

## EUROCENTRISM IN THE HUNT FOR THE ASSASSINATION OF J.W.W. BIRCH IN PASIR SALAK, PERAK BY ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS IN 1876: A VISUAL ANALYSIS

Azian Tahir<sup>1\*</sup>, Arba'iyah Mohd Noor<sup>2</sup>, Mohd Firdaus Abdullah<sup>3</sup>, Syed Alwi Syed Abu Bakar<sup>1</sup> and Aznan Omar<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Fine Art Department, Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, Seri Iskandar Campus, 32610 Seri Iskandar, Perak, MALAYSIA

<sup>2</sup>Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

<sup>3</sup>Center for Research in History, Politics and International Affairs, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM, Bangi, Selangor, MALAYSIA

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

*J.W.W Birch,  
Illustrated London News,  
eurocentrism,  
Malaya,  
Perak,  
British*

### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to observe the role of Eurocentrism in the visual reporting of the assassination of JWW Birch, reported by The Illustrated London News in 1876. This study aims to discuss the contents of the visual report in the hunt for JWW Birch's assassination and the Malay resistance against the British colonial powers in Pasir Salak, Perak. The relevant visuals produced and reported by the newspaper served to report to the British public and the British royal family. Previous studies have shown that the focus on Eurocentrism in visual reports produced by Western newspapers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century does not receive enough attention among researchers, even though it can provide new interpretations of the historical events of Malaya through the visuals produced. This study utilises iconography analysis to interpret visual symbolism in the hunt for the assassination of J.W.W. Birch in Pasir Salak, Perak by The Illustrated London News. The essay explores the contextualization, historical significance, and cultural meaning of these visuals, aiming to deepen understanding of using iconography in historical artistic mediums. This study is relevant and possesses its own interest regarding the discussion on Eurocentrism in Malaya. It provides a different approach as the concept of Eurocentrism is discussed via visuals reported by a newspaper controlled by the British compared to other studies that solely focused on Eurocentrism in Malaya via written reports and records. The results found that Eurocentrism in the visual reports produced by the newspaper aims to preserve the British image that was ruined and jeopardised due to Birch's assassination. However, their plan did not go as expected due to the availability of visual reports that displayed the British military attack on Pasir Salak, Perak by other newspapers. This resulted from their own doing, where they did not control their visuals from being produced by other media.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of visual artwork is to leave an impression on the surface of an object. However, the function has developed to more than just decorative purposes. It is also used to convey messages or works for documentation. The earliest form of visual documentation was found in gracing cave walls (Ramli et al., 2020). It has since evolved into a more distribution-friendly form since the utilisation of papyrus into paper. In some disciplines of artwork production, printed art is considered a democratic form (Eisenstein, 2005). It

has also progressed in line with technological advancement that enables the production of printed art in large quantities, which is crucial for the distribution of information. It enables society to access, retrieve, learn, and store information for later use (Pignocchi, 2014). During the 15<sup>th</sup> century, after the arrival of colonial traders and foreign travellers in the Malay Archipelago, the reproduction of information in visual form was still carried out to document events, cultures, and the beauty of nature (Waterson, 2012). This form of

\*Corresponding author: azian572@uitm.edu.my

documentation was considered easy to store, and information could easily be retrieved of through visual prints. Many visuals have been reproduced since and are still being reproduced in various forms, media, and applications, such as etching, lithography, and aquatint (Tahir, 2018).

During the new imperialism period in Malaya in the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century, social interaction between the coloniser and historical events occurred (Gunaish et al., 2022). Before the cameras and even after they were introduced, most historical events in Malaya were recorded visually for the people in England. They were reported through popular visual newspapers like *The Illustrated London News* (ILN). The newspaper reported and produced visuals on various events concerning the role of the British in Malaya, such as the political, economic, and social aspects (Tahir et al. 2015: Sinnema, 1995, 1998) stated that the ILN was a visual newspaper that presented the history of the British nation and focused on the social classifications in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He asserted that the ILN played a role in capturing the historical moments of the British nation through various intriguing visuals. As a result, the visual reports were presented in a Eurocentric or biased view favouring Western over non-Western civilisations.

Eurocentrism is a form of thought that constantly measures and defines non-Western civilisations through historical, cultural, religious, geographic, scientific, and progressive perspectives of Western or European values, considered the highest form (Fanon, 2004). The concept was said to have existed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and some of it was elaborated in writing about local histories through the roles played by the coloniser and colonial administration (Amin & Moore, 1989). The British produced various reports and records about the lands that were colonised. However, they painted an uncivilised picture of the colonised society (Mills, 2003). In that process, they produced a colonial historical record that later became the primary reference for historians to understand and explain local history until now. This situation shows that the record produced by the British is biased and does not portray the actual report on the colonised (Chakrabarty, 2008). The same situation also occurred for the production of visual records and reports on the assassination of James Wheeler Woodford Birch, or JWW Birch, in Pasar Salak, Perak by ILN. Therefore, this study observes the role of Eurocentrism in the visual reports on the assassination of JWW Birch, in Pasar Salak, Perak, reported by ILN in 1876.

This study is interested in discussing Eurocentrism in Malaya. It provides a different approach, discussing Eurocentrism through visuals reported in newspapers controlled by the British, compared to other studies focused solely on Eurocentrism in Malay through written reports and records. The study focuses on newspaper illustrations due to their immediate recognition and practicality for communication. Illustrations complement and support a story, as pictures and illustrations can speak more than words in newspapers and capture readers' attention. Readership of illustrations, visuals, and pictures is higher compared to other elements, as they are

universal, easy to digest, and better able to convey information (Zelizer, 2010). The discussion offers a fresh perspective and new interpretation of JWW Birch's assassination, including visuals that utilize woodblock engraving as a printing technique, which has not been extensively studied by researchers. This study can also enrich Malaysia's historical visual collection, which has not been exposed or displayed to the public. Upholding this contribution would make visuals a choice for depicting crucial events in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Malaya.



