

Iconographic Reading of Visual Propaganda: The Murder of J.W.W. Birch on the Perak River (Perak Water), Malaya (1876) in the Illustrated London News

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the visual reports published by The Illustrated London News (ILN) between January and April 1876 in the aftermath of the assassination of J.W.W. Birch, the first British Resident in Malaya, as a form of imperial visual propaganda designed to reinforce the British Empire's narrative of dominance and control. Drawing upon a qualitative historical methodology that integrates iconographic analysis and visual discourse analysis, the research systematically examines selected ILN wood-engraved illustrations to uncover the symbolic structures, compositional strategies, and narrative framings embedded within these images. Through a close reading of these visual sources, the study demonstrates how ILN selectively represented events in order to shape the perceptions of the British public and the Royal family, presenting the colonial presence in Malaya as disciplined, resilient, and morally justified. British authority is consistently foregrounded, while colonial violence and local resistance are visually minimised or displaced. At the same time, subtle inconsistencies within ILN's visual sequencing reveal fractures in the imperial narrative, exposing anxieties surrounding British vulnerability in the colonial periphery. Beyond its case-specific findings, this study proposes a structured framework for analysing historical visual propaganda within colonial contexts, combining iconographic interpretation with critical attention to absence, visual hierarchy, and editorial selection. By emphasising the importance of incorporating local perspectives into the historiography of colonial visual media,

the research contributes to broader debates on imperial representation, visual power, and the politics of perception in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Iconographic, Illustrated London News, J.W.W Birch, Malaya, Perak, Visual Print

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INTRODUCTION

Visual media in the nineteenth century functioned not merely as illustrative supplements to text but as powerful instruments of ideological mediation. Within imperial contexts, illustrated newspapers translated distant colonial conflicts into intelligible and morally ordered narratives for metropolitan audiences. Rather than treating visuals as decorative additions to textual reporting, this study approaches them as structured sites of meaning production embedded within imperial political culture (Schwartz & Przybylski, 2004). Visuals do not function only as the factor that add spice to a narration: they have a much wider role than expected. For instance, in Europe, since the 16th century, visuals acted as the tools for propaganda to the parties involved in influencing the community to continue its support of the principles, policies and actions taken (Roper & Spinks, 2017). If it is understood well, Gunaish, Abdullah and Wan Teh (2022) explained that propaganda is controlled news in a country to gain support from the public. Propaganda is able to filter the media so that its publication and dissemination to the masses do not highlight the flaw and weakness of a certain government. Hence, propaganda becomes a crucial instrument to the government since it can be used to ensure that the public supports the government's policies (Osman, 2023). Such situation is in line with Merrill and Lowenstein's (1971) research which stated that propaganda is often linked to any premeditated dissemination of message. It is a tool which is able to convey information and 'premeditated' refers to any radical and sinister efforts even though not all of them are like that. In short, propaganda is an activity which is related to an individual or organization's attempt to manipulate another party. Images in visual propaganda are part of an important art in conveying information which is supported by the presence of words. In fact, through visuals alone, a lot of implicit and explicit messages could be delivered as propaganda to influence others (Basilio, 2014).

Creatively, it is clear that visual propaganda acts as the means to convey information from one party to another. During the new imperialism era in 19 and 20th century Malaya, there were social interactions between the colonials and interesting events which occurred in the country (Abdullah et al., 2024; Abdullah et al., 2025; Tahir et al., 2021). Prior to the existence of camera and in the early years after camera was introduced, each interesting event in Malaya was recorded visually for the people in England and it was also published in well-known visual newspapers such as The Illustrated London News (ILN) (Osman, 2017). Visual newspapers emerged in the United Kingdom in the 19th century and quickly gained popularity as a means of disseminating information to the public. These newspapers relied heavily on images, illustrations, and photographs in conjunction with text to convey news to readers. During this time, propaganda was a

common and effective way of shaping public opinion and reinforcing national values. Such situation was in line with the argument by Sinnema (1995, 1998) who concludes that the ILN was a visual newspaper that presented the history of the British nation and focused on the social classifications found in Britain in the 19th century. In fact, he asserted that the ILN plays a role in capturing the historic moments of the British nation through a variety of interesting visuals.

Nevertheless, during the British occupation in the colonies, they were met with nationalistic fighters among the locals: it was reflective of the colonials who introduced policies in governance that went against the local custom and tradition as well as Islamic teachings (Soenarno, 1960). This predicament occurred when the British was in Perak which led to the assassination of James Wheeler Woodford Birch or JWW Birch in Pasar Salak, Perak. His murder in 1875 was shocking to the extent that the British was pressured in trying to solve the unexpected issue (Kheng, 1998). It was a situation which struck the Colonial to the core and tarnished their image. The British Royal family under the reign of Queen Victoria and the general public in Britain also put pressure on the government to rectify the issue and restore the British's image which was marred due to the incident. In fact, the British was concerned with the danger of the perception that the Empire was weak when they faced other opponents such as France, Portugal, Russia and the others in their expedition to colonize other parts of the world (Tahir et al., 2023).

In order to restore their image, ILN had produced visual propaganda which was based on the hunt for the Death of JWW Birch in Pasar Salak in 1876. In this paper, the focus will be on the role played by the British propaganda in the visual newspaper during this period (Tahir et al., 2023). Using reliable sources, this research will highlight how the propaganda was used in the visual newspapers with particular emphasis on the ways in which language, symbolism, and imagery were utilized. It is a study which has its own significance particularly for a discussion pertaining to propaganda in Malaya. Comparatively, a different approach is given to this study as propaganda is discussed through visuals published in visual newspaper reports that were controlled by the British. It is believed that this study covers the earliest visual propaganda known in Malaya which was reported in the 19th century, and this is followed by another discussion on British propaganda in the 20th century especially during the World War I. Moreover, through this discussion, the researcher provides a fresh new outlook to the JWW Birch's assassination narrative: the main issue was made a visual propaganda using woodblock engraving as its printing technique and this has not been discussed by any researcher before.

