

# IMAGE IN PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINT IN THE CONTEXT OF NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY SRI LANKA

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The photography is one of the important media which is being used to record the human memory. It is complementary to the recorded information and also contributes in its own as a source of historical evidence. The photographs as archival material may be more accurate than any recorded description. The old prints, therefore, play a very important role in historical research and in visual representations of events or persons. A considerable amount of image material belonging to the 19th century are still preserved in different institutions and in individual collections in Sri Lanka for us to study and research on various aspects of their creation, existence and preservation. The image material needs specific expertise to ensure their preservation, storing, handling, documentation and making them available to the researchers.

In this paper, it is expected to make a retrospective study on the development of Sri Lankan photography from its inception up to early twentieth century. Therefore, the opening paragraphs of this paper will be devoted to identify the technical processes in which the photographic prints were produced. An attention will be drawn to the pioneer photographers who were active in the 19th century and the role they played in producing images in print.

Several photographic processes were in use in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, namely, **daguerreotype**, **albumen**, **collodion** and later **geletine**. Each of these photographic processes had its own history, however, daguerreotype constitute the oldest popular. This process was named after the Frenchman, L. J. M. Daguerre who invented photography in 1839. Since then photographs have been made either on copper or glass plates or on paper negatives. Albumen and plain salted papers were used to make prints from glass and paper negatives in the 1850s. **Daguerreotype** (1839-1860), **albumen** paper prints (1850-1869), **collodion** prints (1852-1890) were the most popular photographic processes among the photographers in Sri Lanka towards the second half of the 19th century.

In the **daguerreotype** process, a highly polished silver surface on a copper plate was sensitised by fumes from iodine, exposed in camera and the image developed by exposure to mercury vapour. At first the process was very insensitive but optical and chemical improvements

made portraiture possible. A thin plain paper coated with a layer of egg white containing salt was used in **collodion** printing. This **albumenised** paper was sensitised with silver nitrate prior to its use. The printing was done by day light under a negative. The time taken to develop the prints in this process was varied, ranging from one minute to an hour or more. "In those days [1850s] the only system of photography was the daguerreotype, by which the photograph was taken upon a silver sensitised plate and developed by being fumed in ammonia. Customers had to pay as much as two guineas for a single photograph as there was no system of printing or reproduction".<sup>1</sup> In the process of making a **collodion** print, a suitable sheet of glass was first hand-coated with a thin film of collodion containing potassium iodide. Then it was sensitised on the spot with silver nitrate. This kind of plate had to be exposed to light while it was wet, found to be more convenient than the previous process as exposure time was ranging from few seconds to a minute or two.

The photographers at the time were encumbered by awkward paraphernalia and long time-consuming processes; collodion or wet-plate techniques often caused delays. The contents of the photograph too had to be carefully considered before the glass plate was readied for the camera. The emulsion required for developing had to be prepared immediately before or simultaneously with the exposure or just after. The size of the negative determined the positive until enlarging techniques were brought into practice. Their equipment was bulky and had to transport them to the sites they wanted with their ready-made dark-room and its supplies. In outdoor photography they had to travel along crude trails with dense vegetation and along rugged terrains. Their job was made more arduous due to inclement weather conditions and other similar natural obstacles.

The beginning of the photography in Sri Lanka was more or less allied to the developments in this field took place in England during the late 1850s. *The Ferguson's Ceylon Directory* commenced in 1858 contains a note in its Table of Events, "Photographic art was first introduced in Ceylon by Mr. Parting on 24<sup>th</sup> June, 1856".<sup>2</sup> It could be assumed, therefore, that this new 'art' came to be used in Sri Lanka within a short period of 17 years after its invention in Europe. *The Ceylon Almanac* for 1855 describes the profession of Mr. Parting as "Watchmaker and Daguerreotypist"<sup>3</sup> whereas the same publication for 1860 records that the profession of Mr. Parting was "Photographer and Watchmaker".<sup>4</sup> A research conducted recently has revealed that a daguerreotypist named Barrow was active in Sri Lanka from 1844, however, no known examples of his work has come to light.<sup>5</sup> Mr. J. Parting, therefore, could be considered as the pioneer who adopted the daguerreotype process in his photographic work in Sri Lanka.

