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## THE CALCUTTA CYCLONE OF 1864: THE PICTORIAL EVIDENCE\*

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"A cyclonic storm, variously called cyclone, hurricane and typhoon, is the greatest example of nature's forces in action that is known to us. And the results on our atmosphere are exhibited in many ways, which are both terrifying, awe-inspiring, of vast interest to the meteorologist and of wonder to the ordinary spectator." <sup>1</sup>

The Calcutta cyclone of the 5<sup>th</sup> October 1864 is neither the first recorded cyclone in that area nor was it the most destructive. But it is the first Calcutta cyclone the effects<sup>2</sup> of which were photographically documented. Although these photographs, numbering well over 100, testify, how terrifying and awe-inspiring the effects of this cyclone really were, they seem almost to be forgotten, especially since very few can be ascribed to a specific studio or photographer. The composition of some of these views, especially those showing shipwrecks, rival several of the shipwreck scenes painted by artists active in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century like Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) or Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840).

### I. Attributed and/or attributable photographic views

Probably the earliest widely distributed view illustrating the damage caused by the storm wave appeared on the front page of *The Illustrated London News*, No.1288, Volume 45, Saturday, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1864 (**Plate 3.1**). The caption below this woodcut informs: "Effects of the cyclone at Calcutta on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October. - From a photograph.- See next page." The "next page", numbered 502, dedicates three quarters of a column to the description of the damages caused by the storm, as far as known by then. The report, titled "The Destructive Hurricane at Calcutta starts": "The illustration on our front page may help to give some notion of the scene of devastation on the banks of the river Hooghly at Calcutta, immediately after the tremendous storm of Wednesday, the 5<sup>th</sup> of October. Our engraving is copied from a photographic view taken by Mr. F. Fisk Williams on the day after the hurricane". It is warmly recommended to read the rest of this article, as it is one of the most touching descriptions of what had happened on that day in Calcutta.

In 1859 the photographer, F. Fisk Williams, is listed as "ordinary member" of *The Asiatic Society of Bengal*,<sup>3</sup> a year later he published not the first but one of the first manuals of photography in India.<sup>4</sup>

Apparently the only available description to figure 1 informs: "'Mirzapore', (paddle steamer), still on shore at Armenian Ghant [sic!]; jettisoning salt; will probably be got off." <sup>5</sup> Further photographs either signed by or attributed to this talented photographer<sup>6</sup> have not come to my notice.

\*This article was published in *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol. 22, but inadvertently, the notes were not printed. Therefore, whole article with notes is published in this Volume. Editor.

A week later, on Saturday, November 26, 1864, *The Illustrated London News*, No.1298, Volume 45 reproduced two more engravings on page 544. The one on top (**Plate 3.2**), is titled "Effects of the Cyclone at Calcutta," the illustration below (**Plate 3.3**), bears the same title. Both illustrations "are engraved from the photographs taken on the spot by Mr. Wagentreiber." Since the name is quite common and the initials are not given, the identity of this gentleman is all but clear.

All three photographs engraved for *The Illustrated London News* share the engravers artistic licence in adding clouds to the view which were certainly not visible in the photograph.

