

Unveiling the Untold Stories: Photography and Belonging in the British Empire

Photography has long been hailed as a powerful medium for capturing the essence of a moment, freezing it forever in time. Beyond its artistic and aesthetic value, photography played a significant role in shaping identity and sense of belonging during the heyday of the British Empire.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the British Empire expanded its dominion across various continents, it sought to assert its authority through documentation and visual representation. Photography, with its ability to illustrate lives and landscapes in distant lands, became a tool for shaping narratives and perceptions about the Empire.

The British Empire encompassed lands as diverse as India, Australia, Africa, and the Caribbean. Through the lens of photography, the Empire aimed to construct a visual narrative that portrayed these territories as tamed and civilized, under the wise leadership and guidance of the British Crown. These images were intended to feed the imagination of the British public, creating a sense of pride and belonging to a global superpower.



Projecting Citizenship: Photography and Belonging in the British Empire

by Liz Wright (Kindle Edition)

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

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However, beneath the surface of these carefully curated images, there are untold stories waiting to be unveiled. The photographs not only captured the landscapes and architectural marvels but also showcased the lived experiences of the people who inhabited these territories.

One such example is the work of noted British colonial photographer, Felice Beato. He was known for his documentation of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, a pivotal moment in British colonial history. Beato's photographs depicted the aftermath of the rebellion, showcasing the devastation and destruction caused by the conflict. These images not only exemplify the power of photography to capture history but also provide a glimpse into the lives and struggles of those caught in the crossfire.

Another aspect of photography's role in shaping belonging within the British Empire was the representation of indigenous people. These photographs, often taken by British settlers or administrators, aimed to depict the 'exotic other' as submissive, loyal, and subservient. Such representation perpetuated the notion of the Empire's superiority and the need for British control.

However, critical examinations of these images reveal a more complex reality. Indigenous people were often forced into contrived poses, clad in traditional attire, or asked to mimic western customs for the camera. These images not only depict the power dynamics at play but also invite questions about agency, resilience, and resistance.

One notable example is the work of Australian photographer Olive Cotton, who documented the lives of Aboriginal people in the early 20th century. Her photographs not only captured the struggle and resilience of these communities but also challenged the prevailing narrative of white superiority.

Beyond the realm of official photography, amateur and vernacular photography also played a pivotal role in shaping belonging within the Empire. Families and individuals living in colonies would use photography to create mementos and memories of their lives. These photographs, often kept in family albums, became a means of reinforcing a sense of identity and belonging amidst the vastness of the Empire.

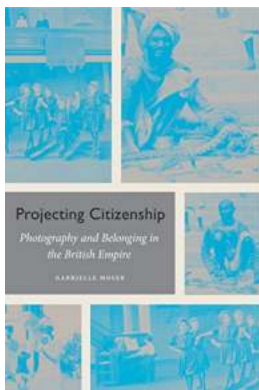
One of the most iconic images from this era is that of the 'Afghan Cameleers' in Australia, taken by Samuel Sweet in the late 19th century. The photograph captures a group of Afghan and Pakistani camel handlers, highlighting their crucial role in the transportation industry and providing a glimpse into their hidden stories of resilience and adventure.

Photography within the British Empire was not limited to documenting people and places; it also played a significant role in the realm of anthropological studies. Many photographs were taken of indigenous communities across different territories in an attempt to classify, categorize, and understand the 'other.' Though these images were often taken without consent and with a sense of objectification, they provide valuable insights into the rich diversity and cultural complexities of these societies.

Photography and belonging in the British Empire were deeply intertwined. The Empire sought to create a narrative of control, superiority, and homogeneity through imagery. However, within the gazes of the photographers, there were

moments of resistance, subversion, and resilience that challenged these dominant narratives.

Today, photography continues to be a powerful medium for storytelling and reclaiming untold histories. By delving into the archives and critically examining these historical images, we can uncover the stories that have long been suppressed, offering a more nuanced understanding of belonging and identity within the legacy of the British Empire.



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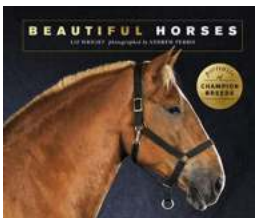
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In *Projecting Citizenship*, Gabrielle Moser gives a comprehensive account of an unusual project produced by the British government's Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee at the beginning of the twentieth century—a series of lantern slide lectures that combined geography education and photography to teach schoolchildren around the world what it meant to look and to feel like an imperial citizen.

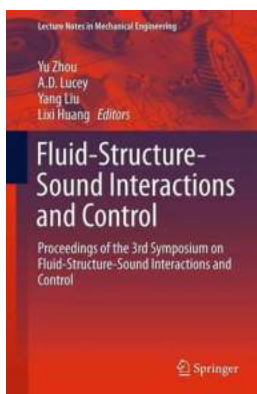
Through detailed archival research and close readings, Moser elucidates the impact of this vast collection of photographs documenting the land and peoples of the British Empire, circulated between 1902 and 1945 in classrooms from Canada to Hong Kong, from the West Indies to Australia. Moser argues that these photographs played a central role in the invention and representation of imperial citizenship. She shows how citizenship became a photographable and teachable subject by tracing the intended readings of the images that the committee hoped to impart to viewers and analyzing how spectators may have used their encounters with these photographs for protest and resistance.

Interweaving political and economic history, history of pedagogy, and theories of citizenship with a consideration of the aesthetic and affective dimensions of viewing the lectures, *Projecting Citizenship* offers important insights into the social inequalities and visual language of colonial rule.



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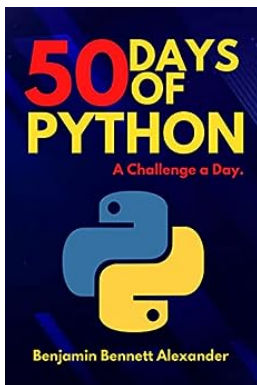
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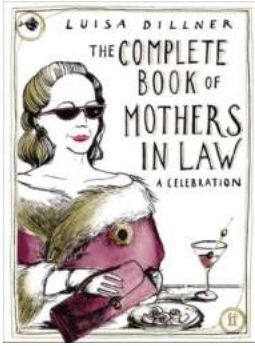
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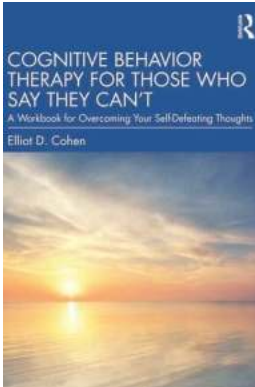
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