

A LATE DEVELOPER – ISABELLA BISHOP FRGS

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Isabella Bird was born in 1831, a fragile intelligent girl who was taken by her father, the Rev. Edward Bird, on his rounds on horseback sitting in front of him on a cushion. In later life she became a fearless horsewoman – “on horseback I can do anything”.

Isabella’s writing prowess was already evident at the age of 16 when she wrote an essay against free trade. This was printed a year later, when the family arrived in Wyton, Huntingdonshire, from Birmingham. She spent her adolescent years at the Rectory in Wyton and later returned to the county to live in nearby Hartford. At the age of 18 a fibrous tumour was removed from her spine. Despite her health problems, she became an intrepid traveller, an acclaimed lecturer and writer of books describing her adventures. At the age of 61 she studied photography, subsequent lectures being illustrated using the magic lantern.

Her first book, *The English Woman in America* (1856), resulted from a journey across the Atlantic to Nova Scotia, taking her to New England and then across to Chicago and into Canada. She returned via New York, sailing from Boston. She was 23 and apparently recovering from an unfortunate affair of the heart. Her father had given her £100, Isabella returned with £10 but without the husband that perhaps her parents had hoped for. There were two more journeys to America, one as part of a round cruise.

Her second book, *The Hawaiian Archipelago* (1875), recorded her experiences during her travels in Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii and America. She stayed in Hawaii for seven months, during which time she introduced the King to English trifle puddings and she burnt her boots, eyelids and eyebrows when visiting a volcano. On another occasion Isabella traversed a narrow loose gravel path with a 1,000 foot drop by dismounting and holding onto the hind legs of her horse. She returned via San Francisco and, in *A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879), recalls an incident in the Rockies when, caught in a blizzard on horseback, she had difficulty in finding her way as her tears froze and closed her eyelids.

Her next book, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880), described the lives of the aboriginal inhabitants of Hokkaido. She had returned to England via Malaya and Egypt where she was exposed to typhoid. Isabella was nursed back to health by her sister Henrietta who unfortunately contracted typhoid herself and died in 1880.

Isabella married Dr John Bishop in March 1881 – she was 50 and he was 40 years of age. *The Golden Cheronese and the Way Thither*, describing her earlier visit to Malaya, was published in 1883. Sadly her married life was cut short in 1886 when John died of pernicious anaemia. Isabella then trained to become a casualty surgical nurse, was baptised by Reverend C.H. Spurgeon and set off for India and Tibet. In Kashmir she established a hospital in memory of her husband and in the Punjab one in memory of her sister. Isabella returned via Persia, Armenia and Turkey. Travelling between Baghdad and Tehran six of her muleteers died and Isabella lost 32 lbs in bodyweight.

In 1891 *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan* was published and, now back in London, W.E. Gladstone invited Isabella to recount her experiences, being especially interested in the fate of the Armenian Christians. In November that year Isabella gave an illustrated lecture to the Royal Scottish Geographical Society with views shown by limelight. In 1892 Sir John Scott Keltie, the secretary of the Royal Geographical Society, seconded John



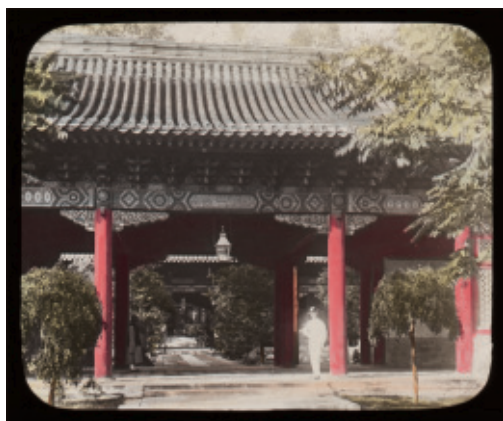
1. Isabella Bishop with her Ross camera

Murray’s proposal that Isabella should become a Fellow of the Society, one of the first women to be so honoured. Isabella was already a Fellow of the Scottish Society. The following year, what was in effect a gentleman’s ‘club’ decided that from then on women would no longer be admitted. This remained so for the next 20 years.

It was in 1892 that Isabella began to consult Howard Farmer, the Head of Photography at the Regent Street Polytechnic. She also received help from John Thomson, the Instructor of Photography at the Royal Geographical Society, who emphasised the need to become proficient at producing high quality negatives on glass or on celluloid film. He also advised travellers to carry two cameras. Isabella chose a Ross camera with tripod, weight 16 lbs (Fig. 1) and a hand-held camera, weight 4 lbs.

Among the Tibetans appeared in 1894, the year in which Isabella embarked upon another extensive tour of the orient. From Japan she visited Korea to record a society being influenced by Japanese and Western cultures. To process her photographs she made a small dark-room on her sampan. A visit to Manchuria was cut short by territorial disputes and she managed to escape to China. Isabella was made an Honorary Member of the Oriental Society of Peking which she acknowledged by giving a lecture to eminent guests at the British Legation (Fig. 2). She then travelled to Vladivostok before returning to Japan.

The following year, 1895, she was back in Korea photographing the royal palaces, then on to Tokyo, where she worked on her photography and established an orphanage in memory of her husband. Later in the year she travelled along the coast from Hong Kong to Shanghai. Between January and June 1896 Isabella made another of her epic journeys in China. This began with a 600 mile journey up the Yangtze River, from Shanghai to Hankow, aboard a 2,000 ton vessel. She noted along the way that the Germans had built factories to produce albumen, used in the production of photographic prints – 7,000 duck eggs were required to make 100 lbs of albumen. One of her Chinese images showed men carrying raffia baskets lined with oiled paper to transport wine and, beneath the baskets, cylinders to hold their cash (Fig. 3). Another of her slides showed a boat propelled by the feet (Fig. 4).