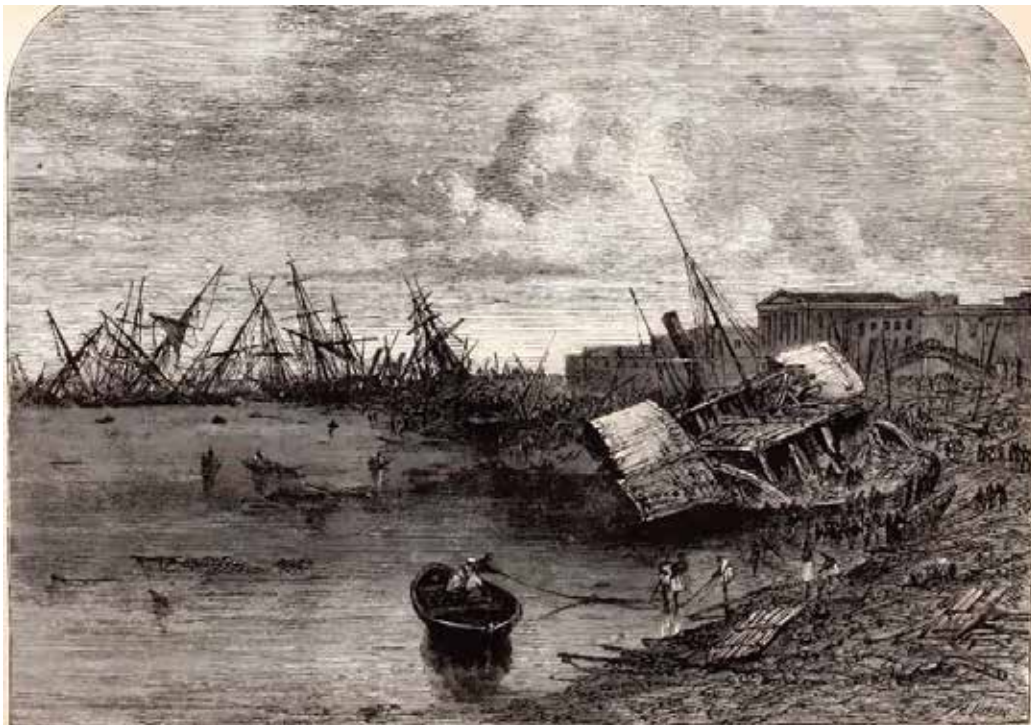
An unaltered view was published in 1922 with the caption " 'Southampton' after the Calcutta Cyclone 1864."<sup>7</sup> *The Lyttelton Times* mentions that the Southampton is "almost a wreck",<sup>8</sup> more, however, is not said about this photograph. A second view, reproduced below the photograph showing the wrecked Southampton is captioned: "After the Calcutta Cyclone, 1864" without any further information in the text. More recently another print from the same negative was published by the British Library (Photo 682[82]) with the caption: "Ships wrecked on the Hugli at Sibpore after the Calcutta Cyclone, 1864."<sup>9</sup> This photograph belongs to a group of 19 listed views illustrating the effects of the said cyclone as part of the A.C. Pearson collection in the British Library (Photo 682 + Photo 782). These 19 views, (Photo 682[78] - [95] + Photo 782[81]) are ascribed to "Pearson & Paterson" on the basis of a series of "fifty views entitled 'Records of the Cyclone' documenting the effects of the great storm of 1864 [...] which were shown at the Bengal Photographic Society Exhibition of that year."<sup>10</sup> Pearson's initials, however, seem to be a matter of debate. Accordingly, "J.F. Pearson"<sup>11</sup> as well as "E.S. Pearson"<sup>12</sup> are mentioned.

Be that as it may, there is a series of photographs documenting the damages caused by the cyclone of 1864 ascribed to "Pearson & Paterson."<sup>13</sup> The common factor of these unsigned photographs seems to be their size, they measure about 15.5 - 16.7 centimetres in height and generally 20.0 - 21.6 centimetres in width.

One view of a sequence of five photographs presented here, each of which is framed by red rules, is titled below the print in pencil: "The Thunder ashore Bankshall." It measures 15.5 × 2.1 cms. (**Plate 3.4**). *The Lyttelton Times* notes: "Steamer Thunder still on the top of a wreck off Bankshall, every effort being made to save her,"<sup>14</sup> while Photo 682(78) in the British Library is captioned: "Steam ship Thunder on the shore at Colvin Ghaut."

**Plate 3.5** (16.0 cms. in height) introduces a view titled in pencil: "Avenue in Howrah", which apparently corresponds to Photo 682(93) titled "Remains of an avenue, Howrah" in the British Library albeit the description of another view in the same collection, Photo 1168/1(100), also matches with **Plate 3.5**.<sup>15</sup> It is ascribed to F.W. Baker.

"Near St. James' Church" is the pencilled title of **Plate 3.6**. This view might illustrate the following observation in *The Illustrated London News* of November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1864: "Except the coconut and other palms, scarcely a tree was anywhere to be found standing."<sup>16</sup> The St. James' Church, then the largest of its kind in the city, was duly consecrated on St. James' Day, on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1864.<sup>17</sup>



