The cataloguing and indexing of the photographic collection of the Royal Commonwealth Society

John Falconer

Photographic Cataloguer, Royal Commonwealth Society

Describes the history and scope of the Royal Commonwealth Society's photographic collection, the approach to and working methods of cataloguing and indexing it, and the particular problems involved in maintaining a photographic collection, especially those of identification, dating, and conservation.

The richness of the historical heritage contained in old photographs has come to be valued to any extent only in the last few years, and various bodies and institutions now find themselves with large, often physically unwieldy archives of photographs of considerable importance and also, incidentally, often of considerable financial value. The fact that in the past photograph collections have often been a largely disregarded aspect of a library or archive's resources has caused the contents to be uninvestigated and therefore not able to be made available to scholars and researchers. The special factors involved in organizing, storing and using these often fragile prints pose problems that necessitate treating photographs as a separate entity from the main body of a library or archive of manuscript material. The inherent vulnerability of photographic emulsions to decay and chemical decomposition (problems often exacerbated by the original mounting of prints into albums and on card with unsuitable glues) has not been entirely overcome by modern conservation techniques, but enough has been done to enable most institutions at least to minimize harmful storage methods while still keeping material available for inspection and use. The ever-increasing demand for photographs by publishers, scholars and the visual media generally has led a number of libraries to contemplate programmes of comprehensive cataloguing and indexing, several of which are in progress now.

The scope of the collection

Origins and size. Founded as the Colonial Society in 1868 as 'a place of meeting for all gentlemen connected with the Colonies and British India' and as a centre for the study of colonial affairs, the Royal Commonwealth Society has built up alongside its library a large collection of photographs which was early seen as an integral part of any comprehensive survey of the concerns of Empire. In 1896 and for several succeeding years the Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute included appeals for members to present to the society photographs of the scenery, peoples and architecture of the various colonies. This resulted in the donation of collections of various sizes from individual members, ranging from loose bundles of amateur prints to albums compiled from the work of professional photographers in various locations. Thomas Joshua Alldridge, for instance, a Travelling Commissioner in the Sherbro hinterland of Sierra Leone in the 1890s and a Corresponding Secretary to the Royal Colonial Institute, appears to have responded to this appeal and presented photographs taken by himself which give a detailed record of native types, costumes and artefacts in the Protectorate in the last years of the nineteenth century. Many of these prints were also used as illustrations in his own books on the colony.

A considerable amount of material had already been given before the 1890s, however, particularly by official bodies: commissioners of international exhibitions often donated collections illustrating the landscape, architecture and engineering triumphs of the colonies, generally bound in back-breaking heavy leather albums: a collection of photographs showing the state and extent of the New South Wales railway system in 1887 falls into this category, as does an album recording the stages of the construction of the Colombo Breakwater, completed in 1885.

Another major category is the several large individual collections which form a numerically significant proportion of the collection as a whole. Perhaps the most impressive of these is the Queen Mary collection which contains around 4000 prints and chronicles the visits to India of the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1905-06 and (as King George V and Queen Mary) in 1911-12: these albums, the Queen's own collection, range from presentation volumes compiled by professional pho-
Figure 1. Portrait of Sir John Coode (1816–1892), harbour engineer and Member of Council of the Royal Colonial Institute 1881–92. Photograph by John Fergus, Largs. From the Society's collection of members' portraits.

tographers recording the formal events of the visit, to informal snapshots taken by members of the royal party.

Another large collection compiled by an individual is that of Sir Henry Hesketh Bell, recording his career as Governor of Uganda, Northern Nigeria, the Leeward Islands and Mauritius. These photographs are stuck into scrapbooks alongside newspaper clippings and other ephemera, and the Library possesses a large collection of his letters and other writings which have been valuable in identifying and dating many of the prints. The Library also holds the important collection of historical photographs donated by the now-defunct British Association of Malaya.

In the early years of the society, until the mid-1920s, the Royal Colonial Institute amassed a series of portraits of its members which are inserted in heavy leather albums and number around 3000 cabinet-size portraits. This cross-section of the Society's history ranges from men of influence such as colonial governors to the utterly obscure about whom little is known, or indeed likely to be discovered. Figure 1 is one of these, a portrait of Sir John Coode, the great harbour engineer.

