

Overexposed: Looking around Photographic Texts and Images in the Archive

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibilities of studying photographs which cannot be seen and suggests that this opportunity leads to new ways of looking at photographic images. It proposes that the term 'exposure' is a useful one to explain how archival power dynamics attempt to place limits on what can be seen, particularly when these effects are exaggerated by solely digital remote access. The focus of the paper is a photograph held in the British Library. It was created during a 1902 hunting trip in Hyderabad, India, taken by Lord George Curzon (1859-1925), former Viceroy of India. Alternative versions of the photograph are drawn on to demonstrate how the archive constructs the event and supports Curzon's narrative. Building on this, a copy is made from a digitised version of the original photograph and overexposed, making visible a different image.

Introduction

This article is about a photograph which I have not seen. I have looked at two reproductions of its image but have never seen the physical print which is the subject of this paper; a distinction which frames my decision not to include an image of the photograph below. The photograph is in an album inside the British Library and is part of the Curzon Collection (1876-1904). Lord George Curzon of Kedleston (1859-1925) travelled Asia extensively and was a prominent British politician, most famous for his role as Viceroy of India (1899-1905) and British Foreign Secretary (1919-1924). Individuals

are always engaged simultaneously in the sociohistorical process and the construction of its narrative (Trouillot 1995: 24) and individuals such as Curzon had the resources and desire to contribute significantly to the creation of their own historical record, with the intention that it could be seen in the future. The Curzon Collection contains nearly 1500 documents and 89 photograph albums previously belonging to the Viceroy, a record he initially collated himself and now organised by the British Library.

Existing images and written works about Curzon largely support imperial perspectives of the past. Powerful individuals who were active in colonisation and its perpetuation are over-represented in the historical record, but it remains a vital question how their actions can be appropriately accounted for while they are de-centred. It is necessary to re-centre the individuals who have been marginalised in archival records such as the Curzon Collection to counter imperial history-telling. This article proposes 'exposure' as a method to redress this balance and make visible an alternative narrative. It utilises photographic documents created from a photograph of a 1902 hunting trip in Hyderabad, India, to draw out some of the tensions between archival categories and the ambiguous position of the photograph. In doing so, this paper utilises both 'text' and 'image' in combination to approach the photographic in a novel way. Drawing on the Finding Aid for the Curzon Collection and two reproductions of the image in published books, I identify a slippage in the British Library's written record of the photograph which reinforces Curzon's narrative of the event. Building on the copies of the photographs, I create another of my own, exposing it further and undermining the existing visual record.

A Theory of Exposure

The webpage dedicated to the Collection provides catalogue information about the albums' provenance, including details about the Collection's Custodial History, explaining that it was transferred to the India Office Library

and Records in 1976 and that further material was acquired in 1992.¹ When working with the physical materials, further details about the acquisition of these albums might be available, but when working solely with the website this remains unclear. The Coronavirus Pandemic and its resulting restrictions have meant that throughout my PhD I have had little to no in-person access to archival material. When Britain's first national lockdown began in March 2020, I was initially left with no images to look at. I increasingly wondered what a thesis about photographs which the author had not seen might look like. This article forms a first attempt at writing about a photograph I am yet to see.

Writing about the past is constructed within and around the limits of the material available, as well as individual researchers' positionalities (Ghosh 2005: 27). The Library collection was originally formed in the eighteenth century as part of the British Museum but became a separate institution in 1973. While the Library in its present form was established after the formal end of the British Empire, the formation of its collections has been shaped by imperial constructions of knowledge. The British Library's archive holds material created from the documentation of British rule in India from the India Office Records. For archaeological researchers using archives in the place of field work, "the form of the archive itself...how it is organized, labelled and accessed, is something that has a direct relationship to the creation, form and possibilities of archaeological knowledge" (Baird and McFadyen 2014: 16).