**Figure 1:** The front page of *The Illustrated London News* on February 22, 1879, depicted the visual of *The Zulu King* who was involved in the *Zulu War* in South Africa

Source: *The Illustrated London News*, February 22, 1879

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study is a historical study that uses a qualitative approach. Several techniques and processes were performed, such as criticism, analysis, heuristics, and historiography, to ensure the study achieves objectivity (Mohd Noor, 2006). Similar to other historical studies, library research was conducted to collect primary and secondary resources. The researchers have visited various institutions to collect the resources, such as the National Archives of Malaysia, the National Library of Malaysia, libraries in public higher education institutions throughout Malaysia, the National Art Gallery of Malaysia, the Lithograph, Caricature, and Manuscript Gallery at the Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities (FSSK), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), the National Archives of United Kingdom National Art Library, Victoria & Albert Museum London, etc. The study depends on official documents, such as newspapers, British records, journals, books, and others. It began

with the heuristic process, which is the collection of resources, such as visual reports by ILN, newspapers, official documents, and others, that are considered critical information regarding the hunt for the assassination of JWW Birch. The resources were examined as they contain all significant actions, thoughts, and information pertaining to this study. The next process is source criticism, where the resources obtained were compared with other records, such as books, journals, academic papers, etc. This process is essential to determine the truth and validity of the resources obtained, thus eliminating inaccurate information relating to the research topic. Next, the study underwent an analysis process involving a deduction based on primary and secondary resources. The process produced a synthesis of the resources and the research results. The final process involved a historical writing process or historiography. In conclusion, the processes stated are essential in a historical study (Mohd Sharif et al. 2022). This research also focuses on utilizing iconography analysis in studying and interpreting the visual symbolism observed in the hunt for the assassination of J.W.W. Birch in Pasir Salak, Perak in ILN. The essay delves into the contextualization of the images, icons, and symbols used in these media to convey and represent specific concepts and ideas surrounding the events. The essay further explores the historical and cultural significance related to the visual elements present in these media, which contribute to a broader understanding of the study itself (Berg, 2014). Through the rigorous analysis of primary sources and historical scholarship, this essay aims to provide a deeper appreciation and understanding of the utilization of iconography in understanding historical artistic media (Tahir et al. 2023).

In this study, we have incorporated a total of 15 visual as integral components of our research. These illustrations serve as valuable primary sources, shedding light on the Eurocentric perspective surrounding the assassination of J.W.W. Birch in Pasir Salak, Perak, as depicted by ILN, FLIN, The Graphic, Perak and the Malays: “*sārong*” and “*krīs*” by McNair (1878) and Company Drawings in the India Office Library by Archer (1972). These illustrative sources were selected by their historical significance, relevance, and capacity to offer insights into the Eurocentric narratives of the time. We have analyzed a variety of visual materials, carefully considering their merits and historical context. In particular, we examined 7 illustrations from ILN due to the publication’s prominence and influence in disseminating Eurocentric viewpoints during the late 19th century. Additionally, four illustrations from FLIN were included to address Eurocentric bias and provide a nuanced perspective. While they partially respond to the Eurocentric bias found in ILN, these illustrations offer a more balanced and comprehensive view of the events in Pasir Salak and the role of J.W.W. Birch, reflecting an attempt to reconcile multiple viewpoints and offer a broader historical context. Furthermore, the two illustrations from Perak and the Malays: “*sārong*” and “*krīs*” by McNair (1878) were included to directly challenge the Eurocentric bias found in ILN directly, providing indigenous perspectives on the events in Pasir Salak. Lastly, one illustration from Company Drawings in the India Office

Library by Archer (1972) was chosen for its historical significance in documenting British colonial history. By including these illustrative examples and explaining the rationale behind their selection, we aim to provide a thorough visual analysis of Eurocentrism in reporting J.W.W. Birch’s assassination in Pasir Salak, Perak. This approach ensures a multifaceted exploration of Eurocentric perspectives and their impact on historical narratives, with McNair’s illustrations serving as a bridge between Eurocentric and indigenous viewpoints.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on Eurocentrism through Western visual newspapers in Malaya seem to lack popularity among previous researchers. In fact, most previous researchers seem to constantly relate injustices in Western reporting through the theory of orientalism. Said (1979) defined the theory of orientalism as a thought technique based on ontological and epistemological differences made about Eastern societies, which are pioneered by the West. The theory of orientalism provides exposure on the views of Western society, especially authors of Eastern societies, which is clearly different from the norms of Western societies. This includes depictions that paint the East as backwards and uncivilised because of the significant differences in cultural norms compared to Western societies, which are said to be an example of a civilised and advanced society. Yahya (1990) expanded the theory by applying Macherey’s theory, which views the author as a worker who spreads his ideas in writing and does not necessarily have the freedom from making mistakes. The ideology adopted by the author may not be translated completely in his writing. In fact, it could be influenced based on the objectives of the written report, whether it was done for the interest of a particular party or otherwise. This shows how Western and pro-British Malayan newspaper reports were done based on British interest in Malaya. This is in line with the imperialists’ ideology that portrays the superiority of the “White Man”, which was depicted as accurately as possible through the newspaper reports. Therefore, it is necessary to study and critique the inaccurate depiction of the local society to ensure the depiction does not become the benchmark in evaluating the condition of the local society during the colonial era. Tahir et al (2021) stated that the visual reports by ILN and The Graphic in the 19th century represented their interest in Malaya and also consolidated the imperial image of its colonies. Only visuals that represented British interest were displayed. This is to show the strength of their empire to the whole world. Thus, visuals on social activities in Malaya can be criticised as they do not portray the actual situation of the events that occurred. On the contrary, the social activities were depicted specifically to portray the role of the British in Malaya.

