

WALTER WOODBURY IN JAVA

Trevor Beattie

In the *New Magic Lantern Journal* for Autumn 2007¹ I wrote about the extraordinary life and sad end of the brilliant photographer, adventurer and polymath Walter Bentley Woodbury (1834-1885) who invented the Woodburytype, the highest-quality, most permanent photographic process ever developed. Woodbury began his career in photography in Australia (Fig. 1) but it was when he moved to Java in 1857, aged 23, that his career really took off.² The strikingly beautiful photographs he took there inspired his search for a new grain-free photographic process that would do justice to them and would transform the quality of lantern slides. For this reason, it is worth examining this period of his life in greater detail.

Walter Woodbury was the son of a prosperous factory-owning family in Manchester who started work as an apprentice in its patent office, training to be an engineer. When the wet collodion process was published by Frederick Scott Archer in 1851 Walter became a keen amateur photographer. In 1852, aged only 17, he left to seek his fortune in the Australian goldfields.³ The young man soon realised that he was not going to make his fortune as a gold miner and urgently needed to earn some money. He took on a series of jobs including as a surveyor's labourer and a draughtsman in Melbourne waterworks before spotting a better financial opportunity in his original love of photography. By 1853 Walter was taking portraits and by 1855 he had set up a photographic studio in Melbourne. There was, however, too much competition for him to make

much money so, enterprising as ever, he walked 200 miles to the major mining town of Beechworth, opening a studio in the hotel there.

It was in Beechworth that Walter entered into partnership with James Page (1833-1865) whom he had first befriended in Melbourne. James was the son of a respectable family in London who began work as a clerk in the City. He quickly tired of the tedium of office life and decided to seek his fortune in Australia. He too had little success in the harsh environment of the Australian goldfields. The two young men bonded over their shared interest in photography and their perilous finances. They decided they had to leave Australia but pride would not allow them to return to their families in England with nothing to show for their time abroad. They needed to find a new location where they could commercially exploit their photographic skills.

It's not clear why they chose Java as their escape route but it was likely to be because they saw it as virgin territory for the new art of photography where they could rapidly build a business and establish their reputations. Walter was probably also thinking that it would provide plenty of material for a series of stereo views and prints, and perhaps also a lantern lecture.

So on Monday 18 May 1857 Woodbury and Page left Australia on board the North American ship *Young America* for the four week voyage to Batavia (now Jakarta), the capital of what was then the Netherlands East Indies.⁴ One of the Woodburytype slides of Java that he took later titled 'Java – Mail Steamer Coalings' illustrates the sort of vessel they would have travelled on (Fig. 2). It is perfectly possible that this is the same ship.

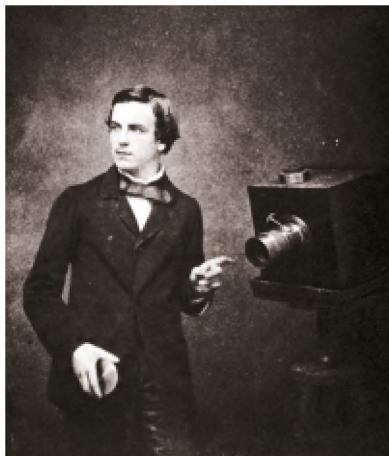
Two weeks after arriving in Java they opened their first photographic portrait studio under the name 'Woodbury and Page' in the house of a Mrs Bain, a Scottish woman who was their landlady.⁵ The business thrived from the outset. Just a few weeks after opening their studio Walter wrote to his mother: "Every day we have had carriages at the door every ten minutes and have got engagements for the next week."⁶

While expensive studio portraits provided the financial basis of the business, the two young men were keen to see and record the Javanese scenery, people and customs. Over the next five years they travelled widely across Java, opening and closing studios as they went. Walter continued to use his own version of the wet collodion process, even though dry plates had by then become available, because he felt it was better adapted to a tropical climate.⁷

Their first visit outside Batavia was to Buitenzorg, now called Bogor, the location of the Governor General's residence (Fig. 3) which Walter's brother Henry described in his later lantern lecture on Java (which can be found in the MLS Readings Library) as "a very neat structure, the gardens are famous for the great variety of palms and other tropical trees, the lake in front of the palace is covered with aquatic plants."⁸ From the start Walter set out to document his travels with the aim of selling photos and stereo views to the European market. His deep feeling for the lush scenery shines out in the photographs which he took at the time, many of which later became Woodburytype slides (Figs 4 and 5).

The business thrived and by early 1859 it was doing so well that Walter's 23-year-old brother, Henry James Woodbury (1836-1873), came out to join them. The growing firm experienced continual difficulty in obtaining photographic supplies from Europe so Walter and James both took short trips back to England to build relationships with suppliers and to sell some of their photographs and stereo views. Walter also used his time back in England to acquire the information and cameras necessary to satisfy the new craze of collecting *cartes-de-visite*.

