LUCKNOW AFTER THE INDIAN MUTINY

The Photographs of Felice Beato

BY PETER HARRINGTON

SOME OF THE EARLIEST EXTANT PHOTOGRAPHS OF BATTLE scenes are the well-known images taken by Felice Beato in Lucknow, India, shortly after the relief of that city in 1858 during the Indian Mutiny. Beato also photographed buildings and places in Delhi, Cawnpore, Agra, and other towns connected with the revolt. Examples of the Lucknow photographs have been reproduced in many histories of the uprising, but relatively little is known about the photographer himself.

Italian by birth, Beato met British photographer James Robertson, possibly during a visit to Malta in 1850. It was a business and personal relationship that was to last for 20 years. Robertson married Beato's sister, Maria Matilde, in 1855. For the next few years, under the partnership Robertson, Beato and Co., the two photographers traveled together to Greece and Egypt. The mid-1850s found Robertson working in the mint at Constantinople, and in 1855 he received a commission from print publisher Dominic Colnaghi to go to the Crimea and cover the final stages of the Crimean War. The company's previous photographer, Roger Fenton, had decided to return home.

It is generally assumed that Beato accompanied Robertson to the Crimean front, as the latter certainly had an assistant with him. Robertson was able to produce some remarkable images of the interior of Sebastopol following the successful assault of that city in September 1855.

Two years later, Beato went to India. It has been suggested that his journey was the result of a commission from the British War Department to record images of the ongoing mutiny, but this cannot be verified. Alternatively, his trip might have been motivated by personal gain. Whatever the truth, Beato was able to obtain per-

OPPOSITE: In this famous Felice Beato photo, the bones of dead rebels lie scattered in the foreground at Secundra Bagh.
ABOVE: The 32nd Mess House was the site of Sir Colin Campbell's first attack in March 1858.
LEFT: The old citadel at Lucknow, Machee Bawn, was originally occupied by Sir Henry Lawrence.

All photos courtesy the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection

mission from the British military authorities to move around the various battle areas. It is not clear when Beato arrived at Calcutta–one source says January 20, 1858, another says February 13–but he was certainly in the city by February 17, when he addressed the Bengal Photographic Society.

Whether Beato was accompanied by Robertson cannot be determined with any degree of certainty. Exhibitions of the Lucknow photographs at the British Association in Leeds in October 1858 and at the Photographic Society in London in February 1859 cited Robertson as the photographer or co-photographer, but beyond this, there is no hard evidence that Robertson went to India with Beato.

Whether or not he was accompanied by Robertson, Beato was definitely on the scene in India that winter. In his memoirs, British officer Francis Cornwallis Maude placed Beato in Lucknow by the end of March 1858, within days of the capture of the city by British forces under Sir Colin Campbell on the 21st. Lucknow had weathered two sieges and two relief's between September 1857 and March 1858, and the vast majority of its buildings had been battered by cannon fire or explosions. It was the state of these buildings and the infamous scenes connected with the military events that Beato wanted to document.

Beato's main equipment was a large box camera that used 10-by-12-inch plates. The resulting albumen glass-plate negatives were printed on silver chloride paper. Several minutes were needed to expose each plate, with the result that some of the photographs have occasional blurring of figures and flags. Beato took over 60 images in and around the city of Lucknow, including a panorama captured on six collodion wet plates exposed from the roof balcony of a mosque.

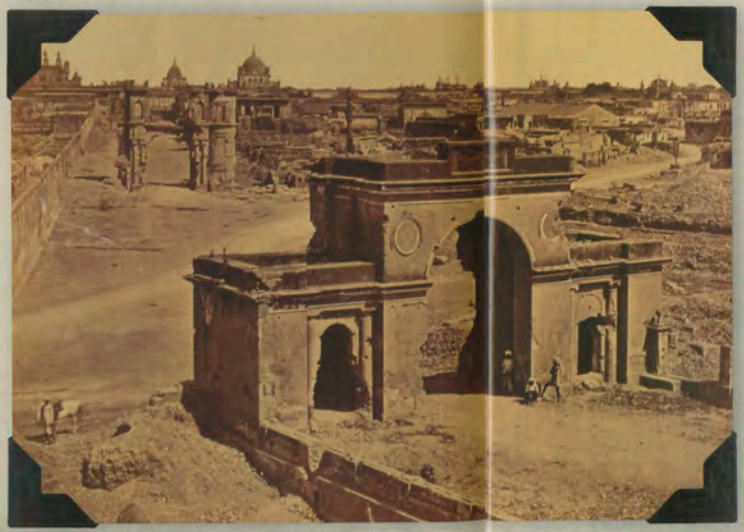
Perhaps his most famous photograph shows the interior of the Secundra Bagh, scene of intense fighting in November 1857. According to contemporary accounts, over 2,000 Indians were killed by British troops when this position was captured. The human bones in the foreground are supposedly the remains of these victims. Francis Maude had this to say about the photograph: "A few of their bones and skulls &c are to be seen in front of the picture, but when I saw them every one was being regularly buried, so I presume the dogs dug them up."

William Howard Russell, however, made the following entry in his diary on March 12, 1858: "Rode over to the Secunderbagh ... a large enclosure, with turrets at the angles, and a garden inside with kiosks and summer houses. I walked as far as I could venture among the skeletons." If Beato took this photograph shortly afterward, it is quite possible the bones were still lying about, although Sir George Campbell noted in his memoirs that "the great pile of bodies had been decently covered over before the photographer could take them, but he insisted on having them uncovered to be photographed before they were finally disposed of." An exterior shot of the Secundra Bagh shows the breach and gateway, with a dead Indian figure deliberately posed to mark the breach.

