

APPENDIX A

Pioneer Biographies

of the British Period to 1947

Maurice Vidal Portman (1861-1935)

M. V. Portman

Of all the Andamanese pioneers, Maurice Vidal Portman is by far the most fascinating, unapproachable, elusive, even mysterious. In many ways, he resembles the Andamanese people that he spent so much of his life studying, bullying and protecting. He wrote several major works in which he reveals little about himself apart from occasional tantalizing flashes of his character.



Two of the very few existing photographs showing M.V. Portman - if not too clearly. They must have been taken sometimes in the late 1880 or early 1890s



Another Portman picture of the 1890s (from the collection of the Anthropological Survey of India)

It has been quite a struggle just to track down the years of Portman's birth and death. When we finally had found them, we discovered that Portman apparently has not written a single traceable line during the 34 years between his retirement in 1901 and his death in 1935. After he had published a number of large and important volumes on the subject, this was something of a surprise. What had the man been doing for 34 years? We still do not really know. Portman's obituary in *The Times* of London of 22nd February 1935 was not terribly helpful even if it is a remarkable text. We reproduce it here in its entirety:

OBITUARY

MR. M.V. PORTMAN**"FATHER" OF ANDAMAN ISLANDERS**

Mr. Maurice Vidal Portman, who died at Axbridge, Somerset, last week at the age of 74, had done a remarkable work in the Andaman Islands. The third son of the late Hon. Maurice Berkeley Portman, he joined the Royal Indian Marine at the age of 16 and was some time in charge of the Viceroy's yacht. "L.P." writes of him:-

Many old Anglo-Indians, as well as a vast circle of friends of later years, will have been grieved to hear of the death of "M.V.," one of the large number who carry out brilliant and immensely responsible work in the East and are now never heard of in England.

From 1879 onwards, when he was first made "Officer in Charge of the Andamanese," Maurice never ceased to labour on their behalf. In many parts of the islands the natives were still either ferocious enemies or at best half-tamed; and his work consisted in making contact with them and very gradually bringing them to recognize the value of British rule. Above all men he had the "native touch," that rare, mysterious gift that attracts and makes friends at once with natives; and slowly, through a long period of years, he made his gift prevail - work of extraordinary difficulty, for most of them were as shy as wild animals, and often of extreme danger - he would frequently have to land on their beaches, standing up in an open boat, amid a shower of poisoned arrows. But in course of time he won them by sheer personal magnetism. He doctored them; they were very rapidly dying out from venereal disease. He judged them and, if necessary, he hanged them. Often for weeks together he lived with them, almost like one of themselves, but always intensely respected and loved. Not only did he carry out a colossal amount of daily administrative work, but he found time to write an exhaustive history of them and their islands, as well as a grammar of their language, and to perform an immense amount of anthropological research, the value of which was repeatedly recognized by the British Museum and other authorities. He made himself the master of 12 or more Indian dialects, for which he was made a Fellow of Calcutta University. For his brilliant administrative services he had "the thanks of the Government of India," a very high honour, no fewer than 13 times.

For 20 years or more he was "everything and everybody" at Port Blair. Then, at the age of 45, incessant over-work and ill-health proved too much for his extraordinarily frail physique; he was invalided home, for the last time, and his active life came to an end.

A man of intense magnetism, charm, and sympathy, a brilliant and most amusing talker, he made friends among all men wherever he went, from aborigines to Viceroys; and never was friendship so staunch, so "understanding," and so highly valued. A great fighter, he was always at war officially; carrying on the tussle with Asiatic cunning and an intense Puckish humour and delight, and seldom failing to get his way. After retirement he did some journalism, and during the War [World War I] some valuable Secret Service work. Always, too, he was hard at work helping people of all classes, doing something for somebody; and his services to the Union Club, of which he was recently made an honorary member, will not easily be forgotten. Latterly he was much cut off from his activities and friends by increasing infirmity, but was able just to get about till a few weeks ago.