Walter Woodbury published an account of a two-month journey which they took in June 1860.⁹ "With our minds elated by the prospect of a pleasant trip,



1. Self portrait of Walter Woodbury taken while he was in Australia



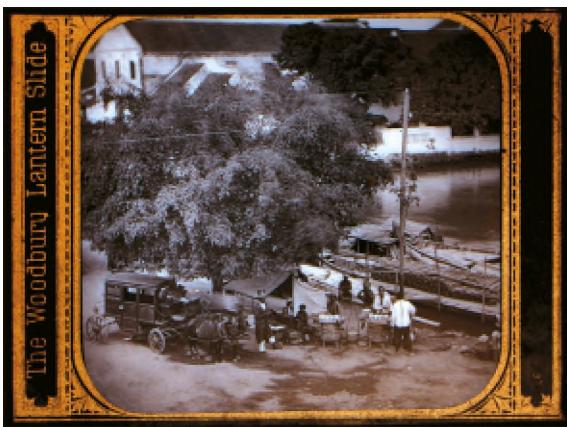
2. Mail steamer coalings



3. Palace of Governor, Fan Palms



4. Bamboo Bridge



5. Java, instantaneous group

humid climate, with a vertical sun in the mid-day hours, to produce work that achieved a distinct reputation in the far East. For this success a perfect genius of resource was necessary, and Woodbury was equal to the task.¹⁴

At the end of 1860 Page returned to England and the partnership seems to have broken up, with the Woodbury brothers operating a studio in Batavia under the name of 'Atelier Woodbury'.¹⁵ The demand for *cartes-de-visite* led to a shift in emphasis from scenery to local people and dignitaries. There is an unpleasant strain of colonial superiority in the way these photographs were taken and described. As Steven Wachlin says: "people in Europe at that time craved images of the unknown, the strange and the exotic. Commercial photographers provided these often stereotyped images [and] Woodbury had one of the largest selections of 'native types' in the Netherlands Indies."¹⁶ It is highly unlikely that the people whose images were taken and disseminated either gave their permission or saw any of the proceeds.

The photos that Walter and Henry took of the Royal family and their court, however, have a more respectful tone (Figs 6 and 7). These are beautiful, considered portraits of a lost age. In his lantern lecture of about 1870 Henry Woodbury gives a detailed, fascinated, and rather awed, description of the Royal court, for which he is "on the tip-toes of expectation". Gwen Sebus describes some of these slides in her *TML* article 'Woodbury in Leiden'.¹⁷ The dignified portrait of the Crown Prince is particularly striking. Henry's reading says: "he will be about 14 years old, has an establishment of his own, and about a dozen concubines".

On 22 January 1863 Walter married Marie Sophia Olmeijer, the daughter of a Borneo trader, who was only about 15 at the time. They were to have eight children. Marie outlived Walter, remarried and outlived a second husband before moving to Barbados where she married for a third time and lived happily until 1941.

Soon after their wedding the couple travelled back to Europe because Walter's health was declining.¹⁸ He had probably also already developed the concept of an entirely new photographic process and knew he would have to be in England to refine the idea and patent it. He was never to return to Java.

Just before Walter Woodbury left Java he announced that the firm of Woodbury and Page was being reformed, led by James Page and Henry Woodbury.

through the wildest and most beautiful scenery of Java, and with a first-rate supply of apparatus, including one of Smart's dark tents, which we had just received by mail from England, and in which we anticipated pleasant working, we (a party of three) started from Kedirie, an inland town of Java, at the close of a hot day."¹⁰ These vivid articles detail the problems of using the wet collodion process in a tropical climate with exposures of up to ten minutes, long waits for the sun to evenly illuminate the view, continual water shortages and India rubber components that stuck together in the heat.

Walter provides a long list of the huge amount of equipment needed for the trip which meant that they "started off twenty-seven coolies with our apparatus, wearing apparel, a case of wine, and one of provisions". He gives plenty of detail about the chemical processes employed and explains that "as regards cameras it is difficult to say which is best suited for a hot climate, as most of them go to pieces through the alternate changes of heat and damp. If the metal cameras advertised in our last Photographic Journals, turn out what they profess, they will be one of the greatest boons to Indian photographers". He concludes with the hope "that some of the numerous travellers that photography attracts to foreign places, may gain some small benefit from my experience."¹¹

During the whole of this two-month journey they "made a nice collection of some twenty-five to thirty views of each sort, stereoscopic and otherwise."¹² In our era of instant camera phone pictures it seems extraordinary that this meagre output required two months and a supply train of 27 porters. This helps to explain the extreme care with which each picture is composed and the high technical quality of the photographs.¹³ It is no wonder that Walter began to consider how he might invent a new process that would make it possible to duplicate these photos in a manner that did justice to the time and trouble taken in their creation.

