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LOOKING AT HISTORY:
A consideration of two photographs, one from Darwin, one from Dili

Steven Farram

Images are often used as aids for understanding history and for communicating research outcomes. In this paper I discuss two strong historical images, one from Darwin in the early twentieth century and one from Portuguese Timor (Timor-Leste) from immediately after World War Two. I talk about the circumstances under which these photographs were taken and how we can interpret them in terms of what we know they represent and how they could enhance our understanding of historical events. I also talk about alternative readings of the images.

Introduction
Photographs are often used as aids for understanding history and communicating research outcomes. Until relatively recent times, however, most historians deemed photographs as mere illustrations for their textual analysis and not as part of the historical evidence itself. Critical evaluation of photographs for use in the writing of histories became more common in the 1990s and 2000s, but not all historians are convinced this is a valid practice. Doubters argue that a photograph is not a replication of exactly what was ‘in front of the camera lens’ and it does not depict ‘the “reality” of the setting or event’. In this view, a photograph cannot be considered as ‘evidence’ because it could have been ‘posed’ or manipulated in a number of ways.¹

Nevertheless, many historians accept that photographs can be critically evaluated in a similar way to primary source documents. In order to do this several things must be considered, including attempting to uncover the motives of the photographer and the values and assumptions that might have informed their work.² The values and assumptions of the original audience for the work should also be considered and we must not allow our own prejudices to influence our interpretation. The latter is a difficult task but must be approached with conscious effort. Other ‘essential questions’ we should ask are where was this photograph taken, and when? If the photograph includes people (as do the two examined here) we should ask who are they, what are they doing, and what can the photograph tell us about their lives?³

The two photographs
For this article I have selected photographs encountered during research in my main areas of interest: north Australia and Southeast Asia. The Darwin photograph allows discussion of the issue of photographs of Aboriginal people and facilitates discussion of the use of supporting documentary evidence, such as newspaper articles, and physical evidence, such as buildings. The Dili photograph is used as an example of how photographs can be examined to help us understand matters from the past, in this case Australia’s prior ambitions in its region. It also allows for discussion of the interpretation of uniforms, insignias and so on. The examples are by no means exhaustive but are deemed to provide a useful introduction to the potential use of photographs as historical evidence.

This photograph is held in Darwin at the Northern Territory Library (NTL). The photograph appears on the NTL’s PictureNT website with the title ‘Woman and maid’. It has the further description:

Maid servant (nurse or companion?) wearing crucifix stands beside well dressed [sic] lady with high necked blouse, large embellished straw hat, long white gloves, seated in cane chair outside Government House. Possibly Cissie McLeod and Mrs Mugg (B. James)

The idea that the young woman in the photograph is an employee of the other woman is enforced by the
Another photograph in the NTL collection is titled ‘Group at presentation’, but has the further description:

Crowd seated inside Palmerston Town Hall Smith Street, dressed clothing of the time. Gilruth presents bravery award to Cissie McLeod for saving Mrs Mugg from drowning.

In this case we are also given the photographer’s name, WJ Barnes, and a date, 1 September 1913. Given the recurrence of the names Cissie McLeod and Mrs Mugg it is reasonable to assume the photographs are related. When looked at closely it can be seen that both women from the first photograph appear in the second photograph as well and seem to be wearing the same clothes and adornments (in the case of the younger woman, this includes a medal), so it is likely the two photographs were taken on the same day.

The NTL has another copy of the second photograph titled ‘Ceremony.’ The photograph is dated 12 September 1913 and has a detailed description, which in part reads:

Cissy McLeod, foster daughter of Capt Frederick and Mrs Mugg, receives the Bronze Medal of the Royal Humane Society of Australasia at a reception in the Palmerston Town Hall from the Administrator Dr J.A. Gilruth. On 9th January 1912 Cissy had jumped off the Railway Jetty to rescue her foster mother who had fallen in in the darkness.

A third copy of the second photograph is held by the
Northern Territory Archives Service (NTAS). The NTAS description of the photograph is:

Half caste Sissy McLeod receiving medal for bravery in rescuing Mrs Ryan, manageress of Victoria Hotel when she fell off wharf [sic] when farewelling friends; at Town Hall Smith St, early 1900s.

The various titles and descriptions of the photographs make it difficult to be certain of who and what we are looking at. Are the people in the first photograph Cissy (Cissie, Sissy) McLeod and Mrs Mugg? Or Cissy McLeod and Mrs Ryan? Was Cissy a maid or nurse? Was the photograph taken at the Town Hall or at Government House? Was it taken on 1 or 12 September? Who was the photographer? Clearly, not all the information given with the photographs can be correct, but the detailed description for the photograph ‘Ceremony’ gives it an air of authority. After checking various sources it was found that that description was based on a report titled ‘Presentation to Miss Cissy McLeod’ that appeared in the Northern Territory Times (NTT) on 18 September 1913. That report declares the ceremony took place on 12 September and after the event a photograph of the gathering was taken by WJ Barnes, a well-known local amateur photographer. It seems likely that Barnes then took a photograph of just Cissy and Mrs Mugg together.

