

COLONIAL PHOTOGRAPHS AS AGENTS OF IMPERIAL HISTORY: FELICE BEATO AND THE AFTERMATH OF THE SEPOY REBELLION OF 1857

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A History major with a correlate in Art History at Vassar College, McKenzie Quinn was intrigued by the influence that photography had on the collective memory of the British after the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857. Having written her final research paper for a British Empire history class on the topic of Felice Beato's 19th-century colonial photography in India, she decided to explore how Beato's photographs functioned as active agents in the construction of an imperial history that ultimately perpetuated colonial systems of British superiority.

Images are constants, the ideas they legitimate take on different forms and values.¹

- Edward Said

In the mid 19th-century, photography was largely considered to be a mechanical process for recording information. However, during the Indian Sepoy rebellion of 1857, the British used the medium to promote imperial values and power structure through British military accomplishments. In 1858, following the first state-sanctioned archival photographic practice in India, the commercial Western photographer Felice Beato traveled to the colony to document the path of the British army during the rebellion. Due to his commercial function, Beato constructed his images to appeal to specific audiences and evoke specific interpretations. His subject matter reflected the evolving nature of photography as an interpretative, rather than merely documentary, representation of knowledge. Felice Beato's photographs became key interpretative agents of imperial history that represented a broader, positive, propagandistic narrative of the events of 1857 that satisfied the British public's interest. Beato was able to manipulate the immediate atmosphere of the rebellion's aftermath for a profit. The British imperial system used the publicized images to promote a pro-British colonial

¹ Edward Said, quoted in Maria Antonella Pelizzari, ed., *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation, 1850 – 1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 88.

collective memory that characterized the Indian “other” or “rebel” as part of a vanishing, inferior race. These constructed images supported an imperial narrative of authority and expanded the visual framework through which history was received and internalized by the British public through photographic exhibitions.

In British colonial India, the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 marked a watershed moment for how the Empire and colonial India were presented at home and abroad. Indian sepoys in the East India Company army initiated a rebellion that resulted in acts of extreme violence by both the sepoys and the British soldiers opposing them. The rebellion – known at the time in Britain by the emotionally charged and problematic term, *mutiny* – sparked interest and curiosity in the mind of the British public. The events of 1857 occurred during a period in history when artistic, photographic, and journalistic modes of representation intersected, and more of the public had access to textual and visual information. The public cherished narratives of British bravery and perseverance of the British against the threat of the Indian “mutiny.” In response, visual interpretations of the conflict were constructed following an imperial agenda that promoted a favorable view of the history of 1857.

Due to the challenges of transmitting information across the geographical divide between colonial India and Britain, initial reports of the May 10th insurrection did not reach the English press until July of 1857.² Within months of the outbreak of the rebellion, illustrated memoirs and historical narratives were published and disseminated to the public. Their purpose was to both inform and to influence the formation of a collective knowledge of the key military events and causes of the rebellion. Texts, such as the *Narrative of the Indian Revolt from its Outbreak to the Capture of Lucknow by Sir Colin Campbell*, were both journalistic and visually descriptive in function. In order to dramatize the geographical and cultural divide between Britain and India, the text paired a basic retelling of key events with nearly two hundred engravings from “authentic sketches.”³ However, the engravings were created based on other drawings, thus becoming a sort of visual hearsay because there was a high degree of separation between the engravings and the actual events. Moreover, the images were not objective, but rather embellished with standardized stereotypes of Indian during the rebellion of 1857.

² Vidya Dehejia, *India Through the Lens: Photography 1840-1911*, (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2000), 120.

³ George Vickers, *Narrative of the Indian Revolt from its Outbreak to the Capture of Lucknow by Sir Colin Campbell* (London: Strand, 1858), 1.