2. The British Legation in Peking



3. Chinese men carrying raffia baskets

From here Isabella journeyed another 300 miles in a stern-wheel steamer to Ichang. The captain gave her permission to use the saloon to process her photographs, the engineer providing an unlimited supply of condensed water. For the next part of her journey to Wan Hsien Isabella hired a 20 ton houseboat. The crew consisted of the skipper and his family of five, the pilot, the steersman and the cook. There were also 16 rowers or trackers. The latter were used to haul the vessel through rapids and gorges. In one particularly difficult section it took nearly six hours for 70 trackers to haul the vessel upriver. At first her trackers were suspicious of the camera, believing that it contained a black devil. When they were shown Isabella's photographs they used one hand to close one eye whilst using the other to make a tunnel through which, with great glee, to see the pictures. With a very limited supply of filtered water she was able to develop the negatives at night and to print during the day by hanging the printing frames over the side of the houseboat.

She was fascinated by vernacular architecture. On approaching Wan Hsien, she remarked: "I have never seen so beautiful a bridge as the lofty, single stone arch, with a house at the highest point, which spans the river-bed and seems to spring out of the rock without any visible abutments" (Fig. 5). Isabella noted that she was not challenged as she took her photographs here.

The aim was to reach Tibet, some 600 miles overland. To this end she was carried in an open chair by three chair bearers, with her servant and four porters carrying the luggage. In many places she was perceived to be a foreign devil and photography to be foreign magic. She still managed to create dark-rooms to develop her images at night although some of these were fogged when the curious made a hole in her 'room' to see what she was doing. After a 300 mile journey the party reached an outpost of the Church Missionary Society where Isabella established the Emily Clayton Dispensary and a surgical ward. The journey had taken them over many passes – one at 2,900 feet was ascended by 1,140 steps protected by granite rails and uprights. At other times the route was on narrow banks across rice paddies.

Travel into the unknown 'beyond' was impeded by officialdom. After washing their hands of any responsibility for her safety a group of ten spearmen, led by a mounted Chinese officer, joined them. However their purpose seemed to be to prevent the travellers gaining accommodation. Isabella was lucky to reach Somo, close to the border with Tibet. Her party had arrived at the base of a pass early in the evening and decided to continue, but they encountered a severe snow storm with high winds resulting in drifting. With great difficulty they reached the 12,000-foot summit at midnight and did not find shelter until 3 a.m. when they descended to 9,000 feet. At Somo, Isabella commented upon the greater freedom of women she encountered. She also noted and photographed the non-Chinese appearance of the inhabitants. A lack of food, evidence of civil unrest ahead, the effects of the blizzard and the ongoing difficulties over accommodation led Isabella to abort further travel into Tibet.

By taking a different route involving more river travel she was back in Shanghai by the end of June 1896. She then spent time in Japan working upon 60 of the 200 photographs she had taken on her journey, selling some in support of the orphanage in Tokyo. Isabella was back in London by March 1897.

Writing to Sir John Scott Keltie on 29 April 1897 she told him that she had left with Mr Simpson about 40 negatives for lantern slides needed for the lecture she was to present to the Society. 'A Journey in Western Sze-Chuan', illustrated with the slides made for her, was duly delivered on 10 May, the first to the Society by a woman. It appears that at one time the use of a magic lantern had been deemed by the Royal Geographical Society likely to lower the standard of the Society's lectures. On 12 June she gave one of her lectures to the Royal Photographic Society, of which she was a member. Isabella decided that she should learn how to make the lantern slides she needed for the lecture to be given at a meeting of the British Association in Bristol, including how to reduce the size of her photographs.

Two more books were published in the next two years – *Korea and Her Neighbours* in 1898 and *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond*, illustrated with 106 of her photographs, in 1899. In March 1899 Isabella, now 68, took a long lease on The Hurst in Hartford, near Huntingdon, a house with grounds that ran down to the River Great Ouse. Cassell published *Chinese Pictures* in April 1900 and their art director, Mr Ball, visited The Hurst to take down the notes that Isabella wished to accompany her photographs.

Isabella's last expedition took her to Morocco for six months in 1901. She became the first European woman to visit the Sultan in the Atlas Mountains. He was interested in



4. A foot boat found in central China



5. The bridge at Wan Hsien

photography and possessed a golden camera made in London at a cost of 2,000 guineas.

Isabella maintained a busy schedule of meetings and lectures. A lecture to the boys at Winchester College in March 1902 lasted for two hours, with her slide show accounting for 45 minutes. She continued to take photographic lessons in London and to work in the dark-room she had established in the cellar of The Hurst. In the July she attended a five-day photographic convention in Cambridge. In 1903, the diagnosis of a fibrous thoracic tumour, cardiac and circulatory problems resulted in her decision to return to Edinburgh. This had been the family home after her father's death in 1858. Isabella died there on 28 September 1904 – a remarkable lady who came late in life to photography and to the magic lantern. However her photographs and slides, together with her writings, shone a light upon the lives of people living in places far from her own home shores.

This article is based on a presentation to the Magic Lantern Society at the summer meeting held at Laycock in July 2006. With the assistance of Jennifer and Keith Utteridge and of Justin Hobson and his colleague from The Royal Geographical Society, who brought with them some of Isabella's photographs and 22 of her lantern slides, we told her story.

NOTES

The four lantern slides (Figs 2–5) are reproduced courtesy of The Royal Geographical Society.

In 2015 The Ammonite Press in collaboration with The Royal Geographical Society published Deborah Ireland's *Isabella Bird: a Photographic Journal of Travels Through China 1894–1896*. This reproduces some 180 of Isabella's photographs with examples of her lantern slides. Sources of further information are provided in the Bibliography and Notes.