While iconographic methods hold substantial promise for researchers delving into the symbols present in British-controlled publications. Analyzing symbols within these visuals offers a window into the historical and sociopolitical context, illuminating the intricate dynamics of British colonialism. This approach provides several key advantages. Firstly, it allows for exploring the rich historical backdrop against which these symbols are embedded, shedding light

on the broader context of British control. As Said (1979) has shown, symbols and iconography played a pivotal role in shaping Western perceptions of the East, highlighting the potency of symbols in colonial discourse. Additionally, the works of Hall (1997) provide insights into how symbols are used to construct and convey meaning within a colonial context. Moreover, it facilitates the identification of ideological and propagandistic elements conveyed through symbols, providing a deeper understanding of the motivations and messages behind the visuals. The comparative dimension of iconographic analysis permits researchers to trace the evolution of symbols and their shifting meanings over time, offering a dynamic view of colonial representations. This interdisciplinary approach, drawing from the likes of Mitchell (2013), blends elements of art history, semiotics, cultural studies, and history, promoting a comprehensive understanding of the visuals. Additionally, iconographic methods complement textual analysis by unveiling symbols that might remain unaddressed in accompanying texts. However, this approach is not without its challenges. One of the primary drawbacks lies in the subjectivity inherent in interpreting symbols, as individual researchers may bring their unique perspectives and biases to the analysis. The complex nature of symbols, as discussed by scholars like Barthes (2015), adds to the difficulty of unraveling their full significance without oversimplification. Access to historical British-controlled publications and their visual content can be limited and may vary in condition, potentially hindering a thorough analysis of symbols, a challenge also noted by Alpers (1983). Misinterpretation is a concern, as it can lead to erroneous conclusions, necessitating careful research and contextual background. Scholars like Mitchell (2013) emphasise the multifaceted nature of symbols and the inherent subjectivity in interpretation. Furthermore, some visual materials may lack attribution, making it challenging to determine the creators' intentions and the contexts in which symbols were employed. Ethical considerations, as discussed by Smith (2021), come into play when using these materials, particularly when they contain representations that are offensive or uphold colonial stereotypes, requiring researchers to address these sensitivities. In sum, iconographic methods provide a promising avenue for investigating symbols in British-controlled publications, potentially offering profound insights into the colonial past. Nevertheless, researchers must navigate the subjectivity and complexity of symbol interpretation, address access limitations, and exercise caution to avoid misinterpretation while being mindful of ethical concerns in their quest to unlock the meanings behind these symbols.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 The Assassination of JWW Birch in Perak

This event cost the British Government £12,000,16.6 in operational costs to hunt the person who claimed responsibility for the assassination of the first British Resident to Malaya (C.O. 273/89: Birch, 1976). This was a big and important event in Malaya. The resistance against the British initiated by Maharaja Lela and his followers was deemed critical and had to be inserted in history as

one of the most significant events in Malaya. This event sparked the first few initiatives of Malay resistance against the British in Malaya (McNair, 1878).

Birch was assassinated on November 2, 1875, due to Sultan Abdullah's dissatisfaction with enforcing the Residency system, which granted authority only to the Sultan and his delegates on matters of religion and customs (Bostick, 2009). However, Cheah Boon Kheng (1998) argues that while contemporary Malaysian school history textbooks present Birch's assassination as an anti-colonial rebellion participated in by nearly all Malay Malays, the political situation in Perak was much more complex, with deep divisions between supporters of the rival claimants to the throne, Sultan Abdullah and Sultan Ismail. Cheah argues that Maharaja Lela's action, which contributed to Birch's assassination, should be understood within the context of Malay feudal rivalry rather than as an early example of resistance to imperialism. Birch's replacement, Sir Hugh Low, Perak's fourth Resident (1877-1889), even described Birch as somewhat fierce and savage. The same was stated by Fawzi Basri (1986). According to Low, Birch was also a drunk with no sense of pity toward others. These qualities eventually led to his assassination (Parmer, 1987). News of his assassination reached Penang on November 3, 1957, the day after. Upon receiving the news, Lieutenant Colonel A. E. H. Anson, who was appointed Lieutenant General of Penang (1867-1882), deployed a group of soldiers to settle the conflict. A team of 90 soldiers, led by Captain Innes R. E. (C.O. 273/87), was tasked with investigating the matter and ensuring the safety of British officials in Perak. However, the plot was foiled by the Malays, and Captain Innes, along with three other team members, was killed (Raugh, 2004).



**Figure 2:** James Wheeler Woodford Birch, or JWW Birch, the first British Resident to Malaya  
Source: *The Graphic*, November 20, 1875



**Figure 3:** *Sultan Abdullah and the Chiefs of Perak*  
 Source: McNair, J. F. A. (1878). *Perak and the Malays: "sārong" and "kris"*. Tinsley brothers.

As a response to the tragedy, the British deployed their defence team from India and Hong Kong to Penang. The counter-attack team to Perak consisted of 1,200 men and five battleships (Parmer, 1897). Reports stated that the support team reached Perak only after the resistance ended because of the actions of Major Dunlop, the Queen's Commissioner (Grant, 1876). According to reports, Malay strongholds and safe settlements along the foothills were raided by Captain Chennar and several Gurkha soldiers on December 22, 1876. In a report by Colonel Anson, Captain Chennar, the Bengal Staff Corps of the Indian Army and 1<sup>st</sup> Gorkha Rifles (The London Gazette, April 14, 1876), crawled through the jungle until he reached behind a Malay soldier guarding his post and shot him. Commander Stirling, the captain of the Thistle battleship (Grant, 1876), and Colonel Hill had headed toward the fort and Malay stronghold. However, they followed a detour. The party had gone through the backdoor of the fort's stronghold and seized it. After the British had confirmed no more resistance against the Governor to Perak, they continued to Malacca (Cheah, 1998).