The obituary does not explain why Portman could do the physically highly demanding work in a hellish climate that he did for more than 20 years when he was of such "extraordinarily frail physique." Nor is there an explanation of why he published nothing that we know of during his long retirement. The obituary hints tantalizingly at "some journalism" but we do not know what this refers to. Rather more in the nature of things is that we do not know what sort of work Portman did for the Secret Service; we can only assume that it had some relevance to India. What has happened to the allegedly vast circle of friends? Did a man as secretive as Portman really have so many friends? The evidence is against it. In his last will and testament Portman left all his money - not very much - to his man-servant and some masonic items to the Masons; nobody else is mentioned in the document. What made Portman leave England behind to enter the relatively low-prestige Indian Marine, why did his family mean so little to him and why did he never rise above the lowly rank of Captain despite his considerable contacts and skill as an office guerilla (see the following correspondence)?

Another puzzle is why Portman's biography has been so difficult to track down. Scientific references to Portman are extremely rare. The vast British Biographical Index has an uninformative short entry, saying only

that he "flourished around 1898/9," obviously the years of his major publications. The Who Was Who for the years 1897-1916 does not mention him, nor does the Dictionary of National Biography with all its supplements. The work of pulling Mr. Portman out of the shadows continues.



Portman's palatial mansion in the 1890s (from the collection of the Anthropological Survey of India).

Maurice Vidal Portman was born on 21st March 1860, the third son of Maurice Berkeley Portman (of his first marriage, to Helen Vidal Harris) who was in turn the third son of the 1st Viscount Portman. In other words, Maurice Vidal had aristocratic family connections, complete with a short entry in "Burke's Peerage." Family connections do not seem to have any importance to him, in fact he seems to have deliberately shied away from them. Portman never married and has left no descendants.

As we have mentioned, Portman wrote two books, both containing enormous amounts of information not elsewhere available, often based on documents long since lost or buried in the depths of inaccessible archives. Yet both works contain very little about their author. Only on close reading can the author's sometimes sardonic sense of humour be seen. Portman in all his works went to great lengths in order to stay invisible, to give away nothing away. He appeared in person only when he reprinted one of his own official reports on scientific or military expeditions - in stiff Victorian prose. Whatever else he was, Portman was not a self-publicist.

Of course, his books give away a lot more than their author can have suspected. In every conceivable way apart from their shared enthusiasm for things Andamanese Portman was the very opposite of E.H. Man. While Man was painstaking, impersonal and systematic, often to the point of pedantry, Portman gives the impression of having been genial and a little chaotic, though not consistently so. He also comes across as a strangely contradictory character : he ran the Andamanese Homes efficiently and competently for longer than anyone else, he was entrusted with difficult and often dangerous expeditions that demanded a high degree of diplomacy and circumspection, not to mention military training and physical stamina. He was very popular with the Andamanese - enough to attract Man's envy - yet he could be a stern, even brutal colonial administrator, not hesitating to burn down Andamanese villages who had somehow offended "to show them who was the master," as he put it himself, and to hang the insane son of a chieftain. He was also personally brave, repeatedly facing down armed Andamanese war parties without flinching.

His books were thrown together in such an unsystematic way and without an index that they drive even well-balanced researchers up the wall. The information Portman's work provides is as indispensable as that supplied by Man, although it is much harder to extract. There is enough material in Portman for any number of adventure and documentary films, and yet it is important enough scientifically for this author to have made his own working index to it, a tedious task not undertaken lightly or for any ephemeral work. There is very little duplication between the two rivals: while Man listed all the tools, accomplishments, skills, knowledge, words, beliefs and legends of the Andamanese that he could find, Portman recorded (the title of his main work sums it up) the History of Our Relations with the Andamanese. Portman gives far more historical information than Man and incidentally sheds a great deal of new light on the Andamanese themselves, their behavior and their reactions in the face of outsiders' intrusion. Portman's other major work, the Notes of the Languages of the South Andaman Group of Languages published in 1898 is more than a match for the publications of Man and

his friends. Typical of Portman, this excellent volume is extremely rare today and so difficult to find that it is hardly ever consulted which is a pity and quite undeserved.

Just as characteristic of Portman are the inconsistencies in his other works. Radcliffe-Brown called his Notes of 1898 "useful and accurate" as well as "of much greater value" than a Manual of the Andamanese Languages Portman had published in 1887. That work was judged to be "full of errors and entirely unreliable." But then, Radcliffe-Brown was an anthropologist, rather than a linguist and it is open on what criteria he judged Portman's linguistic writings. Moreover, Radcliffe-Brown did not think that Portman's History of our Relations "added very much to our knowledge of the Andamanese themselves," a very odd statement. Radcliffe-Brown in his own book was not so much interested in collecting and sifting new information (although he did that, too) than in interpreting its "meaning" in terms of his anthropological theory.