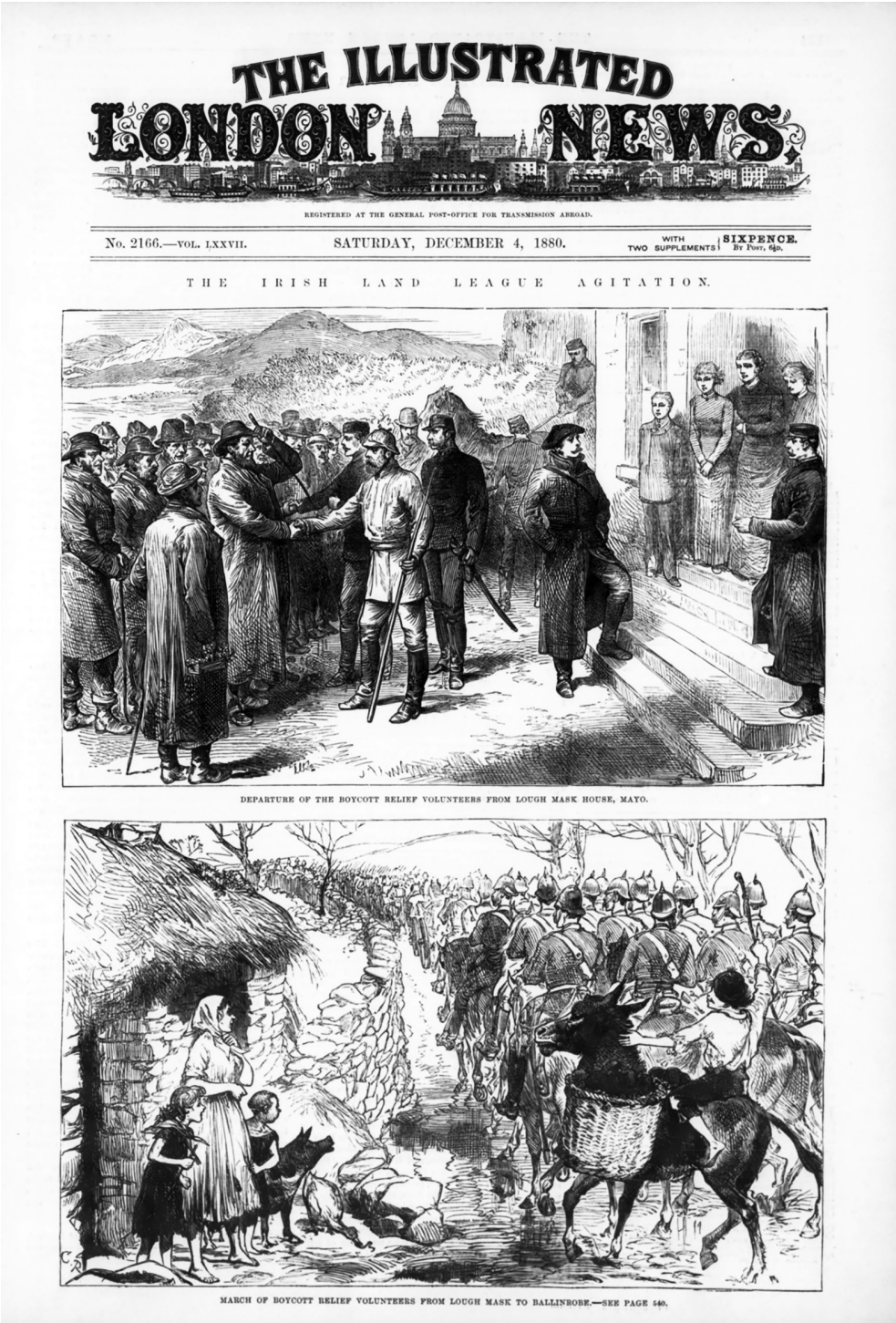


Figure 1. The front page of ILN News on February 15, 1897
Source: ILN, February 15, 1897

THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS AND COLONIAL VISUALITY

Iconographic analysis, as developed most systematically by Erwin Panofsky, refers to a method of visual interpretation that proceeds beyond surface description toward the decoding of symbolic meaning embedded within historical images. Panofsky (1939) distinguishes three analytical levels: first, pre-iconographical description, which identifies the factual and formal elements of the image; second, iconographical analysis, which interprets conventional motifs and symbolic content; and third, iconological interpretation, which situates the image within its broader cultural, ideological, and historical structures of meaning. Within the context of colonial visuality, iconographic analysis becomes particularly significant because imperial images did not merely document events; they structured perception and encoded political authority. As Mitchell (1994) argues, images are not passive reflections of reality but active participants in the construction of ideology. Visual representations produced within imperial media systems functioned as technologies of seeing that shaped metropolitan understandings of colonial space, violence, and governance.

In the nineteenth century, illustrated newspapers such as *ILN* operated within what may be termed an imperial visual regime. Their engravings mediated distant colonial events for British audiences, transforming frontier conflicts into legible narratives of order, discipline, and civilisational mission. Within this framework, iconographic analysis enables a critical interrogation of how compositional choices, spatial arrangements, symbolic objects, and strategic omissions functioned to naturalise British authority. This study therefore adopts a combined iconographic and visual discourse analytical approach. At the pre-iconographical level, the study examines compositional elements such as spatial hierarchy, scale, positioning of figures, and technological contrasts. At the iconographical level, it interprets recurring symbols such as flags, artillery, riverine pathways, and weapon displays. At the iconological level, the study situates these images within the broader ideological framework of British imperial governance, particularly in the aftermath of the assassination of J.W.W. Birch in 1875.

The temporal scope of the analysis is confined to *ILN* issues published between January and April 1876, corresponding to the period of the Perak Expedition and the immediate imperial response to Birch's assassination. The selected visuals were chosen based on two criteria: first, direct reference to the Perak River campaign; and second, their function in narrating British authority, pursuit, or military presence in the region. By defining these boundaries, the study ensures methodological clarity and avoids ambiguity regarding the corpus under examination.

Through this framework, the ILN visuals are analysed not as neutral illustrations but as ideological artefacts that participated in the construction of imperial legitimacy. Iconographic analysis thus provides the methodological bridge between visual form and colonial power, allowing the study to move beyond description toward a critical examination of how nineteenth-century imperial violence was visually stabilised for metropolitan consumption.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative historical methodology that integrates archival research with a structured iconographic analysis in order to examine the visual propaganda produced by The ILN in relation to the assassination of J.W.W. Birch in 1876. The temporal scope of the study is deliberately confined to the period between January and March 1876, during which ILN published a sequence of illustrated reports concerning the Perak expedition and the pursuit of Birch's alleged assailants. This focused timeframe allows for a close examination of how visual narratives were constructed in the immediate aftermath of the incident, when imperial legitimacy and public perception were particularly sensitive. The selection of ILN visual materials was guided by three criteria. First, the images had to be directly related to the Perak River expedition and the events surrounding Birch's assassination. Second, only illustrations accompanied by editorial commentary or descriptive captions were included, as these provide insight into the intended narrative framing. Third, the images were selected on the basis of their thematic relevance to representations of authority, military presence, landscape, and indigenous resistance. This purposive selection ensures that the analysis remains coherent and directly aligned with the study's objective of understanding visual propaganda within a specific colonial crisis.