The photographs collected by the Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee, found gathering dust in the Society's strongroom by the Librarian, were taken to make lantern slides for use in lectures promoting knowledge of the Empire. In tours made between 1907–10, around 3000 photographs were taken by A. Hugh Fisher (see figure 2), and supplemented by prints solicited through official channels. Although Fisher was originally a painter and was only taught photography specifically for the purpose of making these tours, his work, competently performed and accompanied by detailed written annotations, forms a valuable record of the look of the Empire in the early years of the century, and is an important example of the use of photography as an educational tool. The accompanying details are a joy to the indexer and an all too rare model of the sort of information which should ideally be attached to historical photographs.

The Royal Commonwealth Society collection totals about 50,000 prints, a large but manageable collection which is added to when possible. The present price of photographs on the open market precludes major purchases, but by arrangement with the Colonial Records Project in Oxford, photographs which generally lie outside their range of interests are when possible passed on to the Society, and this has resulted in the donation of the collection of Sir William Battershill, in many ways comparable to Sir Henry Hesketh Bell's as a comprehensive record of a colonial administrator's career. Photographs mounted in printed books, whether as original prints or through photo-mechanical processes such as Woodburytypes, Autotypes and carbon prints are not included in this total. Such volumes as Francis Frith's views in Egypt taken in the mid-1850s, or the series of portraits of Indian rulers included in J. Tallboys Wheeler's history of the 1877 Delhi Durbar are, however, being catalogued as part of the photograph collection, and amount to several hundred prints.

Cataloguing: approach and working methods

The cataloguing of the Royal Commonwealth Society collection follows as closely as possible the general system operating within the Library, while differing in those respects which purely illustrative material demands. Printed matter in the Library is arranged within geographical divisions with numbers allocated to them. Thus books referring to the Commonwealth in general are grouped under the number 1, those on India under 2, the Far East under 3 and Africa under 4. A more detailed numerical classification exists for the countries within these general headings. Thus, while Africa is 4, 43
refers to Nigeria, 446 to Sierra Leone, 447 to the Gambia, and so on into more specific and defined locations. This geographical arrangement is followed also within the photograph collection, with the addition of the prefix Y30, the code specifying photographic and illustrated material. Thus, a reference Y30446 indicates photographs from Sierra Leone. The first stage in the cataloguing and indexing process is the making out of a card for each item, the 'item' meaning any batch or collection of photographs from a single source. Thus one item might comprise three or four loose prints or an album containing several hundred photographs. Each separate item is given an alphabetical coding following the geographical reference, and a number following this indicates the print number within the item. Thus a reference Y30446B/10 refers to plate 10 of album B of the Sierra Leone collection. The general cards made out for each item record the basic known information, such as number and type of print, approximate date, and, where known, photographer, donor and date of accession. The storage location is also given, for the use of the Library staff. Items are given their alphabetical reference in chronological sequence in the first place, although new accessions, which receive the next available letter, will necessarily dislocate this arrangement in some cases. These cards therefore form basic reference to the resources of the collection, and can be used to give a very rough outline of the amount of material held from a given country.

On the completion of the project the user will be able to approach the collection in two ways: on a general level through the basic reference cards alluded to, or through the detailed indexes, both of which will direct him to the detailed print catalogue which will in turn give sufficient detail for a decision to be made as to which albums or batches of prints he might wish to see. This detailed print listing forms the central portion of the catalogue as a whole, and aims to provide a full description of the print itself and to give any useful or illuminating historical background. Taking as an example an album of 39 prints of events connected with the proclamation of the British Protectorate over South-East New Guinea in 1884, the introduction, as well as recording the general statistics of the album, attempts to outline the circumstances of the mission as a whole, its purpose and duration and the personalities involved. The photographer of this particular album is unknown, but internal evidence indicates the involvement of more than one photographer, and it is stated in one source that two men were brought up from Sydney for the occasion. The album is not, as has been stated earlier, the work of the photographer John William Lindt, who did not visit the area until the following year. It is considered worth recording these admittedly fragmentary and negative clues which may at