Cissy McLeod had received earlier press attention in 1907 when she won a number of prizes for her sewing work at the annual show. In 1910, she was awarded a prize for achieving the ‘highest mark for school work’ amongst the fourth class Convent School students that year. Two years later, Cissy was reported to have performed in a children’s play as part of the fundraising program of the Methodist Church. Although she was a Catholic school student Cissy, like Mrs Mugg, was an active member of the Methodist congregation. Providing descriptions for archival photographs can be difficult when little is known of their origins. Archivists are usually cautious when describing such photographs and for this reason many can be found with prosaic captions such as ‘Two men’ or ‘Man and a woman’. Sometimes, however, caption-writers can be less prudent. The title and description of the first photograph which suggest that Cissy McLeod was a maid or nurse may have been based on an assumption that a young Aboriginal woman standing next to a well-dressed European woman must be her employee. This is not an unreasonable assumption, as many young people of Aboriginal descent who lived with European families during this period were assigned servants. Cissy, however, was always referred to as the Muggs’ foster-daughter in local reports. Meanwhile, the declaration that the photograph was taken at Government House is difficult to understand, as most of its external walls are and were (according to photographic evidence) dissimilar to the one shown. On a visit to the Town Hall site I was able to identify the exact spot the photograph was taken due to the distinctive patterns in the rough stone wall. The final words of the description, ‘Possibly Cissie McLeod and Mrs Mugg’, seem to have been added at a later date at the suggestion of historian Barbara James (now deceased) who must have known of Cissy’s story and realised that the fact the young woman in the photograph was wearing a medal and holding what appears to be a rolled-up certificate indicated the photograph was taken following a presentation.

The description of the NTAS photograph, which replaces Mrs Mugg with Mrs Ryan, is at first puzzling. However, the NTT ran an article titled ‘A Narrow Escape’ on 19 March 1909 that described how Mrs Ryan had fallen off the jetty and into the harbour a few days earlier but was rescued by two local men. It seems reasonable to assume that the caption-writer knew this story and also the one of the presentation made to Cissy McLeod and somehow joined them together. And the date given for the photograph ‘Group at presentation’ could have been due to the caption-writer being aware the photograph must have been taken in September 1913, but was not sure of the exact date, in which case the first of the month was used as a default date.

None of the known contemporary Northern Territory press reports that mention Cissy McLeod acknowledge that she was of Aboriginal descent, although that would have been common knowledge in Darwin. The story of Cissy’s heroism in rescuing Mrs Mugg was reported interstate, however, and in nearly every case Cissy’s Aboriginal status was highlighted with headlines such as ‘An Aboriginal Heroine’, ‘A Dusky Heroine’, ‘A Brave Act. Plucky Half-Caste Girl’. Another difference to the Northern Territory press articles is that many of the interstate reports make no mention of Cissy’s relationship to Mrs Mugg, as if she was a mere passer-by, whereas others state simply that Cissy lived with the Muggs, or that Cissy was employed by Mrs Mugg. Some of the interstate reports claim that Cissy was a ‘nursegirl’, but they do not say who she worked for and there is no indication elsewhere that she performed this function for Mrs Mugg or that Mrs Mugg needed any nursing. It seems unlikely that the caption-writer who suggested that Cissy was a nurse was influenced by these reports, as that person seemed unaware of the identity of the people in the photograph.

Cissy was adopted by Captain and Mrs Mugg from her European father, Arthur McLeod, storekeeper of Borroloola. It is unknown if her Aboriginal mother (‘Polly’, according to Cissy’s birth certificate) had any
say in the matter. By all accounts Cissy was hard-working, brave, a good student, a loving daughter and a devout Christian. For Europeans who valued such attributes she would have been a source of pride and Cissy’s photograph can be read as a celebration of her successful assimilation into European society. Assuming that WJ Barnes was the photographer, one of his motivations in taking the portrait of Cissy and Mrs Mugg could have been to make a record of this success. Barnes was known to have entered his photographs into the annual Darwin show and he may have planned to do so with this photograph. He may also have made the photograph as a memento for some of the people present. The copy now held by the NTL is described as being ‘18 x 13 cm’, so it is reasonably large. The photograph comes from the collection of Jean A. Austin, a daughter of Administrator Gilruth, the man who presented Cissy with her award. The connection with Gilruth may have led to an assumption that the photograph was taken at Government House.