Whether Beato met Russell is unknown, although the latter did note on April 5 that an "intelligent photographer" had recently arrived in Lucknow. Russell had pitched his tent close to a well at an angle of the mess house and was living there in early April 1858. Before he left on April 14 with Campbell's force, it is probable that the correspondent would have seen Beato photographing the building. This was one of the buildings and structures Beato shot shortly before the occupying forces began to demolish many of the places.

In several of the photographs, evidence of the recent violence can be clearly seen, with huge holes and cavities where the walls had been pierced or blown out. In particular, the images of the residency are a poignant reminder of the critical time during the siege when the building was crammed with soldiers and civilians. As one lady wrote in her journal, "There is not one hole or corner where one can enjoy an instant's privacy."

Another photo captures the badly ruined building known as the Machee Bhawan, or Old Citadel, amid piles of debris and rubble. This was occupied prior to its evacuation on July 1,1857, by Sir Henry Lawrence's troops. Shortly after the British quit the place, there was a tremendous explosion that blew open the doors of the residency. Thick smoke billowed out from the building, revealing a heap of ruins. The result is clearly delineated in Beato's shot.



RIGHT: The walled garden at Secundra Bagh, clearly showing the breach through which British troops forced their way. BELOW: A view from inside the Bailee Guard Gate. The city of Lucknow lies in the distance.

Another photograph shows the Baillie Guard Gate, which was reported to be "completely riddled with round shot and musket balls." Visible in the photo is an empty courtyard with rubble around; the remains of the Lal Bagh, where General James Neill was shot through the head and killed in September 1857; and the road down which General Henry Havelock entered the residency on September 25, 1857. There are images of major buildings in the city, including the Martiniere School, which was the scene of Sir Colin Campbell's first and second attack on the city; the Kaiser Bagh Palace; the Emambara Magazine; and the iron and stone bridges. One familiar but fascinating image portrays the King of Oude's fish-shaped wooden boat sitting in the shallows of the River Gumti.

The photographs were taken in the bright blazing sunlight, when the heat was reaching 102 degrees in the tents at Lucknow. On seeing them mounted on the walls of the photographic exhibition held in Suffolk Street, London, in February 1859, one reviewer described them as "yellow as if dyed with curry-powder or super sunshine," while another noted that they were "highly jaundiced ... perhaps owing to the great amount of varnish on them."

Some of the photographs include unidentified figures, all of whom appear to be natives, with one or two exceptions where British soldiers or officials appear. In one photograph detailing the damage caused to the Chutter Munzil by a mine, a British officer and another European appear amid the destruction, with an Indian servant behind them. Whether intentional or not, the European figures are posed as conquerors, while the natives are in a submissive stance. Beato photographed groupings of the various British generals and soldiers who fought in the conflict, including members of Hodson's Horse, and these have been likened to Fenton's well-known Crimean portraits. One native figure who seems to appear in several shots may have been Beato's assistant, and a horse with an attendant standing to the right of the Bailee Guard Gate could be the photographer's mode of transport.

While the vast majority of the photographs are of places and buildings, Beato also photographed an infamous execution scene showing two Indians being hung before their British captors.

At an exhibition of the photographs, one review stated that they were the work of Robertson, while another suggested that they were by "Mr. Robertson, or his Armenian [sic] brother-in-law, it does not matter which." This is the first reference to Beato. Four of the photographs were reproduced as engravings in the *Illustrated London News*, but the source was not identified. By October the following year, when the same paper was cover-

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ing the war in China where Beato had also gone, it reproduced two of his China photographs with the note that they were from photographs "by Signor Beato, of Crimean and Indian celebrity." In 1862, the Indian photographs, along with his scenes of the China War, were shown at Henry Herring's gallery in Regent Street, where they were highly regarded, and patrons could subscribe to purchase copies. Perhaps his work in China had finally brought Beato to the forefront of British photography.

Could some of the photographs have been the work of James Robertson? The evidence that he accompanied Beato to India is unclear. One tantalizing clue that he might have been there appears in a letter from a soldier written in India in August 1858 and quoted in *The Photographic News* of November 19, 1858. In it there is a reference to a photographer, "a little, short, elderly man, dressed in white canvas; by him stood an object dressed in black,—this was a camera." Beato would have been only in his twenties at the time, while Robertson would have been in his mid-forties. The soldier went on to describe a scene of two dead Indians, a lady and himself being photographed by a man who was "armed with a long sword, a six-barrelled revolver, and a sharp-pointed knife about ten inches long." Could this have been Robertson? A few other photographers, mainly soldiers, were known to have photographed scenes of the mutiny. But if Robertson was in India, why did William Howard Russell, who must have known him in the Crimea, not allude to him in his diary or newspaper columns?

What do the Lucknow photographs mean today? The empty buildings and ruined places standing amid stark desolation speak to us across a century and a half of a time when colonialism was an acceptable practice. They bring alive the awful events of 1857-1858 in ways that prints and paintings cannot, since they are real snapshots of real places, albeit reflections of the attitudes of the day and the photographer's bias. Except for the few natives whom Beato probably posed deliberately, Lucknow appears to be a ghost town, which it had become by the spring of 1858. Today, we can look at these pictures and almost feel the heat of the moment, when the besieged garrison in their heavy Victorian uniforms and clothing suffered in intolerable conditions, waiting desperately for the relief column to appear. □