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<sup>1</sup> *Twentieth century impressions of Ceylon*, ed. Arnold Wright, London, 1907, p. 451.

<sup>2</sup> *Ferguson's Directory*, 1858

<sup>3</sup> *Ceylon almanac and annual register*, 1855, Colombo, p. 365.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 1860, p. 467.

<sup>5</sup> *From Bombay to Shanghai, historical photography in south and south east Asia (1860-1900)*, the 7<sup>th</sup> volume in the series of photography from the collections of the Museum of Ethnology, published by the Foundation Fragment Foto, Amsterdam in cooperation with the Rotterdam Museum of Ethnology, Den Haag, 1994/95, pp. 54-55.

Mr. Parting was not only credited with having introduced photography to Sri Lanka, he was also commissioned as the official photographer to record the occasion of cutting the first sod for the railway on 03<sup>rd</sup> August, 1858. (see: photo 01 and 02) G. F. Perera, railway historian in his

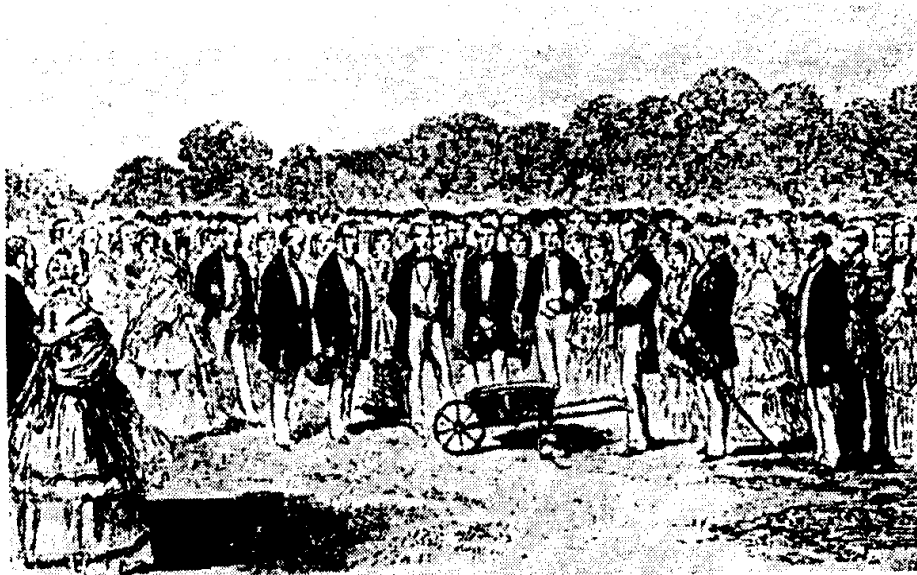


Photo 01

1A: CUTTING THE FIRST SOD, AUGUST 3, 1858 This took place in Dematagoda in "Malicaha Kande, half-a-mile north-east of the Moorman's Mosque in the Marandahn Road". This makes the location at, or close to, the point where School Lane now passes under the railway line. A triumphal arch was erected at the point where "Maligahakanda Road strikes off from the Main Road at Marandahn".