**Plate 3.1:** Engraving from *The Illustrated London News*, 18.11.1864, p. 501. Size: 17.0 × 23.5 cms.



**Plate 3.2:** Engraving from *The Illustrated London News*, 26.11.1864, p. 544, top.





**Plate 3.3:** Engraving from *The Illustrated London News*, 26.11.1864, p. 544, bottom.



**Plate 3.4:** "The Thunder ashore Bankshall." Albumen print, P&G collection, Karlsruhe - Berlin.



**Plate 3.5:** "Avenue in Howrah." Albumen print, formerly collection of Günter Heil, Berlin.



**Plate 3.6:** "Near St. James' Church." Albumen print, formerly collection of Günter Heil, Berlin.



**Plate 3.7:** Untitled. Albumen print, formerly collection of Günter Heil, Berlin.



**Plate 3.8:** Untitled. Albumen print, P&G collection, Karlsruhe - Berlin.





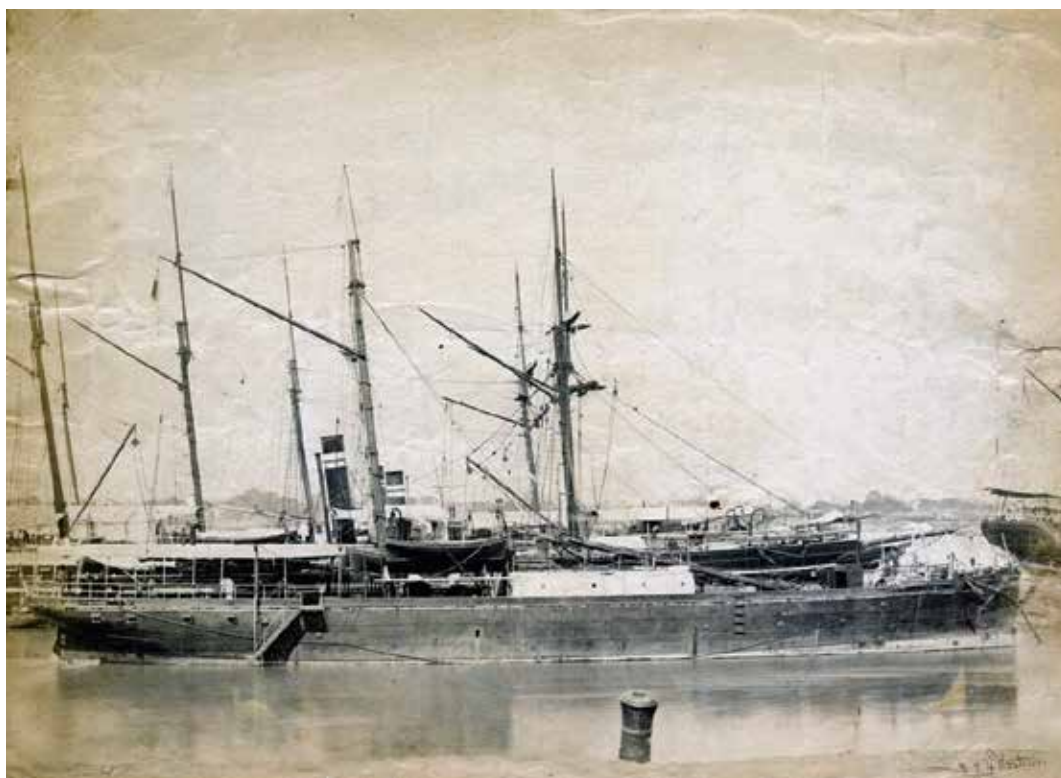
**Plate 3.9:** "Calcutta. The 'Coked Hat.'" Albumen print, P&G collection, Karlsruhe - Berlin.