The iconographic analysis was conducted through a three-stage procedure adapted from established visual culture methodologies. The first stage, descriptive analysis, involved a detailed visual inventory of each illustration, including composition, spatial arrangement, symbols, gestures, technological elements, and the presence or absence of indigenous actors. This stage remains strictly observational, documenting what is visibly represented without interpretative assumptions. The second stage, interpretative analysis, examined the symbolic and ideological meanings embedded within the visual elements. At this level, attention was given to how authority, hierarchy, technological superiority, and environmental control were visually encoded. Particular emphasis was placed on recurring motifs such as flags, military formations, weaponry, river navigation, and the representation of Malay material culture. The third stage, contextual or iconological analysis, situated the images within the broader political and imperial context of late nineteenth-century British expansion in Southeast Asia. Here, the visual materials were read alongside archival documents, official colonial correspondence (CO 273 files),

contemporary Malay accounts, and relevant historiography to identify how the illustrations functioned within a larger imperial discourse.

In order to strengthen interpretative validity, the study incorporates a comparative reading of British and Malay perspectives. British colonial reports, military dispatches, and ILN narratives were examined alongside Malay historiographical accounts, including local narratives of resistance and secondary analyses by Malaysian historians. This comparative approach does not treat the visual materials as neutral documentation but evaluates them against alternative historical representations. By juxtaposing imperial visual narratives with Malay accounts of resistance, the study identifies tensions, omissions, and narrative asymmetries that reveal the propagandistic function of the illustrations. This process enhances analytical balance and prevents the study from reproducing colonial viewpoints uncritically.

The integration of archival research with systematic iconographic procedures allows the study to move beyond descriptive commentary and toward a structured interpretation of how visual media contributed to the consolidation of imperial authority. By explicitly defining selection criteria, temporal scope, and stages of analysis, the methodological framework ensures transparency and replicability. This structured approach strengthens the academic rigor of the study and provides a clear analytical pathway for examining colonial visual propaganda in other historical contexts.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is confined to a specific third-month publication window and focuses exclusively on ILN as a metropolitan illustrated newspaper, which may not fully represent the diversity of imperial visual media circulating at the time. The analysis is also dependent on surviving archival materials and reproduced illustrations, which may not capture the full editorial process behind image selection and engraving. Furthermore, while comparative reference is made to Malay historiographical accounts, the study does not examine systematically how local audiences visually interpreted or responded to ILN imagery. These limitations, however, do not undermine the central findings but rather indicate productive directions for further research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Death of JWW Birch in Perak

The assassination of J.W.W. Birch on 2 November 1875 must be understood not merely as a violent local incident, but as a moment of imperial rupture that exposed the fragility of early British indirect rule in the Malay States. Archival evidence from the Colonial Office (C.O. 273/87; C.O. 273/89) reveals not only the substantial operational expenditure of £12,000.16.6 incurred in pursuing those responsible, but also the logistical strain and

initial military setbacks faced by British forces. The deaths of Captain Innes and other officers during the failed expedition demonstrate that British authority in Perak was neither immediate nor uncontested (Rough, 2004). These material and symbolic losses generated what may be described as an imperial crisis of representation, a situation in which the projection of British dominance no longer aligned with realities on the ground.

It is within this context that the subsequent visual reporting by The ILN should be situated. The financial cost of the expedition, the reinforcement of troops from India and Hong Kong, and the delay in suppressing resistance collectively signaled vulnerability within the imperial system. Such vulnerability required not only military retaliation but also symbolic reconstruction. Visual media became a crucial mechanism through which imperial authority could be reasserted before a metropolitan audience (Parmer, 1897). The ILN illustrations therefore should not be read as neutral documentary records but as components of a broader imperial effort to stabilize the image of British control after an episode that threatened to expose colonial weakness. The linkage lies in the transformation of military contingency into visual certainty. Through carefully curated imagery, instability was reframed as disciplined retaliation and restored order.

Contemporary characterizations of Birch, particularly those attributed to Sir Hugh Low and later colonial commentaries, require critical scrutiny. Descriptions of Birch as harsh, uncompromising, or temperamentally unsuitable for local governance have often been repeated in both colonial and postcolonial historiography (Basri, 1986). However, these portrayals were themselves embedded within imperial discourse. They functioned retrospectively to rationalize the assassination either as the result of Birch's administrative rigidity or as the tragic consequence of Malay misunderstanding. In both interpretations, the emphasis on personality risks obscuring the structural tensions inherent in the Residency system, which curtailed the Sultan's authority and disrupted established political hierarchies.

More importantly for this study, the selective filtering of Birch's character in British visual representations reveals an additional layer of ideological mediation. While textual accounts occasionally acknowledged Birch's abrasive style, ILN illustrations avoided any suggestion of administrative miscalculation. Instead, the visual narrative foregrounded British victimhood, military resolve, and technological superiority. By omitting structural critique and personal controversy, the visual medium neutralized ambiguity and redirected public attention toward imperial retaliation. In this sense, the assassination became not only a political crisis but also a representational opportunity, an event through which the British Empire could reassert symbolic dominance via controlled visual narration.

Accordingly, the historical episode of Birch's death must be analytically connected to the emergence of colonial visual propaganda. The economic burden of the expedition, the

casualties among British officers, and the temporary exposure of imperial vulnerability created the conditions for a visual counter-narrative. Through ILN engravings, uncertainty was transformed into spectacle, and resistance was reframed as a manageable disturbance within an otherwise orderly imperial landscape. This interpretive shift demonstrates how colonial violence was not merely suppressed militarily but also reorganized visually for metropolitan consumption.



Figure 2. James Wheeler Woodford Birch or JWW Birch, the first British Resident to Malaya
Source: Birch, J. W. W. (1976). *The Journals of J. W. W. Birch, First British Resident to Perak, 1874-1875*. Oxford University Press.

ILN Background

The Illustrated London News must not be understood merely as a pioneering visual newspaper of the nineteenth century, but as an institutional apparatus embedded within the ideological machinery of British imperial expansion. While previous scholarship has established ILN's prominence in visual journalism, particularly its innovative use of woodblock engraving and illustrated reportage, its organizational structure and editorial practices warrant closer scrutiny in relation to colonial knowledge production. Founded in 1842, ILN quickly achieved a circulation that far exceeded other daily presses in England, reaching approximately 300,000 copies by 1863, a figure that demonstrates not only its commercial success but also its extraordinary capacity to shape public perception on a

mass scale (Archer, 1972; Chapman & Nuttall, 2011; Douglas, 2009; Hill & Schwartz, 2015). As Sinnema (1995, 1998) argues, ILN functioned as a visual archive of the British nation, constructing narratives of national identity, hierarchy, and imperial authority through curated imagery.