Doing one's predecessors down has been a traditional preoccupation among Andamanologists from the earliest days. Perhaps it is just the modern academic version of the traditional evening dance at the Andamanese village.



Ross Island in the 1890s, seen looking south. The castle-like structure is the European troops' barracks with officers' housing around it (from the collection of the Anthropological Survey of India).

We owe John Falconer of the British Library Oriental and India Office the discovery of an official correspondence that delightfully highlights Portman's character and his talents as a ruthless office guerrilla. It also lifts a tiny corner of the struggle that was going on under the official blanket between Man and Portman. At the time Portman was taking a series of photographs of the Andamanese with ultra-modern equipment he had imported himself from London. As far as is known, most of these photographs are still stored at various museums and few have ever been published. Portman's newly-appointed superior in 1892, Col. Horsford, wanted to replace him as Officer in Charge of the Andamanese with, of all people, E.H. Man. It must have been this, rather than the threatened removal of a few miles to an island in Port Blair harbour that made Portman rise to the provocation.

Telegram, Andaman, 28th October 1892
from M.V. Portman, 4th Assistant Superintendent, Port Blair
to C.J. Lyall, Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, Simla

Chief Commissioner has ordered my transfer to Viper [an island within Port Blair harbour] and deprived me charge Andamanese. No fault found. No reason given. Photographic work consequently stopped. Suffer great pecuniary loss. Have memorialized Viceroy. As great favour may Colonel Horsford's order be held abeyance till decision on memorial known.

Memorial, Port Blair, 17th October 1892
from M.V. Portman, 4th Assistant Superintendent, Port Blair
to His Excellency the Viceroy and Governor general of India in Council

Your Excellency, - Your memorialist humbly begs to lay before you the hardship under which he suffers owing to the treatment he has received from Colonel N.M.T. Horsford, Superintendent of Port Blair. When your memorialist petitioned Your Excellency in 1890 regarding his

supersession in an officiating appointment by Mr. H.G. Tayler, he was informed in letter No. 612 from the Home Department of the Government of India, to the Superintendent of Port Blair, dated Simla, 1st August 1890, paragraph 3, that "should the appointment at present filled by Mr. Tayler become permanently vacant, or should the new scale of establishment proposed by the Commission above referred to, be introduced it will, I am to say, be open to you, in case you should consider Mr. Portman fit to undertake the charge of a division, in which the work is heavier, or of a more responsible character than it is in that which he now holds to make any recommendation on his behalf, which you may deem expedient."

In the following year Mr. Tayler was permanently appointed to supersede your memorialist, and on his enquiring the reason for this, he was informed by Colonel Cadell, then Superintendent of Port Blair, that though there was nothing against your memorialist's character, and he was intellectually capable of holding any appointment in the Settlement, yet, that his extreme delicacy of health, made it impossible for him to be appointed to the charge of a district, or of any other division than the one he now holds. Colonel Cadell also assured your memorialist that in consequence of this, he would not be moved from the house he resided in, and Colonel Cadell's subsequent actions will prove that he never contemplated moving your memorialist from this house.

Your memorialist has held charge of the Andamanese from July 1879 to December 1880, when he proceeded to England on sick leave; again from December 1883 to March 1887, when he proceeded on furlough; and again from March 1888 to the present time. This appointment carries no pay with it and the duties of it are performed in addition to the officer's other duties.

From the favourable remarks of the Government of India, your memorialist believes that he has done his work satisfactorily, and he would most respectfully draw attention to the fact that he tamed the aborigines of the Little Andaman, wrote, at the request of the Superintendent of Port Blair, the Andamanese Manual in four languages, and, for the good of the Andamanese race, has established a Home at his own house for sixty Andamanese of ages from five to twenty-six, but principally children, which Home has been favourably remarked upon by the Government of India.

In 1890 your memorialist volunteered to make at his own expense a series of photographs illustrative of the manners and customs of the Andamanese aborigines for the British Museum, and at the request of the Government of India is supplying them with three copies of a somewhat similar series on payment.

