapes were domesticated, huge wilderness made accessible and less hostile and racial and ethnic groups surveyed in an attempt to make the exotic familiar to a new, mainly western audience."

This through-the-lens anthropological survey is well represented. Apart from the aforementioned female studies, 'Veddahs' by Charles Scowen & Co. (1875) is of obvious interest, as is a series of four portraits by the same company — 'Malay Girl,' 'Sinhalese Headman,' 'Chelhar Man' and 'Mudaliyar' (1800s) — and 'Tamil Theatrical Group' (1890), by an unknown photographer.

Possibly the most telling social portrait is used for both the front and back cover of the catalogue. By Charles Scowen & Co., and titled 'Street Scene in the Pettah, Colombo' (1880s), it had a long exposure time, and as the human throng below the photographer's vantage point took the opportunity of displaying curiosity in what he was doing. Although the photographer must have cursed the tardiness of the process, the result is advantageous to us, because the sea of upturned yet discernible faces provides a unique portrait of a remarkable, albeit exclusively male, cross-section of working-class society.

"Regeneration" — the catalogue includes over 40 full plates of prints from the exhibition, as well as an illustrative list of all the exhibits. Among the plates are the earliest known examples of photography in Ceylon by Fred Fiebig. His hand-coloured salt prints, such as 'Street Scene, Point de Galle'

and 'Establishment of a Coffee Plantation' (both circa 1852) are therefore of obvious historical importance. The former print, together with 'View in Galle Harbour during Monsoon' (1872), by the Indian company Bourne and Shepherd, adds a stunning visual dimension to the many written descriptions of Galle during its heyday as a port in the mid-19th century. Similarly, the picture 'Jewellers of Galle' (1872) – also by Bourne and Shepherd – provides an excellent record of the work environment, tools, and even the dress of the craftsmen.

Also included in the catalogue are a brief history of 19th century photography in Ceylon, a useful account of the many processes of the early photographic era, and a biographical index of photographers – local and foreign – who worked in Ceylon at the time. The content, together with the quality of the printing, makes this a catalogue that is definitely more than the sum of its parts.

The prime mover, the person who links the "Regeneration" exhibition and catalogue, and the subsequent album *Images of British Ceylon: Nineteenth Century Photography of Sri Lanka*, is the art historian Ismeth Raheem. The research and documentation of this subject has spanned many years, taking Raheem on an often-frustrating quest. However, it reaches a highly satisfactory culmination with the latter work, in which his perseverance and scholarship is evident.

Images of British Ceylon is co-authored by Percy Colin-Thome, authority on the Burghers. Why such a pairing? In their Preface, the authors draw the reader's attention to the fact that this is the second volume in a series begun with the controversial *People In-between: The Burghers and the Middle Class in the Transformations within Sri Lanka 1790-1960* (Ratmalana, 1989). The link between these publications is the study of the middle class in the colonial period, and both, it is noted, are therefore necessarily Colombo-centric.

Because of this specific focus, *Images of British Ceylon* mostly complements the "Regeneration" catalogue. While there is some inevitable duplication of information in parts of the text – in the history and biographical index, for instance – the photographs are largely distinct. In the final analysis, now there are two significant works on the early history of photography in Ceylon, where there were none just a few months ago.

Images of British Ceylon includes several illustrated essays. The core one expands on the brief history contained in the "Regeneration" catalogue. It necessarily begins with the unveiling of the daguerreotype process in August 1839, interest in which spread rapidly around the world. In India,

for instance, the process was made available within three months of its discovery. It took a little longer for it to percolate to Ceylon – three years or so – but, as the authors point out, this is in sharp contrast to the introduction of television to the country, which arrived almost half a century after the first transmissions in 1936. The comparison is not all that apt, of course, for the photographic medium had obvious benefits at the cusp of colonial expansionism, whereas the power of television represented a threat in post-Independence years.

The essay traces the history of photography in Ceylon from its very beginnings in the early 1840s, when the first daguerreotypists set up studios in Colombo and Kandy to specialize in middle class portraiture. (At up to 10 pounds each, such portraits were beyond the means of the poor.) It goes on to sketch the careers of the early exponents – such as J. Barrow, who was one of if not the very first. James Parting, the original 'official photographer' with his coverage of the cutting of the first sod of the Ceylon Railway Company's operation, and S. Slinn Skeen, who initiated a Skeen family connection with the formative years of photography in Ceylon. Indeed, the firm W.H. Skeen & Co. is considered important enough to warrant devoting a separate section to its history.

