

Scott Merrillees. *Batavia in Nineteenth Century Photographs*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000. 282 pp.

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Reviewers have praised this book. Scott Merrillees, born in 1962, identified on the dust jacket as trained in economics and commerce, who worked in those fields in Indonesia and other places, is an amateur; that is, someone who loves his subject. He patiently collected photographs of nineteenth-century Batavia, finding numerous pictures we have not seen before. They are arranged by area of the city, and the pictures are annotated so that we know what we are seeing and where we are seeing it from. Some of the buildings are still standing. We are told how to find the sites: "This photograph shows a fine private residence in the Prapatan area that still stands today. It is located on the eastern side of the bend of the Ciliwung River behind Hotel Aryaduta on Jalan Prapatan." (p. 222) Or, in another example, "This building still stands today although the façade has been changed and lacks its former elegance. It is now the headquarters of the Korps Brimob." (p. 220) Would we recognize what we saw if, after seeing the photos, we stumbled across the originals? The familiarity we gained through the picture might allow us to do so, but the feeling of having seen something from the past, still living despite its transformation, would probably have disappeared, given the way in which Batavia has become Jakarta. The point of the book is to restore something that otherwise is lost. We see and, he hopes, we feel in the pictures what we are unable to see and feel except for them.

Merrillees makes clear his motivation in his first sentence: "This book grew out of my fascination with examining old photographs of Batavia . . . and researching their contents as well as trying to date them and identify the location from where they were taken." (p. 8) This effort, beginning with fascination and passing through identification ends with the presentation of a city that in large part no longer exists. He uses the word "topography" to explain himself. Given the arrangement of the photographs by area, we can find our way through a city that now exists only in his book.

But at the same time, there is frequent cross reference between past and present.

This photograph looks in a south-westerly direction along the southern end of Tanah Abang west (Jalan Fakhruddin). It would probably have been taken just beyond the southern corner of what are today Jalan Kebon Sirih and Jalan Abdul Muis near the front of the Millennium Hotel. (p. 238.)

The photograph becomes a means of moving from 'here' (meaning now and wherever the site was in Jakarta) to "there," which means "then" when something else would have been before our eyes.

In essence, the photographs became my personal "time machine" or "window" into the Jakarta of another age that spanned the period from the late 1850s to the mid-1890s. It was an age which is now long gone and there is little left today to remind us of its former existence and yet, in a sense, it didn't feel completely out of reach to me. I can still remember as a teenager being with my great grandmother who was born in 1878 and already well into her nineties by that

time, and who therefore belonged to the era depicted in many of the photographs in this book. Although she never visited Batavia herself, I still perhaps felt that she provided me with a personal link to the period I was researching. (p. 8)

Not much is left to connect him to the period, and yet there is a connection. It is genealogical in essence. He knew his great grandmother and she lived then. It is not that she could tell him about Batavia; she had never been there. But she gives him, nonetheless, a "personal link." Knowing her, he has a connection to someone who lived during the time the photographs were made and therefore, in an unexplained way, a connection to a place she had not known.

Compare this to a comment of Roland Barthes writing about photographs: He says of the picture of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852, that he, Barthes, "am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor."¹ Here the link is not at all familiar. Something in the photograph is transmitted through someone he never knew and whose picture was taken well before Barthes was born. Barthes would sometimes tell people of his "amazement" at the connection he felt with someone from an era he could not have known through a picture of someone else, equally unknowable to him. No one was interested. He was prompted to write a book about photographs to explain a sort of communication that is not at all evident. Merrillees not only knew, he is descended from, the person who links him to the place, even though she had no connection to that place. When he stands on a certain corner in Jakarta and looks to a place where a building shown in a photograph once stood, he sees what she might have seen. What might have been in her mind had she only been there is now in his. He does not "see" at that moment. He pictures what the photograph shows him; he replaces whatever he sees with an imagined version of the photograph made three generations earlier and in doing so he vaguely enters the mind of his great-grandmother.