Both the Secretary of State for India in Despatch No. 88, dated 19th December 1889, and the Government of India in letter No. 122, dated 4th February 1890, approved of this work, and directed that your memorialist should be given every reasonable facility for the undertaking.

Your memorialist has now received an order from Colonel N.M.T. Horsford, Superintendent of Port Blair, transferring him to Viper [island], and depriving him of the charge of the Andamanese.

Relying on the assurance of Colonel Cadell that your memorialist would not be moved from his present house, he fitted it, and its dark rooms, with electric light at a cost of nine hundred pounds.

Owing to this, he has been able to do his photographic work both better and quicker than he otherwise could have done. By the transfer of your memorialist to Viper, this electric light plant, which has only been down a year, and which has been cut up and fitted for this special house, is rendered useless, and your memorialist suffers a serious pecuniary loss.

Colonel Cadell built, at Government expense, a year ago, an engine-room for your memorialist's electric light engine [generator], and previous to that a studio and dark room had been built and fitted for him in accordance with the Secretary of State for India's Despatch No. 88 of 19th December 1889 and Home Department letter No. 122 of 4th February 1890.

This is sufficient proof that Colonel Cadell had no idea of your memorialist being transferred to another division.

Further, in being deprived of the charge of the Andamanese, your memorialist is prevented from finishing his ethnographic photographs for the British Museum and the Government of India. The work was commenced by your memorialist, because owing to his official position and the authority he holds over the Andamanese, he has facilities for doing it which another officer would not have.

By thus stopping the work it renders it very difficult, if not impossible, for many reasons, including pecuniary ones, for your memorialist to recommence at any future period, should this be considered desirable.

Your memorialist humbly hopes that both his past services with the Andamanese and the fact that he is supplying the public through the British Museum with a large and costly series of ethnographic photographs at his own expense, may be taken into consideration, and that he may be permitted to remain in his present house, and in charge of the Andamanese for the next five-and-a-half years, during which period he will endeavour to complete his scientific work.

Colonel Horsford's present order causes your memorialist a pecuniary loss of over one thousand pounds, as besides the cost of the electric light, your memorialist has been at an expense of over five hundred pounds for apparatus, etc., for his photographic work, and he is now prevented from recouping himself by the sale of his series of photographs, as suggested by the Government of India, because the series is incomplete.

And your humble memorialist will, as in duty bound, ever pray.

Letter, Port Blair, 24th October 1892
from Colonel N.M.T. Horsford, Superintendent, Port Blair
to The Secretary of the Government of India

1. I have the honour to forward, for the order of the Governor General in Council, a memorial from Mr. M.V. Portman appealing against my orders, transferring him to Viper, and replacing him by Mr. E.H. Man in charge of the Andamanese. He prays that these orders may be cancelled, that he may be permitted to retain charge of these aborigines, and be allowed to remain on in his present house at Aberdeen [Port Blair] (where he has already been for upwards of ten years] for the next five and a half years.

2. I beg to submit, as per margin, copies of the entire correspondence which has passed between Mr. Portman and myself in this matter:

Superintendent's No. 1038, dated 14th October 1892
No. 1. Mr. Portman's No. 3, dated 15th October 1892
No. 2. Superintendent's No. 1049, dated 17th October 1892
No. 3. Mr. Portman's No. 4, dated 17th October 1892
No. 4. Superintendent's No. 1056, dated 19th October 1892
No. 5. Mr. Portman's No. 5, dated 19th October 1892

3. It will be observed that Mr. Portman has been unable to produce any letter, or other written communication from Colonel Cadell in support of his statement, that a promise was made to him that he should be allowed to remain at Aberdeen [Port Blair]. He was doubtless assured that he would not be removed elsewhere during the remainder of Colonel Cadell's short tenure of office. I have no doubt whatever that when Mr. Portman made his purchase of electric plant [his photographic apparatus with electrical lighting], he hoped it would ensure his remaining on; or that if there was any thought of removing him, the difficulties in the way would be so great that the idea would be abandoned. He would probably have succeeded, under circumstances, other than those about to be mentioned in this letter.