While Cissy McLeod’s portrait could be read as portraying European triumph over her Aboriginality, some observers have noted that many Aboriginal people today simply ignore such interpretations and would treasure any photograph of their ancestors as ‘a means of strengthening the continuity of family, an affirmation of Aboriginal identity and a means of negotiating sociality through time and space by validating the past’. There is also no reason why Cissy or her family should not have been proud of her achievements. Cissy McLeod, however, died of tuberculosis in 1928; she never married and appears never to have had children. It is unknown whether any other descendants of her biological parents can be found in the Northern Territory today.

One matter not mentioned so far is that Cissy McLeod did not remain in Darwin all the time. For example, just a few weeks after she received her award and medal, Cissy travelled with Mrs Mugg to Adelaide. Captain Mugg, meanwhile, travelled to many places along the Northern Territory coast and elsewhere. In 1908, Captain Mugg took his wife and Cissy with him on a trip to Kupang in Timor, which is a good segue to our next photograph, as it was taken on Timor, although many years later and at the opposite end of the island.

Photograph two: Dili, Portuguese Timor, 1945
This photograph, taken shortly after the end of World War Two, is held at the Australian War Memorial (AWM) in Canberra. The detailed description for the photograph to be found on the AWM website reads:

Dili, Portuguese Timor 1945-09-24. A small party of Australian troops under VX89 Brigadier L.G.H. Dyke DSO, Commander of Timor Force, landed in...
This description provides much of what historians would hope for, including the who, when and where, and the name of the photographer. Davis was an official photographer for the Australian Army’s Military History Section. The online description tells us nothing of the photograph’s materiality, but it has clearly been taken by a professional and is probably printed on high quality paper. The caption was likely added to the photograph soon after it was taken and the two were then filed in a methodical manner. There is little doubt that the photograph is what it claims to be and there is no need to replicate the verification process that occupied so much time with the previous example.

The AWM website shows that in the weeks and months that followed the taking of this photograph, Davis took scores of others in Dili and elsewhere in Portuguese Timor, many of which corroborate what is said to be portrayed in this one. There is, however, a lot of information not provided in the description of this photograph, such as why it was taken, and the nature of the ceremony referred to, which makes it necessary to seek different sources. Meanwhile, this photograph and others can be examined in detail to discover other clues.

The photograph’s caption declares the Australian troops ‘were made welcome’ by Governor Ferreira de Carvalho. One can imagine that the governor was diplomatic, but the truth is the Portuguese were wary of the Australians and with good reason. Against Portuguese wishes Australian troops had landed in Dili in December 1941. Following this violation of Portuguese neutrality, Timor was invaded and occupied by Japanese forces in February 1942. The Japanese initially allowed the Portuguese administration to continue, but in 1943 the Portuguese were placed in detention and the governor held under virtual house arrest in his palace. After the Japanese capitulation, Australia occupied the eastern Indonesian archipelago for the Allies. Australia informed the United Kingdom (UK) that it believed Portugal was ‘unfit to be entrusted with defence of territory so important to the security of this area’ and proposed that after accepting the Japanese surrender, Australian forces should remain in Portuguese Timor until the conclusion of defence and economic arrangements first proposed in 1943. The UK persuaded Australia to abandon this plan. Nevertheless, only weeks before this photograph was taken an Australian representative asked the Portuguese ambassador in London how his government would respond to the suggestion of a 100-year lease of Portuguese Timor to Australia. The ambassador replied that Portugal could not relinquish sovereignty of any of its territory. It is probable that Governor Ferreira de Carvalho knew of such intrigues.

Australia learnt that the Japanese had not established separate commands in eastern and western Timor, so only one surrender ceremony was necessary, which took place at Kupang on 11 September 1945. Meanwhile, the Japanese transferred authority to the Portuguese in eastern Timor on 5 September 1945. Portugal let it be known it therefore considered an Allied occupation of its territory completely unnecessary. However, Australia remained determined to appear as the victor in Portuguese Timor and on 23 September Brigadier Lewis Dyke of the Australian forces arrived in Dili. Dyke formally notified the governor of the surrender of Japanese forces on Timor. At Dyke’s suggestion, he and Ferreira de Carvalho made speeches at a public ceremony the following day acknowledging Australia’s association with the liberation of Portuguese Timor.

This is the ceremony referred to in the photograph’s caption. The clearly staged photograph shows the governor, his aide-de-camp and chief of staff standing to attention in the middle of a road. It seems the three men have just arrived from the governor’s palace in the motorcar seen behind them. It is curious that one of the motorcar’s doors is still open, as if the men had been brought specifically to this place for the photograph and would then move on. The ceremony must have been held nearby, but by taking the photograph here Davis was able to include the remains of the Dili cathedral, the tallest building in the town. The cathedral had suffered heavy damage from aerial bombing, as had the buildings on either side of the road. Other photographs show nearly every building in the town had suffered lost roofs and other damage. Some minor damage would have occurred at the time of the Japanese invasion, but the majority was caused by bombing raids conducted by the Royal Australian Air Force during the occupation.