The production process of ILN was neither neutral nor incidental. Visual reports began as field sketches prepared by correspondents, many of whom were military officers trained at institutions such as the Royal Military Academy. Their training was not limited to technical drawing skills but was embedded within the epistemological framework of imperial governance, discipline, and surveillance. These sketches were subsequently transmitted to London, where professional engravers and editors reworked them into publishable woodblock prints. As Archer (1972), Douglas (2009), and Hill and Schwartz (2015) demonstrate, the transformation from field sketch to engraved print involved editorial mediation that shaped composition, emphasis, and symbolic meaning. The process was therefore not a simple act of documentation but a structured visual translation aligned with metropolitan expectations and imperial priorities.

In the context of Malaya, ILN's correspondents were frequently individuals directly involved in colonial administration or military operations. This institutional proximity between the producers of visual content and the machinery of empire created a representational regime in which colonial encounters were filtered through the gaze of imperial authority. Tahir et al. (2021) and Osman (2017) have shown that British visual prints of Malaya consistently foregrounded scenes of order, ceremony, and picturesque landscapes while marginalizing indigenous agency. Such selectivity was not accidental. It reflected an editorial logic that privileged images reinforcing British governance as stabilizing, civilizing, and technologically superior.

ILN's popularity and wide circulation further amplified its ideological function. As Potter (2003) notes in his study of the imperial press system, illustrated newspapers operated as connective media linking the metropole with its colonies, transforming distant conflicts into consumable visual narratives. The high circulation figures were therefore not merely indicators of readership but measures of ideological reach. Through repeated visual motifs of disciplined troops, orderly encampments, advanced weaponry, and compliant local collaborators, ILN normalized imperial authority in the public imagination. In this sense, circulation functioned as a multiplier of imperial ideology, converting visual reportage into a mechanism of political persuasion.

The reliance on military correspondents also shaped the epistemic boundaries of what could be seen and represented. Military sketchers were positioned within colonial campaigns, and their vantage points frequently reflected strategic perspectives rather than

local experiences. This positionality influenced composition, framing, and the selection of subjects. Scenes of conflict were often reframed as orderly expeditions, and resistance was rendered either invisible or exoticized. The institutional workflow of ILN, from sketch to engraving to editorial selection, thus contributed to the production of what may be termed a disciplined colonial visuality. Understanding ILN as an institutional actor is essential for the present study of the assassination of J.W.W. Birch. The visual sequence related to Birch's death did not emerge in isolation but was shaped by ILN's established editorial conventions and imperial commitments. The omission of certain violent scenes, the emphasis on British resilience, and the selective depiction of Malay weaponry must therefore be read within the structural logic of ILN's production system. The assassination visuals were not simply illustrations of an event; they were curated images designed to stabilize imperial authority at a moment of vulnerability. By situating the case study within ILN's institutional framework, this section establishes the necessary analytical foundation for interpreting the assassination imagery as a deliberate construction of colonial narrative rather than as neutral reportage.

Visual Propaganda of the Death of JWW Birch di Pasir Salak, Perak by ILN

In this study, propaganda is treated not as an abstract European wartime phenomenon but as a colonial practice of mediated representation in which information is selected, organised, and circulated to shape public perception and legitimise imperial action. Following Jackall's definition of propaganda as the dissemination of information and ideas for the purpose of influencing or manipulating public opinion, the ILN sequence on the Birch assassination can be read as a carefully curated visual narrative aimed at stabilising the image of British authority at a moment of reputational vulnerability (Jackall, 1995; Kheng, 1998). Rather than foregrounding the violence of anti-colonial resistance, ILN constructs an optics of control through repeated visual emphasis on orderly encampments, riverine mobility, imperial symbols, and the disciplined presence of British forces. This aligns with the broader historical observation that propaganda functions through framing and omission as much as through explicit persuasion, especially when the state or imperial centre seeks to pre-empt doubt about the legitimacy of its intervention (Cull et al., 2003; Sanders, 1975). Within the Perak case, the key propaganda features are therefore operationalised as (i) the management of public opinion through selective picturing of events, (ii) the mobilisation of symbolism that naturalises sovereignty, and (iii) the visual construction of threat and otherness through curated attention to Malay weaponry and the strategic absence of local resistance as an agentive force. These features are not introduced as generic categories but are demonstrated through the formal and thematic choices observable across the ILN visuals attributed to Major O.H. Nicollas and Sub-Lieutenant Holme and translated into wood engraving for publication (ILN, February 26, 1876; ILN, April 8, 1876).

All visual propaganda published by ILN, the report for Visual of The Death of JWW Birch had all the characteristics mentioned. The researcher believe that this visual propaganda was used to cover the British's weakness and the empire's tarnished image in the wake of the assassination. Hence, their visual propaganda was focused on showing the strength of the British army expedition to hunt for the murderer. Visuals which were meant for the propaganda were all courtesy of Major O.H. Nicollas and Sub-Leftenan Holme who happened to be at the scene of the crime. It was then detailed and executed with the wood engraving technique (ILN, April 8, 1876). Visual propaganda in favour of the British was planned before hand and served their own importance to the British. Therefore, it was not surprising that this visual propaganda was biased and leaned towards the British entirely. It goes without saying that ILN had uplifted its image through the visual propaganda mentioned. Simultaneously, it was apparent that ILN tried to influence the British public on their perception of the Malays' social issues through visuals of weapons used in the murder. Moreover, it was deemed as shocking when no visual propaganda of the local's resistance or attack on the British was made public. The researcher believed that should there be images of the local's resistance or attack on the British, they would only showcase the strength of their army to the British public and the Royals. It was found that there were five visual propaganda produced and they were sufficient to project the image that the British was strong and could not be blamed. To avoid a separation between theory and case, the following analysis reads each ILN illustration as a structured visual argument. The analysis attends to composition, point of view, visual focus, and hierarchies of meaning, as well as to what is systematically excluded, because omission is itself a propagandistic technique that manages the moral visibility of empire. Across the Perak sequence, the river functions as a colonial stage on which British order is rendered visible and repeatable, while the local resistance that made the expedition necessary is displaced into the margins of text and into the category of threat rather than being granted pictorial agency (ILN, January 1, 1876; ILN, February 26, 1876; ILN, March 26, 1876).