**Plate 3.10:** "Cyclone of 1864." Albumen print, P&G collection, Karlsruhe - Berlin.



**Plate 3.11:** "Cyclone of 1864 - Str "Moulmein." Albumen print, P&G collection, Karlsruhe - Berlin.



**Plate 3.12:** W.G. Stretton: "B J S.S. Moulmein after Cyclone." Albumen print, P&G collection.

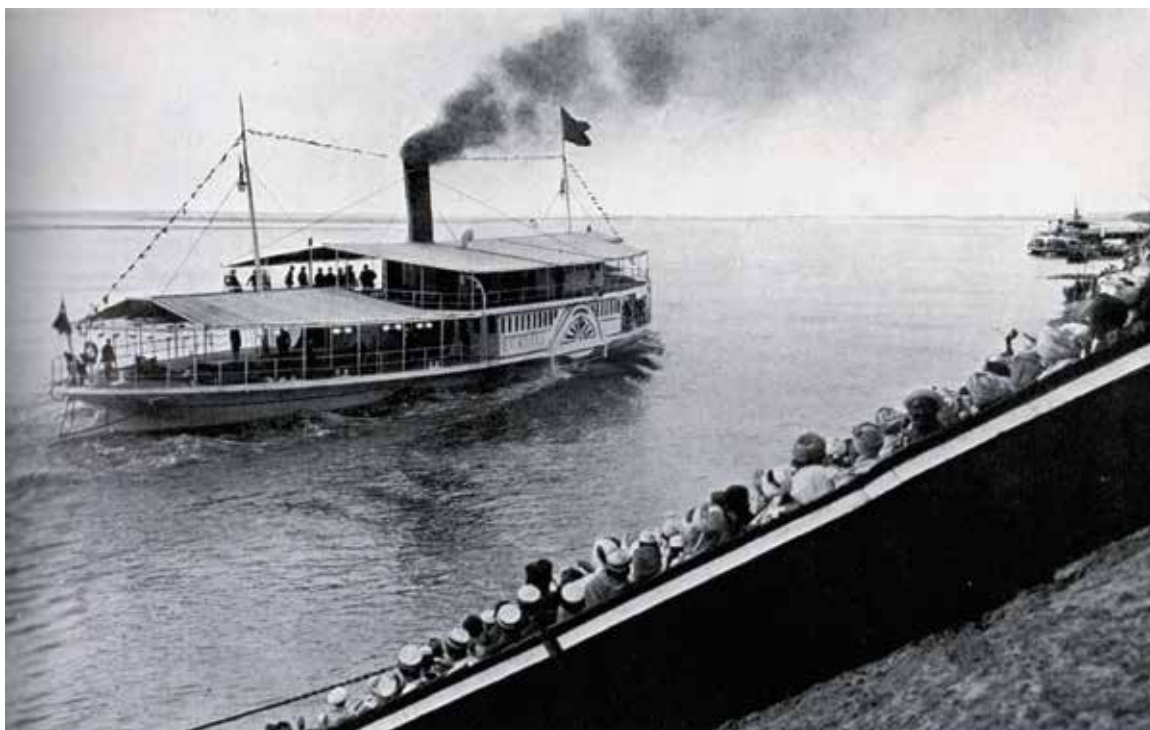




**Plate 3.13:** Samuel Bourne: "The 'Blenheim' and other Shipping, after the Cyclone." P&G collection.



**Plate 3.14:** Untitled [The S.S. Howrah ashore]. Formerly collection of Philippe Doublet, Biarritz.



**Plate 3.15:** E. Brooks: "His Imperial Majesty crossing the Ganges [aboard the S.S. Howrah]".

It is hence not clear, if parts of the church were still under construction or whether the storm had carried away the points of the steeples.

**Plate 3.7** (15.5 cms. in height) is unidentified but might be compared to the description of a view in Photo 1168 / Photo 1168/1 in the British Library: "View looking along the Hugli at Cossipur in the aftermath of the 1864 cyclone, showing sailing ships wrecked on the riverbank and houses beyond."

Also without any caption is **Plate 3.8** (16.5 × 21.6 cms.) showing two large stranded sailing ships side by side.<sup>18</sup>

## II. Identified views

A number of photographs taken at Calcutta show an identification, usually at the lower left edge of the print, rendered in white embossed script as for example in: 'Calcutta. The "Cocked Hat.", **Plate 3.9** (16.0 × 23.5 cms.). Only a part of the post- and chain-fencing enclosed area known as the "cocked hat" on the Maidan of the city becomes apparent in the right hand part of the view, but it is interesting to note the landing stage with the Babu Ghat in the centre. The equestrian statue in the foreground shows Henry Hardinge, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Hardinge (1785-1856), completed in 1857 by John Henry Foley (1818-1874).<sup>19</sup>

**Plate 3.10** (16.0 × 22.7 cms.), likewise titled "Cyclone of 1864" also exists in an uncaptioned version as part of an unpublished album with 22 views titled:

### **"PHOTOGRAPHS ILLUSTRATING THE EFFECTS OF THE HURRICANE IN CALCUTTA 5<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 1864"**

Unfortunately, none of the views in that album, formerly in the collection of Philippe Doublet in Biarritz (France), bears any identification.

**Plate 3.11** (14.9 × 23.1 cms.) entitled: "Cyclone of 1864 - Str "Moulmein" was published earlier as being the work of W.G. Stretton,<sup>20</sup> for whom see below. This steam ship is mentioned at least twice in the reports: " 'Moulmein' (steamer), afloat, and very much injured in upper decks"<sup>21</sup> as well as: "S.S. Moulmein, making no water."<sup>22</sup>

#### **III. Signed views**

Signed views showing the effects of the Calcutta cyclone of 1864 are exceedingly rare. **Plate 3.12** (19.1 × 26.1 cms.) bears a signature in the lower right corner: "324/11 Stretton." A pencilled inscription below the print reads: "B J S.S. Moulmein after Cyclone" and: "Stretton."