*Illustrated London News, 1858*

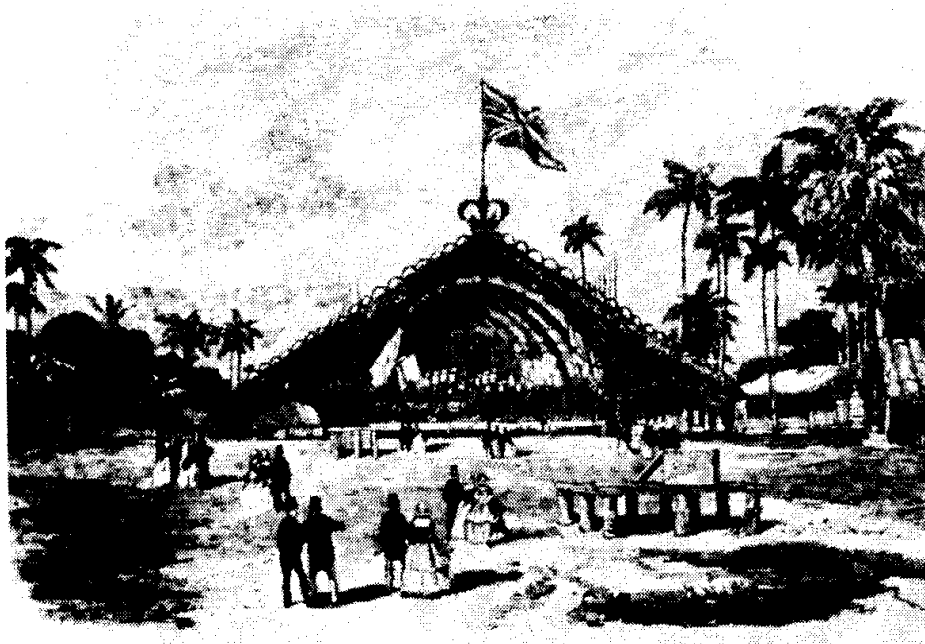


Photo 02

1B: THE TENT FOR THE CELEBRATIONS £ 2014 were spent on the Inaugural Fête. The "temporary bungalow" alone cost £ 570, a large amount of money at that time. At the back of the tent are the words "God Save the Queen".

*Illustrated London News, 1858*

work on *the Ceylon Railway*, stated that this official “had a very important business to perform, no less a business than the production of a picture of a scene which could not be repeated and which was to mark an important event in the history of the Island”.<sup>6</sup> G. F. Perera quoting from a contemporary newspaper record from *the Observer*<sup>7</sup>, states that “Mr. Parting’s effort, however, turned out a complete failure. The most prominent feature in the fore-ground was found to be the back view of a lady with a ‘most portentous breadth of crinoline culminating in a bonnet of delightful minuteness’. Another picture was taken when only ‘ladies that could be kept in order were permitted to be present’<sup>8</sup>. The photographic establishment of Mr. Parting was active from 1856 and later in 1860, it was purchased by William Skeen, then the Government Printer (1849-1872), for his son William Louis Henry Slinn Skeen.<sup>9</sup> The ‘*Adam’s Peak: Legendary, traditional and historic notices of the Samanala and Sri-pada with a descriptive account of the pilgrim’s route from Colombo to the foot-print*’ a pioneering work of Wiliam Skeen was later published by W. L. H. Skeen in 1870.

Within several years, W. L. H. Slinn Skeen with his partner John Edward Wilshaw became one of the leading photographers in Colombo and traded under the name S. Slinn & Co. Their advertisement published in the *Colombo Observer* on 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1860 records “Photographic portraits both positive and negative on glass, paper... taken daily from 9.00 a.m. to 1 p.m. and every description of photographic work carefully executed by S. Slinn & Co., late J. Parting, at their establishment, 3, Baillie Street, Colombo”.<sup>10</sup> The firm had studios in Chatham Street between 1866 and 1892. The establishment of W. L. H. Skeen who had trained at London school of photography commenced building up a comprehensive portfolio of views illustrating scenic beauty of the island and its economic resources and potential. He captured in print the Royal visit in April, 1901 and produced an album containing 58 platinum prints. Skeen’s was much profited by the opening of the railway from Colombo to Kandy in 1867. Using the new railway line, Skeen photographed the scenic beauty of the countryside and coffee plantations. The photographic documentation of “Skeen and Wilshaw produced a series of illustrations of coffee culture and from felling of the forest to the shipment of the berry”.<sup>11</sup> They produced an album containing 30 photographs of the coffee industry. Similar series of photographs were also produced in respect of cinnamon, cocoa, rubber, cardamom and plumbago. All these photographs of Skeen & Co., were fascinating photographic accounts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century economic development of the island. They covered a wide range of subjects including local people of different ethnic groups, various occupations of the inhabitants, modes of transport, scenic beauty, flora and fauna mostly on picture post cards. These were aimed at attracting not only the tourists to Ceylon but also indirectly the entrepreneurs and businessmen from Europe. (see:photos 03-06)

