

# Between East and West: John Thomson in Cyprus

NICOS PHILIPPOU

## Abstract

*Thomson's 1878 Cyprus expedition is a key moment in the history of representing Cyprus. This paper highlights the disconnectedness between the mostly uncritical contemporary consumption of Thomson's images and historical realities. The paper argues that Thomson's photographs are much more than documents of a Cypriot past and are, in fact, the product of complex political, ideological and cultural concerns of his time. The context, within which he operated, notably colonialism, was instrumental in shaping the vision of Cyprus his photographs construct. His text and imagery emphasised decay but also Thomson employed a narrative of salvaging. When dealing with people Thomson emphasised physical characteristics over culture and typicality and collective character over individuality. Further, and almost inevitably, Thomson engaged in a discussion about the cultural orientation of the place and its people. Yet, Cyprus proved to be a non-straightforward case. It was a geographical, historical and cultural territory that would 'resist' a direct and uncomplicated categorisation and placement within either cultural sphere.*

**Keywords:** Photography, Travel, Colonialism, Orientalism, Cyprus

*'The photographic exploration and duplication of the world fragments continuities and feeds the pieces into an interminable dossier, thereby providing possibilities of control that could not even be dreamed of under the earlier system of recording information: writing' (Sontag, 1979, p. 156).*

## Introduction

In 1878 Cyprus re-emerged from obscurity *vis-a-vis* Europe to acquire new political significance when control of the island shifted from the Ottoman Empire to the British. The event heightened curiosity about Cyprus in Europe and especially in Britain. This thirst for information about Cyprus was satisfied by, among others, a number of British and European traveller photographers, the most important of which is probably John Thomson. This paper examines Thomson's photographs of Cyprus taken in the autumn of 1878 and tries to interpret them in the socio-political context of the shift from Ottoman imperialism to British colonialism.

Today, Thomson's work is popular among contemporary Cypriot institutions, such as banks and cultural foundations, which publish his photographs in glossy coffee table books, calendars and diaries. This contemporary consumption of Thomson's images is rather uncritical, his photographs merely taken as a window into late nineteenth-century Cyprus. This can be attributed to a contemporary national project of nostalgia and a romanticisation of the past and it is only relatively recently that Thomson's Cyprus project has been scrutinised through a critical lens (see Hajimichael, 2006 and Papaioannou, forthcoming).

This paper aims at highlighting the disconnectedness between the mostly uncritical contemporary consumption of Thomson's images and historical realities. It is my aim to show that Thomson's photographs are much more than documents of Cypriot things past; they are, in fact, the product of complex political, ideological and cultural concerns of his time and would fit into the greater scheme of the attempt of the British Empire to assert its control over the new acquisition.

The paper is also informed by the premise that documentary, ethnographic and pseudo-ethnographic photographs are not merely documents of whatever it is they depict but are first and foremost documents of the producer's perception and evaluation of the subject. They are, also, evidence of how the perspective of the photographer is shaped by the image-producing context. The suggestion here is that Thomson is not solely responsible for his visual and textual assessment of Cyprus but that the context, within which he operates, notably colonialism, is instrumental in shaping the vision he projects. It is not clear if Thomson, in this case, was directly commissioned by the British government. His Cyprus project resulted in a two-volume publication titled *Through Cyprus with the Camera in the Autumn of 1878*, published in 1879 and dedicated to 'Sir Garnet Wolseley, KCB, GCMG, Lord High Commissioner of Cyprus'.

This, and the fact that Thomson was the first writer and photographer to visit Cyprus after Britain gained control of the island, led his biographer to suggest that perhaps Thomson and his publishers 'approached the Foreign Office for a commission to provide an "official" survey account, as a sort of "cultural" propaganda mission' (Ovenden, 1977, p. 22). Nevertheless, even though such a direct commission has not been established, the fact that Thomson's Cyprus publication is 'dedicated by permission' to the Lord High Commissioner – whose official portrait appears in the original publication – suggests a form of endorsement by the newly established British Administration of Cyprus. This informs many observations and arguments in this discussion.

Further, the paper takes into account the perceptions about the status of, and the real or perceived qualities of the medium. John Tagg's Foucauldian theoretical perspective on photography together with Christopher Pinney's more empirical, anthropological study of photographic practices in India provide a very useful framework of analysis of Thomson's project in general and the analysis of Thomson's portraits of Cypriots in particular.

Finally and almost inevitably, the paper examines the complexities that emerge from attempts to define Cypriot identity. In Thomson's narrative Cyprus, Cypriots and Cypriotness appear to be caught between east and west.

## Photography as Document

Before deliberating Thomson and his Cyprus project it is useful to discuss photography and those characteristics of the medium that set it apart from other forms of documentation and representation. Because of the natural, chemical processes involved in photography, the medium in its infancy was seen as an accurate and value free method of recording the world. The most effective articulation of this perception of photography is provided by Barthes who, in the early 1980s, explained that every photograph is almost co-natural with its referent and it thus acquires a special status as a system of representation:

‘Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often “chimeras”. Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there’ (Barthes, 2000, p. 76).

Despite this idea being widely accepted, particularly during the nineteenth century, it was gradually understood that this is not all there is in the photographic image. It was gradually made evident that the photograph is also telling of the photographer’s perception of whatever ‘thing’ is placed in front of the lens. After all it became clear that different photographers produced different photographic records of the same thing. As Sontag put it,

‘as people quickly discovered that nobody takes the same picture of the same thing, the supposition that cameras furnish an impersonal, objective image yielded to the fact that photographs are evidence not only of what’s there but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world’ (Sontag, 1979, p. 88).