By the 1850s-60s, the potential of Ceylon had attracted a number of photographers from Europe and North America, who jostled with the resident British and Ceylonese to claim a share of the expanding photographic documentation market. Among them was the already mentioned Fred Fiebig, whose photographs of urban settlements, street scenes and buildings are of great interest to architectural researchers. In addition, there were two pioneers of 19th century photojournalism – Samuel Bourne, a great landscape photographer of the Indian subcontinent who revealed the Himalayas to the world, and John Thompson, who did likewise with Angkor Wat.

Considerable attention is deservedly paid to the most famous visiting 19th century photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron – one of the earliest pioneers of photography as an art form at a time when this concept was not altogether accepted. Cameron was a portraitist who had taken classical pictures of the cream of Victorian society and introduced several techniques designed to heighten the expressiveness of portraits, such as soft-focus, the narrow close-up and harsh lighting. There was much criticism of her work, no doubt partly because she was an interloper in a male preserve, but she was also simply ahead of the times, and too experimental to be appreciated. She travelled to Ceylon in 1875, and until her death in 1879 was domiciled in Kalutara, where she took

photographs mainly of Ceylonese women. Regrettably, though, only one of these portraits is featured.

The 1870s, we learn, were also notable for the contributions of the lesser-known, such as Joseph Lawton, who spent several years photographing the island's then remote archaeological sites before succumbing to malaria. There was also Charles Scowen, whose beautifully lit and elegantly composed photographs are considered the best of his era and much admired by collectors today. Yet, surprising to learn, such was the competition in the photographic trade that the talented Scowen was forced out of business after nearly 20 years of creative work.

European domination of the trade was eroded towards the end of the century with the introduction of more practical equipment and cheaper and more efficient processes. Photography went to the bazaar, where indigenous practitioners could now offer a portrait for just a few shillings. Foremost among this new breed was the gifted A.W. Andree, who helped to foster photography among the urban elite. Indeed, it was from Andree that Lionel Wendt, the country's greatest 20th century photographer, received his very first lessons in the art.

The main photographs are presented in a section called Views, and are grouped under headings. 'Middle Class Mansions' covers the gamut, from the palatial Alfred House, symbol of Ceylonese capitalism, to the more simplistic planter's bungalow, outpost of British colonialism. 'The Fort of Colombo' is remarkable because it presents little-seen views of the city (circa 1864), a few years before the old Dutch Fort was demolished. 'The Harbour and its Environs' features a noteworthy photograph of Colombo with sailing ships at anchor (1866), and a panoramic view of the city with the port in the distance (1902). And 'Streets and Urban Landscape' has, in particular, some fascinating photographs of Chatham Street and Queen Street (both 1868-70).

Despite the middle-class emphasis of *Images of British Ceylon*, 'The Working Class Situation in Colombo' explores the theme through street pictures as 'Rickshawman' by A.W. Plate (dated 1926, this is surely beyond the purview of the book), as well as 'Goldsmiths at Work, Jaffna' and 'Cinnamon Peelers,' both by W.L. Skene (1880). Similarly, although it is Colombo centric, the sections titled 'Communications in British Ceylon' and 'Urban Outposts' give a welcome wider visual perspective. The former is characterized by bridges, canals, coaches, carts and railways, while the latter consists of views of Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Galle and Trincomalee.

Detailed sociological interpretation of the photographs is provided in a section titled 'Notes on the Views.' This is different in tone to much of the rest of the text, revealing the influence on the publication of Michael Roberts, who, together with Raheem and Colin Thorne, authored the first volume, *People In-between*. So it is that the reader is introduced, for instance, to the concept of Galle Face and its environs as symbolic space – an arena for the late 19th century middle class to display status and power. It has to be said, however, that this concept is better illustrated in the pairing and verse of Hamilton and Passon. Nevertheless, this section is crammed with fascinating information on diverse socio-economic aspects of the period.

Images of British Ceylon is marred by the indifferent reproduction of some of the photographs (compared to "Regeneration") and an inexcusable number of typographical errors – especially where the names of places and people are concerned. That this extends to an elementary error in a major heading is lamentable in such a prestigious publication. However, lapses of this nature cannot obscure the significance or detract from the ultimate readability of *Images of British Ceylon*. It represents a long overdue addition to the bibliographies of social studies and the visual arts of the island. A companion volume covering the period 1900-1948 is now required. ■

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