He included some of his prints into his publication *The Knuckles and other poems*. The construction of the Ceylon Railway between 1860s and 1890s and Colombo breakwater in the 1880 attracted him very much and produced a good number of print. Skeen had the opportunity of being the official photographer to the visit of Duke of Edinburgh 1870. Mr. W. L. H. Skeen continued to manage the business until his death in 1903. His brother F. A. E. Skeen arrived in Colombo in the same year took over the business under the name F. Skeen & Co. and continued up to 1914. Then the firm was purchased by E. Coch and shifted the premises to Union Place in 1919. It ceased to exist when stock was taken over by Plate & Co. in 1920.

The profession of photography was extended from Colombo to Kandy in 1876 after opening a business by Charles T. Scowen who arrived in Sri Lanka in early 1873. The intention of Scowen was to take his business to Trincomalee Street in Kandy as he did not wish to have competed with already well established Skeen & Co. in Colombo. He was expected to have specialised, more general topographical and portrait work in Kandy. "Many of his portraits of Ceylon types are notable for their sensitive lighting and composition".<sup>12</sup> Scowen's business existed until about 1890s and appears to have taken over by the Colombo Apothecaries Company, which at the time was aiming at entering the photographic field.

The Colombo Apothecaries was a mercantile concern owned by W. H. Smith and James Smith Finlay located at the De Soysa Building in Slave Island in Colombo in 1883. This was moved into a small store at the junction of York and Prince street in Colombo Fort. The company got its registered name 'Colombo Apothecaries' in 1892 and opened a photographic business at Kandy in 1890, 'where climatic influences are more propitious for high-class photographic work than Colombo'.<sup>13</sup> This studio produced thousands of Ceylon views and sent to all parts of the world. They include representations of the famous Buried Cities of Ceylon and some of the photos previously published by Skeen. Apothecaries also published a very interesting catalogue of their collection of prints. The main store at Colombo maintained a dark-room where all conveniences were provided for the use of amateurs, passengers and others. A large stock of photographic materials was kept there for sale. A completely fitted job-printing department was added to the store with electricity for its motive power.

Skeen's main competitor was Joseph Lawton who established himself as a photographer in 1860s and gained a good reputation for his series of Ceylon railway views which successfully competed with those of Skeen's. Lawton was employed by H. C. Byrde & Sons circa 1864 and located the establishment at 1, Castle Hill Street in Kandy. Lawton did remarkably well in his undertaking for the Committee on Ancient Architecture in Ceylon between 1870 and 1871, which resulted in an important photographic record of the ruins of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya.<sup>14</sup> The Surveyor General in his administration Report for 1871 records, "With respect to

Archaeological work, Mr. Smither<sup>15</sup> proceeded to Anuradhapura early in the year, accompanied by Mr. Lawton and Mudiliyer De Soysa, the Government Interpreter in the Colonial Secretary's Office and a most interesting set of photographs were taken; but I regret to state that Mr. Lawton suffered so much in health after his return from Anuradhapura, that he has been compelled to proceed to England. I hope, however, that his absence may be only temporary and his services are much required in this Island. Two large volumes of photographs of ruins, etc., in Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura and Sigiri, are now in possession, and available for inspection. Duplicate copies of them have been sent to England to the Secretary of State for the Colonies".<sup>16</sup> One of his photographs was used by John Capper for the frontispiece of his work *The Duke of Edinburgh in Ceylon: a book of elephant and elk sport* published 1871. Lawton died in 1874, however, his business continued by C. Robertson at 11, Ward Street, Kandy until 1876. Its propriety was changed again in to R. Charter in 1885.