Nevertheless, this perceived semiotic superiority of the photographic image over other systems of representation meant that the medium acquired a special status as a method of documentation. Of course it needs to be said, here, that the medium’s privileged status was acquired only partly due to its intrinsic characteristics; notably the natural, chemical processes involved in the production of a photographic still. Its use within privileged institutions such as the government, the police and the hospital plus the connotations which went along with such use, played at least an equally important role in the construction of such perceptions about photography. Tagg describes photography’s privileged status as a document, or as guaranteed witness, and attributes this special status, partly, to its adoption and use within institutions of authority:

‘It has been argued that this insertion of the “natural and universal” in the photograph is particularly forceful because of photography’s privileged status as a guaranteed witness of the actuality of the events it represents. The photograph seems to declare: “This really happened. The camera was there. See for yourself.” However, if this binding quality of the photograph is partly enforced at the level of “internal relations” by the degree of definition, it is also produced and reproduced by certain privileged ideological apparatuses, such as

scientific establishments, government departments, the police and law courts. This power to bestow authority and privilege on photographic representations is not given to other apparatuses, even within the same social formation – such as amateur photography or “Art photography” – and it is only partially held by photo-journalism’ (Tagg, 1988, p. 160).

During the second half of the nineteenth century and at a time of rapid social change the recognition of the photographic image as evidence was closely related to the expansion of the state and the development of institutions and practices of discipline and control along the lines of prisons, the police, asylums and hospitals, and the emergence of different areas of knowledge through the formation of new social and anthropological sciences like criminology, psychiatry, comparative anatomy, germ theory and sanitation; knowledge that would provide new forms of exercising power on the social body (Tagg, 1988, p. 5).

Arguments and evidence relating to these areas of expertise would circulate only within specific circles and among experts and, therefore, would form specialised discourses. Tagg points to the effects of such expert discourses on those subjected to scrutiny, notably the *working classes, colonised peoples, the criminal, poor, ill-housed, sick or insane* who were subjected to a scrutinising gaze, constituted as the passive or ‘feminised’ objects of knowledge and instituted as incapable of speaking, acting or organising for themselves (*ibid.*, p. 11).

If the coupling of photography and evidence was related to the effort of the state in industrialised countries to exercise more effective control on the social body we can immediately see why during the same period it would be employed in surveys of distant lands, particularly colonies of European powers. The camera, seen as a ‘scientific’ apparatus, would bestow a particular power to the white European over newly acquired land and people and would be used to record, classify and buttress control over these. Upper class Europeans, serving as colonial government officials, or at other times acting under the labels of the traveller, ethnographer or anthropologist, would embark on their cultural safaris in the Middle East, Africa and Asia and bring back their specimens in the form of the photograph. The motives for such practice were closely related to those driving other colonial practices like the setting up of institutions of social control, geographical mapping, population censuses, the introduction of identification cards, police records and fingerprinting: all enabling the colonial power to acquire knowledge of and classify and control the colonised.

### **The Photographer of Kings: Thomson’s Short Biography**

John Thomson was born in Edinburgh in 1837, two years before the emergence of Daguerre’s photographic system, the first patented photographic system. He was the eighth of nine children of the tobacconist William Thomson and Isabella Newlands. Out of the nine children in the family only two survived into manhood; John and William (Cowan, 1985, p. ix). Richard Ovenden, author of a book on the life and work of John Thomson, gives a detailed account of his development into, probably, the most celebrated photographer and amateur geographer of his time,

and his account is the main source of the information provided in this section (Ovenden, 1997).

Thomson's modest background did not guarantee him a University education despite the fact that he was born during a period in which Edinburgh was enjoying its cultural and scientific heyday. Ovenden reports that by 1851 Thomson had become apprenticed to an optician and scientific instrument maker and that in the course of 1856–1858 had attended the Edinburgh School of Arts gaining the 'Attestation of Proficiency' in Natural Philosophy, Junior Mathematics and Chemistry (*ibid.*, pp. 2-3). Ovenden also asserts that Thomson was quite a strongly religious person throughout his life; a conclusion drawn because of a thorough knowledge of the Bible exhibited in his writings and because in his letters he urged his wife to attend church regularly (*ibid.*, p. 2). He was elected as an Ordinary Fellow of the Royal Scottish Society of Arts in 1861 and Ovenden believes that Thomson came to be interested in photography because of his participation in scientific circles which included many photography enthusiasts (*ibid.*, pp. 4–5).

At about that time Thomson decided to join his brother who had moved to Singapore in 1859 and set up as watchmaker. He had certainly arrived before June 1862 because on the twelfth day of that month Thomson advertised his photographic services in a local newspaper (*ibid.*, p. 6). Thomson used Singapore as a base for his extensive travel along the islands and the mainland territories of Malaya and Sumatra (*ibid.*, p. 7).

In September 1865 Thomson travelled to Bangkok where, with the help of the British Consulate, he was able to gain an audience with the Siamese Royal Family. He spent a lot of his time there producing what Ovenden described as 'stunning formal portraits' of the King, his family and his court (*ibid.*, pp. 8–9). He also used Bangkok as a base for further journeys, the most important of them being a four month rough journey from Siam to Cambodia which began in January 1866. The journey, which was 'eased' by a letter from King Mongkut, was fruitful. Thomson became the first photographer to visit Angkor, the heart of the ancient Cambodian kingdom and one of the most important archaeological sites of the world (*ibid.*, p. 10).

He arrived in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, in March of 1866 where again he seized an opportunity to produce photographic portraits of political leaders (*ibid.*). Thomson's writings about Cambodia reveal a

'typically European disregard for native cultures and sensibilities ... he regarded [Cambodia] as a "miserable remnant of 'Khamain'", and he repeat[ed] his imperialist accusations concerning the "listlessness and apathy" of the native peoples' (*ibid.*, p. 10).

Among Thomson's surviving images of Phnom Penh predominate the portraits of the King of Cambodia, Norodom, and the royal family (*ibid.*, p. 10). From there Thomson returned to Singapore, through Bangkok, and then back to Britain at around May–June 1866 (*ibid.*, p. 11).

Throughout his stay in Britain he used his Far East photographs and experience to establish himself as photographer and geographer. His activities and successes at this period included being elected as a fellow of the Ethnological Society of London as well as a fellowship of the Royal Geographical society. He presented papers to ethnological and geographical conferences, published

in both the British Journal of Photography and the Illustrated London News, and exhibited his photographs. His stay in England provided him with two further achievements: the publication of his first book, early in 1867, with the title *The Antiquities of Cambodia: A Series of Photographs Taken on the Spot* and meeting his wife to be, Isabel Petrie (*ibid.*, pp. 11–13).