Unknown artist, *The Revolt at Meerut*, 1858

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In response to the events of 1857, the British government encouraged the use of photography to reconstruct and record key military engagements as part of a larger imperial agenda. The supposed accuracy and immediacy of 19th-century photography, in contrast to sketches or engravings, appealed more directly to the interests of the Empire. The British government saw photography as the ideal medium to expose the Indian world to the scrutiny of a Western lens in the present, and preserve the interpretation for the future. After 1857, colonial photography modified the visual representation of India. The object of photography in India changed as a result of the Rebellion. After the 1858, state-sanctioned initiative to document images of India, commercial photographers adapted to new subject matter and used their images to outline a military history of

⁵ Vickers, *Narrative of the Indian Revolt from its Outbreak to the Capture of Lucknow* by Sir Colin Campbell, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷ Vickers, *Narrative of the Indian Revolt*, 12.

the events of the Sepoy Rebellion.⁸ Colonial photography at once recorded and reproduced the brutality of history.⁹

Photography had the potential to memorialize and commemorate depictions of people and places during the rebellion through a relatively small degree of separation. The photographer could only influence the contents of the photograph by selecting scenes and posing subjects. Once the photograph was taken, everything seen by the lens was unalterably recorded, unlike engravings based on earlier drawings or sketches. Due to the practical requirements of the photographic process, including its long exposure times with nonmoving subjects and bulky apparatus, commercial photographers in 1857 were confined to recording the aftermath of conflict. Despite the nature of these obvious difficulties in the process, photographers still managed to portray the violence of warfare.¹⁰

While in India, Felice Beato retraced the path of the British military during the rebellion and concentrated his attention on the relationship between topographical and architectural scenes in photographs that would appeal to his principal market, the British military itself. Initially, the interests and needs of the British who experienced the violence of the rebellion firsthand largely determined Beato's choice and treatment of his subject matter.¹¹ Therefore, he focused on the three sites where British military and public interests were the most prevalent in the aftermath of 1857: Delhi, Kanpur, and Lucknow. Beato sold his work to soldiers as unmounted prints, which allowed the buyer to select a series of images to create a personal visual record.¹² The immediacy of his photographs for British military memory revealed the importance of war photography in reconstructing scenes that could be applied both directly to personal experiences, and to a broader historical narrative of conquest. Beato generally paired scenes of architectural ruins with carefully positioned Indian men in military uniform. These scenes implied total victory by showing images of destruction without the inclusion of British colonial figures. The narrative of defeat stemmed from the propagandistic

⁸ Maria Antonella Pelizzari, ed., *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation, 1850-1900* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003), 221.

⁹ Zahid R. Chaudhary, *Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 80.

¹⁰ James Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 76.

¹¹ Dehejia, *India Through the Lens: Photography 1840-1911*, 122.

¹² *Ibid.*, 123.

pairing of a destroyed physical world with the worn down morale of the Indian rebellion.



Beato, Felice. *The Barracks which General Sir Hugh Wheeler occupied, and where he was shot and killed near the broken pillar.* Lucknow, 1858.

Beato's construction of the aftermath of 1857 military engagements, both failed and victorious, suggested that an ultimate British victory resulted in the inaction and fading image of Indian resistance. In *General Wheeler's Entrenchment at Cawnpore* (Kanpur), Beato photographed the ruins of a British barracks in Kanpur where General Wheeler was defeated and had surrendered to Indian rebels.¹³ This image showed a place where the British were not initially victorious and yet Beato did not include British figures in his emotive reconstruction of the scene. The photograph presented an image of the Indian "other," as they were in the flesh, not a likeness from the hand of an artist, giving them a demonstrable authenticity. The constructed elements of Beato's photograph suggested his ultimate artistic control over the presentation of

¹³ Dehejia, *India Through the Lens: Photography 1840-1911*, 133.

the subject, which allowed him to depict an Indian victory as a British triumph. The physical placement, posture, and colors of the Indian's military dress echoed the architectural structure and shadows of the dilapidated building. The Indians appeared to blend into the architectural structure and were, consequently, directly woven into a narrative of destruction. The Indians were literally, and figuratively, vanishing into a scene that ultimately suggested British conquest. The battle-scarred building is still, showing no sign of the activity that reduced it to its depicted state. Beato placed the Indians nonchalantly in front of their own victory, but their presence in front of the dilapidated building implied that the Indian subjects actively contributed to their self-destruction. Beato reconstructed this scene of an Indian accomplishment as a memorial object to be sold to and possessed by British soldiers. A viewer of the image in 1892 described,

the intense realism of the picture [that] defies description when we look at the charred barracks occupied by Sir H. Wheeler where he was mortally wounded, every crevice and hole produced by shot and shell telling of human suffering and despairing anguish in language too eloquent for words.¹⁴

The Indians became transparent, and the viewer looked past them to the wounded building that served as a vivid metaphor for the pain experienced by a British General. Beato's emotive photography succeeded in memorializing and commemorating a scene for British consumption that used architecture to carry narratives of victory and remembrance.