The photographs in *Batavia in Nineteenth Century Photographs* seem to calm Merrillees. He sees, and it is, a source of satisfaction, one that he hopes to duplicate in the readers (or viewers) of this book. And he sees, of course, without shame. There is nothing to be ashamed of. Whatever is in the picture, whatever the sight, nothing happened there. This is different from the scene today. The Brimob is feared. Its headquarters is known as the site of torture. But this is not the point, or, if it is, it is at best only alluded to by the loss of elegance that came with their use of the house. In the meantime, the goal Merrillees sought, he says, was already present in an early photographer, John Thomson, who wrote of his pictures of China that "the faithfulness of the pictures affords the nearest approach that can be made towards placing the reader actually before the scene which is represented." (p. 8) Merrillees concurs, "Only photographs (and not other visual means of representation) could satisfy me. . . ." (p. 8)

What is missing in this book, both in the selection of photographs and in the commentary, is an unwillingness to face the phantasmatic quality of communication through photographs. Barthes looks into the eyes of a man as they appear in a photograph, one whom he knew only through his photograph. Seeing the image of Jerome's eyes, he communicates with him in an inexplicable way photographs

¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 3.

sometimes allow to happen. Barthes explains that this is because the photograph contains something of the original moment, even in a chemical sense. One does not have to agree with him about the reason to feel that there is a strange sort of communication in photographs. It is one that Merrillees tells us he felt. But he domesticates this strangeness when he invokes his real experience of his great-grandmother. He sentimentally assumes that photographic communication passes through human contact. The effect of thinking this is apparent in the choice of photographs.

Merrillees's photographs are from *tempo doeloe*. "*Tempo doeloe*," a term with one word taken from Dutch and another from Indonesian, designates the time before one could have been aware of it; nonetheless, one feels one has a connection with it. In the most important photographic celebration of this time, Rob Nieuwenhuys, in the book called *Tempo Doeloe*, had a picture of himself as a small boy on the knee of his father put on the dust jacket. Inside, there was also a picture of his father at work in a hotel. Merrillees shows his daughter on his knee on the dust jacket of his book. In both books there is a stress on genealogical connection, though in *Tempo Doeloe* there is a great deal shown of family life, whereas this is missing in *Batavia in Nineteenth Century Photographs*. *Tempo Doeloe* is nostalgic, but the nostalgia is tempered by the pictures of people whom we engage with for reasons that have to do with the pictures rather than the imagined familial connection. These pictures had a theatrical cast, as though the subjects of the photographs presented themselves. Not the reality recovered but the theater entered animated the collection.

Merrillees has excluded portraits from his book on the grounds that these have already been reproduced. (The exceptions are photographs of Raden Saleh and his wife.) What is left is architecture. Sometimes there are human figures, but these are secondary. The buildings seem to appropriate them. They are lined up in front of the building or occasionally appear at the windows. We identify the buildings and then attach the figures to them. Whoever is pictured is appropriately found in the vicinity of a certain architecture. In place of the *éclat* of the pictures in Nieuwenhuys's *Tempo Doeloe*, there is quietness. People here are noiseless. This is only partly due to the need for long exposures and the consequent requirement that people hold still. One has the sense in Nieuwenhuys's photographs of speaking subjects. Merrillees's decision to eliminate portraits has rendered the aggregate of his pictures inanimate. What one sees over and over again in the pictures is "nothing is happening here."

Nothing other than the taking of the picture, which, in the context of the book, means that the reader is placed "actually before the scene which is represented." The danger of this placement—that one might, through what Merrillees calls his "time machine," see almost anything at all—is avoided. Whomever one eye sees in these pictures is not engaged in much and holds still forever. Nonetheless, through emptiness and stillness one might gain the impression of Walter Benjamin looking at the bare cobblestones of a Parisian street: it is the scene of a crime. Emptiness in Merrillees's pictures, however, leads only to satisfaction. Particularly when we read the page of explication that accompanies each photo. It tells us, for instance, of the Hotel de L'Europe (as its sign gives the name) that "little is known about this probably modest hotel, which was first listed in the government almanac in 1880 and last appeared in