#### 4.2 Visual Report Analysis of the Assassination of JWW Birch in Pasir Salak, Perak by ILN

Visual arts should not be separated from facts when documenting history. D'Alleva (2009) wrote that "Art history granted us with unique access of the past because history cannot be told through documents, texts, and words alone." Furthermore, historians have only slowly learnt from art history the concepts and terminologies that allow them to acknowledge the complex, formal, and iconographical mediations through which prints represent historical events (Maidment, 2001). The overall visual report by ILN on the assassination of JWW Birch focused on the British's military expedition in hunting the assassins involved. The reports and visuals were all courtesy of Major O.H. Nicollas and Sub-lieutenant Holme, who happened to be at the scene of the crime. The visuals were recorded with the information obtained from the police and reports by the press office. They were then detailed and executed through the wood engraving technique (ILN, April 8, 1876). The visuals produced by ILN seem to serve the interest of the British

in the way the Malays and their weapons were represented in the assassination. At the same time, ILN also did not portray visuals showing the British attack in Perak. There were, in fact, photographs of Birch, Sultan Abdullah, and others at that time, which can be used as a comparison, but ILN did not publish them. This indicates that the visuals are Eurocentric, as ILN only published them to serve the interest of the British. The proper selection of visuals is essential to influence the British public and the British royal family. It was found that only six visuals were published, although there were still others not reported in the newspaper. However, another newspaper from the USA did publish the visuals, which was Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper (FLIN).

The first analysis involved a scenery visual report. The visual depicts the scene of the hills overlooking the harbour and George Town, Penang, with Province Wellesley in the background (Figure 4). The scene depicted in the visual was not where the assassination took place. The visual came from Malaya. The artist, who was a soldier, became a representative of the newspaper agency and required more time to record the event and relayed it back to agency's headquarters in London (Barringer, 2005). Thus, in this news report, the editor decided to promote Penang as a surveillance centre and British military rescue headquarters in light of Birch's assassination. This was considered apt because Birch's assassination was reported to Lieutenant Anson in Penang (ILN, January 1, 1876).



**Figure 4:** *Georgetown, Penang, near Perak, in the Malay Peninsular* by *The Illustrated London*  
 Source: *The Illustrated London News*, January 1, 1876

The report was about the location of George Town, situated in the northwest of the Straits of Malacca. The route to this island takes approximately 5 hours by sea from Galle, Sri Lanka. Additionally, there is information regarding Province Wellesley, which is located 44 miles to the north of Malacca. Malacca, Penang, and Singapore were part of the same group known as the Straits Settlements, all under the supervision of the Lieutenant-Governor (Mohamed et al., 2002; Turnbull, 2009). They are crucial for their sovereignty in commercial transactions and natural resources. Warren Hastings, the first Governor General of Bengal, was honoured by the newspaper editor as the person who gave the orders to take over Penang from the Government of Kedah (Gleig, 1841; Merican, 2023). Francis

Light had already taken over Penang in 1786 (Bonney, 1965). Geographically, Penang was known as a commercial hub and an emporium of successful trades (Wan Ibrahim, 2022; Rohazid & Abdullah, 2022). However, the soil was not as fertile as expected. This was because the pepper growing industry, which was once a prosperous industry, was replaced by nutmeg and other fruits that could adapt to the climate and soil condition of the land (Tan & Jusoh, 2021).

The previously mentioned print of the harbour overlooking George Town reflects a massive and progressive town. The detailed attention given by the artist in producing the visual could be seen clearly through the composition of large and fibrous trees on the right side of the image, while small trees populate the left side. In the middle is the famous areca tree, made famous due to the origin of the name Penang. The print work gave the impression of how large Penang was at that time after the British occupied it. It was accentuated with small houses, buildings in the background, and boats and ships in the middle-ground, as if to say that the place is thriving (ILN, January 1, 1876). The visual, which portrayed Penang's reputation, was used to convey information to the British public and the British royal family regarding the latest development and expansion of the British Empire in the colonies (Reed, 2003). Visuals of prosperity were used to impress the Queen on the Empire's achievement in occupying Penang, which is situated in the Straits of Malacca, one of the most significant trade routes in the world (Nordin, 2013; Hultsch, 2017). However, the occupation of Penang, if analysed today, revealed that Penang was never leased, given, nor handed over to the British through any agreement (Merican & Mohamed Amin, 2021; Merican, 2023). This situation was acknowledged by Booney (1974), who stated that the leasing of Penang is considered one of Francis Light's greatest illusions.

The the British East India Company (EIC) settlement in Penang in 1786 was also visualised and was among the early visuals made of the British settlement in Penang. This print comes from the collections of The Indian Office Library at the British Library, London. Imprinted together were statements of View of the North Point of the Prince of Wales Island and the ceremony of christening it by E. Trapaud Delt, T. Medland sculpt., published as the Act directs on March 26, 1788, by J. Stockdale, Piccadilly (Bastin & Rohatgi 1979). The artwork was created to relay information regarding the occupation of Penang as part of British-owned regions. Print arts evolved from recordings of events to documents created for safekeeping and reference by travellers and writers who had set foot in Malaya.



**Figure 5:** *Prince of Wales Island (Penang): Tanjung Penaga, March 26, 1788, sketched by E. Trapoud, engraved by T. Medland*  
Source: Archer, M. (1972). *Company Drawings in the India Office Library*. London: H.M. Stationery Office.