Although there was money to be made from coffee and a few other products, Portuguese Timor was not wealthy, with the majority of the people living as subsistence farmers. Dili was rather a small place; outside the capital there was little development, and few Portuguese lived in the colony. So why was Portugal determined to remain in control there? One reason was pride. Portugal had been a mighty imperial power. It still retained Angola and Mozambique in Africa, which were large and prosperous, but Portugal’s might in Asia had been eroded by the other colonial powers, especially the Netherlands and the UK. Of the remaining fragments, Diu and Goa in India, Macau in China, and Portuguese Timor, the latter was the largest. Some of that Portuguese pride might be seen
in the expression on Governor Ferreira de Carvalho’s face in the photograph. In this and some of the other photographs taken at the time, the governor’s expression might also be interpreted as showing mild levels of indignation and suspicion. The general tone of Ferreira de Carvalho’s subsequent report to his government was one of satisfaction in deterring the Australians from any inappropriate action while they were in his territory.

What was Davis’s motivation in taking this photograph? The obvious answer is that it was part of his job and this is just one of many photographs taken in Portuguese Timor at the time. Other photographs document matters such as the destruction of Japanese war materiel, and there are several portraits of individual Portuguese and Timorese who assisted Australian troops when they conducted commando operations against the Japanese during the period February 1942 to February 1943. These latter photographs can be seen as part of an effort to commemorate and honour those people. The photographs of the ceremony to commemorate Australia’s role in the liberation of Portuguese Timor are, I believe, quite different. Portugal did not request such an action and it had many reasons to be suspicious and resentful of Australia’s behaviour. The photograph of the governor and his staff is evidence of a time when Australia sought to take control of Portuguese Timor. In that ambition Australia did not succeed, but in this and other photographs taken in Portuguese Timor at the time, Australia’s role in the Japanese defeat is highlighted and the role played by the Portuguese diminished. It is as if Australia sought to take possession of the territory through a camera’s lens. Used in conjunction with other sources these photographs enhance our understanding of the events they portray.

Before leaving this photograph, there are some other issues that could be considered. For example, we are told the photograph portrays the governor, his aide-de-camp and his chief of staff, but none are identified further. While it can be assumed that the central, foremost figure is the governor, some knowledge of military uniforms could help identify the others. Specifically, it will be noticed that the man to the governor’s right wears a braided cord hanging from his right shoulder. This device is known as an aiguillette, a common badge of office for aides-de-camp in many military services, although it can signify other honours. The assumption that the aiguillette-wearer is an aide-de-camp appears justified by the existence of other photographs that show this man greeting Brigadier Dyke on his arrival at Dili, as the meeting and hosting of visitors is one of the common duties of the post. A close study of the three men’s emblems of rank and the military decorations they wear could provide further interesting information.

Conclusion
Critical evaluation of photographs for use in the writing of histories is a relatively recent practice. Historians must take care in using such material and need to ask various questions relating to a photograph’s provenance, probable motives of the photographer, and other matters, as outlined earlier. In the two examples examined here it has been shown that it is easy to come to wrong or incomplete conclusions and that a close study of supporting evidence is often critical to our understanding. Whether the material being examined is a written text, a photograph or other source, a cautious approach is essential. A photograph can be ‘faked’, but so can a document. If it is accepted that the assessment requirements for photographs and the textual primary source documents traditionally used in historical analysis are really not so different, there seems little reason for historians to avoid the use of photographs as evidence. On the contrary, provided normal precautions are taken there is much to be gained.

Notes
1 Penny Tinkler, Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research, Sage, London, 2013, pp. xiii, 5-7
3 Drake and Drake Brown, ‘A Systematic Approach to Improve Students’ Historical Thinking’, pp. 472, 482
4 Tinkler, Using Photographs, pp. 23, 94-5. The notion of photographs as ‘a form of material culture’ is discussed in Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (eds), Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images, Routledge, London and New York, 2004. A number of the papers acknowledge photographs as part of the historical record, but the idea of their critical evaluation for use in the writing of histories is less developed. A good overview is provided in the editors’ own paper, ‘Introduction: photographs as objects’, pp. 1-15.
8 Database description for the photograph NTAS, HSNT, NTRS 1854, Item 2183
9 NTT, 16 August 1907, 30 December 1910, 3 October 1912, 15 July 1922
10 Truth [Brisbane], 7 December 1913
11 Advertiser [Adelaide], 26 August 1913
12 Singleton Argus, 28 January 1913
14 NTT, 13 April 1928
15 NTT, 2 October 1913
16 NTT, 20 March 1908
20 Farram, ‘Australian interest in Timor’, p. 57
22 Farram, ‘Portugal and the Netherlands in Timor’, p. 118