

William Louis Abbott in Thailand: A Research Resource on Southern Thailand in the 1890s

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ABSTRACT—This paper introduces an important group of archival materials deriving from two expeditions to southern Thailand by American naturalist William Louis Abbott (1860-1936) in the late 19th century. Beyond summarizing the localities he visited in Thailand, and the current organization and usefulness of his collections for research, the paper attempts to interpret Abbott's unpublished archival correspondence to assess his collecting focus, biases, and purposes, as well as his perspectives on contemporaneous events in the Kingdom of Siam and in the surrounding, encroaching colonial regions. This also allows for an assessment of the important role these short expeditions to Thailand played in Abbott's later, much longer period of collecting in insular Southeast Asia, as well as the role that he and other collectors of this period played within the history of anthropology and of museums.

William Louis Abbott, naturalist collector

This paper introduces an important group of ethnographic, biological, and unpublished archival materials deriving from two expeditions to southern Thailand by American naturalist William Louis Abbott (1860-1936), the first from February 1896 to April 1897 (interrupted by a brief trip to Penang in June 1896), and the second from late December 1898 to March 1899. The ethnographic collections from Thailand that he assembled form a little known resource within a Thai collection at the Smithsonian Institution that is best known as the repository of a very different kind of collection, the Royal Gifts from Thai monarchs which were turned over to the Smithsonian as the country's national museum (McQuail 1997), some of which constituted the earliest catalogued objects within our current records of ethnographic materials. Abbott was also by far the Smithsonian's most prolific collector of Indonesian and Malaysian artifacts (see e.g. Taylor 1993; and examples in Taylor and Aragon 1991), and a major collector of biological specimens from the region. While Ong and the Asian Civilisations Museum (2009) have recently also published information on the Malaysian and Indonesian collections Abbott donated to museums in Singapore, his Thai ethnographic interests and collections are much less well known.

At the time of his death in 1936, Dr. William Louis Abbott had the distinction of being the largest single donor of collections to the United States National Museum (now the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution). A shy, eccentric millionaire, this Philadelphia native, who learned but never had to practice medicine (M.D., U. Pennsylvania, 1884), was as allergic to publicity as he was to “civilization.” This paper¹ is largely drawn from the author’s archival research and compilation of Abbott’s widely scattered fieldnotes and correspondence (see Taylor *in press*), primarily with his family and with Smithsonian officials, regarding his lifelong series of expeditions which began in East Africa, and continued in South and Central Asia before he first arrived in Southeast Asia and essentially began his explorations there in Thailand.

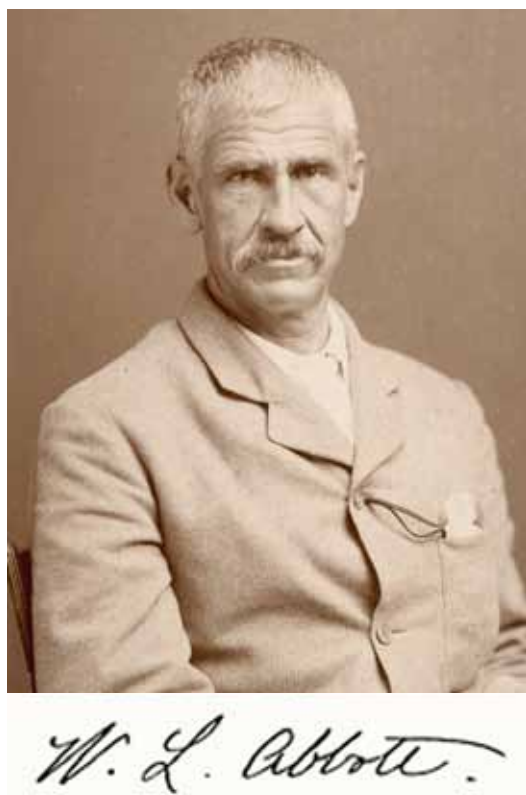


Figure 1. William Louis Abbott (1860-1936). National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

William Louis Abbott’s life is one of collecting and donating; he very early dedicated himself to collecting for the Smithsonian, and he never stopped. His collecting was entirely self-financed, since at the age of twenty-six, Abbott received a large inheritance upon the death of his father (1886). His papers are now found in two of the Smithsonian’s major archives (National Anthropological Archives, and the separate Smithsonian Archives, which include early Registrar’s records for the National Museum of Natural History), and in field records stored in the Smithsonian’s Mammals Library and its Botany Library; all four of these repositories contain archival material relating to his travels in Thailand. These archives and the biological and ethnographic collections represent a relatively well-documented, under-utilized and little known research resource for the study of southern Thailand.