The first ILN visual (Figure 3) operates as a framing device that establishes a colonial optics of tranquillity before the viewer encounters the violence of Birch's assassination. Its composition privileges an elevated point of view that surveys the harbour, Georgetown, and Province Wellesley in a single panoramic field, producing a legible landscape that appears ordered and governable. The visual focus rests on natural abundance and spatial coherence rather than on human activity, and this is reinforced by the notable absence of indigenous subjects. Such absence is not a neutral aesthetic choice but an iconographic strategy that de-populates the scene and displaces local presence from the frame, thereby reducing the possibility that viewers might imagine contestation, grievance, or political agency within the colonised space. The resulting

hierarchy of meaning positions the land as the primary object of contemplation, while imperial presence is suggested indirectly through maritime infrastructure and the implied circulation of ships and trade. This establishes Malaya as a calm imperial possession rather than a politically fractured territory, and it prepares the reader to interpret subsequent visuals of encampment and expedition as corrective, orderly, and necessary interventions rather than as coercive violence. In this sense, the image does propaganda work through an aesthetic of serenity, making colonial rule appear as a condition of stability rather than as a contested project (ILN, January 1, 1876).



Figure 3. Georgetown, Penang, near Perak, in the Malay Peninsular
Source: ILN, January 1, 1876

This next visual from ILN serves as a potent example of colonial propaganda, depicting the campsite at Bandar Baharu in Pasir Salak where J.W.W. Birch was murdered (ILN, February 26, 1876). The illustration is centered around a flagpole marking the exact location of Birch's assassination, symbolizing British authority and the significance of this event. The serene landscape, with its calm river and orderly campsite, contrasts sharply with the violence of Birch's murder, presenting a narrative of British civility and control in the region. The peaceful setting, devoid of any signs of conflict or resistance, deliberately omits the brutal reality of the assassination, thereby downplaying the local opposition to British rule (Parmer, 1987; Abd Jalal, 2019). This portrayal reinforces the idea of British dominance, suggesting that despite the tragedy, their control remains steadfast. The flagpole not only marks the site of Birch's death but also serves as a symbol of British sovereignty, subtly conveying that the British Empire's presence and influence

are unshaken (Ghazali, 1997). By memorializing Birch in this way, the image attempts to justify the colonial project in Malaya, presenting the British as benevolent rulers who bring order and stability, even in the face of resistance (Williamson, 2007). The overall effect is a sanitized narrative that promotes continued British expansion and dominance, carefully crafted to shape public perception in favor of the Empire’s actions in the region.

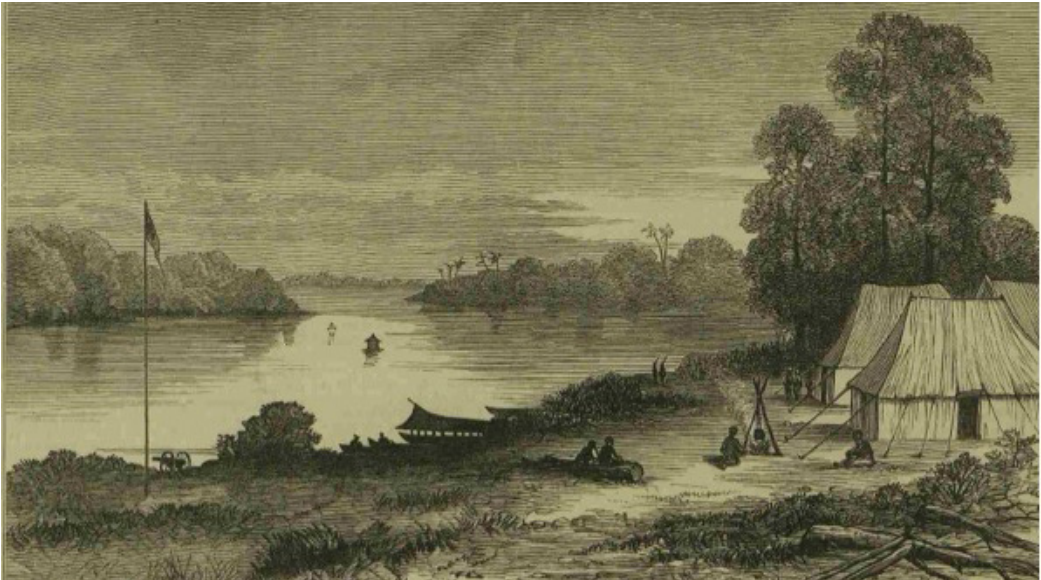


Figure 4. Camp at Pasir Salak, Perak River drawn by Major O.H. Nicollas, The Illustrated London News
Source: ILN, February 26, 1876

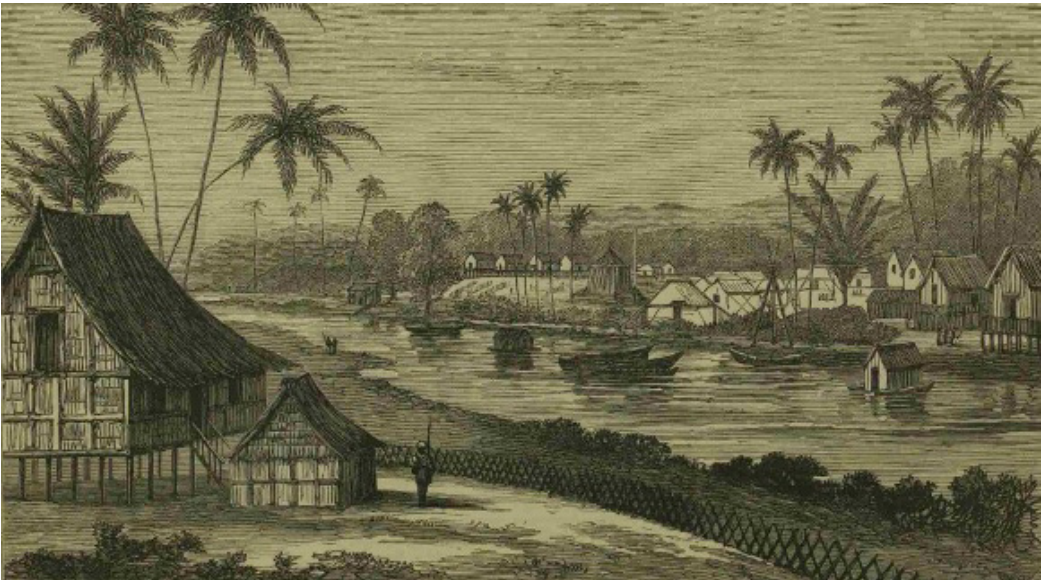


Figure 5. View of the Encampment, Bandar Baharu, from the Back of the Residency, drawn by Major O.H. Nicollas, The Illustrated London News
Source: ILN, February 26, 1876

This third visual from ILN depicts a serene river scene with traditional Malay houses on stilts, palm trees, and boats navigating the water, providing a visual description of the boat manned by British security forces and a Malay escort as they searched for Dato' Maharajalela and his followers. The illustration captures the calm and idyllic nature of the Malay environment, emphasizing traditional architecture and the natural landscape. This tranquil setting contrasts with the underlying conflict, subtly promoting the idea that the British presence brought peace and stability to the region, even during times of unrest. The inclusion of both British forces and a Malay escort in the boat suggests a narrative of local collaboration, portraying the British not as invaders but as legitimate rulers working in partnership with local leaders to maintain order. The peacefulness of the scene, with no visible signs of conflict, serves as a propaganda tool to downplay the severity of the pursuit and frame it as a necessary and orderly operation. By omitting any direct depiction of violence, the image reinforces the narrative of British control as a stabilizing and benevolent force in Malaya, supporting the broader colonial agenda of justifying British rule in the region (ILN, February 26, 1876).