Going back to the visual production by ILN on the hunt for the assassination of JWW Birch, sometime around this period, it was a norm for soldiers to be equipped with drawing skills. This is because it was considered an important skill at that time. Many officers were sent to India to learn and sharpen their skills in drawing. The British sent their officers to learn military drawing and architecture at The Royal Military Academy, established in 1741, to equip them with good drawing skills (Archer, 1969). The work below was produced at a campsite at Bandar Baharu in Pasir Salak (ILN, February 26, 1876), where Birch was assassinated (Figure 6). Bandar Baharu was a British-owned area situated along the Perak River. Birch gave the place a sanctuary status for runaway indebted slaves (Parmer, 1987). The print visualises a flagpole to mark where Birch was assassinated (ILN, February 26, 1876). The assassination was done in a boathouse that was tied to the river bank (Abd Jalal, 2019). The boathouse was owned by a goldsmith, who went by the name of Koh An Yong (Ghazali, 1997). Birch was assassinated while bathing in the boathouse (The Straits Times, November 13, 1875).



**Figure 6:** *Camp at Pasir Salak, Perak River drawn by Major O.H. Nicollas, The Illustrated London News*  
Source: *The Illustrated London News*, February 26, 1876

During the sentencing, an amok took place before the assassination. McNair (1878) described the situation as follows: “Amok, amok! was raised and a savage rush was made by all present, who seemed to be animated with but one desire-to kill” (Williamson, 2007). The description described the scene when the amok took place, with everyone going insane, trying to kill the person who started shouting amok (Ghazali, 1997). The artwork above illustrates how the army camped around the crime scene. Even though only a few tents were depicted, it was enough to show that the campsite consisted of many soldiers sent to patrol the area. Apart from the flag, a cannon was also drawn near the river as a reminder of the tragedy. A few guards were there on standby just in case. The visual shows the soldiers on patrol and its surrounding explains its purpose. Indirectly, the visual succeeded in portraying the situation of the British settlement and its soldiers at the time. The visual in print below depicts the location of the army campsite. It was facing the residence of the Resident of Perak, a traditional Malay house. The house was built based on a plan drawn by artist Ling Pah Soon that was to be the residence of the first British Resident (C.O. 273/87). It was guarded by armed British soldiers, with many tents set up along the river.

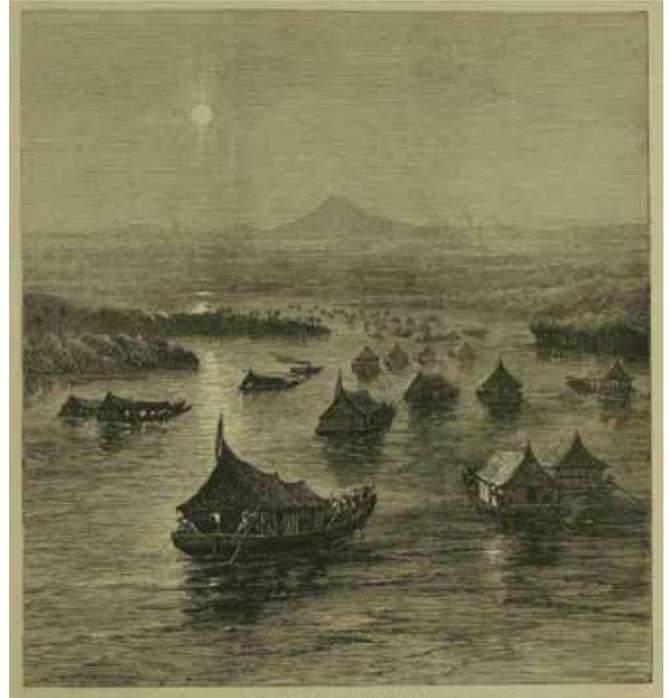


**Figure 7:** View of the Encampment, Bandar Baharu, from the Back of the Residency, drawn by Major O.H. Nicollas, *The Illustrated London News*  
Source: *The Illustrated London News*, February 26, 1876

The next print was produced to provide a visual description of the boat that was boarded by security forces and a Malay escort (ILN, February 26, 1876). The boat was traversing the river in search of Dato' Maharajalela and his followers (Figure 7). It was stated that during the hunt for Dato' Maharajalela, 80 boats were heading north (Ghazali, 1997), but in this depiction, only 40 boats were recorded in *The London Illustrated News*. Among the 40 boats, there was a steam-engine boat. Two boats with heavy artillery, the *Thistle* and the *Fly*, docked a few miles from the river as a precaution (Rockhampton Bulletin, December 4, 1875). The hunting expedition was conducted in December 1875, with many soldiers consisting of 200 infantrymen from the 10th and 80th Regiments, 40 canon teams, metal artillerymen and rocket tubes, and central troops consisting of 70 high officers and more from the *Medeste* and *Ringdove* ships, armed with two metal cannons on the sides and three tube rockets (Abu Bakar, 2015).

Captain Alex Buller, an officer of the Straits, also reported the event in his letter dated December 29, 1875, from Kinta HQ as follows:

“...Major Dunlop proceeded in the most energetic manner and with great difficulty succeeded in obtaining a sufficient number of native boats from friendly Chiefs, with Chinese polers, to convey 200 troops and 70 seamen, with two rockets and two guns, up the river” (*The London Gazette*, April 14, 1876).



**Figure 8:** The British Forces Ascending the Perak River, drawn by Major O.H. Nicollas, *The Illustrated London News*  
Source: *The Illustrated London News*, February 26, 1876

With the help of dignitaries and Chinese merchants, the British took possession of a few ships and boats that assisted them in hunting down the rebels (*The London Gazette*, April 14, 1876). Commander Francis Stirling, Commodore of the H.M.S *Thistle*, stated:

“...numerous boats laden with guns, ammunition, and stores for many consecutive days against a strong current (4 knots) and in carrying guns, rockets, and ammunition, in addition to their own accoutrements through the jungle over roads so nearly impassable, that only 7 miles could be gained each day” (*The London Gazette*, April 14, 1876).