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Smithsonian Scholarly Studies Program, the Seidell Endowment and the Walcott Endowment for the study of Abbott’s archival and ethnographic collections. Some of the information presented about Abbott’s background and his Smithsonian correspondence is drawn from material previously presented in a study of Abbott’s Indonesian collections (Taylor 2002); however, this study did not consider his work in Thailand, nor did it recognize the importance to Abbott of these Lower Siam expeditions in developing the collecting method he used later in Indonesia, with his schooner the *Terrapin*, as posited here.

Abbott faced many practical difficulties as a collector, especially during his first expedition to Lower Siam, which was his first tropical Southeast Asian expedition. These included problems obtaining appropriate supplies (traps, rifles, proper packing material for shipment), logistics of keeping collections dry enough to preserve, pack, and send, and worries about safely leaving collections at a central location while he traveled to distant field sites, in addition to his long unproductive periods of waiting for the end of heavy rains in order to start collecting again. For example, Abbott wrote to his mother from Tyching, Trang, on June 29, 1896 saying:

I have a quantity of fish baskets & traps for Prof. Mason's dept. at the Smithsonian which I cant send away at present as I have no long enough packing cases & for the time being I cant buy any boards here that are sufficiently thin for boxes. The Siamese have expended a surprising amount of inventive genius over their fish traps & they have a large variety.

Between the two Thailand expeditions, he returned to northern India (Ladakh and Kashmir) while ordering supplies and equipment to be sent to him for his return to Southeast Asia. His return was delayed however by the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, for which he hastened back to the U.S.A., briefly visiting Washington and the Smithsonian in his rush to Tampa (Florida) to volunteer for the Cuban invasion in the "irregular" cavalry of his friend and fellow gentleman-scholar W.A. Chanler. Though proud to be a dutiful patriot, Abbott found his native country still impossible to live in, as he expected; he thought its weather unbearable and the masses of its people vile. Longing to return as soon as possible to distant jungles and unexplored places, he had decided by the time he returned to Singapore in December 1898, en route to his second trip to Thailand, to outfit a schooner in Singapore. In fact that schooner, which he named the *Terrapin*, would later become his moveable base of natural history collecting operations for the ten years following his return to Singapore from the second Lower Siam expedition (thus until 1909).

The second Thailand trip took place while he waited for the schooner to be finished. It seems that, in addition to any other results from his first Thailand collecting expedition, Abbott had devised from this first extensive experience in the Southeast Asian tropics the method of collecting that would bring him so much success later in Indonesia, for the schooner seems to have provided a solution to the shortcomings of the expeditionary approach he had used in Lower Siam. It allowed him to bring vastly greater numbers of biological and ethnographic collections from the most remote islands of Indonesia directly to Singapore for packing and shipping, where he could also purchase the supplies needed for the next trip. During this subsequent ten-year, entirely self-financed, labor of love, Abbott sailed through the East Indies and along the Malay peninsula, collecting birds, mammals, reptiles, fish, mollusks, crustaceans, and insects – and over 6,000 well-documented artifacts from

the peoples he visited, interviewed, and photographed -- until his collecting was interrupted due to the fact that he became afflicted with partial blindness in 1909.

During his expeditions in Thailand and later, Abbott tried carefully to document each kind of collection in the way specialists of the time required. Otis T. Mason, Head Curator of the Department of Anthropology at the U.S. National Museum during Abbott's Southeast Asian collecting period, wrote that "[t]he Abbott collections are of greatest scientific value as types, because after studying the wants of the Museum he labeled each specimen carefully according to the latest requirements" (Mason 1908: 1). From Abbott's correspondence we see that his special interest in Siamese basketry, including fish traps and other forms (see Figure 2), came largely from the encouragement of Mason.



Figure 2. View of "Basket for catching shrimps and small fish," in a storage unit at the Smithsonian's Museum Support Center, Suitland, Maryland. Abbott collected this basket in "Trong" [Trang] in 1896. Ethnology catalog number E176045.

Mason (1838-1908) maintained an active and enthusiastic correspondence with Abbott regarding Abbott's expeditions to Lower Siam, after which he encouraged more shipments of artifacts and notes from his later East Indian voyages. Mason

had spent his long career studying museum collections in order to establish artifact typologies and to posit from them evolutionary culture-historical sequences and culture areas (Hinsley 1981: 84-117). Thus the basketry and other artifacts sent back by Abbott, alongside material flowing into the Museum after 1898 from America's new Philippine colonies, "seemed to fill gaping holes in Mason's culture history," (Hinsley 1981: 115) because these artifacts (in Mason's view) represented a stage of industrial development midway between North American Indians and early civilizations of the West. Mason oversaw the careful accession of Abbott's materials and notes, and prepared a detailed and well-illustrated booklet on the *Vocabulary of Malaysian Basketwork: A Study in the W. L. Abbott Collections* (Mason 1908), "with the view of having a lucid nomenclature in describing the Abbott specimens more at length in a larger work" (Mason 1908: 1). ("Malaysian" basketwork of the title referred to basketry and woven plant-fiber matting from what is now Indonesia as well as Malaysia and Lower Siam.) The booklet was issued on the day of Mason's death, however, and the larger work never appeared.