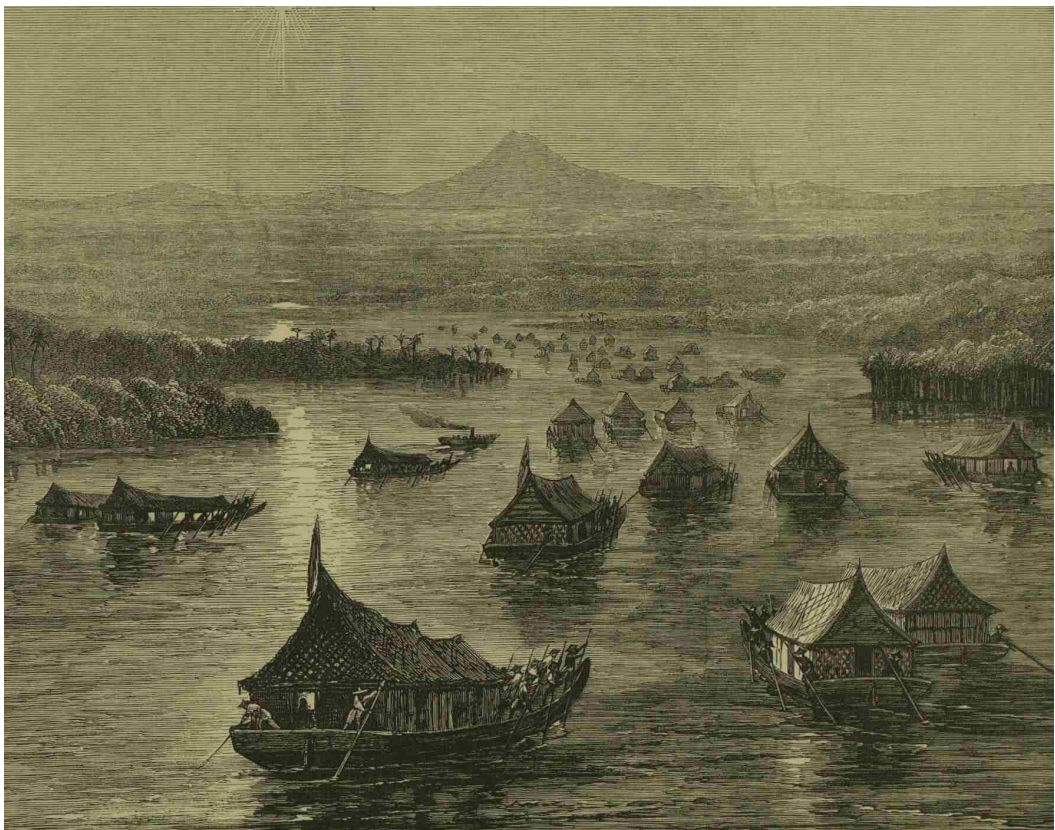


Figure 6: The British Force Ascending the Perak River, drawn by Major O.H. Nicollas, The Illustrated London News

Source: ILN, February 26, 1876

This fourth visual from ILN depicts the British forces ascending the Perak River, focusing on the environment around Pasir Telor. The image prominently features the largest square boat, equipped with advanced artillery, machinery, and a steam-powered rocket launcher, symbolizing the technological and military superiority of the British forces. This visual serves as a powerful piece of propaganda by emphasizing British military might and their capacity to dominate the region. The orderly progression of the flotilla along the river signifies the Empire’s control over both the natural landscape and the local population, reinforcing the idea that British colonization was an unstoppable force. The calm yet foreboding setting, with the fleet moving steadily forward, suggests a controlled and inevitable assertion of British authority. By highlighting the advanced weaponry and organized nature of the British forces, the image projects an image of invincibility, intended to intimidate any potential resistance while reassuring the British public of their military’s effectiveness. Overall, this visual works to legitimize British colonial efforts in Malaya, portraying them as a disciplined and dominant power capable of bringing order and control to the region (ILN, February 26, 1876).

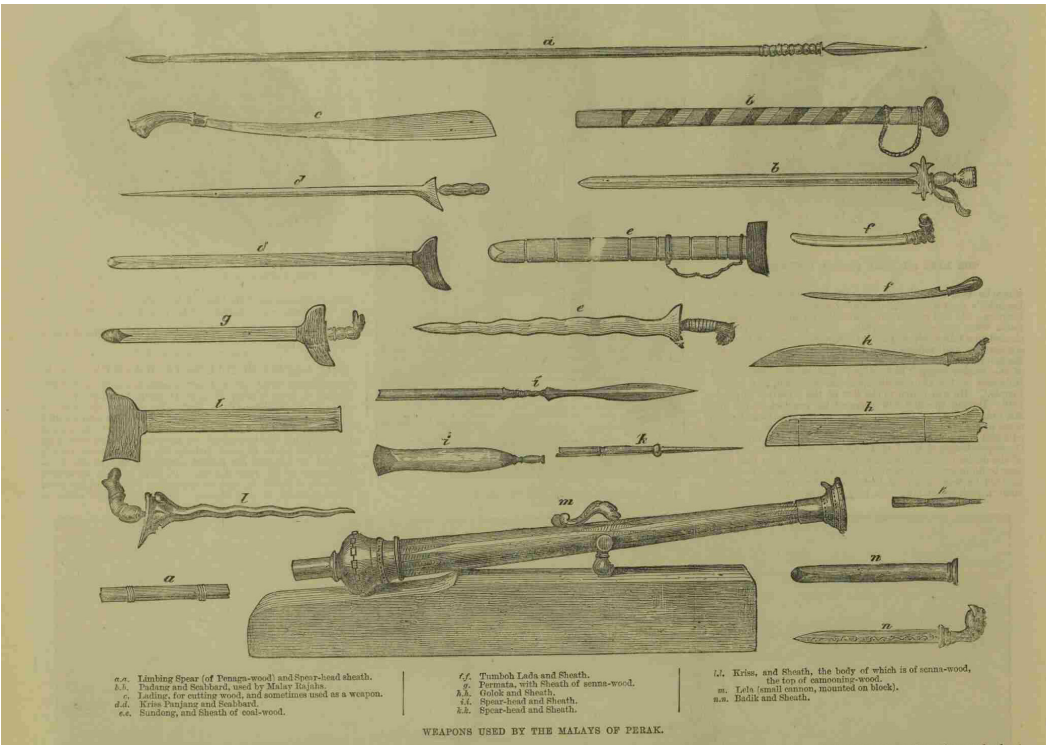


Figure 7. Weapons Used by the Malay Perak drawn by Major O.H. Nicollas, The Illustrated London News
Source: ILN, February 26, 1876