The print above was created to depict the environment in Pasir Telor, located around the vicinity of the Perak River (Mohammad Azmi, 2019; Mamat et al., 2022). The largest square boat was fully equipped with artillery, machines, and coal to fire up a steam-powered rocket launcher (ILN, February 26, 1876) (Figure 8). A newspaper reported that the drawing was sketched near the left side of the Perak River, which is a place known as *Blanja*, a village under the command of Sultan Ismail (ILN, February 26, 1876). Figures 6, 7 and 8 were sketched to display the strength and reliability of the British security forces. The visuals were an attempt by ILN to cover their previous

flaws during their first expedition, when Lieutenant Colonel A. E. H. Anson, the Lieutenant General of Penang (1867-1882), deployed a group of his army to settle the conflict. A team of 90 soldiers, led by Captain Innes R.E (C.O. 273/87), were defeated when their plot was foiled by the Malays. Captain Innes, who led the first team to Penang, was also killed along with three other soldiers (Raugh, 2004). The visuals indicate that ILN was trying to convince the British public of their own military strength through grand representations. However, the information contradicted other records, such as the number of boats, as stated previously.

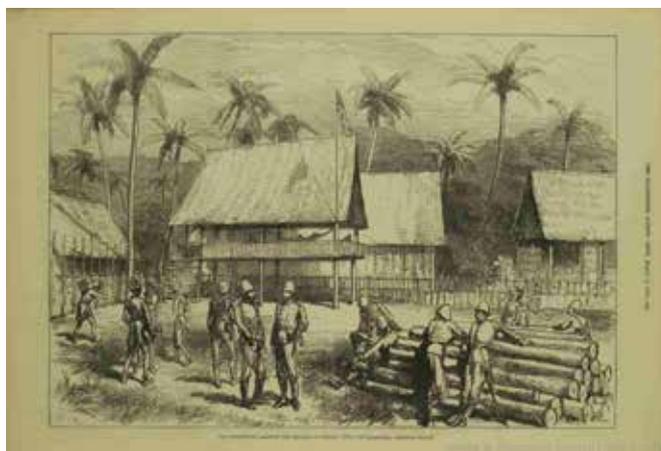
According to another in-depth analysis, the visuals by ILN were an attempt to portray the British as a superpower as they have control over the seas. It is acknowledged that the British Empire, centred on the British islands, depended on the seas to transport soldiers and supplies to and from France and Ireland (Ferguson, 2012). The wider, overseas empire that expanded during the 'age of reconnaissance', first in the Americas and then in Asia, relied on mastery of the seas and protection of trade routes. Naval power was essential, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to resist and thwart other competing imperial maritime powers, notably the Spanish, Dutch, and French. Having this advantage, they also took control of overseas territories in Asia, including Malaya (Ali & Tarsat, 2008; Killingray, et al. (Eds.), 2004). The arrival of the British in the colonies, including Malaya, made it crucial for them to control water resources and the regional water system (Abdullah et al., 2023). The people of Malaya relied on water supply from the rivers, which was the source of the local economy's strength. This was based on the theory that control over water resources expanded the economic system (Abdullah et al., 2022). The visuals depict settlements along Sungai Perak, indicating that the British understood the function of Sungai Perak as the regional water system and their strategy toward imperialism to gain control over it. Abdullah (2021) stated, "If you can control the water system, you can control everything," indicating how the British attempted to control the water system in Malaya and eventually amass their wealth through limitless control of economic outputs in the region.



**Figure 9:** Weapons used by the Malays of Perak drawn by Major O.H. Nicollas, *The Illustrated London News*  
Source: *The Illustrated London News*, February 26, 1876

A list of weapons used was also drawn to justify the need to strengthen the British army. Swettenham (1895) also noted the types of weapons, as listed above, stating that in this report, the artist only sketched several traditional weapons, such as spears and *kris*es, even though there was evidence indicating the presence of firearms (ILN, February 26, 1876). The British could not identify the actual weapons used in the assassination. However, according to a report by Inspector Sagis, a policeman in Bandar Baharu, stab wounds were present on Birch's body. This indicates that Birch was killed by sharp objects. Among the main weapons listed were lances and *parang* or machetes (C.O. 273/90). Hence, the description of traditional weapons was appropriate in this report as these illustrate the possible weapons used in the assassination.

The visual depicted by ILN aims to portray violent images through the weapons used by Malay Dignitaries and Sultans to assassinate Birch. Whereas from the perspective of the Malays, they were everyday weapons used to cut and stab/impale (not necessarily for killing) and considered a basic necessity by the locals (Mohamad et al., 2013). The visual by ILN can be interpreted as though Birch was assassinated brutally by Malay Dignitaries and Sultans through lethal weapons. From another perspective, the weapons used, which were mostly traditional weapons, can be seen as though the Malay society in Perak was still underdeveloped and backwards as they lacked the usage of advanced weapons, such as pistols and rifles. The Malays, through their weapons, were represented as outdated and not as advanced as the British. From that representation, it can be said that ILN made an unequal comparison toward the Malays.