"Stretton" is William George Stretton (1836-1899),<sup>23</sup> who is listed as "photographic artist" in Calcutta in 1875<sup>24</sup> along with six more photographic studios.<sup>25</sup> It is, however, not known, where he lived in 1864, when his daughter, Annie Stretton, was born.<sup>26</sup> Plate 8.12 was probably not photographed exactly on October 6, 1864, but it is highly unlikely that it was photographed much later, especially since the view shares the "frozen", i.e. ripple-free surface of the water with the other illustrations shown here; an indication of an early photograph.

A signed as well as identified view is apparently only offered by the photographer Samuel Bourne (1834-1912) who photographed "The 'Blenheim' and other Shipping, after the Cyclone", **Plate 3.13** (19.0 × 31.0).<sup>27</sup> The view is signed in the negative, lower right: "Bourne 1703." The cyclone mentioned by Bourne, however, is the hurricane that hit Calcutta on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1867. A French eye-witness of this cyclone, Louis Théophile Marie Rousselet (1845-1929) happened to be in Calcutta then.<sup>28</sup>

#### **IV. Unidentified views**

The great majority of known views is unidentified, both in terms of authorship as well as exact location and/or identification of the ship, with the result that many unanswered questions remain. The paddle steamer Howrah, to give an example, is clearly recognizable in **Plate 3.14**, a view which is part of the album mentioned along with **Plate 3.10**. The steamer Howrah, however, is not mentioned in any of the reports available to me. Was plate 8.14 hence photographed in the aftermath of a later hurricane or was it simply forgotten in the coverage of the Calcutta cyclone of 1864? A strikingly similar paddle steamer of that name, **Plate 3.15**, still existed in Calcutta in 1911 and transported the King-Emperor, George V and the Queen-Empress on their arrival in that city: "Here Their Imperial Majesties embarked on the Port Commission paddle steamer Howrah [...] which was to take them to the other side of the river. This vessel had been completely refitted for the occasion, the deck cabins being removed."<sup>29</sup> It is hoped that future research will add to the clarification of at least some of those points made here.



**Notes and Reference:**

- 1 Lubbock, Basil: *The Blackwall Frigates. With Illustrations and Plans*. Glasgow: James Brown & Son Ltd., 1922, p.138.
- 2 For the most detailed and relevant information about the meteorological data, contemporary reports, the loss of life and property, cf. Gastrell, J[ames] E[ardly] / Blanford, Henry F[rancis]: *Report on the Calcutta Cyclone of the 5<sup>th</sup> October 1864. With Maps and Diagrams illustrating the Origin and Progress of the Storm and the Track of the Storm Wave*. Calcutta: Printed and published for the Government of Bengal, by Order of the Lieutenant-Governor, 1866.
- 3 *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, edited by the Secretaries*. Volume XXIX, Nos. I. to IV. - 1860. Calcutta: Printed by C.B. Lewis, Baptist Mission Press, 1861, p. 66 and p. 67.
- 4 Williams, F. Fisk: *A Guide to the Indian Photographer. With numerous illustrations engraved on wood by the author*. Calcutta: R.C. Lepage & Co., 1860.
- 5 <http://www.historic-shipping.co.uk/calcutta/calcutta.html>, quoted from *The Lyttelton Times*, Volume XXII, No.1322, Christchurch: Thursday, November 24, 1864, page 3, column 4, where the text reads: "Mirzapore, still ashore at Cossipore; jettisoning salt." The *Lyttelton Times* quotes the *Bengal Hurkaru* from the 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October of that year.
- 6 In Falconer, John / Wachlin, Steven / Groeneveld, Anneke: '*Van Bombay tot Shanghai, historische fotografie in zuid- en zuidoost-Azië*' verschijnt ter gelegenheid van de gelijknamige tentoonstelling in het Museum voor Volkenkunde Rotterdam van 22 Oktober 1994 tot 6 februari 1995. '*From Bombay to Shanghai, historical photography in South and Southeast Asia*' has been published to coincide with the exhibition of the same name in the Museum of Ethnology, Rotterdam, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1994 - 6<sup>th</sup> February 1995. Rotterdam: Museum voor Volkenkunde, 1994, p.102 he is styled "Amateur."
- 7 Lubbock, note 1, *supra*, facing page 144, top.
- 8 See note 5, *supra*, page 3, column 4.
- 9 Falconer, John, *et alii*: *A Shifting Focus: Photography in India 1850-1900*. London: The British Library, 1995, p. 66, no.7.5 and p. 83. The online catalogue of the British Library adds: Vessels on shore Seebpore, cf. [http://searcharchives.bl.uk/primo\\_library/libweb/action/search.do?vid=IAMS\\_VU2](http://searcharchives.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do?vid=IAMS_VU2) under: Photo 682 (82).
- 10 Falconer, John: *India: Pioneering Photographers 1850-1900*. London: The British Library and The Howard and Jane Ricketts Collection, 2001, p.139.
- 11 Falconer, note 9 *supra*, p.139.
- 12 Falconer, cf. [http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/photographer/E\\_S\\_\\_Pearson/A/](http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/photographer/E_S__Pearson/A/)
- 13 Falconer / Wachlin / Groeneveld, see note 6 *supra*, p.103.
- 14 See note 5, *supra*, page 3, column 4.
- 15 "View looking along a path, strewn on either side with fallen and denuded trees, with a thatched house in the right background. Photograph uncredited, but tentatively attributed to F. W. Baker, who is known to have taken a series of views of the cyclone."
- 16 *The Illustrated London News*, 19 November 1864, p. 502, 2<sup>nd</sup> column.
- 17 *W. Newman & Co.'s Hand-Book to Calcutta, Historical & Descriptive. With a Plan and Illustrations*. Calcutta: W. Newman & Co., 1875, pp.125-127.