4. Had Colonel Cadell wished to bind his successor in this matter, and had he considered it to the advantage of the public service not to remove Mr. Portman, he would, I feel sure, have mentioned the subject to me during the ten days I was here as his guest and when he was telling

me about everything regarding the Settlement. If he had made any promise, he would have placed the matter beyond any doubt, by formally recording this promise in writing. If Mr. Portman was satisfied that such a promise had been made to him, why did he not have it confirmed by Colonel Cadell before me; or why did he not mention it to me when Colonel Cadell was still here? The first intimation I had of this matter was Mr. Portman's letter No. 3 (enclosure No. 2), which was disposed of by my letter No. 1049 (enclosure No. 3), which he has not attempted to answer. I cannot find the slightest trace in this office of any of the communications which Mr. Portman in his various letters and memorials alleges to have taken place between him and Colonel Cadell.

5. During my service of over thirty-four years, I have come across many hard bargains in Government servants, but I have never come across a case like the present one, taking it in all its bearings. Leaving out earlier periods but taking from the 5th March 1890 to the 14th July 1892, i.e., for the date the orders of the Government of India, that assistance was to be rendered to him in his photographic work, was communicated to Mr. Portman, until he was the other day placed by me for two months in charge of the Aberdeen Division, he seems to have had little but photography to do. During this period of under two years and four months, he was once on privilege leave for three weeks (viz., showing off some Andamanese in Calcutta); in charge of the division in all one year seven months and a few days, and for seven months and thirteen days without the division. During this period this division changed hands seventeen times, out of which Mr. Portman had it seven times. During the time Mr. Portman retained charge, he went cruising about on three different occasions. To make five other cruises he was formally relieved by other Settlement Officers. Such constant changes cannot but be most detrimental to this division however convenient they may be to Mr. Portman. In the accompanying correspondence Mr. Portman practically admits that he is not physically fit to be in charge of any but the Aberdeen Division, of which he claims to be the permanent incumbent. I go further and contend that he is unfit for even this, the lightest division in the Settlement. For a Divisional Officer to do his duty properly, he must ride about it. Mr. Portman is physically incapable of riding. He might have partially overcome this difficulty by driving as far as possible, and then walking to parts he could not drive over. Mr. Portman cannot even drive himself about the place. Under such circumstances most men would be modest and reticent in their bearing, and make excuses for being unable to do the work, but Mr. Portman glories in it, and openly gives out that he is on a different footing to the other Settlement Officers, and is exceptionally treated under orders from the Government of India. The absurd part of this is that he has succeeded in persuading some even senior officers of this. How low down the scale this belief has spread, I am unable to say, but that it is subversive of discipline, and will have a pernicious effect in the Settlement, if now allowed to continue, does not seem to me open to doubt. The position Mr. Portman now occupies amounts, in my opinion, to an official scandal which would not have been allowed to exist had the Government of India been aware of it.

6. It will be seen from the correspondence now submitted to Government, that Mr. Portman wishes to pose as a man working in the interests of science and devoting his time and money for the public good, whereas I believe he is working in his own interest. I have had to come to this conclusion because he has made no secret of it, and more than once repeated in my presence that he expects to be rewarded for his photographic work, by having an order conferred on him. All this sounds ridiculous, but it is believed by many, and I am compelled to mention this now, because of the position he has taken up, and the harm he is thereby doing.

7. ... It appeared to me that Viper was the very place for him. Here neither riding nor driving is required; and as the island is only 74 acres in extent, a man can walk over it without much trouble. An officer is always required to be in charge at Viper, because of the jail, and the worst criminals being located on the island. There is no practical difficulty in managing it apart from the rest of the Southern Division... Under any circumstances, Mr. Portman's work at Viper will be less than half the work of any other Settlement Officer. This will leave him ample time to go on with his photographic work for the British Museum. His new house in on the same plan as his present one, and his electric light, etc., will fit in there perfectly, whilst the engine shed can be erected close by, at very little cash cost to the Government. In the correspondence, however, Mr. Portman purposely ignores all this.

8. With reference... in which [Portman] says that he does not care to purchase new accumulators and wires whenever it may be necessary to transfer him from one division to another, I cannot conceive any successor of mine knowing Mr. Portman as I do, thinking for a moment of moving him from Viper. The Governor General in Council might therefore safely give him the assurance that until his photographs for the British Museum have been finished, he will not be moved from Viper, assuming, of course, that he conducts himself properly and does his official work there efficiently.

