The Journal of Burma Studies

Volume 3
1998

Featuring Articles by:
Michael W. Charney
Oliver B. Pollak
Marilyn Longmuir
L.E. Bagshawe
ARTICLES

RISE OF A MAINLAND TRADING STATE: RAHKAI NG UNDER
THE EARLY MRAUK-U KINGS, C. 1430-1603
Michael W. Charney 1

ROBERT TALBOT KELLY AND "PICTURESQUE" BURMA
Oliver B. Pollak 35

FOOTNOTE TO BURMESE ECONOMIC HISTORY: THE RISE
AND DECLINE OF THE ARAKAN OIL FIELDS
Marilyn Longmuir 47

KINGSHIP IN PAGAN WUNDIAKU TIN’S “MYAN-MA-MİN
OK-CHOK-PON SA-DÀN”
L. E. Bagshawe 77
ROBERT TALBOT KELLY AND "PICTURESQUE" BURMA

Oliver B. Pollak

Robert Talbot Kelly, through his art and his 1905 publication, Burma Painted and Described, provides a visual and textual account of colonial Burma that was subsequently marketed in England and America. Travelogues served as a form of voyeuristic education about the exotic for the stay-at-home adventurer. Postcolonial scholarship, to some degree assisted by Edward Said’s Orientalism, now permits a reanalysis of both the art and the written texts of travel literature for what they say about cultural attitudes during the age of high imperialism, and in particular about Kelly’s use of the word picturesque as a literary and artistic descriptor.

Introduction

Robert Talbot Kelly was a second-generation offspring of a four-generation artistic family. Born in England in 1861, he went in 1883 to Egypt, where as a popular water colorist he exhibited his works in several galleries. His Egyptian illustrations and travel writing appeared between 1893 and 1900 in Black and White and The Century Magazine, and in 1902 in the profusely illustrated volume Egypt, Painted and Described. In 1904-05 Kelly spent about seven months in Burma with pen and brush, publishing in the latter year

1 Oliver B. Pollak earned his B.A. at California State University at Los Angeles in 1964 and his Ph.D. in History at the University of California at Los Angeles in 1974. He earned a J.D. at Creighton University School of Law in 1982.


The Journal of Burma Studies
Volume 3, pp. 35-45
© Copyright 1998 by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies,
Northern Illinois University.
Oliver B. Pollak

his *Burma, Painted and Described*, with a cover designed by Albert Angus Turbayne (1866-1940), an American influenced by William Morris. While *The Burman, His Life and Notions* (1882), by Shway Yoe (pseudonym for James George Scott), may be the most widely available book on Burma, Talbot Kelly’s work is probably the most widely available illustrated publication on the same region. An American edition (with some textual and illustration changes) appeared in 1910 under the title *Burma, The Land and the People*, while the English edition was reprinted once in 1912 and then released in a second edition in 1933. Kelly also prepared an eighty-four-page version with twelve illustrations for the A&C Black series *Peeps at Many Lands*. These texts, intended for use in school geography classes, were first published in 1908, then reprinted in 1909 and again in 1918.

Although as an Edwardian writer-artist Kelly appealed to the commercialism of both publisher and public, since his illustrations appeared after the heyday of the picturesque genre they have received limited critical attention, while his writing has heretofore been completely ignored. Now, however, Kelly’s status as an orientalist is being reevaluated. His watercolors have been included in two major studies of the Oriental style by Lynne Thornton and Gerald M. Ackerman, respectively. Read now through a postcolonial prism, a prominent constituent of which is Edward Said’s provocative construct of orientalism, Kelly’s water colors, self-consciously evocative of the “picturesque,” are seen to be permeated with the ambience of orientalism. What has not heretofore been fully

---


36 *The Journal of Burma Studies*, Volume 3
addressed, however, is the extent to which Kelly’s writing reflects that same ambiance. This present study, therefore, concerns itself less with Kelly’s place in the “picturesque” art tradition than with how his written texts, and particularly his use of the word picturesque, reveal the author’s essentially colonial mentality.