There are some bound volumes of photographs in the Library of the Department of Archaeology which were presumably the photographs taken on the instruction of the Committee on Ancient Architecture in Ceylon.<sup>17</sup> The Surveyor General Amelius Beauclerk Fyers,<sup>18</sup> (1829-1883) refers to **two large volumes** in his Administration Report of the Survey Department for 1871,<sup>19</sup> Harry Charles Purvis Bell (1851-1937) in his Administration Report of the Archaeological Survey for 1911-12 refers to these photographs. "Now completely faded and pitted and represent conditions no longer existing. Negatives were sold to various purchasers before Ceylon Archaeological Survey was initiated and are scattered past recovery".<sup>20</sup> This is the earliest testimony to official interest in making photographic prints of the ancient historical monuments of Ceylon. Fyers refers to a small committee of which he was a member appointed "to obtain information respecting the different ancient architectural works in the island to report on them generally and to state what steps we would recommend to have the most interesting of them preserved or photographed".<sup>21</sup> As no report was published it is not certain whether the committee issued a report.

Apart from the photographic firms referred to above, Adolphus William Andree had opened a small studio at his residence in Norris Road, Colombo named as Hopetoun Studio. While he was there, Andree photographed Prince of Wales and his bride when they visited Ceylon in 1901. Later, he was commissioned to take a group photograph of the players in a historic cricket match played between the Boer prisoners in Ceylon and the Colombo Colts at Victoria Park, Colombo on July 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> 1901. The Governor Sir West Ridgeway and a party from Queen's House were

the chief guests. *The Ceylon Independent* in one of its reports on the second day of the play stated that "Mr. A. W. Andree and an assistant from the Hopetoun Studio were present with the requisite apparatus. The teams grouped themselves partly inside and partly in front of the Governor's pavilion and after a little delay due to the electronic positions endeavoured to be taken up by the humourists in each team, the process was successfully completed. Andree also took photographs of the appearance of the ground whilst the match was in progress and afforded another instance of his enterprise and keenness to improve the shining hour by improvising a bookstall at the entrance to the ground and stocking it with his popular booklet *Illustrations of the Boer Camp* the sale of which was industriously pushed by an European and his native assistants".

Andree's photographs were then much cheaper and six copies of small prints 'highly enamelled and mounted on beautiful granulated plate, which with sunk mounts' were available for one rupee. Six copies on the permanent platinotype process 'warranted and never fade' were available at the cost of two rupees.

Andree was the first to take flashlight photographs. Certainly there were no flash bulbs at the time or electronic flashes as photographers now use. The artificial light had to be obtained by using magnesium flash powder, often with explosive results. When Andree took a flashlight photograph of the Bloomfield Ball at the Public Hall, [later the Empire Theatre and now built up on with a new building at Braybrook Place,] the magnesium powder exploded a little prematurely and shook the hall. The jittery dancers jumped to safety but happily for everyone the picture was a success,

The Hopetoun Studio was later shifted to Union Place close to Slave Island. (see:photos 07) The new studio was well equipped with latest equipment and specialized in portraiture, enlargements, views of Ceylon and pictorial postcards. He was competent in work by platinotype process, black and white and colours. Andree started touching and finishing of photographs which rendered little tone values. His employee, E. G. Koch practiced touching and finishing as a fine art which was much appreciated by his customers. He had issued booklet with his work on principle camp at Diyatalawa and on pearl fisheries.<sup>22</sup> The building where the Hopetoun Studio was housed is still to be seen at the Union Place, Colombo but used for a different purpose.

Andree was a close friend of Justice H. L. Wendt, who was an amateur photographer and sent his son Lionel to learn the first lessons in photography from Andree at the age of ten. This boy, Lionel Wendt later revolutionized photography in Sri Lanka. Among those who worked in Andree's Hopetoun studio were Mudliar A. C. G. S. Amarasekera Joss Collette, father of famous cartoonist Collette and Arthur Jongs who became famous as the Times of Ceylon photographer. E. T. Coch and Sam Coch together with C. A. Beling were among the others who learned photography from Andree. Sometime later Lionel Wendt and Eric Swan, who was killed by the elephant he photographed, and the Coch brothers proved that the photography as in many other accomplishments, the best Sri Lankans are as good as any in the world.