Figure 2. View of The Flats, Edmonton, Alberta, c. 1908. Photograph by A. Hugh Fisher for the Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee.
some future date help to identify the photographers. Following this general outline is a print-by-print description of the album. Each print is given a title; where available, that found with the print. If none exists, a title is composed for the catalogue, any new caption being enclosed in square brackets. After the title, size and condition are noted. There then follows the main print description; a general description of the scene illustrated is given together with identifications, where possible, of the people seen in the photograph. In figure 3, for instance, Commodore Erskine is seen reading the Protectorate Proclamation from the verandah of the Port Moresby Mission Station on 6 November 1884, with the commanders of HMS Nelson and Espiegle standing beside him. The missionary W. G. Lawes, not clearly seen in this print, translated the proclamation into the Motu language, and his wife is the only European woman visible on the verandah. For an album such as this the research involved is fairly straightforward, as the expedition is described in detail in Charles Lyne’s New Guinea, published in 1885. Indeed, several of the photographs are reproduced as illustrations in Lyne’s book, and from this it is possible to date precisely and arrange the photographs in chronological sequence. Of this particular flag-raising ceremony Lyne, who was covering the event for a Sydney newspaper, states that it ‘had the effect of impressing them all with some sense of the importance of the ceremony being performed’. This is an interesting example of the way a photograph can be interpreted and it is worth recording too the impression of another, less awed witness to the occasion. Hugh Hastings Romilly, who had mistakenly performed the same ceremony (subsequently declared invalid) some days before, noted, ‘I don’t think I was ever so hot in my life, and we were very glad when it was over. The natives, who were beginning to get accustomed to seeing the flag hoisted, were apathetic, and only a few stragglers turned up. The distribution of knives and tobacco the preceding day amused them far more.’

These New Guinea photographs illustrate well documented occasions which can be described and placed in historical context by a fairly straightforward recourse to readily available printed sources. The amount of time which can be profitably spent on individual prints can
often be difficult to determine, and inevitably relies to a large extent on a subjective appraisal of the likelihood of any information being revealed and, if so, whether the potential historical value of the print is likely to justify the time so spent. One interesting photograph taken around 1910, for instance, has not been positively identified despite consultation with a number of authorities over the years. The costumes pin the locality down to the Oil Rivers area of Nigeria, and it possibly shows Chief Frederick Jaja, son of the King of Opobo, but no positive evidence has been found to substantiate this apart from an inconclusive likeness to the few other known portraits of the man. Chance however played a part in the identification of a figure who had similarly evaded identification for several years, when the same portrait was found reproduced in Allister Macmillan’s Red book of West Africa, published in 1920. It shows Overamu, the King of Benin ousted by the British in 1897 in exile in Calabar around 1912.

The identification of types of print and processes will supply some indication of date, although the introduction and spread of new techniques was uneven, and outmoded processes often continued to be used in the more far-flung locations when they had been largely superseded elsewhere. Thus the daguerreotype, first publicly announced in 1839, is unlikely to be found after 1860, while salt prints from calotype or talbotype negatives had generally fallen into disuse by the early 1860s. The commonest type of print in nineteenth-century photography was the albumen print, in general use from 1850 until the 1890s, while the very glossy prints made on collodio-chloride paper were introduced only in 1888 and continued in general use until about 1910, or sometimes later. It should be borne in mind that an older negative might have been printed at a later date on a type of paper not available when the photograph was actually taken. Some other factors are useful in the dating and identification of prints. The careful examination of the whole of the print surface with a magnifying glass often reveals valuable information in the form of advertisements and placards which may appear in the photograph. For example, a view of the offices of the Cape Argus in Cape Town can be accurately dated to mid-1857 from a billboard announcing the fall of Delhi. The same procedure is also useful when the names of shops or other commercial premises occur in the photograph. Details and dates of proprietorship can be found in the commercial sections of the almanacs and directories issued in most of the colonies. References to these almanacs can also help to identify unnamed streets and towns, if a shopkeeper’s sign can be found and the general area is known.