**Figure 10:** Officers' Quarters, Campong Boyah, drawn by Sub-Lieutenant Holme, *The Illustrated London News*  
Source: *The Illustrated London News*, March 11, 1876

The final report shows a visual report in the March 11, 1876 edition (ILN, March 11, 1876). Figure 10 shows the camp quarters of British officers in Campong Boyah, with images of wooden huts on stilts with no walls. These camps were places where officers came for a quick rest or naps and were erected in light of the assassination of many British Residents in Malaya. The print was drawn by Sub-Lieutenant Holme. It was the last piece of the visual report published on Birch's assassination in Perak. The soldiers under the

command of Major General Colborne, C. B., and Navy Seals under Captain Alexander Buller, R.N. were posted there (ILN, February 26, 1876). The visual shows the environment and condition of the camp, depicting the resting areas for officers prepared by the British government. The print shows how relaxed the officials were while talking to each other, having a breather, with the surrounding areas unrelated to the assassination. It seems that ILN did not portray visuals showing the British attack. This indicates that ILN was attempting to cover the oppressive actions of the British. The British Empire represents a symbol of pride and a force of progress, decency, and the rule of law around the world. If ILN portrays visuals showing the British attack, it can be seen as degrading to the symbol they represent. Thus, the visuals by ILN were illusions and showed how they were systematically created as self-serving hagiographies. However, ILNm's efforts to hide the actual situation that happened during the British occupation seemed unsuccessful. Several visuals of the British attack were released and displayed by a visual newspaper from America, which is FLIN.



**Figure 11:** The front page of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper on June 13, 1885, depicted the visual of The Statue of Liberty under construction in Paris.

Source: Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, June 13, 1885

FLIN is a visual newspaper by an illustrated American literary and news magazine, founded in 1855 and published until 1922 by publisher and illustrator Frank Leslie. Like ILN, FLIN published illustrations and reports representing America's interests in the world and consolidated with the American image of its colonies. FLIN also displayed visual news reports on the outside world, including interesting events involving the British Empire (Kuhn, 2006). The events of the Perak War was included in their report through three visuals published in The Pictorial Spirit section of the Illustrated Press on April 8, April 22, and August 19, 1876.



**Figure 12:** British Expedition against the Malays in Perak by Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

Source: Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, April 8, 1876

The first visual, which was published on April 8, 1876, seems similar to the visual published by ILN on March 11, 1876 (Figure 12) (FLIN, April 8, 1876). This shows that the visual obtained by FLIN and ILN came from the same source. The visual was brought from Malaya by an artist, a soldier, who became a representative of the newspaper agency. At the same time, this shows the possibility of visuals by ILN being sold to other visual newspapers, such as FLIN. The process of producing a visual began with a basic sketch, which was obtained from correspondence, such as artists, engineers, British army officers, scientists, and individuals. Once the sketch reached the press office, it would be reproduced to ensure that each visual was prepared meticulously with detail (Archer, 1972; Douglas, 2009; Hill & Rehwartz, 2015; Chapman & Nuttall, 2011). This makes it hard for correspondence from other visual newspapers, such as FLIN, to be involved in the process stated due to different roots, methods and purposes of production. In fact, they also seem to have correspondence from other empires. It is believed that ILN did not only sold the visuals they produced but also news reports that upheld their image to other visual newspapers, such as FLIN, to strengthen the British's position as the world's greatest empire. This seems to be a desperate attempt, but it is a medium for the British, through ILN, to interact and showcase their achievements to the world.

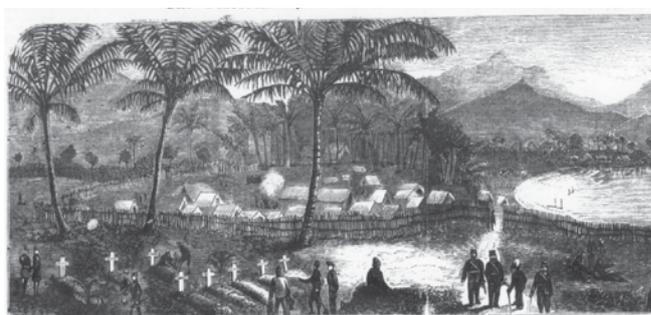


**Figure 13:** *The British Military Attack on the Village of Kota Lama, Perak River* by Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

Source: Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, April 22, 1876

The second visual by FLIN, which was published on April 22, 1876, shows the British military attack on January 4, on the village of Kota Lama, near the Perak River. The village was situated about one and a half miles from the British camp at Qualla Kangsa (Kuala Kangsar). It was attacked by a portion of the British forces under the command of Brigadier-General Ross, C.B. The initial purpose of the attack was to destroy the houses of some notorious outlaws. However, due to the determined resistance shown by the villagers, the whole village was burnt down. The Malays received heavy blows, which was believed to have materially moderate their expression of hostility toward the British. According to FLIN, the image shows one of the chief's houses, where the Malays made a steady charge after firing a volley at the troops to cover the advance of their spearmen. Their fire did no harm, thanks to the thickness of the jungle (FLIN, April 22, 1876).

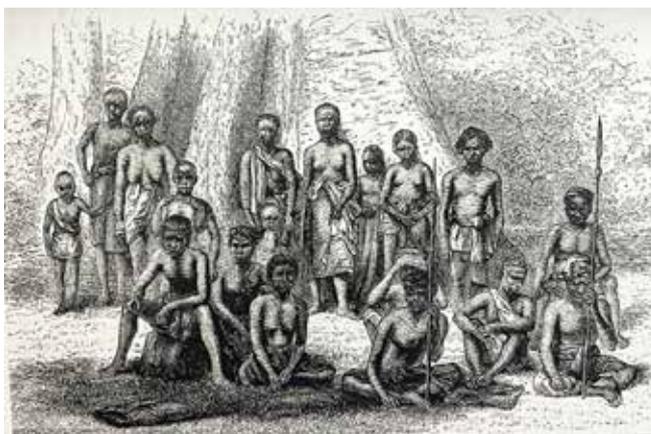
However, FLIN seemed to have made a factual error in the visual and description. The description of the image by FLIN stated that the Malays were making a steady charge after firing a volley at the troops to cover the advance of their spearmen. A more in-depth analysis indicates that it was not the Malays portrayed in the image, as the Malays did not wear the type of outfits depicted and generally had a tanned skin tone. In contrast, the above visual is of the wild tribe of Perak or Sakai (McNair, 1878). The analysis was justified through the discovery of weapons, such as spears, portrayed in the visual by ILN on February 26, 1876. In addition, McNair (1878) noted that there was information and illustration engraved by R. Knight regarding the Sakai and their weapons, such as *sumpitan* and spears. The factual error portrayed an image as though the Malays are weak, uncivilised, jungle people. However, the error seemed to have exposed their incompetence, as they could not even differentiate or identify actual Malay people. At the same time, ILN also made an error like FLIN by describing the weapons as Weapons used by the Malays of Perak (Figure 9), whereas the Perak War did not only involve the Malays (Hashim, 1993; Hussiin, 2023).