The challenges faced by photographers in the tropics in 1860 were neatly summarised in a tribute to Walter Woodbury in the *Amateur Photographer* of 20 March 1885: "those who remember the difficulties that beset the collodion process five-and-twenty years ago, will appreciate the obstacles to be overcome in a hot and



6. Crown Prince



7. The Bonang

In his later lantern lecture Henry spoke from painful experience when he wrote of Java that "the climate used to be considered the most unhealthy in the world and Java has been called the graveyard of Europeans" because by late 1864 James Page's health was so bad that he had to return to England. Unfortunately the doctors could do nothing for him and he died on 7 January 1865 of "dysentery from long residence in Java", aged just 32.

Henry's own health started to suffer and in January 1866 he also returned to England with his wife and the four-year-old daughter of James Page.¹⁹ He bought a cotton mill with the money he had made in Java but it quickly went bust. The bankrupt Henry was given a small annual allowance from a philanthropist to work with the industrial poor of Manchester. It was in this role that he probably used the lantern lecture on Java that I have quoted here, but Java had taken too heavy a toll on him and he died in 1873, aged 37.

A third Woodbury brother, Albert (1840-1900), had gone out to Java in 1869 and ran the firm for more than a decade, living in Brighton on his return to England. The firm then continued under various ownerships until about 1896.

When Walter Woodbury returned to England in 1863 he opened a photographic studio and began experiments in photo-relief printing designed to capture the clarity of the photos he had taken in Java. Within a year, on 23 September 1864, he had been granted a patent for the process that was to become known as the Woodburytype.

The unique brilliance of the Woodburytype process is that, instead of representing variations of tone across the surface of the plate or slide, as in a traditional photograph, it produces a three-dimensional model of the image, using the depth of the ink to represent changes of tone. It is also highly stable and capable of mass production on a factory scale.²⁰

Woodburytypes began to be produced commercially in Britain in 1869, when the Woodbury Permanent Photographic Printing Company was founded. The first lantern slides produced by the process appeared in 1872.²¹

The third edition of the *Sciopicon Manual* published in 1875 lists 57 slides of Java "from negatives by W. & H. Woodbury" amongst a total of 518 slides. It is appropriate that Walter also credited his late brother who accompanied him on many of his tours around Java.

However, it is reasonable to assume that the vast majority of these slides are Walter's work since after Henry returned from Java in 1866 he took no further interest in professional photography.

In my view these slides are the stand-out images from the whole of Walter Woodbury's production output, perfectly capturing Java's landscape, people and places from the six pioneering and formative years that he spent there. They were the inspiration for the first and greatest of the many inventions of the man who was rightly called "the Edison of photography."²²

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *New Magic Lantern Journal (NMLJ)*, Autumn 2007, Vol. 10, No. 3
2. Steven Wachlin, *Woodbury and Page, Photographers Java*, KITLV Press, Leiden, 1994. This catalogue is a rich source of information on this period in Woodbury's life.
3. Some sources, including an article about Woodbury in *The Amateur Photographer* of 20 March 1885 and my previous *NMLJ* article, give an earlier date of 1849 for his departure to Australia but Wachlin's catalogue specifies that he sailed from Liverpool in July 1852 aboard the ship *Serampore*, which seems to clinch the matter.
4. Wachlin, p.9
5. Wachlin, p.11
6. Walter Woodbury, letter to Ellen Woodbury, 2 September 1857
7. Wachlin, p.13
8. 'Lecture on Java by Mr Woodbury of Manchester, to accompany 48 photographs taken by him during his residence on the island.' It is not entirely clear which 'Mr Woodbury of Manchester' gave this lecture but the evidence points to Henry Woodbury, not Walter, since he was living in Manchester while Walter had settled in Birmingham. The date is also uncertain, but is probably about 1870. It is the basis of the Pumphrey Brothers slide set that can be found in *Lucerna* (Lucerna ID 3006006).
9. 'Photography in Java; Account of a short photographic ramble through the interior of the east end of the island', *The Photographic News*, 15 February, 22 February and 15 March 1861
10. *The Photographic News*, 15 February 1861
11. *The Photographic News*, 15 March 1861
12. *Ibid.*
13. Woodbury said: "We have long had an aversion to that patch of white, which passes for sky in so many of the stereographs offered for sale."
14. *The Amateur Photographer*, 20 March 1885, p.384
15. Wachlin, p.17
16. Wachlin, p.19
17. *TML*, March 2016, No. 6
18. My 2007 article gives a date of 1862 for Walter's return to England, but it was in fact 1863.
19. Wachlin, p.22
20. For details of the process see my article in the *NMLJ*, Autumn 2007, Vol. 10, No. 3
21. These slides are categorised in my 2007 *NMLJ* article.
22. *The Photographic Times*, 15 December 1893