In portrait groups costume, of course, gives a general indication of period, but as with photographic processes, abandoned styles often lingered on in out-of-the-way places. Formal uniformed portraits are often more rewarding both in terms of period and the number of identifications that can be made. In this respect it is always worth cultivating experts on medals and uniforms. In a print from the Hesketh Bell collection the Coronation Medal worn by Bell dates the photograph to post-1911 and shows that it must have been taken during his period as Governor of the Leeward Islands, from 1912–15. Working on the assumption that the group shown represents the Legislative Council of the Leeward Islands, it is possible to attempt some individual identifications. Besides Hesketh Bell, two figures wear the C.M.G. Of the four members of the Legislative Council who held this award during the period, a figure standing in the back row can be identified as Lieutenant Colonel Wilfred Bennett Davidson Houston, Commissioner of Montserrat. Davidson Houston can be identified both from the medals he wears relating to various African campaigns and from the fact that, as a member of the Royal Colonial Institute, his portrait is included in the Society’s collection. Another holder of the C.M.G., Sir Thomas Laurence Roxburgh, can be identified from portraits in other sources. The absence of the fourth holder of the C.M.G., John Alder Burdon, from the picture, dates the photograph to the meeting held in March 1914, the only occasion during this period that Burdon was recorded as absent in the official report. By a process of elimination most of the other figures in the group can also be identified.

**Compiling the four indexes**

This detailed catalogue can be approached from the indexes being prepared as the catalogue manuscript is typed up. These are divided into four separate categories: a portrait index, a photographer index, and geographical and subject indexes. The first two of these are relatively straightforward.

The **portrait index**. For this, a card is made out for each individual appearing in a photograph. The possibility of making such an index selective was briefly considered, and rejected as creating more problems than it solves: the criteria for judging who is or is not historically significant are practically impossible to formulate, and there are numerous instances of figures whose importance has not become apparent for several years. This is particularly so in the case of non-Europeans, as historical studies start to give more emphasis to their contribution. A selective system would also leave the user in doubt over marginal cases. Given that all identified figures are to be recorded, there then arises the problem of how much biographical information should be included on each card. With eminent figures such as colonial governors a brief biographical *résumé* along the lines of a *Who was who* entry is used, giving known dates, education, major appointments held, events with which they were associated, and publications, if any. Occasionally, cross-references to other figures represented in the collection are made, and where applicable an asterisk is used beside an event or a post held, to indicate the period when the
photograph was taken. At the other extreme, when no biographical information can be found, one is reduced to stating the approximate date and location of the photograph. Additional information can be added to these cards if it becomes available at a later date.

The wide range of biographical sources on Empire and Commonwealth figures used in the compilation of these cards is worth noting: as well as the very detailed national biographical dictionaries produced by Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, there are a number of fine dictionaries of more restricted scope which are monuments to scrupulous and dedicated scholarship and have been freely drawn upon. D. G. Crawford's *Roll of the Indian Medical Service* and Peterkin, Johnston and Drew’s *Commissioned Officers in the Medical Service of the British Army* are two particularly good examples from one field. For missionaries, there is the register of the Church Missionary Society and the even more detailed volume for the London Missionary Society. The careers of civil servants in colonial administrations are less evenly documented, the civil service lists for the Cape of Good Hope and Natal, for instance, confining themselves to minutely detailed records of posts held while in government employment.

The Southern Nigeria lists however, also record date of birth, place of education, qualifications, previous activities and periods of leave; and this sort of detail is also found in the lists for Ceylon, Hong Kong, and Malaya. These latter are particularly useful in dating prints since it is often possible to pinpoint the time when all the figures in a group were present in a particular location.

Useful biographies of consular and diplomatic officials can be found in the *Foreign Office lists*, and these also include the date of death for officials previously in the service. The *Colonial Office lists* also include biographies of selected individuals, although figures above a certain level only are given an entry. Colonial officials appearing in none of these sources can generally be traced through the civil establishment lists which appeared in the yearly *Blue books* of statistics issued by each colony. By following individuals through year by year an outline of their period of service and posts held in a particular colony can be constructed. This is a time-consuming exercise and it is not generally practicable to pursue figures from one colony to another unless the place of transfer is specifically stated. For those altogether outside government employment a run of commercial directories can often supply Christian names to initials, periods of residence at a particular place, and occupation.