A. W. A. Plate opened his photographic studio in 1890 in the Bristol Hotel in Colombo Fort, and later shifted to Colpety in 1892 having its headquarters there. Arnold Wright in his *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* records 'Mr. Heinemann joined the firm as managing partner and the business continued to steadily expand with the result that the present staff of the establishment comprises of ten Europeans and over 60 natives. Plate was the photographic firm established in by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with extensive work-rooms, dark-rooms, show-rooms, and other adjuncts to a photographic establishment.<sup>23</sup> This was considered to be one of the finest of its kind in the East. Plate had branches in Nuwara Eliya and in Queen's Hoten in Kandy. The firm became a limited private company in 1900 and the business was enlarged to concentrate on supplying of photographic apparatus and material. In 1907, the output of picture postcards by Plate exceeded half a million. Photographic Studios were opened in major towns including Galle by Louis Augustine Berteaux, in Kandy by J. Lawton and in Jaffna by S. K. Lawton.

Meanwhile, the British administrators also showed a considerable interested in making photographic records of important archaeological sites of Sri Lanka. The photographic art at the time became a quicker, cheaper and a more accurate tool than the painstaking and time-consuming efforts of an artist. The British administrators observed it was profitable to employ number of military personnel to attend to the duties of a photographer and document the architectural heritage of the island. A dispatch sent to Earl Carnarvon by Governor William Henry Gregory (1872-1877) dated 5th September, 1874 refers that the photographs of inscriptions were made by Captain Hogg of the Royal Engineers. The policy of the colonial government at the time was that, "It would be more economical to engage a military person with a considerable knowledge in photography rather than engaging a professional photographer on salary".<sup>24</sup>

On 7<sup>th</sup> January, 1875, Governor William Henry Gregory wrote to Earl Carnarvon that "I think it would be advisable to have two dozen copies of the photographs taken by captain Hogg printed, a half dozen to be sent here to be on record and as assistance to Dr. Goldschmidt. Copies might be sent to the India Library, Royal Asiatic Society, Messers Max Muller and Jas. Ferguson and Captain Hogg may wish to have few copies for himself. I requested Captain Hogg to take instructions of the Colonial Office as to where the negative should be deposited. I have no doubt he will gladly make arrangements for and supervise the printing of them."<sup>25</sup>

There is an album containing 145 photographs of the Anuradhapura ruins taken by Captain Hogg during his sojourn in Sri Lanka, still preserved in the National Museum Library. The inner first page of the album bears the following pencil note probably recorded by Mr. H. C. P. Bell, retired Archaeological commissioner. "These photographs were taken by Captain Hogg R. E. for the Ceylon Government in the seventies see: S: P. I. of 1878. The negatives are probably sent to England. Nothing the printer knows. B".<sup>26</sup> Captain Hogg subsequently made a large number

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of photographs for Professor Paul Glodschmidt while he was deciphering old Sinhala writing on rock inscriptions.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1877, Governor Gregory wrote to Earl Carnarvon that “some years ago (circa 1872) photographs were taken by order of Governor Sri Hercules George Robert Robinson (1865-1872) of the principal structures in Anuradhapura. They fill two large volumes, and reflect much credit on Mr. Lawton, the photographer and on Mr. Smither the architect under whose instructions they were taken. There is a concise and useful comment on each of the plates by Mr. Liesching, who was then Assistant Agent at the station.”

Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879), a lady who selected photography as her hobby which was unusual at that time for a woman, made a remarkable contribution to the photography in Sri Lanka.\* She was the wife of famous Charles Hay Cameron who with Colebrook converted the British (see:photos 08) Colonial Military administration in Ceylon to a civil administration by establishing the Legislative Council in 1832. Mrs. Cameron made a considerable number of portraits of famous men including Tennyson, Darwin, Carlyle, Browning, Herschel and host of others. The portraits of Governor William Henry Gregory, Hungarian violinist and composer Joseph Joachim (1831- 1907) and Sir John Frederick William Herschel (1792-1871) made by Mrs. Cameron are still preserved in the National Museum in Colombo. The photographs made by Mrs. Cameron are valued not only because of the famous men who posed for her but also for their artistry and technical perfection with which she ensured effects of light and shade. Those works are some of the distinguished achievements of one of the pioneer photographers in Sri Lanka. [In 1948, Mrs. Cameron’s biography and 52 of her photographs were published by Helmut Gernshien, Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society, entitled Julia Margaret Cameron, her life and photographic work in the series of “Famous Photographers” of Fountain Press, London.]