Colonial Art, Picturesqueness, and the Postcolonial Critique

As a product of the age of imperialism, Kelly’s Burma belongs to that larger corpus of colonial-period literature that has been the subject of much postcolonial and postmodern scholarship. Of these, Mary Louise Pratt, in Imperial Eyes, Travel Writing and Transculturation,9 and David Spurr, in The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration,10 purport to unmask the travelogue genre. More generally, Edward W. Said, in both Orientalism11 and Culture and Imperialism,12 pierses Western attitudes to the East. These authors critique colonial narrative literature, culture, and art as a whole, demonstrating how ostensibly objective colonial representations of “reality” in fact reflect the values, biases, and unmasked rhetoric of imperialism, high technology, and racism. In recent years, these critiques have themselves become the center of considerable academic controversy. In Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts, for instance, John M. MacKenzie states that although he initially found Said’s thesis “provocative and stimulating,” he nonetheless came to take serious issue with its implied castigation of the West.13 On the other hand, Anthony Milner and C. Andrew Gerstle, in Recovering the Orient: Artists, Scholars, Appropriations, suggest that the importance of Said’s work is in promoting “not closure but sensitivity to cultural difference.” Consequently, scholars should, they say, “reflect on both the motives and categories which underpin their cultural investigation” and unlink that investigation from “confident

---

assumptions about European power or European civilization” that may have informed earlier investigators and participants.14

The idea that there often exists a close relationship between written texts, visuals, and editorial policy is not new, as Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins demonstrate in their study of photograph selection in National Geographic.15 As Alan Wallach remarks elsewhere, audiences and critics have traditionally seen art as “transcendent, timeless, and universal,” and in opposition to history, which is “worldly, time-bound, and usually based on factual evidence.” These same audiences and critics, he says, resist efforts to “understand works of art in relation to their social, political, or cultural contexts,” especially where the subject broaches questions of political power, race, class, and gender.16 Finally, Scott Heller comments that pictures which “seem benign and generic, unthreatening examples of landscape . . . respond to wider political debates about such matters as race relations, women’s rights . . . [and] expansionism.”17

In the field of imperial art specifically, Linda Nochlin has rigorously assaulted the prevailing contention that “the unifying characteristic of nineteenth century Orientalism was its attempt at documenting realism.”18 Her reevaluation, combined with Said’s analysis of narrative, concludes that art of the period was designed to justify and perpetuate European dominance.19 In analyzing the mechanism of this domination, Nochlin finds in orientalist art two inherent features: first, such art dwells on the picturesque; and second, it presents a timeless world in which the image never changes. The total effect is that of anthropologizing the subject matter in a way that in Nochlin’s opinion constitutes “taxidermy rather than ethnography.” Even when Europeans are not depicted,

their presence is implied since the image inevitably depends both on the white man who created it as well as on those who view it in galleries and books. The prevailing touristic vision in orientalist art effectively denies the possibility of shared human experience, while images of architectural decay insinuate the corruption of the non-Western society in the sense that whatever glory once existed has now been eclipsed by mismanagement and barbarism. Furthermore, images tend to assert the European male's power over women, and an absence of working scenes suggest the vices of idleness, laziness, and sloth.

Although the term picturesque has been used for nearly four hundred years by artists, writers, critics, art historians, and tourists, it is in many ways what John Ruskin long ago said it was: a “masked word” that “nobody understands.” Nevertheless, by the time Kelly came to use it, the word had long since eclipsed its early seventeenth century “pittresco” origins and its more than one hundred year English heritage of theoretical, political, and popular nuance. As a citizen of the late nineteenth century imperial age, picturesque was to Kelly a trope for “quaint” and “native,” one implying dominance and superiority while at the same time positing an anthropological appreciation of “the other” and “the different.” In the present postcolonial era, as Elizabeth Helsinger has pointed out, the semantic load of picturesque has again shifted, and the term now signifies a viewer who is “mobile, like the tourist,” and presumably possessed of a certain cultural superiority. For Nochlin, picturesque encompasses “a wide variety of visual objects and ideological strategies, extending from regional genre painting, down to the photographs of smiling or dancing natives in the National Geographic.” The quality of picturesqueness, she says, comprises the perception of the native subjects as “backward, oppressed peoples sticking to traditional practices,” and visual arts