In Beato's photographs, buildings were key players in the history of the rebellion and became interpretative monuments to the violence that was carried out by and against the British. The association of sites with events was a common practice in the creation of monuments as memorials, and it was manifested in colonial photography as an "instrument of myth-making."¹⁵ Beato used buildings as memorial sites of military engagements in order to structure his account of success, and these buildings became landmarks for British soldiers and civilians. On a larger imperial scale, Beato's subjects reflected one of the main interests of the British public regarding the rebellion, the city of Lucknow. A large

¹⁴ "Description and Handlist 1892," in the British Library, London, Vibart Collection: The Dannenberg Album, Text, Photo, 1, 245.

¹⁵ Maria Antonella Pelizzari, ed., *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation, 1850-1900* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003), 43.

number of his photographs focused on the city – in fact twenty-six of his Lucknow images were exhibited in 1858 by the Photographic Society of London. Lucknow was an especially important city in the minds of the British due to the violence committed against British men, women, and children during the five-month siege of Lucknow at the British Residency.¹⁶ The popularity of Beato's images was attributed to his “striking and memorable” connection between the buildings of the “great and beautiful city” and the “chivalry of Havelock [the British General who recaptured Lucknow].”¹⁷ From an impassioned British perspective, the relationship between the typified valor of British military leaders and the monumental buildings in the city emphasized the epic nature of the British victory.

The most notorious example of Beato's constructed narrative was his rendering of the aftermath of the British slaughter of two thousand rebels in Lucknow at the Secundrabad under Sir Colin Campbell.¹⁸ The photograph showed the interior of the Secundrabad, which was a relatively small, walled pleasure garden on the eastern outskirts of Lucknow. Beato carefully positioned Indian figures across the scene where, on November 16th 1857, the British breached the wall and entered the garden. The Indians were depicted as statuesque, implying that these stoic figures could be easily overtaken. The only sense of movement came from the blurred outline of the horse. The remnants of destruction, evident in the building, reinforced this idea.

The image reconstructed the gruesome scene in the garden pavilion where the British slaughtered two thousand Indians. Beato explicitly referenced the scale and extremity of the attack in the image's caption, as he did in his arrangement of disinterred bones scattered about in the foreground. He used the interior ruins of the palace as the “theatrical backdrop of a funeral.”¹⁹ The empty, skeletal architecture was echoed in the fragmented bones littered throughout the foreground. However, the Western architecture stands, while the Indian skeletons are divided and dispersed. The photograph became a *vanitas* image because of

¹⁶ Alison Blunt, “Home and Empire: Photographs of British Families in the Lucknow Album, 1856-57,” in *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination*, Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan, ed., 243-260 (London: L.B. Tauris, 2003), 244.

¹⁷ Hugh W. Diamond, *The Journal of the Photographic Society of London: Volume 5*. (London: Taylor and Francis, Red Lion Court, Fleet Street, 1859), 185.

¹⁸ Dehejia, *India Through the Lens*, 146.

¹⁹ Pelizzari, *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation, 1850-1900*, 43.

its explicit reference to the Indian's mortality. The four living Indians had the potential to command the scene as survivors, but Beato posed them in a picturesque manner that made them living ornaments to the scene. The figures' faces and gazes are indiscernible: they are denied individuality. Once again, Beato neglected to show the cause of the destruction. He chillingly juxtaposed a still, tranquil background with the aftermath of extreme violence in the foreground. Beato's decision to include the bones was calculated; the human remains were chaotically unearthed from their burial place on the site of the former battle specifically for the photograph.²⁰ The strong sense of British dominance and the cost of the rebellion on the Indians were emphasized in the relationship between the Western architecture and the display of the bones.

²⁰ Pelizzari, *Traces of India*, 43.