The present collections of 19th century photographic prints of Sri Lanka are scattered in several institutions including the Department of National Archives, Department of Archaeology, Department of National Museums (Library) and in some private collections. The available sources are inadequate to build up a good cross section of 19th century prints ranging from the best to the worst or experimental to aesthetic or generally representing the different techniques. However, the albums of old photographs have a curious power to stir the historical imagination. There is nothing quite like these sallow faded prints for communicating the sense of a past period and the flavour and perfume of a vanished world.

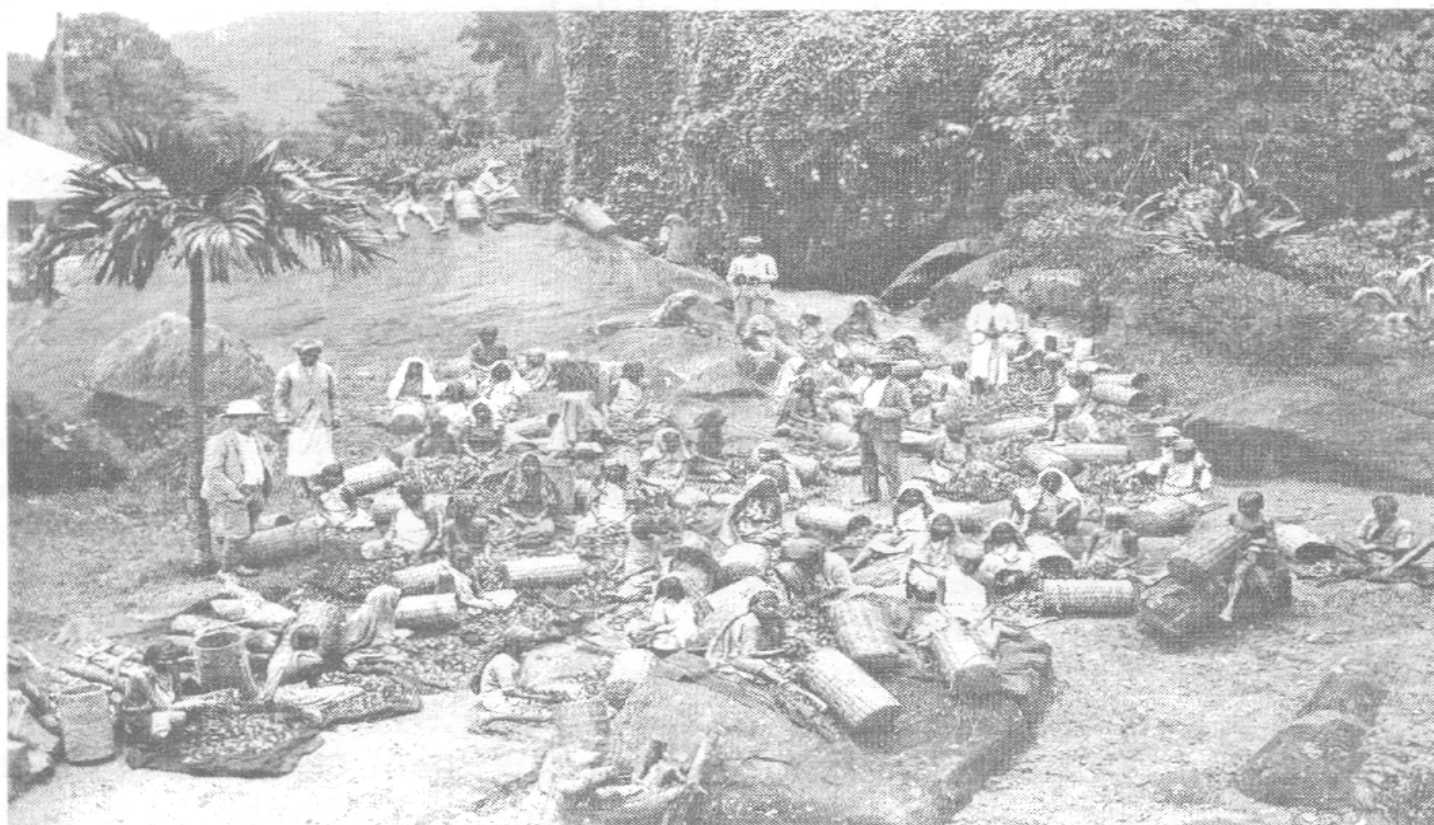


Photo 03 : Tea Pluckers, upcountry



Photo 04: Two females in the Kandyan dress



Photo 05: Kandyan Chiefain



Photo 06: Wayside Scene Galle Road

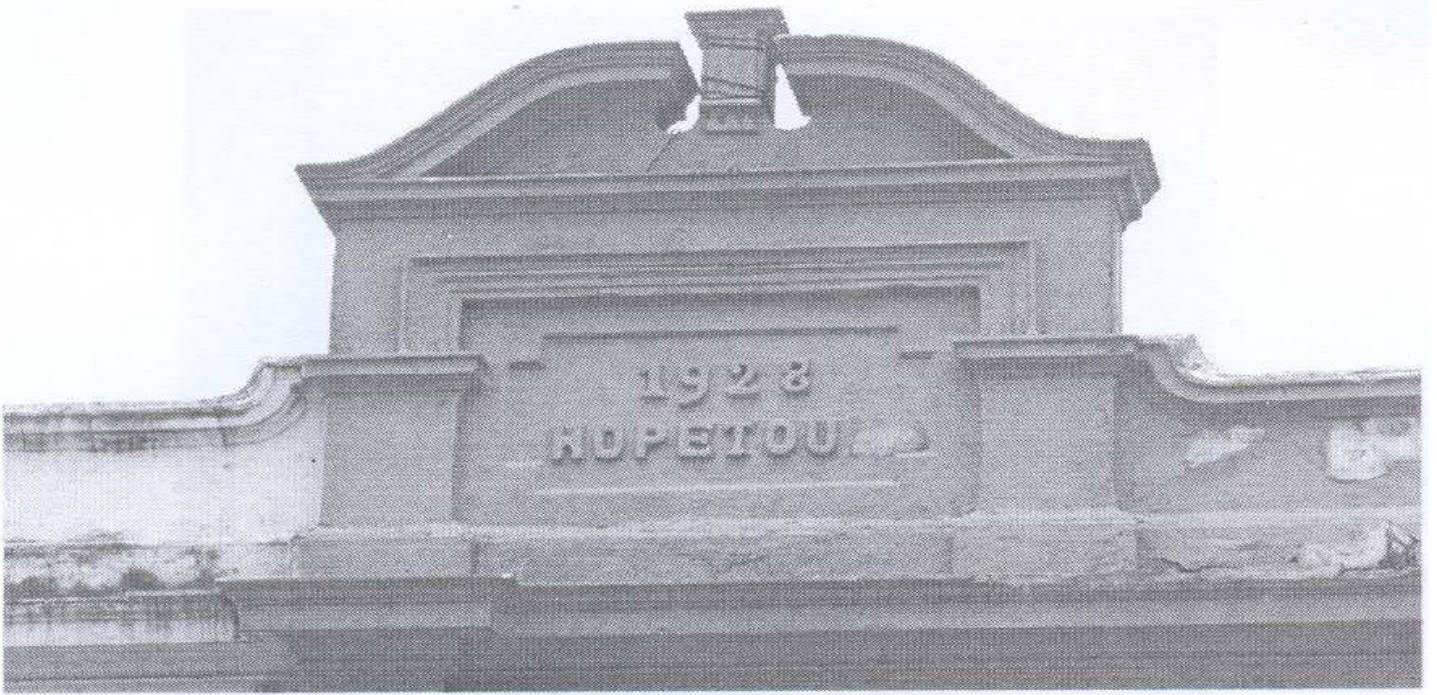


Photo 07 Gable - Hopetoun Studio - Union Place, Colombo



Photo 08