---

21 Nochlin, “Imaginary,” 123.
in the picturesque mode constitute "a category of obfuscation, masking important distinctions under the rubric of the picturesque, supported by the illusion of the real." Painting and reportage of the picturesque thus preserve the subject as artifact and reinforce European dominance at the same time that what is being painted is under attack by the West. On the imperial periphery, the perspective of domination was often intensified. David Bunn, for instance, notes in his study of the African landscapes of Thomas Pringle how the tropes of mobility, unobstructed presence, economics, and erotic presence suffuse both written page and canvas.26

Robert Talbot Kelly first developed his theory of art and of the picturesque during his over thirty-year residence in Egypt from the early 1880s, where he saw East and West jostle in the streets of Cairo, and then continued that development during his seven months in Rangoon. His goal in writing, painting, and traveling in Egypt and Burma was, he writes, to "give a broadly pictorial representation of the life and scenery of the country, and particularly those phases of each which lie off the beaten track." While not pretending "to fully illustrate my text or describe my illustration," he hoped text and image would each would amplify the other and "excite some feeling of sympathetic interest" in the beholder.29 He wanted to depict Burma "as it appears to the eye of a stranger" and in so doing to succeed in "rightly appraising a strange country and a strange people."30 He deliberately refrained from reading any books on Burma so that he could "receive without preconceived ideas the most vivid impression possible" of its physical beauties, monuments, and "people admitted by general consent to be both picturesque and lovable."31 In this way he hoped to present a "truthful impression of the beauty of the country," with "insight into the happy picturesqueness of its people" (ix). His subject matter is varied. The seventy-five watercolors feature 21 riverscapes, 13 landscapes, 9 views of dense jungle and forest, 15 pagoda scenes, 8 bazaar scenes, 8 village scenes, and 3 portraits of women painted from live models. The emphasis throughout is on water. The

26 Nochlin, "Imaginary," 189.
28 Kelly, Egypt, vii.
29 Kelly, Burma, Painted and Described, (1905) vii-viii. All the parenthetical citations which follow are of page numbers in this source.
thematic breakdown of the images in the volume on Egypt are similar, except that a background of desert replaces one of tropical jungle. Each book has four pictures of beautiful, graceful, and alluring women. Kelly’s accompanying reportage is impressionistic and anecdotal. In total, he tends to archeologize and anthropologize, rather than sociologize, “the other.”

Kelly’s writing and paintings combine literary and visual forms in their discourse of “the other” and “the different.” The printed text and the many prints of his water colors are neither synchronized nor coordinated. There frequently appear words such as extremely, very, beautiful, interesting, strange, pretty, pictorial, quaint, and romantic to distinguish indigenous cultural aesthetics from European views and practices; but picturesque is the most telling descriptive term. In his Egyptian work, Egypt Painted and Described, Kelly uses picturesque no less than 79 times in 275 pages, frequently twice in the same paragraph. In the 258-page Burma, Painted and Described, picturesque is used thirty-one times. When an Egyptian once asked him why he was painting a “dirty little mosque,” he responded that he would sell the painting for “[p]erhaps thirty guineas” since “[t]he very dirt of Cairo is picturesque” and profitable.

Picturesqueness for Kelly is associated with artistic scenes, such as one in which a reflection on water is of such opacity as to almost perfectly image the picturesque banks (124), or that of a picturesque landing-place for the railway ferry foregrounding the beautiful undulations of the Sagaing hills (146). In many cases, Kelly adopts picturesque as a cultural term connoting “out-of-fashion,” a usage that had become common by the 1890s. The word appears, for example, when the subject is ancient and decayed, as at Taungdwingyi, where Kelly observed the crumbling walls and

---

2 Kelly was not alone in the use of the term “picturesque,” though he did use it more frequently and emphatically than other authors. Mrs. Ernest Hart in her 400 page Picturesque Burma Past & Present (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1897) only used the term about 5 times. William Ferley Curtis in Egypt, Burma and British Malaysia (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1905) observed, “tourists are always fascinated by the picturesque costumes, graceful manner and free-and-easy cordiality of the natives” (260). Friedrich Hochberg in An Eastern Voyage (London: Dent, 1910), v. 1, 206, uncharacteristically states that Burma was not picturesque.