9. In his memorial Mr. Portman says my order causes him a pecuniary loss of over £1,000; as besides the cost of the electric light he has been at an expense of over £500 for apparatus, etc., for his photographic work, and he is now prevented from continuing this work, and so recouping himself by the sale of photographs. I confess I am unable to understand how this loss can possibly come about by my requiring Mr. Portman to move to a house less than five miles off. It rests, however, with him to decide whether it is or is not worth his while to move his electric plant, bearing in mind the fact mentioned ... that the electricity is becoming exhausted. No doubt Mr. Portman will be put to some little expense in the matter by his move (though this can be reduced to a minimum by the assistance I am prepared to give him), but this is one of the ordinary incidents of official life, which he must have foreseen, and from which he has not hitherto suffered much. Why his photographic apparatus and materials should suffer by the removal, Mr. Portman does not explain. If they have come safely from England to Port Blair, they can surely be moved five miles more. Mr. Portman does not, it is presumed, open out more material than he requires for immediate use, if such materials are of a perishable nature. He has had more than a month's notice of his move, and during this period can use up such materials as are opened. The fact is, however, palpable Mr. Portman does not wish to move, and is prepared to give any number of exaggerated reasons why he should not do so. As a last resort he holds out the threat that if he is moved, he will be unable to continue his photographic work.

10. It is a mere coincidence that the relieving of Mr. Portman of the charge of the Andamanese has come about at the same time as his transfer to Viper. ...

11. On Mr. Man going to the Nicobars in July 1879, Mr. Portman was placed in charge of the Andamanese, and they were retained under him by Colonel Cadell who arrived some months later. Whether Colonel Cadell or his predecessors were the most successful in their management of these aborigines, is not a question for me to entertain here. But whatever has been done by Mr. Portman has been done under the orders and direction of Colonel Cadell who has at all times borne the most generous testimony as to Mr. Portman's services. Whether Mr. Portman, as he asserts, is to receive the exclusive credit for whatever has been done, I need not consider here. In his present memorial, however, he asserts that he tamed the aborigines of the Little Andamans [the Onge]. In his former memorial regarding his supersession by Mr. Tayler, he advanced a similar claim but in more egotistical terms. I see from the file that in forwarding it Colonel Cadell only took notice of this semi-officially in his letter of the 25th June 1890, in which he remarked as follows: "Portman's insinuation that I failed to get in the Little Andamanese is rather absurd, as all the operations in connection with their pacification were carried out under my directions and I took an active part in them." This is a specimen of how Mr. Portman on every possible occasion rates his own services.

12. For some months past, the conviction has been growing upon me, that Mr. Portman should cease to have charge of these Andamanese. However much he may extol his own management of these aborigines, I have come to the conclusion that it will be to their benefit and interest to have a different stamp and character of man over them in the future. He is capricious in his dealings with them. He does not hesitate to use a life-preserver [a gun] against them on trivial grounds. This he doubtless considers necessary, because he is a man of no physical strength and could be mastered by one of these men, and very easily by two of them, when any other European could simply push them aside and show how completely he was their master without exercising violence against them. Though he considers them on the footing of school boys for acts of mischief and temper, he does not hesitate to flog them with a riding whip as well as with a cane, and sometimes inflicts this punishment with his own hands. He confines them in a room in his house for various periods. He says that on one occasion he had to put two of them in irons.

13. If it can be otherwise managed, he is not the officer I care to have over these people. I have

however refrained from stirring in the matter, as I waited for the return from privilege leave of Mr. Man. I was anxious to get him to take the Andamanese under his personal care, and it is a great relief to me that he has consented to do so, as I now feel that we have got the best man here for this work. Mr. Man was for four years at one and six months at another time in care of the Andamanese. The Administration Report from 1875-76 to 1877-78 will show the good work done by him in those days, though it is now ancient history and perhaps forgotten. With difficulty I have obtained from him a list of his literary work which will be found as enclosure No. 7 to this letter. I also give on this same enclosure a copy of a letter received by him from Professor Tylor, F.R.S., President of the Philological Society of Great Britain, since his return from leave. These will show that Mr. Man knows more about the Andamanese, than any other Englishman living. I am perfectly convinced it will be very greatly to the advantage of these aborigines, of Government, and of science, that they should now find a master in Mr. Man. His well-known high character is a guarantee of the treatment they will receive of him.