Mason's influence on Abbott's collections from Trang in fact have an interesting parallel in the most well-known component of the Smithsonian's Thai collections, because as noted in McQuail's (1997: 145) study of the Royal Gifts, King Chulalongkorn had also become aware that although the Royal Gifts displayed at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia (1876) were presented as a gift to President Ulysses S. Grant, the gifts themselves (including some examples of baskets) ended up in the Smithsonian. Furthermore the King later learned that the Smithsonian as ultimate recipient of such materials was primarily interested in the comparative study of basketry, consequently he chose to send additional baskets and fish traps as gifts in 1881 in conjunction with that year's ratification of revisions to the 1856 Harris Treaty, and many more for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904 (see McQuail 1997: 144-160).

Some of Abbott's contemporaries critically noted that he never wrote up his expeditions and discoveries, though Abbott himself seems to have considered that the role of the "naturalist" (collector or expert in "natural history" which in America subsumes anthropology as well as earth and biological sciences) was separate from that of the curator and scientist. Just as he expected biologists to "write up" the descriptions of species of birds and mammals he sent back to the museum, he seems to have perceived that it was the job of the ethnologists to describe and study the ethnographic materials. In a 1911 essay ("The American Hunter-Naturalist," published in the popular magazine *The Outlook*), President Theodore Roosevelt praised the typical unpaid volunteer spirit of America's explorers and naturalists. Yet he compared Abbott unfavorably with naturalist and author Charles Sheldon, upbraiding Abbott for recording but not publishing his notes:

It is exasperating to think of certain of our naturalists and hunter-naturalists the value of whose really extraordinary achievements will wholly or in part die with them unless they realize the need of putting them on paper in the proper form....

Dr. Abbott's feats as a naturalist and explorer in Africa and in Asia have been extraordinary, but they have not been of more than the smallest fraction of the value that they should have been, simply because they have not been recorded. There are very few men alive whose experiences would be of more value than his, if they were written out. (Roosevelt 1911: 855)

During this period of Abbott's travels in Thailand, his Smithsonian correspondents began trying to encourage him to formally publish accounts of his expeditions and their results, but though Abbott continued an extensive personal, handwritten correspondence, their efforts to encourage publication were to little avail. On March 2, 1896, mammalogist F.W. True sent Abbott a long letter following up on discussions with the Smithsonian's Assistant Secretary Goode, about preparing "some account of the results of your explorations in Africa and Asia published in the Report of the Museum." Offering Abbott an outline of potential chapters of such a narrative, True wrote:

It occurred to me that possibly you might have an idea of producing such a narrative yourself, in which case you might not wish us to duplicate it. As I understand Dr. Goode's idea, it was to have a non technical account of your work somewhat after the style of Rockhill's Tibet, recently published by the Institution, a copy of which will go with this mail. Each separate expedition would be taken up in turn, and the scientific results in every connection dwelt on at sufficient length to bring out their importance. When we came to the zoological parts, we would put in lists of species, with annotations as far as possible, and dwell on the new forms discovered by you. It would probably be possible to get colored plates of the new birds and mammals, and other things. I have a notion that you have published something in the geographical line, but have not yet hunted it up.

Prior to responding, Abbott wrote about this to his mother, from Tyching (Trang) on May 6 of that year:

I received a letter from Prof. True at the Smithsonian a couple of weeks ago. A copy of Rockhill's Tibet, published by Smithsonian, was sent at same time. Prof. T[rue]. proposed that I should write a similar nar[r]ative of my travels. I have plenty of notes or had at one time but I have never been on ground that has not already been written about by some one else. Major Cumberland &

Lord Dunmore¹ between them covered about all the ground I went over in Turkestan, & of course Kashmir & Baltistan are long since played out. The islands in the Indian ocean Aldabra etc. have all been visited by the surveying steamers so there is really nothing to write about.

Assistant Secretary Goode must also have written to him directly on this topic (original letter not located); Abbott responded to him on July 15, 1896:

I must thank you very much for your kind letter of last January, in which you spoke of publishing some of my work in book form. I sent you from Penang a month ago, the notes of my Turkestan trip, they are the only notes of any of my trips that I had with me & have mislaid the others. The notes will need an awful lot of cutting & expurgation, as they were written on the spur of the moment. I shall be most deeply obliged to Mr. True if he acts as editor, am afraid he can never wade through the mass of notes of that one trip. Besides there really is nothing new about it, as almost the same ground was written about by Lord Dunmore & Major Cumberland the past two years.