When accessing archives remotely, the material being studied is changed further by the different physical context. Achille Mbembe (2002: 19) argues that coloniality is embedded in the physical structures of archives, which de-

1 British Library, 'Browse Collections (Archives and Manuscripts): Curzon Collection (1876-1904)', *British Library*, website: http://hviewer.bl.uk/IamsHViewer/Default.aspx?mdark=ark:/81055/vdc_100025862941.0x00059a&_ga=2.103008963.272164174.1625751481-1682257516.1623682590&_gac=1.117107060.1625568337.CjwKCAjw_o-HBhAsEiwANqYhp5oq7SB5DhduzVfHMzvx7f16L01eWfQ1R6oyygdGB-WPnPOUqxvCSJxoCx4gQAvD_BwE, accessed 30 April 2021.

rive their power from their ‘architectural dimension’. Allan Sekula (1986) and Gillian Rose (2000) highlight the physical and bodily experience of the archive on the part of the researcher. Despite the closure of archives during national lockdowns, many researchers in the Global North still had greater access to related materials than those completing research from the Global South usually do. The digitisation of collections offers the possibility of much greater access for individuals who cannot physically visit the archives which hold them, but the limitations of digital reproductions complicate this (Rekrut 2014; Sassoon 2007). This paper plays on the current lack of physical access to archives by embracing this scenario. Looking ‘around’ rather than *at* the photograph, I use archival information and copies of the image to think about seeing the photograph despite not being able to look at it.

Like the archive, photographs are similarly ‘unfinished’ and *unstill*, as Mark Knight and Lindsay McFadyen (2019) have argued powerfully, demonstrating how different timescales are simultaneously present in photographic images. The photographic object is not still either. Like any artefact, it is slowly changing, and the amount of light it is exposed to is crucial to this process. Exposure is what creates the photographic image, yet too much light impairs it, both as the photograph is taken and once a print is made. Archival practices shape the level of ‘exposure’ experienced by documents and photographs, both literally from physical damage caused by light but also by influencing the extent to which they are seen, by whom and in what way. Susan Sontag (2003: 20) writes about the numbing effect of “incessant exposure to images” which depict suffering, especially those which are reproduced repeatedly, leading to “overexposure to a handful of images seen again and again”. This overexposure feeds the search for photographs that will freshly shock the viewer in order to make others’ pain visible again. Utilising Joan Schwartz’ (1995) conception of the negative as being “only a draft” from which multiple ‘original’ photographic documents can be made, the images discussed in this paper are understood to be different iterations of the same photograph. This article uses the concept of ‘exposure’ to think about how archival photographs are looked at and seen by researchers, and how certain ways of looking are privileged over others.

The archive's depiction of the hunting trip, laid out in the photograph and its description in the catalogue, constructs a version of the event. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) demonstrates how the process of the archive's formation begins with a historical erasure, or "silencing", as events unfold. This process is ongoing, as the archive is continuously made and becomes increasingly layered. Subverting this process, Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011: 3) proposes countervisuality as an ever-present opposition to the "self-evident" appearance of authority, which is derived from visibility. By deliberately *not* looking at the photograph in the archive and creating a new, overexposed version, this paper insists that there is more to be seen and attempts to undermine Curzon's narrative of the hunt.

A Photograph I Cannot See

The British Library's online catalogue enables researchers to identify and locate resources, standing in for the collection up until the point at which the individual accesses the archival material itself. The Library's Finding Aid for the Curzon Collection contains information about each album and photograph, providing descriptions which enable the reader to visualise what they might look like. Because I cannot physically go to the archive, I am stretching the expected use of the Finding Aid, requiring it to stand in more completely for the photograph than it usually would.

By downloading the Finding Aid as a pdf file, I turn the interactive text of the website into an image file, creating a new exposure of the photograph in album 430/33. This one is made up solely of black and white text and summarizes photograph 430/33(19) as follows:

"Their Excellencies just after shooting. Tiger shot dead through back of head at 70 yds [hunting scene near Nekonda, Warangal District, Hyderabad]...Lord and Lady Curzon posed with dead tiger. Beaters and bearers stand in the background."

