

Windows into the Past

Dr Kyle Jackson

A big bowl of boiled baby bees was being pushed towards me. It was the generous appetizer for dinner guests in a home in Mizoram, a mountainous state in India's eastern Himalayas. I wished that my hosts were less generous. I wished that Himalayan starters were less larvae-related. I cursed the British Library under my breath. And grabbed a grub.

I was in Mizoram as part of a pilot project under the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme (EAP), a global rescue mission for the world's most endangered historical documents. EAP researchers have in the past ten years fanned out across the globe. Each are armed with little more than a high-resolution digital camera and a strong stomach. These—combined with requisite post-secondary education—had landed me a spot on the team.

Our mission was urgent. Much of the historical, village-level material that we came across with our local partners was already damaged or destroyed by heat, bugs, rodents, human neglect, or—in one case—by bombs exploded during political insurgency. Humidity was our worst enemy of all. Mouldy historical documents were stark reminders that Cherrapunji, often billed as the wettest place on the planet, was only 200 kilometers to our northwest. History is lost as these sources are lost.

Across three months, we digitized hundreds of rare books, letters, and diaries. But the region's earliest photographs were our biggest find of all. Dating from the 1890s, these compelling visual sources capture the exceptionally rapid historical transformations of the Mizo people. Many of these photographs were taken by amateur foreign missionary photographers and, later, by Mizo photographers and villagers themselves.

My "Open the Doors" Kwantlen Faculty Association (KFA) multimedia project remixes an earlier, more traditional gallery project to present a selection of these beautiful, rescued images (and others drawn from fieldwork in regional archives). I have specially chosen images to bring viewers face-to-face with historical agents often underrepresented in the region's written historical record: Mizo women, children, nurses, farmers, female British missionaries, and migrants step into the spotlight. Today, my KPU History students learn how these sorts of photographs can carry traces of history and of everyday life that written material might not. Images can be used as open windows onto forgotten pasts.

The historical photographs are custom printed onto papers handmade by my wife (Lindy Jackson) and I from materials deeply imbued in the colonial history of Mizoram. Potatoes (the introduction of which was contemporaneous to the advent of photography in the region), rice (so fundamental that in the Mizo language the term is coterminous with the word for *food*) and bamboo (baskets of which Mizos were born into, and coffins of which they were buried within) form our different papers' ingredients, along with salt, tea, lentils, bananas, coffee, cotton, and jaggery (or cane sugar). For this KFA project, I present these images in a single box (complete with a pair of cotton gloves) that invites curiosity. The viewer is beckoned to experience the hands-on thrill of archival discovery—of opening a time capsule of history and gazing within.

Over a decade ago, I wrote my first undergraduate history paper on India's northeast. The essay won a paper prize, and I used the prize money to fly to India to see the region firsthand. Now, countless visits to the region and a doctoral dissertation later, the blue hills of India's northeast are a second home. How could I have anticipated as an undergraduate that, one day, I would be eating honeybee larvae somewhere on the Indo-Burmese border? (They're delicious, by the way). Or that one day I would turn my flat into a veritable papermaking factory, creating art from prints of rescued historical photographs? Who would have thought that, one day, I would be able to share the wonder of world history with students of my own? My KFA project opens a small window onto the gloriously unexpected consequences of a post-secondary education.