In 1867 Thomson returned to the Far East where he stayed until 1872. Initially he used Singapore as his base but he soon established a very successful portrait studio in Hong Kong. From there he travelled extensively into China to produce an extensive body of work that would enhance his profile as the photographer of the East and afford him a number of very successful publications and his fame as a traveller photographer. During this period he married Isabel Petrie, worked as a correspondent for The Illustrated London News and used his contacts with British officials to produce portraits of the most senior Chinese politicians and government officials (*ibid.*, pp. 13–20).

Between his return to Britain and his death in 1921 Thomson did not embark on a photographic expedition abroad other than his Cyprus journey. In this period he established himself as a portrait photographer of the British elite and the Royal Household including Queen Victoria. In 1881 Thomson was awarded the Royal Warrant as 'Photographer to Her Majesty Queen Victoria'. He also gave lectures and published his *Street Life in London* with photographs of the working classes and the poor, which is considered one of his most important contributions to photography (*ibid.*, pp. 21–43).

Conclusively it could be argued that Thomson's professional development rested on colonialist and orientalist assumptions about what 'discovering the East' might mean and to what purpose such a task might be undertaken. His interest in the East could be seen as part of an overall worldview about past and current civilisations, cultural decay, and the task of imperial powers to halt such decay in the east. Political prescriptions about what governing the East should be about were part and parcel of his project, even if unwillingly so and these are assumptions that, as shown here, might have fed into his work on Cyprus.

### **Thomson on Photography**

In his introduction to his two volumes on Cyprus first published in 1879, Thomson reveals his perception of photography; a perception consistent with the dominant discourse on photography of his time:

'I thought that, after all, I would wait and see things for myself, and pursue my original plan of exploring Cyprus with the "camera", taking views (as impartial as they were photographic) of whatever might prove interesting on the journey' (Thomson, 1983, p. xxii).

For Thomson, therefore, photography was synonymous to impartiality. Furthermore, the quote betrays a contradiction of purpose. On the one hand it declares that there is an intention to record what subjectively appears interesting. On the other hand, however, it asserts that the record was to be impartial as it was photographic. Thomson's views on photography were expressed in more

detail in a lecture he gave in Cardiff on 24 August 1891 and published in the Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society. The text which reads like a celebration of the 'scientific' and therefore objective nature of photography includes the following extract:

'The camera affords the only means, with which I am acquainted, of portraying visible objects with scientific accuracy. Every photograph taken with an achromatised and corrected lens is a perfect reproduction to scale of the object photographed, as seen from the point of view of the lens' (Thomson, 1891, p. 669).

He then proceeds to indicate the inefficiencies of the means of representation that photography replaced in the field of exploration:

'It is quite impossible to illustrate by pencil, with any degree of accuracy, or to describe in a perfectly realistic manner, scenes and incidents by the way as to render them of permanent value. Lack of time and opportunity constrains the gifted traveller, too often, to trust to memory for detail in his sketches, and by the free play of fancy he fills in and embellishes his handiwork until it becomes a picture of his own creation' (Thomson, 1891, p. 670).

For Thomson, then, the photographic image is a perfect and objective reproduction of whatever object, scene or incident is placed in front of the lens. It is free of the imagination of the operator since, for Thomson, it is the lens that has a point of view and not the photographer.

The most fascinating, and probably, the most revealing passage in this same text is a paragraph through which Thomson advocates for the introduction into the photographic process of an anthropometric system in the form of a measuring rod:

'In order to obtain a basis of measurement for any object to be photographed, a very simple device may be employed. If the object be ethnological, to wit, a racial type, where it is necessary to take a full face and profile view of the head, or a series of overlapping views of a number of types of the same family; a rod marked with one space of definite measurement will supply the required authority. This rod should be so placed in relation to the head, that it will fall into a plain bisecting the cranium about the ears for full face, and the nose for profile. The rod must then be photographed with the type, and the result will give a basis of measurement' (Thomson, 1891, p. 672).

The above extract reveals a preoccupation with racial types and the quantification of external characteristics, which is in line with observations made by Pinney on the use of measuring grids (in the background of photographs) and other anthropometric systems in nineteenth-century India (Pinney, 1997, pp. 50–71).

Pinney suggested that the use of such systems of measurement was linked with ideas about the readability of physiognomy, which derived from the work of Lavater in the second half of the eighteenth century:

'Lavater suggested that individuals' moral beauty could be judged on the basis of external characteristics, what he called their "corporeal beauty", and he "went back to the ancient

search for occult analogies between physical characteristics, moral qualities and animal forms, attempting to reduce physiognomics to an exact science". Certain structural features of the face were codified in a system which permitted the literal and precise "reading" of character and disposition from external features' (Pinney, 1997, p. 51).

Pinney went on to indicate that physiognomy when employed within a European context would link external bodily features with individual character whereas when used to study the non-westerner the body would be seen to signify collective character. Thus, much of colonial portraiture in India was underpinned by notions of 'type' and 'typicality' (Pinney, 1997, pp. 52–53). Thomson did not use, in Cyprus, an anthropometric system like the one advocated in his 1891 lecture, but, he was, nonetheless, as will be shown further down, pre-occupied with typicality, external bodily features and their semiotic value.

### Decay at First Sight

Thomson's Cyprus project would certainly have political utility for the colonial government and it is unlikely that Thomson was unaware of this. Thomson arrived at Larnaca port on 7 September 1878, three months after the Cyprus Convention was signed between Britain and the Ottoman Empire on the 4th of June of the same year, which gave control of Cyprus to Britain (Ovenden, 1997, p. 21).

In his introduction to 'Through Cyprus with the Camera', Thomson appears conscious of the potential political utility of his Cyprus project:

'The photographs have been printed in permanent pigments, and therefore, while they supply incontestable evidence of the present condition of Cyprus, they will also afford a source of comparison in after years, when, under the influence of British rule, the place has risen from its ruins' (Thomson, 1985, p. xxii).