The title and description of the photograph inform the viewer *when* and *where* they are looking at in the image. "Their Excellencies just after shooting"

shows the viewer that they are looking at the Curzons shortly after they have finished a successful hunt, while the detail about the tiger being “shot dead through back of head at 70 yds” and “posed” with the couple in the description of the photograph’s content provides a sense of the scale of the hunting act itself and their proximity to their new trophy. It is not stated who shot the tiger, but the beaters’ and bearers’ central role in the success of the hunt is clearly not intended to be the focus, as they “stand in the background”. During a tiger hunt, beaters worked as a team to control the direction of the tiger, leading it to the huntsman who would then shoot it. While British women increasingly took part in hunting across the Empire in the twentieth century (Thompson 2015), the lack of specification makes it seem unlikely that the shot was Mary’s, as she is never mentioned as having shot an animal in the other hunting scenes detailed in the Finding Aid. Photographs 24 and 25 from the same album also document the hunting trip, depicting the first and second day’s ‘bags’, or kills. The descriptions of both include similar details about the gunshots: “shot by V” and “killed by two shots”. ‘V’ is taken to stand for Viceroy, as it appears elsewhere in the Finding Aid as “V[iceroy]”, in the entries for Photographs 430/43(14) and 430/43(50). Again, the photograph of the already-dead tiger is stretched to include the moment at which it died, affirming the shot of Curzon’s gun as the central event of the hunt.

The photograph is in an album titled “Souvenir of the Visit of H. E. Lord Curzon of Kedleston Viceroy of India to H. H. the Nizam’s Dominions April 1902”. The photographs follow a chronological order and several of them are taken on hunting trips, an integral part of elite British culture in India in the early twentieth century. James Ryan (1997) demonstrates that a photograph of an animal became an alternative to the body or head as a trophy and souvenir in the early twentieth century, which raises the significance of photography as an integral part of these hunting practices. Hunting was a popular sport among British imperialists and tiger hunting was especially prominent in India, reaching its height in the 1930s and having a huge impact on the tiger population in South Asia. John MacKenzie (1988) described the colonial frontier as the hunting frontier, linking the progress of the hunt to the symbolic and literal expansion of European empires.

The entry for Photo 430/33(19) in the Finding Aid informs the viewer that they need to be registered with the Library as a reader to be permitted access to the item: “appointment required to view these records. Please consult Asian and African Studies Print Room staff”. This serves as a reminder of the archive’s role in gatekeeping the collection and the localised, physical constraints on access to it. The only ‘physical characteristics’ detailed about the photograph in the Finding Aid are that it is in a bound volume and has a secondary support made from card, leaving the viewer/reader wondering about the material record.

“Beaters and Bearers Stand in the Background”

The two images of the hunting photograph which I have seen are printed in a hardback copy of Ray Desmond’s *Victorian India in Focus* (1982) and in an eBook copy of James Ryan’s *Picturing Empire* (1997). The two pictures differ from one another, as the digital version appears to be slightly cropped and pixelated, making some of the details more difficult to see than in the printed copy. These images bring us closer to the photograph in the album, making its composition visible. The photograph shows a typically heroic masculine figure posed with the slain tiger at his feet, a common allegory for British rule in India. Mary and George are standing apart, nearly central in the frame. He is standing further forward than she is, and the dead tiger lies on its front to the left of his feet, its head turned away from the camera. Mary stands with a fan hanging from her waist, one arm raised against a tree behind the tiger. George holds a shotgun pointed to the ground next to the tiger’s head, his other hand in his jacket pocket in a classic portrait pose. The Indian men are standing behind the tree facing the camera, but it is difficult to make out their faces, though some details of their clothing are visible.

In the Finding Aid, the detail about the distance from which the tiger was shot is incorporated into the ‘title’ field for the photograph, suggesting that it was part of the typeset caption produced as part of the album. However, Ryan indicates that “in his [Curzon’s] album this photograph has been further annotated with the note “Tiger shot dead through back of head at 70 yards” (Ryan 1997: 103). The handwritten note that Curzon added to the page ret-

respectively would be better categorised as ‘scope and content’ and placed in the relevant archival field in the entry for the photograph with a reference to it being in Curzon’s script. Slippages like this can remain hidden because the digital, all-text format can more easily blur the distinction between photographer, former owner, and archivist in comparison to a physical catalogue where additions are often made in different mediums and so are visibly distinct. It is essential that an all-text catalogue maintains and attributes these distinctions between authors. The digitisation of collections offers the possibility of much greater access for individuals who cannot physically visit the archives which hold them, but the limitations of digital reproductions complicate this. As a result of its incorporation into the title, Curzon’s note is absorbed into the archival record.