This visual from ILN provides a detailed illustration of various traditional Malay weapons, including spears, swords, krises, and a small cannon, among others. The inclusion of this visual serves several propagandistic purposes, primarily aimed at justifying the need to strengthen the British military presence in the region. By cataloging these weapons, the image subtly conveys the perceived threat posed by the local Malay population, emphasizing their capability for armed resistance. The detailed depiction of traditional weapons, such as the kris and parang, reinforces the idea of the Malays as a formidable adversary, skilled in the use of sharp, close-combat weapons (ILN, February 26, 1876).

The visual is also strategic in its selective representation of weaponry. While the artist sketched only traditional weapons, despite evidence of firearms being present, this choice was likely deliberate. By focusing on traditional weapons, the image evokes a sense of exoticism and primitiveness, which contrasts with the advanced military technology of the British forces, as shown in other visuals. This contrast serves to highlight the superiority of British military power, while also portraying the local resistance as somewhat archaic, yet still dangerous enough to warrant a strong military response. Furthermore, the inclusion of this visual in the newspaper was likely intended to evoke a sense of urgency and justification for the British public and officials. By illustrating the types of weapons allegedly used in the conflict, the image supports the narrative that the British forces were dealing with a well-armed and potentially volatile population. This, in turn, would help justify the need for increased military resources and actions in Malaya, reinforcing the broader colonial agenda of maintaining control and order in the region. In summary, this visual serves as both a tool of documentation and propaganda, emphasizing the perceived threat of Malay resistance and the necessity of a strong British military presence to counter it. By selectively focusing on traditional weapons, the image crafts a narrative that supports British colonial policies and military actions in Malaya.

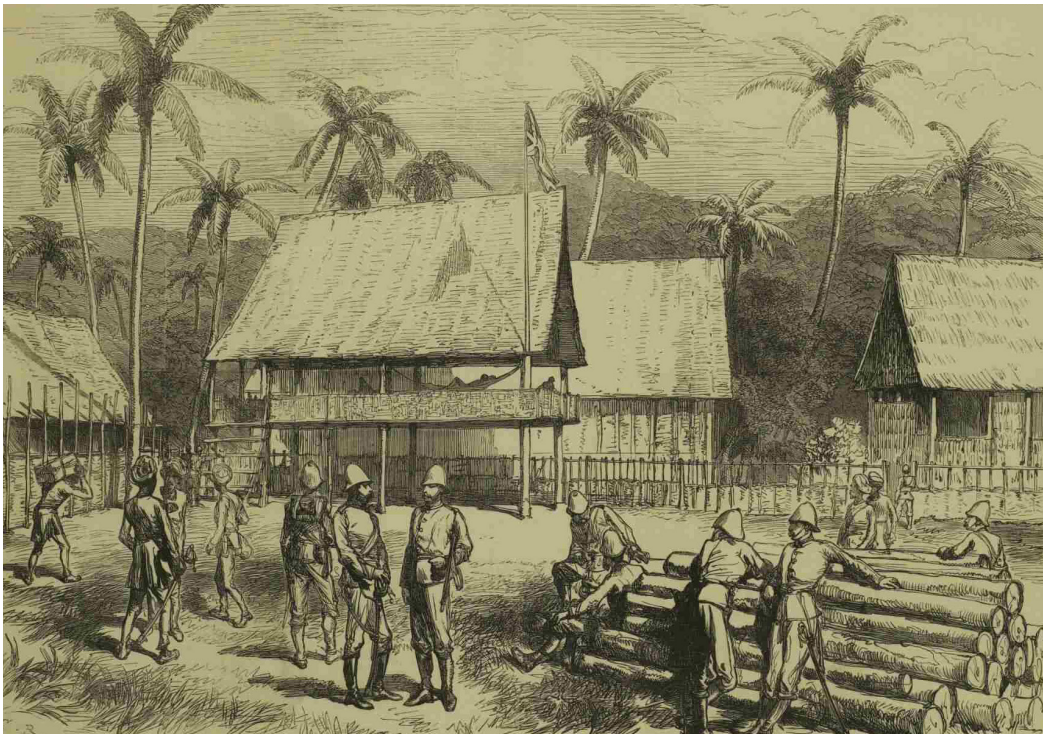


Figure 8: Officers Quarters, Campong Boyah, drawn by Sub-Leftenan Holme, The Illustrated London News
Source: ILN, March 11, 1876

This final visual report from by ILN depicts a British military camp in Kampung Boyah, where officers are seen resting and carrying out light tasks in a setting of simple wooden huts on stilts with no walls. The image emphasizes the basic and rugged living conditions of the British soldiers, portraying them as resilient and determined in maintaining colonial order despite the challenging tropical environment. The relaxed and organized demeanor of the soldiers suggests a calm and controlled military presence, reassuring viewers of the stability and preparedness of British forces even after the recent murders of several British Residents in Malaya. The visual subtly reinforces the pervasive authority of the British Empire, with the flagpole symbolizing their continued control over the region. By normalizing the military occupation and depicting the soldiers as disciplined and unfazed, the image works as a piece of propaganda to emphasize British resilience and authority, downplaying the severity of local resistance and presenting the colonial mission as a necessary and stabilizing force in Malaya (ILN, March 26, 1876).