Not incidentally, the very first image in the book and the text that accompanies it, places emphasis on neglect and decay. The image depicts a rundown area of the sea front of 'Larnaca Marina'. According to the accompanying caption, when he first encountered it from a distance, Larnaca charmed Thomson with its 'peculiar Oriental beauty' and its 'brilliant domes and minarets'. On closer inspection, though, his perception was altered:

'But the scene rapidly loses its proportions, and when we have once cast anchor off the Marina the town is disclosed in detail, deprived of the illusory charm of distance.

Rude jetties invade the sea, while the shore bristles with wooden piles, the wrecks of landing stages, or waterside cafes. Larnaca, indeed, looks as if it had been groping its way seawards, with a thousand antennae, in search of purer air or social reform. Nevertheless, its old-world aspect, its rich colours, its quaint architecture, and even its decay, all tend to render the place one of the most picturesque of Levantine ports.

Stone buildings and sculptured porches bear evidence of the wealth and prosperity which in some measure have outlived three centuries of Moslem rule' (*ibid.*, plate 1).



Decay and stagnation, then, are emphasised here. Larnaca is described as picturesque but still decayed and neglected by its Ottoman rulers. This emphasis on decay sets the scene that allows for a clearly political statement to follow, in the very last paragraph of the caption, which refers to a future revival that Larnaca in particular, and – by implication – Cyprus in general, will enjoy because of the British occupation:

‘During the brief interval which has elapsed since the British occupation much has already been done to improve the condition of the town, and the people, rejoicing in security, have taken heart, and prophesy that a fair city will soon rise over the debris of Citium’ (*ibid.*, plate 1).

An argument repeated in the second image of the publication, which again depicts a section of the ‘Larnaca Marina’ and its caption reads:

‘There are now a number of hotels in the Marina, as well as Greek boarding establishments, where the traveller may be comfortably lodged at a small cost. When the island was transferred to British rule speculators flocked to Larnaca, and companies were started in London for the immediate development of Cyprus. The place was to be raised from the dust, and become an Eastern El Dorado’ (*ibid.*, plate 2).

Such arguments appear elsewhere in the text. But what is more interesting is that an almost identical discourse is employed by Sir Garnet Wolseley himself. The Lord High Commissioner kept a journal about his appointment to Cyprus with entries covering the period between 19 July 1878 and 31 December of the same year. The original journal is kept at the Record Office at Kew and was published by the Cultural Centre of the Cyprus Popular bank in 1991 (Cavendish, 1991).

In an entry on 24 July 1878 Wolseley describes his first impressions of Famagusta:

‘There is an air of decay about the place that tells one that it is an apaanage of Turkey’s Sultan. Wherever one goes here is the same: the face of the island is stamped with relics of a past prosperity that has been destroyed by the Moslems. It is said that wherever the horse of the Turk treads nothing will ever grow afterwards, he can pull down and destroy but he is not only incapable of creating but he cannot even succeed in keeping alive the creations of others ... It is no wonder that the Christians should rejoice at our coming to relieve them from an oppression under which they have groaned so long’ (Cavendish, 1991, p. 10).

Both Thomson and Wolseley highlighted decay while making reference to the island’s more affluent past. At the same time, Ottoman maladministration of Cyprus is used by both observers as a justification of British rule on the promise that it will revive Cyprus and bring relief to the population.

What comes out of this is an interesting alignment of Thomson’s narrative with that of the representative of colonial rule in Cyprus. This adds further to the argument that Thomson’s visual and textual record of Cyprus should not be consumed as a mere documentation of nineteenth-century Cyprus but more as a cultural and political product of its time and context.

## People as Types

Whereas with the examples provided above there is a need to scrutinise the text accompanying the photographs to understand Thomson's perceptions of Cyprus, it is when he turns his lens on the people that his photography becomes more telling. In his book he includes eight individual portraits along with a dozen group portraits. In total, photographs of people make up about one-third of the images printed in his Cyprus publication.

Most of the individual portraits are half-length studies of Cypriots who appear to be photographed outdoors and set against plain walls. The need for sufficient light, given the poor light sensitivity of the plates used at the time, is probably the reason for such a choice of setting. Nevertheless, this removes the individuality of the subject as it becomes separated from a cultural context and looks like a mere specimen on display.

Another immediately evident commonality among Thomson's Cypriot portraits is that his sitters tend (with rare exception) to look away from the camera. Their gaze is usually directed at a low point either left or right of the camera lens. It might be the case that Thomson, through instructing his sitters to look away, was attempting to make his apparently highly constructed portraits look more natural.

These postures are also revealing of the set of relations between photographer and subject. Thomson's control over the direction of the gaze indicates that the photographer was in control of the photographic process and, by implication, was exercising power over the photographic subject. The subject would not look back at the lens which was scrutinising him/her and, therefore, was not an equal partner in this relationship. As a result, Thomson's sitters would be transformed into objects to be observed and scrutinised and in Tagg's terms were constituted as passive and were 'feminised'.

It is useful, here to return to the photographic technology employed by Thomson. Gray, without making specific reference to Cyprus, explains that Thomson's preferred method was the wet collodion, a process cumbersome in operation that required exposure times between 5 and 30 seconds and processing while in the field (Gray, 1997, pp. 167–175). Cowan states that in Cyprus Thomson used dry collodion emulsion, which was still cumbersome and slow (Cowan, 1985, pp. xv, xvii).

The above tells of a slow, staged and certainly not spontaneous photography. It is therefore very easy to imagine Thomson orchestrating each scene to its finest detail. His Cypriot subjects almost certainly had never faced a photographic camera before they were photographed by Thomson. No local vernacular or commercial photography had emerged as yet and only a handful of travelling photographers, focusing mostly on antiquities, had preceded Thomson. The Cypriots that posed for Thomson, then, had no previous experience or knowledge of how to be photographed and would have no other option than to rely on Thomson's instructions on how to do it.