14. The Andamanese Home was in existence when Mr. Man held charge, and the one now referred to consists of a number of aborigines, many of whom are very young. I have just visited them. The majority of them sleep in a disused stable, those married in the servant's quarters, and the rest anywhere about the compound. Mr. Portman's Andamanese services have been amply rewarded by the indulgences which he has reaped, because of being in charge of the them. He has had opportunities, denied to all other officers, of cruising all about the place almost whenever he liked, and he has freely availed himself of these opportunities for his own enjoyment.

15. In conclusion, I may observe that Mr. Portman has failed to show his photographic work for the British Museum will be stopped by the Andamanese being no longer under his charge, though I specially asked him to enlighten me on this point ...

Letter No. 1027, Calcutta, 9th December 1892
from C.J. Lyall, Secretary to the Government of India
to Colonel N.M.T. Horsford, Superintendent, Port Blair

I am directed to acknowledge receipt of your letter dated 24th October last, with which you submit, for the orders of the Government of India, a memorial from Mr. M.V. Portman, Assistant Superintendent, praying that your orders transferring him from Aberdeen to Viper, and depriving him of the charge of the Andamanese, which he has held since 1879, may be cancelled.

2. In reply I am to say that the posting of your Assistants in the Port Blair Commission is a matter which must be left to your discretion, and that the Government of India will not interfere in any disposition of your staff which you may think fit, in the interests of the public service, to make.

It is observed, however, that you seem, from paragraph 9 of your letter, to be under some misapprehension regarding the loss and damage likely to result to Mr. Portman from the removal of his electric lighting plant from his house at Aberdeen to that at Viper. The Government of India consulted Mr. W.R. Brooke, Director General of Telegraphs, on the subject, and I am to enclose for your information a copy of the letter received from him in reply, which shows that considerable damage to the plant is probable as the result of its removal from one site to the other.

3. I am to request that the decision contained in this letter may be communicated to Mr. Portman.

Portman had won.



Andamanese carrying the box containing Portman's camera - the only known photograph showing Portman's equipment. We do not know what make or model the camera itself was apart from the fact that it was as bulky as it was heavy

Portman stayed where he was, continuing his photographic work and remaining in charge of the Andamanese for another eight years. Colonel Horsford was replaced two years later and Mr. Man never took charge of the Andamanese again.

Though he had won the battle against Horsford and secured his exceptional position, Portman's peace of mind did not last long. When the Colonel's successor was appointed in 1894, he turned out to be none other than E.H. Man's friend [R.C. Temple](#). Temple was a man of a different calibre from the straightforward soldier Horsford; he came with a deviousness to match Portman's own. He immediately set in train a campaign to get rid of Portman but did not make Horsford's mistake of underestimating his adversary. In the correspondence on file at the library of the Anthropological Survey of India at Calcutta, Temple's signature is nowhere to be found. Although the two men lived almost next door to each other in the tiny official community at Port Blair, Temple always corresponded formally with Portman through his secretary. In 1899 Portman complains that Temple was "overworking" him and that his relations to "Horsford's Successor" were "scarcely better."

In the first flush of victory Portman made a bad mistake. In his gratitude for the help the Viceroy's secretary C.J. Lyall had given him, he offered a complete set of prints of his work as a gift. The offer was ambiguously addressed but since it was sent to Lyall personally and not through official channels. Portman does not seem to have seen the dangerous position into which this put himself and Lyall - but Lyall did. Portman received a devastating private letter ("in this one case only, having regard to the special circumstances") from Lyall in which the secretary of the Government of India warns Portman that his offer could be construed as an attempt at bribery and forbids him ever to write to him again except through official channels. Strong stuff coming from such a source. The incident may indeed have influenced the appointment of Temple the following year which is unlikely to have been possible against Lyall's wishes.

Portman's photographic work aroused scientific excitement in India and in England. It was a time of high scientific interest in "primitive" cultures and races and there was much speculation on the progress of mankind. Dr. Frank of the British Museum, for example, wrote to Portman

The Andamanese islanders are one of the most interesting ethnological problems of the world.