The absence of visuals depicting direct British military attacks on the rebels, the strategic planning of assaults, and the use of their advanced weaponry in the illustrations from ILN is a significant aspect of the colonial propaganda strategy. By omitting these images, the publication carefully curates a narrative that downplays the violence and

aggression inherent in British colonial rule. Instead of portraying the harsh realities of military confrontation, the visuals focus on the calm and organized presence of British forces, the local environment, and traditional Malay weapons. This selective representation serves to create an image of the British as a stabilizing and civilizing force, rather than as aggressors or oppressors. The decision to exclude visuals of military attacks and weaponry usage could be seen as a deliberate attempt to avoid eliciting sympathy for the local resistance or to prevent the British public from questioning the morality of their empire's actions. By not showing the brutality of military engagements, the publication avoids depicting the British as violent colonizers, thereby maintaining the image of the Empire as benevolent and just. This omission also prevents the viewers from seeing the potentially devastating impact of British military technology on the local population, which could undermine the justification of colonial rule as a civilizing mission. Furthermore, the lack of such visuals aligns with the broader goals of propaganda by controlling the narrative that reaches the public. It ensures that the focus remains on the supposed order, discipline, and legitimacy of British authority in Malaya, rather than on the conflict and violence that sustained it. This bias in representation helps to reinforce the colonial ideology that the British presence was necessary for maintaining peace and order, rather than a source of violence and disruption. By selectively presenting the colonial experience, ILN played a crucial role in shaping public perception, ensuring that the British Empire was seen in a positive light, and its actions in Malaya were justified and supported by the public back home.

Across the ILN Perak sequence, the most consequential pattern is not simply what is shown but what is persistently not shown. While the visuals repeatedly picture British spaces of control such as camps, quarters, river movement, and the material inventory of force, they do not visualise local resistance as a collective actor engaged in confrontation, planning, or tactical counter-mobility. Instead, Malay opposition is displaced into indirect signs, most clearly through the curated display of weapons, which allows ILN to stage Malay threat as an object of scrutiny while withholding the visibility of Malay agency and political purpose (ILN, February 26, 1876). This omission should be read as strategic because it appears consistently across multiple editions and thematic scenes: the encampment at Pasir Salak is pictured as orderly and calm, the ascent of the Perak River is pictured as disciplined and technologically superior, and the officers' quarters are pictured as controlled routine life. The visual narrative thus centres British resilience and administrative continuity, while local resistance remains outside the pictorial field, thereby preventing viewers from confronting the political legitimacy or popular support that resistance might imply (ILN, February 26, 1876; ILN, March 26, 1876). In effect, ILN transforms a crisis of imperial authority into an illustrated sequence of imperial

competence. The sequence also aligns with the broader logic of propaganda in which moral doubt is managed by filtering what can be publicly seen and discussed, so that empire appears as a stabilising force and violence becomes an absent or sanitised background condition (Cull et al., 2003; ILN, April 8, 1876; Jackall, 1995; Sanders, 1975).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the visual reports published by The Illustrated London News on the assassination of J.W.W. Birch were not neutral documentary records but carefully curated visual narratives that functioned as instruments of colonial authority. Through iconographic reading, the study has shown that ILN constructed a visual regime that foregrounded British order, discipline, and technological superiority while systematically marginalizing or omitting representations of Malay resistance. The repeated emphasis on military organization, riverine advancement, symbolic markers of sovereignty such as the flagpole, and the cataloguing of traditional Malay weapons collectively contributed to a visual grammar that normalized imperial intervention and reframed violence as necessary governance. Beyond documenting selective representation, this research contributes theoretically to the scholarship on colonial visual propaganda in Southeast Asia by shifting the focus from textual imperial discourse to the structured production of illustrated news imagery. While studies of British imperial propaganda have often centred on metropolitan political communication or wartime mobilization, this article extends the discussion to the riverine theatre of colonial Malaya, demonstrating how visual print culture participated in consolidating imperial legitimacy at a moment of crisis. By situating ILN within the broader framework of imperial visibility, the study argues that illustrated newspapers were not merely reflective of empire but constitutive of its authority, shaping metropolitan understandings of colonial space as governable, pacified, and hierarchically ordered.

The empirical findings also substantiate the necessity of incorporating local perspectives into the historiography of the Birch assassination. The conspicuous absence of visual depictions of coordinated Malay resistance, strategic planning by local leaders, or the destructive impact of British military retaliation reveals the limits of relying solely on colonial visual archives. The omission of these elements was not incidental but structurally embedded within the logic of imperial representation. By identifying these silences, the study demonstrates how visual absence itself operated as a propagandistic strategy. The call for integrating Malay perspectives therefore emerges not as a normative appeal but as an evidence-based conclusion grounded in the asymmetries revealed by the visual corpus examined. This study also offers a methodological contribution by integrating historical research with iconographic analysis to examine illustrated newspapers as sites of power negotiation. The approach provides a structured means of interrogating composition,

symbolism, omission, and the relationship between image and caption, thereby enabling a more rigorous interpretation of colonial imagery. In doing so, it establishes a framework applicable to other imperial contexts in Southeast Asia and beyond.

The influence of these visuals on British public opinion can be specified more directly through the visual mechanisms identified in this study. ILN's sequence normalised the belief that imperial intervention was a disciplined act of restoration rather than an escalation of violence by repeatedly staging camps, flags, and controlled river movement as the dominant visual facts, while rendering Malay resistance either invisible or reducible to a display of "traditional weapons." This framing encouraged readers to interpret the Perak crisis as proof of British resilience and administrative competence, not as evidence of contested legitimacy. In terms of historical memory in Malaysia, the same visual archive has continued to circulate in heritage and historiographical settings as easily reproducible "authoritative" images of the Birch episode. When such illustrations are reused without critical annotation, they risk stabilising a colonial optic of Perak in which British presence appears orderly and central, while Malay political agency is remembered primarily through absence, stereotype, or material tokens of threat rather than through strategised resistance.

Museums, heritage institutions, and educational settings may also benefit from the findings of this study. The ILN engravings should be approached not as transparent historical illustrations but as curated imperial artefacts shaped by editorial selection and visual omission. For museum and gallery practice, this supports the need for contextual captions and interpretative framing that make visible the politics of representation, including what is absent from the image. In heritage work, the study provides a rationale for re-curating colonial visuals alongside local narratives of resistance in order to avoid reproducing imperial perspectives. In education, the article strengthens the case for critical visual literacy, training students to read colonial imagery as an ideological construction and to interrogate how authority, violence, and legitimacy were visually organised for metropolitan consumption.

Future research may develop this line of inquiry in several focused directions. First, comparative analysis between British illustrated newspapers and visual publications produced by other colonial powers in the region could illuminate differences in visual strategies of domination. Second, studies of reception that examine how colonial visual imagery was interpreted by local elites or reproduced in regional print cultures would deepen understanding of the circulation and contestation of imperial narratives. Third, further investigation into the interaction between visual propaganda and administrative policy in moments of colonial crisis could clarify how imagery and governance operated in tandem. Ultimately, this article argues that the assassination of J.W.W. Birch was

transformed within the pages of ILN into a visual narrative of imperial resilience. By interrogating both what was shown and what was withheld, the study underscores the centrality of visual media in sustaining colonial authority and invites a re-evaluation of nineteenth-century illustrated newspapers as active agents in the making of imperial knowledge about Malaya.

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