Hajimichael also makes a point of Thomson's photographic process being slow and suggests that 'most of his images and narratives were carefully created re-interpretations of life and history

as he saw it, through a colonial eye, in Cyprus during autumn 1878' (Hajimichael, 2006, p. 75). Hajimichael takes the argument a step further as he suggests that people were used and re-used by Thomson as actors:

'For instance, the young woman in a European dress, in plate 59, also appears in somewhat different "peasant" clothing in plate 9. The old woman featured in plate 9 also appears in plate 18, this time with an even younger woman by her side ... Conjecture can lead us to assume some people were in a sense "posing" for Thomson, in different forms of dress. Perhaps these people may have had a small financial incentive or payment from the photographer himself' (Hajimichael, 2006, p. 75).

The titles and the accompanying text also provide an insight into the photographer's perception of his sitters. The subjects are treated as representative of a particular social grouping: a 'Cyprian maid', a 'priest', a 'Cypriote boy', a 'mountaineer', a 'beggar', a 'woman of the labouring class', and so on. These title descriptions along with the absence of references to the names of the sitters are revealing of Thomson's preoccupation with typicality. Individuality is ignored and in its place an emphasis is put on representativeness and collective characteristics.

This preoccupation with collective character is also characteristic of the text in Thomson's rather long captions that accompany each of the photographs. For example the woman presented in plate 20 'is a typical woman of the lower orders in Cyprus', the woman represented in plate 8 is 'an ordinary type of the women of Cyprus' and a man appearing in plate 10 is 'a powerful and picturesque specimen of his race'. These descriptions, like the images themselves, emphasise physical characteristics, which appear to represent a kind of collective character.

The very use of the word specimen when referring to individual human beings reinforces the argument that Thomson is involved in an exercise of scrutiny of the colonised on behalf of the coloniser. And the references to social types can be seen to constitute an attempt to create a social map of Cyprus; an attempt to fragment and classify Cypriot society in a way that would provide knowledge and, in Tagg's terms, possibilities of control useful to the Empire.

### **Gender, Descent and Philhellenism**

Thomson's descriptions of external features reveal differing concerns for each of the genders. Women are described in terms of beauty and men in terms of strength. Nevertheless, both are essentially linked to Classical or European descent and, by implication, civility. For instance 'Cyprian maids' are described in the text accompanying plate 8:

'Their complexions are generally fair, though bronzed by exposure, their features regular, and the colour of their hair varies from light brown to black. Some of them, notably those living in the mountainous districts of the island, are not unworthy descendants of the Cypriote maids of classic fame. The native beauty of the race is, however, seen at its best in the children, for the women, before they have reached maturity, are sent out to work in the

fields, and are thus early trained to a life of toil. The result is that they lack much of that grace that comes of gentle nurture ...' (Thomson, 1985, plate 8).

The image of an old female bread seller (plate 7) is similarly captioned:

'In the features of this old dame, who earns her living by selling bread in Larnaca, there still linger traces of youthful comeliness. Her thin locks are silvered with age, and the years, as they dragged heavily along, have furrowed her brow. Yet her eye is clear and bright, and wears a look of calm contentment; it is the blue eye met among Cypriotes of European origin. She might, indeed, pass for an old Scotch crone, or the decent owner of an apple-stall at the corner of some London street.' (*ibid.*, plate 7).

The Cyprian maid is, for Thomson, fair and beautiful by nature. Despite the fact that nurture obscures this beauty, Thomson is convinced that his contemporary Cypriot women are 'worthy' descendants of Classical Greeks. 'Racial beauty' works here as a link between nineteenth-century Cyprus and classical civilisation. Also, the features of the old bread seller, her blue eyes in particular, link 'Cypriotes of European origin' with northern Europeans. Therefore Thomson places Cypriotes, or sections of Cypriot society within a European physiognomic realm.

As mentioned above: whereas women are described in terms of beauty, men are described in terms of physical strength. Consequently, body structure becomes central and essential in the descriptions of male sitters. The description of a photograph of two Cypriot peasants (plate 10), in which Thomson quotes from an earlier visitor of Cyprus, is a good and interesting example of this:

'In the language of Lithgow, who visited Cyprus more than two hundred years ago, "The people are strong and nimble ... civil, courteous, and affable, and notwithstanding of their delicious and delicate fare they are much subject to melancholy; of a robust nature, and good warriors if they might carry arms." It is evident ... that the modern Cypriote has inherited the attributes of his ancestors. He is strong and nimble, affable and courteous, and has a frame whose power and development would adorn the ranks of the finest regiment. The two men represented in this picture were selected at random from a throng of peasants, such as may be seen any day in the streets of Larnaca. The man on the right, standing erect in his native attire, was a powerful and picturesque specimen of his race. He was tall enough for a life-guardsman, and has the broad chest and muscular frame that belong mainly to the mountaineers of the interior. He was a native of an inland village, and had been down to Larnaca with produce. He had a fine, open, expressive countenance, and nothing would have afforded him greater pleasure than to have acted as the guide and protector of any stranger who desired to visit his country home' (*ibid.*, plate 10).

Plates 39 and 40 are half-length studies of two 'Mountaineers'. The descriptions that accompany them are also good examples of the emphasis placed on body structure. Consider the following extracts:

'The villagers are a robust race, as may be gathered from the two following photographs, the first of which represents one of the chief people of the place, a man who deserves to be

rendered famous for the kind manner in which he welcomes the stranger that may enter within his gates. As soon as he learned that I had determined to make the ascent of Mount Olympus (Troodos) he volunteered to act as a guide; nor did he show the slightest token of wavering, although, a storm was evidently brewing when we started' (*ibid.*, plate 39).

And, also:

'Another Highlander figures in this plate – a tall, bony man of a most obligingly good-natured disposition. He, however, looked a bold, determined character, whose massive hands and muscular frame would stand him in good stead in carrying out any resolve of good or evil' (*ibid.*, plate 40).

There is a common pattern in these three extracts. On the one hand, Cypriot men are described as strong, powerful, robust, courageous and potentially good warriors. They are capable of both good and evil. On the other it is stressed that they are of good nature, civil, courteous, hospitable and ready to protect strangers. Note that such characteristics of Cypriot men are, as in the case of women, attributed to ancestry.