1887. However, the almanacs were often incomplete. . . .” (p. 132) In this picture, however, which is exceptional, the hotel occupies only a corner of the photograph. In the middle a street, identified by Merrillees as usual, runs perpendicularly into a canal. The canal runs across the bottom of the page, suggesting the front edge of a stage. There are figures, mainly draped horizontally along it, but these go unmentioned by Merrillees. This is one of the few photographs not dominated by the buildings and that merits comparison with the pictures in Nieuwenhuys’s collection. The stage setting, rather than the reality that was there when the picture was taken, suggest a scene and prompt us to wonder what sort of play takes place there. It takes fiction to animate the inanimate.

Most scenes in *Batavia in Nineteenth Century Photographs* lack figures, or the figures lack prominence when they do appear. Instead, architecture dominates human activity. The camera respects whatever sense the buildings are meant to convey. We see very little of anything in disrepair, or not as it should be, or framed in such a way that the phantasmatic spectator would ever look at anything unintended. Without humans violating the definitions given by the buildings, the photographs are highly respectful. Unlike the scene just described, the familiarity that results is such that, even when we cannot identify whatever figures are in the photograph, we can assume that they belong in the places the camera caught them.

The respectfulness of the camera is duplicated in the commentary. The insistence on tracing the provenance of whatever is identifiable allays the possibility that, looking at the picture, one might imagine what went on in the hotel, for instance. Benjamin, looking at Atget’s picture of a cobblestone street, thought of the cobblestones used as barricades during the Commune. Here, reference is truncated and is not to events inscribed in memory but to facts that never add up to events. What we cannot know and therefore can only imagine is thus kept at bay. One does not look at these pictures and think they are the scene of a crime; one looks at them to say, “there was no crime here.” Whatever went in them left no impression except that recorded on the photograph.

Within that narrow limit, Merrillees does everything possible to imagine being in the place photographed, sometimes, for instance, giving excerpts from contemporary accounts. Of the Grand Hotel Java, we are told, “In the reading room there is always a good supply of Dutch, English, French, and German papers and magazines, all of which languages are spoken fluently by the hotel officials . . . “ but I, at least, was not prompted to think what might have been in these papers. It is the strange capacity of the photographs, indeed, to retain their fascinating character, making us feel we are present, all the while preventing us from thinking of the consequences of being so.

Nothing moves in these pictures; the buildings are necessarily set often in streets, but the streets, when they are not altogether empty, show humans crouched on their edges. One can say that nothing functions in this world. It is a place of ruins, even though the buildings are in perfect condition. Indeed, their perfect orderliness, their symmetry, the repetitiveness of their columns, the lack of effective human presence, turns this into a ghostly architecture. This city is an effect not of its human builders and users, but of the photographs themselves, which preserve them past their time.

Looking at these building-images, we are immobilized. We hold still, petrified by their ahistoricity. We see no human eyes to look back at ours. Instead it is the buildings that look at us with a regard of a sort that reaches us without our being able to place it; we are thus unable to return it. Circulation, banished from the streets, works only between the pictures and us. It is reciprocal, but without these gazes ever meeting.

Merrillees insists on presenting ghostly building after ghostly building until he builds a city in which there is no possible human spectator. We, from outside this city, respect it, as the photographs urge us to. It is a respect generated by its ghostliness. Imagining a spectator alive when the pictures were taken fused with one looking from the pictures' sites in the present staves off the uncanny. The uncanny, however, remains to fascinate and to petrify. It is not possible to move through this city. One stands still, in the path of what we dare not imagine comes a street in which nothing circulates.²

As Rudolf Mrázek explains it, the mediation of technology in the last part of the colonial era led to a dreamy separation from history. Dutch listened to radio plays on the eve of the Japanese invasion. Indonesians shared this sense that technology could bring one "elsewhere." Joshua Barker explains the *interkom* in West Java today as doing something similar. In *Batavia in Nineteenth Century Photographs*, we are all invited to do the same.

² My thanks to Anne Berger for astute suggestions, essential to this piece. It is for Stan O'Connor.