fortifications of numerous religious buildings set alongside the
"picturesque" village (53), and at Pagan, where he noted in one
passage the many "picturesque" views (143) and, in another, the
picturesqueness and discomfort (173) of the ancient city. Even old
garments—bleached, faded, and patched—are considered
picturesque (158). Picturesqueness is similarly associated with the
thinly populated, the hidden, buried, and desolate, perhaps creating
a critique of underexploitation and waste. Rural life, hidden away by
the palm groves, and urban life, with houses buried by handsome
trees, are picturesque (187). The few natives who inhabit the forests
and live in a stockade are picturesque (100), as are (again) the
desolate environs of Pagan (177). The term also comprises the out-of-
the-ordinary, the inexplicable, strange, weird, and exotic (33, 171,
219-220).

Kelly further associates picturesqueness with a certain mental
attitude. Kelly hoped to give "insight into the happy
picturesqueness" of the Burmese (ix). He hoped the pace of life in
the village would continue for many years in its picturesque and
placid existence, and remain as an interesting link with a phase of
life fast disappearing from Rangoon (28-29). Thus, the houses in a
village are “brightly picturesque, while the little boys and girls run
naked” (42-43), and the “picturesqueness of the temple enclosure” is
enhanced by groups of musicians with quaint instruments (166).
The aesthetic mood also extended to the evening hours when
children lay down their heads (245). In the nineteenth century,
“happy,” “placid,” and “quaint” were expressions frequently linked
to statements about the picturesque; in many ways Kelly implicitly
follows this practice.

Kelly makes numerous references to what he considered the
regrettable trends in Westernization that were supplanting the
picturesque. He notes, for instance, how most of the men in Rangoon
wear boots and carry cheap cotton parasols, thus "supplanting the
more picturesque native article" (17). In the military, the salute had
replaced the more picturesque customary native greeting (22), and
the Burmese police now ambled about in khaki garments, shorn of
the "picturesqueness of their race" (30). A renovation of the Shwe
Dagon Pagoda, including the construction of a new pavilion, is
particularly egregious, comprising "an unforgivable act of
vandalism, as it entirely obliterates a view of an interesting and
picturesque procession of historic structures which was quite
unique” (13). Finally he regrets the substitution of galvanized iron roofing for the more picturesque “thekke,” and the use of kerosene tins in place of the beautiful water chatties of native manufacture (123).

For Kelly, such “improvements” had a moral dark side, leading to decay and corruption. Regretted it, in other words, was both technological and human. Drink and other vices arose where none existed before, and transportation changed the landscape. “Modern improvement” spoiled primitive picturesque. Western-made furniture—as, for example, a four-post brass bedstead from Birmingham—in a monk’s residence is likewise incongruous. Young Burmans, wearing socks and patent-leather shoes and smoking American cigarettes, evinced their forefathers’ conceit, and on a more abstract level, modern education divested youth of their traditional identity and created “swaggering nondescripts” (13, 17, 127).

The final application of the term “picturesque” in Kelly’s writing is in connection with women. Kelly was initially critical of Burmese women, claiming that “[f]ew of the Burmese women I saw in Rangoon can claim good looks” (7). He also states, however, that in the countryside the women “are infinitely more attractive than the men” (17), being both good-looking and graceful. Thus it seems that in spite of his initial impression, Kelly became enchanted by Burmese (and Karen) women, by their colorful dress, their gait, their good looks, graceful manner, and independence (7). Women, it seemed to him finally, “monopolize the brain and energy of the race” (17-18). In Egypt, Kelly “never tire[d] of sketching these dusky beauties at their watering-places.” He enjoyed their shapely limbs, variegated costumes, and enjoyed watching them bathe. Later, in Burma, he watched “lusty young women” loading ships with firewood, and his description of “watching the al fresco toilett of one of these dusky beauties” bathing in the river was stock copy for artists and photographers. He characterizes the Burmese women as “infinitely graceful and attractive in manner,” despite their penchant

---

34 “Letters from Egypt - IV,” Black and White (December 16, 1893): 768.
35 Kelly, Egypt, 129-30.