I would argue that these observations seem to be closely linked with political concerns. This intense preoccupation with body structure reveals an anxiety about the potential threat that Cypriot male subjects were posing on the empire. Note that Cyprus had only very recently been acquired and its status as a colony was still unclear; as were the attitudes of the natives towards the new rulers. Despite this, the 'discovery' of a gentle and civil character came to provide reassurances that, at least, the Christian or Greek population could instead be classified as a potential ally.

But, I think more is revealed from the extracts presented above and I would like to return to Thomson's preoccupation with the ancestry of his Greek Cypriot subjects; the idea of Hellenic descent, interestingly, being a racial/genetic one here (i.e. observed and confirmed through female beauty and male body structure). Thomson appears to be ideologically in line with the nineteenth-century Philhellenic Movement, which occupied the radical wing of the Romantic Movement. Herzfeld notes that an idealised image of Greece was entertained by nineteenth-century European Philhellenes but points out that Europeans, 'though largely receptive to the attractions of Classical Greek culture, were not uniformly impressed by the modern Greeks' claim to represent it' (Herzfeld, 1986, p. 3). While many dedicated Europeans like Lord Byron would sacrifice their lives for the philhellenic cause, others, like Fallmerayer, dismissed the claim that their contemporary Greeks descended from the ancient Hellenes and rejected even the 'very notion of Greeks as Europeans' (Herzfeld, 1986, pp. 75–76).

Thomson, while fitting Cypriots in this wider nineteenth-century discussion about the origins of modern Greeks, was at the same time identifying himself with the philhellenic argument. He expressed his admiration for classical Greeks while at the same time he discovered them in the persons of his contemporary Greek Cypriots who after all were living in a land which enjoyed classical fame. It is already clear from this discussion that the Muslim or Turkish

population of Cyprus is excluded from this narrative. Further down, Cypriot Muslims are shown to have been treated quite differently.

### **Backwardness**

Despite Thomson's apparent Philhellenism and his sympathetic attitude towards Greek Cypriots he did not fail, on several occasions, to express his cultural and class superiority and his perception that his contemporary Cypriots were inferior and primitive. Villagers depicted in plate 42 are described as 'simple-minded peasants' and are presented as incapable of adopting simple measures that would prevent the destruction of their crops by animals.

In another instance (plate 56) Cypriot villagers are described as superstitious folk whose beliefs have 'endowed some of these [church] effigies with marvellous attributes – with the power of healing the sick, of casting out evil spirits from those possessed, and the like'.

Also, Cypriot villagers lived in houses that were deemed inappropriate for the standards of a European traveller (plate 34). Thomson acknowledged that 'these rustic abodes charm[ed] the eye with their picturesqueness' but as he states they were 'certainly not calculated to promote the health of their occupants' as they 'lack[ed] ventilation and the simplest sanitary devices'.

A final example of Cypriots appearing as backward and superstitious is drawn from the caption alongside plate 20 which depicts 'a woman of the labouring class':

'This is a typical woman of the lower orders in Cyprus; one who to a powerful physique, well-formed features, and dark eyes, adds an expression of unflinching resolution. It was some little time before she could be persuaded that neither sorcery nor witchcraft were practised in the mysterious operations of photography; but, at last, the desire to see her likeness overcame her scruples, and she faced the camera with statuesque immobility' (Thomson, 1985, plate 20).

Furthermore, it appears that Thomson ignores the existence of Cypriot elites and focuses on the poor; on the peasants, beggars, water carriers and village priests. Katsiaounis makes reference to the presence of a Cypriot elite consisting of tax-farmers or 'lay Kocabasis' in nineteenth-century Ottoman Cyprus. These were wealthy men who received their privileges from the Pasha. According to Katsiaounis this 'tax-farming bourgeoisie' was made up exclusively of Greeks who were 'allocated an increasingly important role in the administration of Greek communal affairs, such as taxation, health and education' (Katsiaounis, 1996, p. 14). The following quote from Katsiaounis is telling of the outlook and lifestyle of this elite class:

'In manner and outlook there was not much to distinguish the older Greek Kocabasis from the Turkish Agas. At the top of the commoners' scale the Greek merchant magnates and tithes-farmers mixed with the Turkish aristocracy in salons and exclusive clubs, such as the luxurious Yesil Casino in Nicosia. The reminiscences of E. Paraskeva include a vivid

account of a social function in Limassol, with the participation of the elite of both communities, in the house of a Greek notable known as Pavlibey' (Katsiaounis, 1996, p. 15).

Neither the members of this elite, nor the clerical one, were represented in Thomson's 'social mapping' of Cyprus. Focusing on the 'lower' classes resulted in the construction of a narrative of a sympathetic, but culturally backward people that needed to be modernised, or saved; a narrative, which allowed plenty of room for justifying British presence on the island. The photographic portrayal of local elite would obscure such a narrative.

### **Ethnic Representations**

As already hinted above Thomson appears to be pre-occupied photographically with the Christian population of the island and tends to ignore the Muslim population. This is made evident from the clothing of the sitters and Thomson's text which, as was shown above, makes reference to Cypriotes of European origin and links his photographic subjects with classical Hellenism.

Plate 16 includes a Muslim Cypriot who appears to have been photographed accidentally. The photograph depicts a 'Native Group' in Nicosia. The caption is quite revealing:

'A friendly-disposed crowd of spectators had gathered round the mosque to witness the process of photographing the exterior of the building, and while pious moslems held themselves aloof, a large number of native Greeks volunteered to sit for their portraits; those selected were deemed fair specimens of the inhabitants of Nicosia.

The turbaned Turk in the distance was introduced into the picture accidentally. He was leaving the mosque, and, as he halted for a second to view the proceedings, was unconsciously portrayed' (Thomson, 1985, plate 16).

Native Greeks volunteered to be photographed and were seen by Thomson to be friendly. On the other hand Turkish bystanders 'avoided' to be photographed and held themselves aloof. It could be the case that Muslims would have avoided the camera for religious reasons. But it could also be suggested that Thomson felt more comfortable with the Greek population of the island and demonstrated a preference to Greek Cypriots as photographic subjects.