- 18 Either figure 7 or figure 8 might correspond to British Library Photo 682(86): "Ships on shore, Cassipore." It is rather unfortunate that hardly any of these Calcutta cyclone views in the British Library is properly accessible via the internet or elsewhere.
- 19 *W. Newman & Co.*, note 17, *supra*, p. 63 and illustration opposite.
- 20 Bautze, Joachim K[arl]: *Das koloniale Indien. Photographien von 1855 bis 1910*. Köln: Fackelträger Verlag, 2007, p. 38, Abbildung 22.
- 21 <http://www.historic-shipping.co.uk/calcutta/calcutta.html>
- 22 *The Lyttelton Times*, note 5, *supra*, 5<sup>th</sup> column.
- 23 "India Deaths and Burials, 1719-1948," database, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:FG2J-KYC>: 3 December 2014), William George Stretton, 04 Jun 1899; citing ; FHL microfilm 512, 375.
- 24 *The Bengal Directory, 1875, comprising, amongst other Information, Official Directory; Military Directory; Mofussil Directory; Commercial Directory; Trades Directory; Street Directory, Calcutta; Alphabetical List of Residents, &c., &c., &c. Thirteenth Annual Publication*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1875, p. 408 and p. 415 (5, Chowringhee Road).
- 25 Bourne and Shepherd (8, Chowringhee Road), Léon Douffet (5, Old Court House Street), D. Garrick (3, Waterloo Street), Humpidge and Co. (5, Park Street), O. Malitté (10, Chowringhee Road) and Westfield and Co. (10, Government Place), cf. page 415 in *The Bengal Directory*, 1875.
- 26 "India Marriages, 1792-1948 ," database, Family Search (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:FGNT-759>: 30 December 2014), Daniel Hemsworth and Annie Stretton, 20 Jan 1891; citing Bangalore, Madras, India, reference ; FHL microfilm 521,876.
- 27 *Photographic Views in India. By Bourne & Shepherd*, Calcutta and Simla, n.d. [about 1870], p. 30, no.1703. Bautze 2007, note 20, *supra*, p. 41.
- 28 For his report see: Rousselet, Louis: *India and Its Native Princes. Travels in Central India and in the Presidences of Bombay and Bengal. Carefully revised and edited by Lieut.-Col. Buckle*. London: Bickers and Son, 1878, pp. 564-565.
- 29 Gabriel, V. / Luard, C.E. [compilers]: *The Historical Record of the Imperial Visit to India 1911. Compiled from the Official Records under the Orders of the Viceroy and Governor-General of India*. London: Published for the Government of India by John Murray, 1914, p. 245 and photograph, facing p. 246, top.