Felice Beato, *Interior of the Secundra Bagh after the Slaughter of 2,000 Rebels by the 93rd Highlanders and 4th Punjab Regiment. First Attack of Sir Colin Campbell in November 1957, Lucknow. March or April 1858*

As a 19th-century commercial photographer engaging in colonial “war photography,” Felice Beato exploited the experiences of the Indians for the creation of a larger narrative of imperial control. As such, the causes for the rebellion were never addressed and the active, independent, and resistant behavior of the Indians who rebelled was completely divorced from the interpretation of events. His photographs developed from an idea of 19th-century photography as accurate and impartial. Photography was seen as a mechanical reproduction of facts and evidence

that lacked uniqueness and intellectual thought from the photographer.²¹ But Beato's photographs were far from impartial. Beato creatively designed his photographs to validate and support of identifiable ideological positions.²² Beato's topographical photos engaged the British viewer's memory and imagination, in the privacy of veterans' homes and the public display of the photographs at the exhibitions. In the aftermath of what was a violent colonial rebellion, the images were understood to be a narrative of a defeated India at the hands of the British.

In 1859, the British public understood Felice Beato's exhibited photographs of Lucknow to be indispensable for a lasting image of British imperial history. The journal of the Photographic Society of London directly acknowledged that in the 1858 exhibition,

[Beato's] admirable views give us, in fact, the pictorial romance of this terrible war. They are necessary, as our contemporaries say, to an understanding of the war now, and will be indispensable to future historians.²³

The combination of words such as admiration, romance, and war were particularly revealing of Western conceptions of the rebellion and the long-term significance of Beato's photographs. The geographical and cultural distance between England and India lent an air of mystery and exoticism to the British public's interest in the rebellion and its aftermath. Beato's role as the photographer made him an interlocutor, of sorts, between the reconstruction of an imperial narrative and the British public awaiting its consumption. His camera became the witness to the outcome of a successful imperial campaign. The camera also took on a more violent role in the narrative. According to Samuel Bourne, another photographer in India, the camera, "though as suspicious perhaps in appearance, attained [its] object with less noise and smoke," than the gun.²⁴ The photographer possessed as much agency in determining the fate of the Indian in the imperial narrative as the soldier who aimed his gun at the rebels. Both

²¹ Doug Nickel, "The Camera and Other Drawing Machines," in *British Photography in the Nineteenth Century*, Mike Weaver, ed., 1-10, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1-2.

²² Dehejia, *India Through the Lens*, 127.

²³ Diamond, *The Journal of the Photographic Society of London: Volume 5*, 185.

²⁴ Samuel Bourne, "Photography in the East," *British Journal of Photography* 10 (1863): 208.

instruments were used to assert ultimate control over the Indian, but the camera had a more subtle effect.

The historical power of the camera was not lost on the British public.²⁵ The existence of the relatively new photographic society and the public's response reveals the changing role of photography in imperial history. As the quotation from the journal of the Photographic Society of London described, the historical importance of Beato's photographs and the publication itself are a testament to the changing significance of photography and photographic exhibitions. Exhibitions offered the British public the opportunity to directly engage with the photographs. Photographic exhibitions were advertised publicly through the media and the public was encouraged to visit the "beautiful" and "clearly executed" photographs on their own.²⁶ Government officials contended that the spectacular nature of exhibitions as a form of propaganda would mediate imperial and colonial identities through the photographs and last for generations, according to the review of the 1858 exhibition.²⁷ The photograph in itself did not provide a narrative but rather set the terms for the visual language of historical memory.²⁸ The value of Beato's photographs extended beyond the immediate desire of the British to understand the conflict, and served a much larger purpose by depicting Indians in the shadows of imperial victory.

Beato's images functioned as active agents in the development of collective memory. His work influenced the conceptions of historical narrative for both those directly affected by the events of 1857, and those who experienced the rebellion indirectly. His images were no longer considered documentary records, but rather interpretative tools for Empire. They had the capacity to provide the viewer with a closer and self-evidently more authentic connection than engravings or drawings could, especially when presented at exhibitions. Immediately following the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion, an act of resistance to the imperial structure in India, Felice Beato's photographs were used as propaganda to show the British people that there was nothing to fear. As Edward Said stated, images are

²⁵ Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*, 76.

²⁶ William Crookes, ed., *The Photographic News: A Weekly Record of the Progress of Photography, Volume 1* (London: Cassell, Petter, and Galpin, 1859), 280.

²⁷ Peter H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 3.

²⁸ Zahid R. Chaudhary, *Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India*, 65.

constant; the image that was captured cannot be altered.²⁹ However, the ideas behind interpretations of Felice Beato's photographs revealed the power of imperial images to construct a particular historical narrative of victory.

²⁹ Edward Said, quoted in Maria Antonella Pelizzari, ed., *Traces of India*, 88.