Apart from referring to Thomson's philhellenism as a rather obvious possible explanation of this preference it could be argued here, that this is also likely to be related to political concerns and a difference in perception about which of the two major groups was potentially an ally or an adversary of the new ruler of Cyprus. The status of the island was still unclear. If anybody other than the British could claim sovereignty over the island it would have been the Ottomans. Also, the future of the Muslim population of the island was uncertain. This fluid set of relations between the current and the former rulers of the island might account for a lack of trust between the colonial traveller photographer and Turkish Cypriots.

Given another opportunity, elsewhere in his book, Thomson was even more explicit in his references to ethnic group loyalties to the new rulers. Villagers in one of his group portraits seemed,

according to Thomson, 'ready to stand by their English masters' and were presented to express concerns about the status of the island and the rumoured continued involvement of the Ottomans in the administration of Cypriot affairs.

These arguments were introduced into the text accompanying a photograph (plate 42), which depicts a group of villagers who 'assembled one evening in front of the principal house there' to discuss community matters. The image is organised in a way that creates the impression that the group was 'captured' while deliberations were going on and was oblivious of the presence of the photographer; an impossible task considering the long exposure times that Thomson's photography required. Long exposure times, as already explained earlier, required sitters to keep still for a considerable period of time and a photograph in which more than a dozen villagers appear 'frozen' would call for a high degree of involvement and orchestration by the photographer.

That said, Thomson reports on the deliberations from the point of view of a non-interfering observer. The discussion, according to Thomson, shifted from mundane community matters to the general politics of Cyprus:

'The villagers spoke hopefully of the new order of things, and to a man seemed ready to stand by their English masters, although in truth they knew little about them, and disquieting rumours were abroad that the Moslems were still in some way mixed up with the administration of affairs' (Thomson, 1985, plate 42).

The extract is revealing of Thomson's understanding of the potential alliances between each of the two main communities and their new *English masters*. Katsiaounis refers to the set of relations, during that early period of British rule, between the Greek elites and the British, on one hand, and between the Turkish elites and the British, on the other; sets of relations that could account for perceptions such as those expressed by Thomson:

'For a while the factions of the Greek establishment joined ranks, and demonstrated their loyalty to the new power in the land. They were keen to exploit the opportunity and expand their influence in the face of the Turks, who were now fighting a rear guard action in defence of what rights they could preserve from the old Ottoman order' (Katsiaounis, 1996, p. 78).

Whether or not such loyalty was also demonstrated by the Greek peasants or the city poor is unclear and rather unlikely. However, this demonstration of loyalty by the Greek establishment seems to have given enough reasons for the colonial government and for Thomson to classify Greeks, in general, as allies. So this discrepancy in representation between Greeks and Turks might be explained in terms of the establishment of trustworthy relationships with those considered to be potential allies in contrary to those seen as potential adversaries of the British Empire during these early stages of colonial rule.



### The Orient Meets the Occident

I hope it has been established by now that Thomson's rather positive attitude towards Greek Cypriots has both political and ideological roots. As shown earlier, through observations made about external features and female beauty Thomson links the Greek population of the island with classical Greece and western civilisation. It is clearly stated, therefore, that they genetically and culturally belong to the sphere of the occident rather than that of the orient.

Thomson makes such links when describing the landscape of the island as well. This is a landscape that would strike a Northern European visitor as characteristically Middle Eastern and 'oriental'. In spite of that, Thomson identifies, photographs, and highlights European features of the Cypriot landscape emphasising the historical links of the island with classical Greece and Europe. At the same time he sets these descriptions of architectural features of the island's past against descriptions of the Cypriot architectural landscape of his time in a way that reads like a constant juxtaposition of a glorious European past and a dilapidated Oriental present.

For instance:

'The streets of Larnaca are narrow, and, as a rule, devoid of pavement, recalling in their general aspect the older quarters of Alexandria, or Cairo. The houses, however, are more European in style than those of Egypt, a peculiarity which they possibly owe to the period of the Lusignan kings of Cyprus' (Thomson, 1985, plate 5).

Plate 12 depicts Nicosia from the city wall; a point of view that Thomson considers advantageous. Palm trees and minarets mark the landscape:

'Nicosia may be seen to greatest advantage from the summit of its wall. In the distance rises a forest of tapering minarets, that contrast well with graceful palms, and with the undulating lines of foliage that mark the sites of the gardens of the metropolis' (*ibid.*, plate 12).

Such a description is worthy of a cityscape that would appear generally 'Oriental' (note the emphasis on the 'forest' of minarets and the palm trees). Thomson, though, turned his attention to two buildings of religious, cultural and historical significance that at the same time allowed him to highlight the island's links to Europe. The first is the Cathedral of St. Sophia (plate 14) about which Thomson writes:

'The Cathedral of St. Sophia, now used as a mosque, is a noble edifice, which carries one back to the period of the Lusignan princes, whose mutilated monuments may be seen within its walls ... It is fortunate that Moslem economy, or, perhaps, a lack of fanatical zeal, has preserved to us so much of this fine specimen of early Gothic architecture' (*ibid.*, plate 14).

The second building is the church of St. Nicholas (plate 15), which Thomson compares with the 'ramshackle architecture of the capital':

'What could be more striking than the contrast of the two such styles as have been presented face to face in this picture? The one Gothic, the other Turk mudine if we may so denominate it!' (*ibid.*, plate 15).

Descriptions of other Cypriot towns do not escape the pattern. Kerynia for instance is described (plate 23) as 'little beyond a village' but, nevertheless, its classical Greek origins are highlighted:

'The importance attached to the town in olden times is seen in the massive fortifications that guard the entrance to the port. It is supposed to have been founded originally by Dorian colonists under Praxander and Cepheus, and, even at a late period in its history, it was jealously guarded and kept open for the reception of food supplies from the mainland to support the garrisons in the mountain forts of St. Hilarion, Buffavento, and Cantara' (*ibid.*, plate 23).