**Figure 14:** *Wild Tribe of Perak or Sakai*

Source: McNair, J. F. A. (1878). *Perak and the Malays: "sārong" and "krīs."* Tinsley brothers.

From another aspect, although the visual sources between ILN and FLIN were believed to be the same, ILN decided not to publish the image as in Figure 13. This contrasted with FLIN, where they decided to display the visual report that shows the British military attack in Pasir Salak, Perak. The reason may be due to the visuals not being regulated or controlled from being used by other media. FLIN had portrayed a violent side of the British military that was being covered by ILN publishing. The attack was considered shameful and disgraceful, and ILN would have restricted the image if they had known early on that other media was going to use it. The British Empire was claimed to be benign, progressive, and reformist in their intentions, although they were "brutal nonetheless" (Abdul Rahim et al., 2017; Abdullah et al., 2021). In reality, violence was prevalent in the structures and systems of British rule. It was not "occasional" but was "a means and an end for as long as the British Empire remained alive" (Elkins, C. 2022). This can be seen based on how visuals regarding the British were seen as decent and having class, although FLIN had published a problematic image of the British through a violent depiction.



**Figure 15:** *The Location of the Graves of Birch, Captain Innes, and others in Pasir Salak* by Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

Source: Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, August 19, 1876

Figure 15 is the last visual published by FLIN, which is a picture of the location of the graves of Birch, Captain Innes, and others in Pasir Salak, Perak (FLIN, August 19, 1876). ILN did not publish the visual as it would ruin their image through the event of Birch's assassination. The event was a big humiliation for them and served as a lesson to not look down on the capabilities of the Malays to formulate a strategy to assassinate Birch, although they were viewed as "jungle people" by most Western newspapers, including ILN (Abdullah et al., 2021). The British's disappointment can also be seen in Figure 7, which shows how they arrive in Perak with 40 boats, all for the purpose of hunting Dato' Maharajalela and the others involved in Birch's assassination. The visual indicates that the British were determined to capture the assassins to restore their image that has fallen like petals on the graves of Birch, Captain Innes and others in Pasir Salak (FLIN, August 19, 1876). FLIN seems to be honest in portraying the visual of the location of the graves of Birch and others. However, it shows that the British Empire can still be challenged, and they possess weaknesses and flaws that can be exploited by the rebels in the colonies.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the visual reports by ILN on the hunt for the assassination of Birch represented a Eurocentric view of the British. The British, through ILN, produced visuals based on their worldview to establish trust among readers consisting of the British public and the British royal family. ILN seems to be very selective in the publication of visuals pertaining to this event. This is so that their image as the world's greatest empire at the time would not be undermined and tainted by Birch's assassination conducted by the alliance of the Sultan of Perak and the Malays. However, their attempt to cover the tragic event seems to be futile as there are other visual reports that portray the opposite of what they portray. This opens an opportunity for criticism, which shows that the British Empire still have flaws and weaknesses, even though they tried to hide them through a Eurocentric approach in the publication of visual reports by ILN.

At the same time, it is clear that ILN is responsible for preserving the image of the British as the world's greatest empire. The newspaper was more interested in highlighting the British's achievements in dealing with Birch's assassination. In fact, the newspaper provided various interesting and sensational visuals on the hunt for the assassination of Birch. The published visual reports by Western newspapers can be used as part of Malaya's historical documentation relating to the discussion on Eurocentrism. This is due to the lack of discussion on Eurocentrism, which serves a critical role in the production of the visual reports stated. Currently, the discussion on Eurocentrism in Malaysia is still bound by traditional analysis of British records, books, articles, and others. However, there has been an urge to reject the resources stated as they are dominated by Eurocentrism. In addition, historical discussions in Malaysia are encouraged to look through a Malay-centric view, such as this study, to balance the Eurocentric discourse. The study has provided a

fresh perspective on the field of history in Malaysia. The analysis has exposed how the newspapers were not being objective, as they played a critical role in colonial news reporting. The Eurocentric view of the newspapers analysed in the study influenced how news reports were constructed, which has developed its own reporting style. Thus, it is not a surprise that the views of the Western media, such as ILN, towards the colonies, including Malaya, were biased and extreme due to their purpose to stay relevant and maintain their position as the greatest empire in the world. The event of Birch's assassination has led to a serious intervention by the British in Malaya, which became a reason for them to speed the process of exploiting Malaya's rich natural resources. The situation can be seen through their action in sealing the Pangkor Treaty in 1874, which allowed them to gain more power in Malaya.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, Seri Iskandar Campus, especially the Fine Art Department, Faculty of Art and Design on the support of research grant (Geran Khas Insentif Penyelidikan Perak (GKIPP) Fasa 1/2020 UiTM Cawangan Perak, 900-KPK/PJI/GKIPP/01 (0020/2020)). We also want to thank the members of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, Seri Iskandar Campus and Universiti Malaya for their support and encouragement while writing this paper.

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