This of course assumes that the figures have been correctly identified in the first place. The difficulties and pitfalls of correct identification are illustrated in the work done on a photograph showing a levee held at Government House, Entebbe, by the historian of East Africa, H. B. Thomas. From his own knowledge of the people portrayed he was able to make some identifications, while dates of medals awarded to others helped pin down the occasion; a process further narrowed down by consulting official gazettes for the arrival and dates of leave of various of the officials. Correspondence with surviving members of the Uganda administration of the period supplied further names, although there were finally several confidently attributed identifications which conflicted with one another. The research 'may serve', as Thomas wrote in *The Uganda journal*, 'as a cautionary tale, so that every reader will see to it that any photographs, above all of groups, in his possession are forthwith dated and named', a *cri de coeur* echoed by every indexer of photographs. The amount of time devoted to this one picture cannot, however, be expanded to cover a whole collection. There are no doubt voluminous press reports covering the gathering at Government House, Bombay, in late 1905, (figure 4), but, were it not for the fact that individual identifications are provided, with a key in the published accounts of the Prince and Princess of Wales' tour, it would be an enormous task to name each figure.

Other pitfalls for the cataloguer and indexer may be pieces of information which at first seem helpful. Thus a page of prints showing Indian racial types and trades is dated 1880 in the hand of the unknown compiler of the album. In fact this must relate to the date of the owner's visit to India, since Samuel Bourne, photographer of the top print, was in the sub-continent only from 1863-70, and the lower two prints, by the firm of Shepherd and Robertson, date from about 1863. Occasionally the photograph itself is misleading. One print purports to show the meeting held at Pangkor in 1874 which led to the installation of a British Resident in Perak and was the beginning of direct British administration in the Malay States. It has been used as such in many published histories, but there are a number of oddities about the print. It is strange that none of the Malay parties to the treaty are present; the figure standing beside the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Andrew Clarke, is undoubtedly James Birch, the first Resident of Perak, but there is no other record of his having attended the meeting; and the unnatural posture of many of the figures in the group is suspicious. The photograph appears in fact to be a carefully made up montage of the participants in the affair, composed at a later date.

*Index of photographers.* The second index contains names and details of the photographers whose work is represented in the collection. Information on many of these figures is rather more difficult to come by: considerable research has been done on the better-known European figures of nineteenth-century photography, but lack of material has prevented similar attention being given to commercial photographers in more distant
locations. In the main, the major sources of information are commercial almanacs and newspapers. The information supplied is generally meagre, but it is often possible to follow the commercial career of a photographer from his first listing in one town to his disappearance from the scene. The advertisements contained in the directories often give an indication of the speciality of the photographer, and in the case of such firms as W. L. H. Skeen & Co, the whole history of the business can be traced in the Ceylon Almanacs from their first arrival in the island, their expansion and changes of address through to their dissolution in the early years of the present century. The details of firms of commercial photographers also are sometimes included in the Twentieth century impressions of... series which covered many of the colonies: these, while useful, must be approached with caution, as the entries were presumably written by the subjects themselves and there is some tendency to exaggerate the ages of their businesses. The seaports of India and Ceylon, for instance, calmly records that, 'Messrs. Bourne and Shepherd began their activities in the following year, 1840. A few years later Talbot patented the calotype'. This dates the founding of the firm to some 23 years before Samuel Bourne set foot in India, when he was in fact three years old. Another, rarer, source of error may be a name embossed on a print: these sometimes refer to the paper manufacturer rather than the photographer, and it was some time before it became apparent that the seemingly ubiquitous B. F. K. Rives, who appeared to have photographed in Jamaica, India and the Far East, was in fact the name of a paper manufacturer.

Index of geographical locations. Our third index is generally straightforward, although problems may arise as to the amount of detail to be included. Catalogue cards are typed with three headings along the top line; the first entry for country, the second for state, province or district, and the third for the town or more specialized location illustrated. The cards are filed in alphabetical order by the first heading, within that by alphabetical order to the second heading, and the same for the third, largely following the geographical indexing used for printed material in the library. Thus a user looking for photographs of Sydney will look up New South Wales within the Australian section, and for Sydney in alphabetical sequence within that heading. The indexing of geographical locations is made easier as a large number of items are concerned with only one place, and large groups of prints can thus be accommodated under one heading. The indexing of more detailed locations, such as streets within towns, has generally not been attempted,
since this information will be found in the main print catalogue and would lead to an unnecessary duplication of information.