Despite this glorious past Kerynia appears to Thomson's eyes as Oriental and primitive (plate 24):

'The houses in this part of the town are built of stone and roofed in with clay, and where they fringe the port their sanitary arrangements are of that simple order which prevails everywhere among Oriental and primitive communities' (*ibid.*, plate 24).

And on arrival to Famagusta Thomson observes:

'Famagosta [Famagusta] lies in the bight of a great bay, on the south-east of the island, and not far from the ruins of ancient Salamis, a place which, according to Censola, was used by the Christians as a quarry when they built Famagosta, about eight hundred years ago. But Famagosta boasts a history much more ancient even than this: for it stands on the site of "Arsinoë", and was renamed by Augustus Fama Augusti (Ammochostos). The city was overthrown by the Turks in 1571, and was so left by the invaders that its siege appears to have been an event of yesterday. It is a place of ruins, a city of the dead, in which the traveller is surprised to encounter a living tenant. It, however, affords shelter to some six hundred Turks, whose wretched abodes are found scattered among the ruins of old Gothic churches and chapels' (*ibid.*, plate 49).

Thomson was, evidently, influenced by nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse; a discourse which he employs in his text. But, it appears that Thomson was facing some difficulty in placing Cyprus in either the sphere of the 'Orient' or that of the 'Occident'. Cyprus, because of its geographical position and its recent history, could be placed in the sphere of the 'Orient'. Yet, at the same time the island's Classical fame and its Greek-speaking Christian population deemed such an exercise complex and problematic. Thomson discovered a Cyprus, which would simultaneously stimulate the Orientalist and the Philhellenist. As a consequence Thomson's text reads like a constant juxtaposition of everything western to everything eastern; everything Occidental to everything Oriental; everything Greek to everything Ottoman. And the current post-Ottoman state of the island would be judged against a more glorious Greek or European past.

This juxtaposition between classical Greece and the 'Orient' is not unusual in Orientalist discourses. Said, in *Orientalism*, presented several examples derived from western literature where the inferiority of Islam, and what was seen as the Orient in general, was demonstrated through comparisons to an ideal classical Greek standard. Consider Said's reference to Carl Becker as one example:

'Islam, for example, was typically Oriental for Orientalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Carl Becker argued that although "Islam" (note the vast generality) inherited the Hellenic tradition, it could neither grasp nor employ the Greek, humanistic tradition; moreover, to understand Islam one needed above all else to see it, not as an "original" religion, but as a sort of failed Oriental attempt to employ Greek philosophy without the creative inspiration that we find in Renaissance Europe' (Said, 2003, pp. 103–104).

Said, later in his book, draws parallels between Becker and another late nineteenth-century Orientalist, Theodor Noldeke:

'Thus Noldeke could declare in 1887 that the sum total of his work as an Orientalist was to confirm his "low opinion" of the Eastern peoples. And like Carl Becker, Noldeke was a philhellenist, who showed his love of Greece curiously by displaying a positive dislike of the Orient, which after all was what he studied as a scholar' (Said, 2003, p. 209).

Such juxtapositions between the Orient and classical Greece are not a phenomenon that characterises nineteenth-century Orientalist thinking only, but persist well into the twentieth century. Said, quotes from another scholar, Gibb, who at around the middle of the twentieth century stated that 'Oriental philosophy had never appreciated the fundamental idea of justice in Greek philosophy' (Said, 2003, p. 281).

## Conclusions

Thomson's Cyprus expedition is a key moment in the history of representing Cyprus. Both the historical moment and the medium of representation rendered Thomson's project a very popular source of imagery of late nineteenth-century and early colonial period Cyprus. This paper highlighted the disconnectedness between the mostly uncritical contemporary consumption of Thomson's images and historical realities.

It has shown that Thomson's photographs are much more than documents of a Cypriot past, but that they are, in fact, the product of complex political, ideological and cultural concerns of his time and that the context within which he operated, notably colonialism, was instrumental in shaping the vision of Cyprus that his photographs construct.

Both his text and imagery emphasised decay and Thomson employed a narrative of salvaging: the new British rulers would bring about positive change and prosperity. When dealing with people Thomson emphasised physical characteristics over culture and typicality and collective

character over individuality. His portraits, given the long exposure times needed at the time, were highly orchestrated interpretations of everyday life and settings.

Furthermore, and almost inevitably, Thomson engaged in a discussion about the cultural orientation of the place and its people. Cyprus, though, proved to be a non-straightforward case. It was a geographical, historical and cultural territory that would 'resist' a straightforward categorisation and placement within either cultural sphere. Thomson apprehended a land which in his Western eyes fulfilled the criteria for being classified as Oriental, but even so it was full of the scattered remnants of European heritage. It was a society in transition, leaving behind its Ottoman past and already experiencing emerging Greek nationalism and a process of Hellenisation. Its population mix of Christians and Muslims, or Greeks and Turks, further enhanced the complexity of attempting to define Cyprus and Cypriotness through a clear-cut classification system.

Cyprus, and by extension Cypriot identity, was already caught in an endless negotiation and renegotiation of its character and definition that other observers have very effectively described (see Papadakis, 2006 and Karayianni, 2006). This contest involved overwhelming external influences such as colonialism and Greek and (later) Turkish nationalisms, and a variety of internal forces and trends including the emergence of a local modernity that would later add yet another bipolar axis of defining a culture; that of modernity as opposed to tradition.

It seems that Cyprus was a uniquely grey area, unwillingly so at the time. It was a place and culture that would not fit into a cultural grid that opposed two distinct cultural spheres in a clear-cut way. This 'dual character' of Cyprus would deem the employment of such constructs, as binary oppositions, in the process of describing a cultural realm ineffective. Thomson's narrative is full of comparisons between his contemporary post-Ottoman Cyprus with a past classical and European one. He appears to have found it challenging to culturally classify the island and this explains his ambiguous gaze, which casts Cyprus as a cultural hybrid; what another traveller photographer, Williams of the National Geographic magazine, would term 'half-oriental' about forty years later.

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