The Journal of Burma Studies, Volume 3  43
for smoking cigars (17-18, 137, 139). One reviewer openly criticized Kelly for overestimating the beauty of Burmese women, who, he said, do not compare to their Indian sisters.

Conclusion

Kelly's legacy is manifold. When*Burma, Painted and Described* appeared in 1905, one reviewer stated that it "will certainly rank as a standard work on the great dependency of the British Empire."99 Certainly, Kelly's artistic and textual influence among his contemporaries cannot be understated, for his impact extended beyond his familiar imperial vistas and culture, reaching even into the American Midwest.99 Aside from his vocation as artist, he was also a teacher.41 His son, Richard Barrett Talbot Kelly, a painter of birds, has formally acknowledged his indebtedness to his father.42 His granddaughter, Chloé Talbot Kelly, who must also have learned much from her grandfather, either directly or indirectly, now paints scenes of the Middle East, mostly of its wildlife.43 According to Sylvia E. Lu and Noel F. Singer, Kelly's water colors served well as primers for Burmese water color artists turning from the court tradition to the "westernization of painting styles."44 Another authority states that Kelly's Egyptian work stands him "as probably

---

37 On "feminotopia" see Pratt, Imperial Eyes, 166-67, and "eroticization," see Spurr, Rhetoric of Empire, 170-83.
38 Saturday Review, 102 (21 July 1906): 86.
39 International Studio, 26 (March 1906): 87.
40 The copy of Burma, Painted and Described in the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, Love Library, is signed by Kelly in Egypt in 1913 to Charles Dietz. The library's copy of Egypt, Painted and Described contains pencil notes on three water-color plates indicating that these pictures are on the walls of the mausoleum at Forest Lawn Cemetery. The Joslyn Museum was bequeathed a signed water-color of the Nile at Aswan by the Dietz family. Kelly's work was on the tables and shelves of well-to-do-families, and in their galleries and crypts.
41 According to Lynne Thornton, Kelly taught August O. Lamplough, The Orientalists, 252.
43 Brian MacDermot, Chairman Mathaf Gallery Ltd. to Oliver B. Pollak (February 6, 1996).
the best of British watercolourists of the desert.”45 In today’s art market, his work has many ready buyers.

It is also the case, however, that Kelly’s style was transitory. By the 1920s, the empire was under serious attack, and the imperial pleasure of living with one’s perceived inferiors was waning.46 Coincidentally, the water color style of art practiced by Kelly went out of fashion as academic and orientalist art was passed over in favor of the Impressionists and the moderns. His popularity having thus faded,47 Kelly died at the age of 73, on December 30, 1934. One obituary for him had it that although he was “rather old fashioned in his use of the medium, he was a delicate draughtsman and a subdued colourist, his work combining archaeological accuracy with poetical feeling and a sensitive appreciation of atmospheric qualities.”48

On the altar of the culture wars almost a century after Kelly’s most productive years, two views emerge. According to the first, Kelly was a middle-aged Briton who with little knowledge of the Burmese language and accompanied by a servant traveled in the tropics, palette in hand, capturing on canvas the exoticism of the scenes he witnessed. From a second, postcolonial perspective, even though Kelly’s pictures may effectively render the picturesque, the hitherto ignored but nonetheless equally significant written texts provide precious evidence of a colonial artistic mentality that invites criticism. My own purpose in revealing the discourse of high imperialism and the colonial travel genre in Kelly’s works is to neither “celebrate nor denigrate” the author and artist but rather to let his writing coexist alongside his visual art and thus to enhance our understanding of him as an observer possessed of the very skills for which A&C Black commissioned him to produce a book on Burma for the English public.49

---

4 MacDermot to Pollak, February 6, 1996. Neither of the two stories on tourism in Burma appearing in the December 15, 1996 issue of the New York Times used the word “picturesque.”

4 The second edition of Burma in 1933 contains a footnote that assesses the import of the political changes that occurred during the intervening decades since the book’s original publication. Kelly’s observations on the situation are simultaneously facile and profound.


---

The Journal of Burma Studies, Volume 3   45