The subject index. Finding a suitable method for compiling a subject index is the most complicated problem. No generally accepted system for classifying illustrated material exists that can be easily applied to the particular needs of a specialized collection, and the only reasonable basis on which to proceed is in terms of catering for the known requirements of the users of such a collection. The subject headings that have a place in the Royal Commonwealth Society index, such as Government Houses, or durbars, could be redundant in other collections. As with the geographical index, subject cards are arranged with three main headings, moving from the general subject to the specific location of the photograph. To take a straightforward example, a researcher looking for photographs of cocoa production in Grenada would first look under the heading CROPS, within that in alphabetical sequence to COCOA, and within that, also in alphabetical sequence, to GRENADA, ending with the reference to a photograph. Similarly, a user looking for pictures of sheep-farming in New Zealand would look from LIVESTOCK to SHEEP to NEW ZEALAND. On the whole, as with the geographical index, entries are intended to be brief and general, as detailed descriptions are available in the main catalogue. Also, to users conversant with the Library system of classification, the reference number of the print will in many cases identify the geographical location. More abstract activities are rather more difficult to classify, and the subjects most often asked for generally seem to fall into a no-man's-land of categories which cannot be adequately or precisely classified by any existing system. A popular demand is for photographs of Europeans in the colonies being, as it were, 'colonial'. The only way around this is to direct users to more concrete headings which are likely to contain the sort of material they seek. Thus a heading such as LEISURE, which includes such sub-headings as picnics, parties, hunting, and other social events, is likely to cover photographs conveying general atmosphere as well as specific subjects. A list of the subject headings must of course be available.

Another major problem is deciding the amount of detail to be included in the subject indexes. A subject heading such as ETHNIC GROUPS would swiftly reach physically unmanageable proportions if no discrimination were employed and all photographs that included various racial types were listed. The most practical way of dealing with this is to record only those photographs on which a representative of an identifiable racial group is a predominant part of the print. A useful way of determining this is to consider the photographer's intentions in taking the photograph. Thus a picture of Australian aborigines clearly merits indexing as such, as would a group of Bundu devils from Sierra Leone. A group of Creole citizens who happen to figure in, say, a Sierra Leone street scene would not be individually indexed under this heading. Architecture also poses problems of detail and selectivity, and we have adopted what we hope will be a reasonably satisfactory compromise. Types of buildings well represented in the collection and often asked for by researchers have been given their own subject headings: into this category come such buildings as government houses, post offices, bungalows and railway stations. Less important buildings have been grouped under either of the two headings, PUBLIC BUILDINGS—such as hotels, and PRIVATE BUILDINGS, which includes various types of private residence.

The negative collection

Finally, a word about the creation of a collection of archival negatives. The liability of photographs to deterioration and eventual fading highlights the importance of attempting some sort of conservation work if the prints are to be usable in the future. The noting of the condition of prints in the main catalogue allows valuable photographs which are particularly at risk to be isolated and repaired, remounted or rephotographed. A full-scale conservation programme is financially impossible for most archives, but an important and useful step in the right direction can be to copy as much of the collection as possible and incorporate these copy negatives in the main collection. While a modern copy negative cannot reproduce the quality of a nineteenth-century photograph, it can at least preserve the historical information contained in the photograph. Most bodies build up their collections of such negatives by charging users for the making of print and negative and retaining the negative for their own files. This procedure is followed by the Royal Commonwealth Society, and copy negatives are stored in straightforward numerical sequence, the number also being noted in the main catalogue as new negatives are added.

This is necessarily a very abbreviated and sketchy account of an important collection encompassing 130 years of Imperial and Commonwealth history, but I hope that it indicates something not only of the way in which this material is being catalogued, but also of the interest and documentary value of photographic archives in general.

Cryptic note discovered in the notebooks of Constance Fenimore Woolson, perhaps referring to Henry James:

'He is interested in indexes,' said H. with profound stupefaction.

(Quoted in Henry James: the middle years by Leon Edel; Hart-Davis, 1963.)