Curzon was invested in creating and controlling a personal legacy for himself (Gilmour 1994), something which these handwritten notes are testimony of. The note identified as Curzon’s by James Ryan fits within a wider pattern in the Finding Aid which refers to pencilled notes in other albums, suggesting that the details about the tigers killed in photographs 430/33(24) and 430/33(25) were also added retrospectively. Photograph albums appear to have been an important part of Curzon’s memory-creation and were considered “treasured personal mementos” (Ryan 1997: 111-2). In a small way, the conflation of the handwritten note and the caption of the photograph in the catalogue support Curzon’s aim, taking a personal, handwritten note and entering it into a more official record. Specifying that he had shot the tiger accurately and from some distance, Curzon was perhaps trying to shape this narrative and maintain or further his authority within it, even though this was a personal copy of the album. His emphasis on his own shot further diminishes the presence and actions of the beaters stood behind him in the photograph, without whom he could not have made such a shot.

In the other book, published in the same year that the collection was transferred to the British Library, Ray Desmond compiles photographs from the India Office Records. The copy of the photograph is printed as the frontispiece to the book with a caption providing a short summary of Curzon’s role in the preservation of Indian monuments and creation of the Victoria Memo-

rial in Kolkata. It is significant that Desmond chose the photograph taken on a hunt to represent Curzon, rather than a formal portrait or a stately event like the 1903 Delhi Durbar he famously coordinated. The photograph is emblematic of early-twentieth century British imperial visual culture. The first image to appear in the results of a Google search for ‘tiger hunting’ is one of George and Mary Curzon posing with a dead tiger laid on a rug. It is used to illustrate the Wikipedia entry for tiger hunting and is dated 1903. It is not the same image as photograph 430/33(19), but from the description provided in the title field of its Finding Aid entry it could be. However, the detail about the beaters and bearers standing in the background distinguishes the two images.

The addition of this detail made by an archivist is a small but important change and forms part of a wider trend to highlight the presence of colonised people in catalogues where they have often been systemically marginalised (Duff and Harris 2002; Light and Hyry 2002; Povinelli 2011). The slippage between the voice of Curzon and of the archive/archivist in the Finding Aid would be accounted for by seeing the photograph in the album, and in this case has been corrected by Ryan’s nod to Curzon’s narration. To re-centre the role of the beaters in the hunt, a further exposure is required.

Overexposure

I make a copy of the image in the eBook of James Ryan’s *Picturing Empire*, edit it and literally over-expose it, creating a new photographic document. The version of the photograph in the eBook already appeared to have been edited during the digitisation process: the copy of the photograph printed in Desmond’s *Victorian India in Focus* is clearer to look at as the digital copy in *Picturing Empire* is slightly pixelated and cropped, but the latter is also lighter. It is likely that the picture was edited to make the people standing in the background more visible. This may have resulted from the difference in how the contrast shows up on a computer compared to the same image in print, but this ambiguity raises the important point that the digitisation process often involves editing to provide a clearer version of the image for the viewer. This process can enable new information about what was in front of the camera to come to light. However, it is often unacknowledged, meaning that a view-

er looking solely at a digitised version of a photograph online may be misled into thinking that the original copy shares the same appearance. This effect fits within the wider argument that photographs are often treated as though they are ‘transparent’. The tendency to ignore, or look past, the physicality of the photograph and focus on the image has a flattening effect, which may be exacerbated by the digitisation process, as is also seen with paper documents (Dever 2013). To try and see the archival photograph more clearly, I have edited the photograph further, insisting that to reveal the bearers requires that the Curzons are made less visible.