Portman used the support received from many scientists to buttress his peculiar position at Port Blair. Although a paid government servant, he does not seem to have done much, if any, normal government work during the 1890s. His victory over Horsford ensured that he could use all his time on his photography. As Portman made clear in the correspondence quoted above, he had paid for the very expensive equipment and

supplies himself. The question of ownership and copyright of his work never seems to have been settled or even discussed. The Government of India, remarkably, appears to have been satisfied with the promise of a few prints of the entire work for various interested government departments. Portman was later to use the confusion surrounding ownership to make money and to block access to his material from people he did not approve of or who made what he considered inadequate offers.

In answer to a letter of praise from Dr. Tylor of the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, Portman requested that Oxford University use their influence with the Indian government to help him retain his position at Port Blair. It should be noted that this letter was sent before Temple had been appointed. The extraordinary letter then goes on by asking that his record of the Andamanese be published at the University's expense at Clarendon Press. Portman just wanted his expenses paid while ever so generously offering the Press any profits that might accrue. Next he mocks E.H. Man's alleged lack of linguistic knowledge and blackens his work in general:

Mr. Man's book is practically obsolete. He was prevented by his official work from a close personal study of the aborigines and depended on others for his information.

A list of 15 "inaccuracies" in Man's work follows, with each point discussed at length.

In an undated "postscript" to this letter, Portman tells Tylor that he and Man had agreed to collaborate. Portman would take ethnology and Man, of all things, languages, adding that "we will, of course, check each other's work." It is not difficult to imagine Tylor's thoughts on receipt of these missives. He answered evasively and then ceased to respond to Portman's further correspondence at all. Portman thought that his failure with Tylor was because Temple was a friend of the Tylors.

The cooperation with Man fell apart as soon as Tylor had ceased to respond. In 1895 Portman calls his newly appointed superior officer "selfish and ill-mannered," "that scientific charlatan" and a man who "picks other men's brains and puts his name to their work, as his father used to do."

When the scientists he regarded as his enemies still wanted a copy of his work, Portman was having none of it:

Oxford will get nothing more from me so long as Dr. Tylor remains in charge at the Museum.

The correspondence on file at the library of the Anthropological Survey of India at Calcutta closes with a bitter and vicious letter from Portman to the Superintendent (i.e. Temple) in 1899. Portman notes that Tylor had tried to get a copy of his photographic work and uses the confused copyright situation by claiming that "he could not supply them to Prof. Tylor for his use at the Oxford University Museum until he had obtained permission of these authorities to have them." The authorities he claims hold copyright to his work are the British Museum. Although only a few letters from them are on file, Portman seems to have established a successful relationship with Dr. Franks of the British Museum and at one time sold the copyright to them.

Because the available correspondence closes in November 1899, we do not know what happened between then, Portman's retirement the following year and Man's retirement in 1901. That Portman left his own file of discreditable correspondence (including the private ticking-off from Lyall) behind him to survive the 20th century in a government archive speaks for a somewhat hasty departure - as does the scattered and uncertain survival of his photographic work.

The posthumous re-publication of Man's major work on the Nicobarese in 1932 contains a short "memoir" on Man's life written by a friend in which Portman (then still alive) is always called "the successor of Mr. Man" and never mentioned by name. Animosity among Man's surviving friends was still strong in England more than 32 years later.

Portman's photographs have never been published as a whole; only a few being printed as isolated specimens here and there. The Pitt Rivers Museum has about two dozen in its collection and the British Library some more while the Anthropological Survey of India does not seem to have any originals. It is not clear where the majority of what must have been hundreds of originals are stored today nor indeed how many might have survived. His work has, however, been evaluated in a splendid article on ethnographic photography in India 1850-1900 by John Falconer of the British Library, which is reprinted on this web-site under [Reprints](#).

Though with some clear flaws of character, Portman does not deserve the deep obscurity that has been his

fate after death. That large manuscripts and photo albums of considerable scientific value in 11 volumes (1893-1898) should remain unpublished in England and that an even larger work in 26 volumes of copies (1899) should suffer the same fate in the archives of the Anthropological Survey of India at Calcutta is a sad reflection on the state of Andamanese studies.

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