In the catalogue description of the photograph the Curzons’ position in the photograph is not given, but the reader presumes it to be in the foreground because of the implied contrast to the unnamed beaters and bearers who “stand in the background”. The darker, printed image which is closer to the archival photograph initially supports this, as the parts of the scene where the bearers stand are incredibly dark. The couple are clearly intended to be the focus of the image, ensured by Deen Dayal’s original exposure, as the contrast between the Curzons’ pale faces and the Indian men’s is stark. Ryan’s account emphasizes the composition of the photograph and builds on the Finding Aid’s description: “Curzon claims his tiger and the beaters and servants recede into the dark undergrowth in the background” (Ryan 1997: 102-3). In the Finding Aid’s description, the beaters are standing in the background whereas Ryan suggests they are moving backwards, almost in retreat, and becoming part of the foliage behind the Curzons and the tiger, which is now George’s possession to “claim”. Ryan’s reading of the photograph exaggerates the Finding Aid’s narrative, confirming that Curzon and his shot are at the centre of the event being documented. This supports Sophie Gordon’s argument that James Ryan’s analysis of photographs is largely formed from written sources related to the images rather than from a focus on their visuality (Gordon 2004: 185).

The way in which the archival description shapes Ryan’s analysis of the photograph points to the way in which written captions are used to try and control visual narratives. Photographs have historically been constructed as objective representations of people, events, and things. Captions contribute

to and reinforce these narratives, informing the viewer's perception of the image. Although archival catalogues are ultimately intended to assist the user in finding an album or photograph, their descriptions of items have the possibility of supporting or undermining the original author's intentions, as is shown in the Finding Aid's quoting of Curzon. Ali Behdad (2016) interprets the caption as an "anchor" which attempts to minimise the multifaceted narratives inherent in the photographic, which supports Ariella Azoulay's (2008) notion that the photograph cannot be owned and therefore never fully controlled by a particular framing. In this case, Ryan recognises the caption as Curzon's telling of the story but accepts this narrative rather than using the photograph to reject it.

My visual and theoretical exposure of the image does not necessarily make the 'bearers' in the background clearer but they do become more visible, taking up more space in the photograph than they did before. Having been described as being in (or even part of) the background, the brighter image makes it clearly visible that the men are standing in line with Mary, not behind her. On the other side of the tree to Mary there are two beaters in a military-style uniform with striped turbans. One of them holds the stick he used to direct the tiger's movement, in a parallel position to Curzon holding his shotgun. He and the man to his left appear to be wearing medals. Some of the other men surrounding them do not appear to be in uniform, but it is difficult to tell even with the higher exposure. On the other side of the photograph, at the edge of the frame, is a man wearing a *sherwani* and a plain turban. His lack of uniform leaves his role in the hunt unclear. The eBook image is too pixelated to tell where Curzon is looking, but in the printed copy he is clearly looking out of the frame, away from the tiger and into the distance. Mary is looking at George, her head tilted towards him. While the other men appear to all face the camera, the viewer cannot see whether they are looking at the camera, at George, or elsewhere in or out of the photograph's frame. Their faces remain too dark, even when enough light is added to make the Curzons' faces blank.

While this paper focuses on a photograph created to tell a story of Curzon's visit to the Nizam of Hyderabad, it shows that the image is not defined by its imperial vision. Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011: 9) stresses that countervisuali-

ty is formed on its own terms, but my exposure of the hunting photograph offers a potential example of “that space between intention and accomplishment that allows for the possibility of a countervisuality” which he has proposed. The photograph in the archive is supposed to tell a simple story of Curzon’s hunting ability, but this does not have to be the subject of the image. The individual mistake identified in the Finding Aid represents the way in which the archive structurally supports Curzon’s narrative of the hunt, as his voice is privileged. This is reflected in James Ryan’s interpretation of the photograph, as he agrees that the bearers are in the background of the image, seeing the image in the terms set out by the catalogue entry. In these versions of the photograph, the bearers are eclipsed by George and Mary and the hunt defined by Curzon’s role. By embracing my inability to see the photograph and creating a new overexposed image, the photograph is seen differently. The bearers are no longer in the background and become part of the main subject of the picture.

Acknowledgements

The research for this paper was generously supported by the Open-Oxford-Cambridge Doctoral Training Partnership. I would like to thank my PhD supervisors, Professor Dan Hicks and Dr Christo Kefalas, for their help and support in developing this work from its conceptualization. Sydney Stewart Roses’ encouragement and feedback has also been invaluable in shaping this article.

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