Another reason for his refusal to “write up” his finds may lie in the perceived division of labor between the naturalist collector as assembler of objects with notes, and the museum scholar who takes the collected specimens and describes, studies, and publishes them. In fact the role of the field collector as separate from the scholar publishing his finds seems quaint today, but was commonly considered a kind of self-standing professionalism in the nineteenth century. In addition, we see in later, self-reflective documents within Abbott’s archival papers further reasons for this phenomenon. In March 1904, from his schooner off Lower Siam, en route between Malaya and the Mergui Archipelago, Abbott wrote to Otis Mason, “I am afraid I can’t write much myself for various reasons. I am a very bad observer, particularly of men. It is the new comer to the East who sees things. I have been out too long, and it is the West which seems strange to me.” Yet a review of his well-written correspondence reveals that he made no shortage of insightful observations, and also that Abbott was both at-home and out-of-place in every place, east or west.

A more likely reason for Abbott’s inability to write formal studies, despite his voluminous and well-written correspondence, seems to be his concern for completeness. In this respect, a formal study, like a collected specimen, should fill in a gap in science; it should add new knowledge in a clearly identified system of knowledge. Unless a contribution were therefore systematic, well-defined, and adding new knowledge, it would be best not to start. The same demon of “completeness”

¹ Charles Adolphus Murray Dunmore, *The Pamirs; being a Narrative of a Year’s Expedition on Horseback and on Foot through Kashmir, Western Tibet, Chinese Tartary, and Russian Central Asia* (London: J. Murray, 1893).

that helped drive his collecting also stopped his collecting impulse when he felt that he (or indeed anyone) had already obtained “one of each.” That is, one example of each *type* of local technology. Before embarking for the Nicobars, Abbott wonders in a letter to Mason, “I wonder if the Nicobars ... ha[ve] been thoroughly worked; lots of collectors have been there.” Abbott collected for an American museum, but he considered an area “worked” if it had been collected for museums anywhere. He felt scientists should be international, as he was. Smithsonian biologists pleaded unsuccessfully for Abbott to collect in Java, so they could more easily compare Abbott’s other specimens with examples from the Javanese “type localities” of many Indonesian birds and mammals. Yet the existence of such specimens in other collections made Java uninteresting to Abbott himself. Lower Siam beckoned to him largely because other scientific collectors had not been there first.

The current organization of archival documents and ethnographic collections

As mentioned above, the archival records of Abbott’s Thailand expeditions are spread among multiple locations including the National Anthropological Archives, the separate Smithsonian Archives (which stores the Registrar’s records for the National Museum of Natural History), the Mammals Library and Botany Library. To this we may add the handwritten labels, including many that can still be found that seem to be in Abbott’s original handwriting, tied to the ethnographic and biological specimens themselves. While some standardized information from those object labels (especially date of collection and locality) has been recorded within currently used digital databases of museum collections, other non-standard information, including local folk names for objects, birds, or mammals, has not been recorded and can only be found by seeking out the objects in collection storage.

The Thai collections within the Anthropology department of the Smithsonian have been the subject of considerable attention and care since the start of the “Heritage of Thailand” project in 1982, when the first Royal Gifts from Thailand exhibition was held at the National Museum of Natural History, curated by the present author (see Review, Bekker 1983). The move of the collections from the main museum building in Washington, D.C. to a dedicated, spacious research and storage facility (the Museum Support Center) in Suitland, Maryland, involved extensive conservation work and re-housing of the collections as well, during a period in which the use of paper catalog cards was superseded by digital databases allowing for easier public search of collections.

The digital databases for ethnographic collections are currently stored within a museum system known as “Emu”; this records information about each of 135 objects. However one catalog number is sometimes given to a set of similar objects or a set of objects thought to belong together. Therefore the total number of actual

objects exceeds the number of catalog entries. (Taylor 2006c discusses this in detail with reference to Smithsonian collections from a 1926 expedition to the Netherlands East Indies.)

The labels on the objects themselves generally give the cultural or ethnic group of the people who made it, using contemporaneous terminology from Abbott's day (e.g. "Siamese," "Malay," or either "Chow pah" or "Negrito" meaning the "forest people" of Trang), and sometimes locality or date along with other information. In this way, the handwritten labels Abbott tied to ethnographic objects are very comparable to the labels tied to the bird, mammal, or other biological specimens collected. However one reason for beginning any study of these collections with a study of Abbott's archival correspondence and documents is that sometimes information there supplements or corrects information given on these labels. These points can briefly be illustrated by a few examples, such as the "Fish-trap" from "Trong [sic], Lower Siam" (Figure 3) that Abbott sent to the Museum in 1896 (Ethnology catalog # 176033); this meager information on catalog cards or in digital databases is supplemented by additional information on the handwritten label (Figure 4).

Substantially more context to these collections is provided by considering the entirety of Abbott's archival documents, which can indicate collecting biases and reasons for the selection of items he collected. Sometimes he wrote detailed information about individual objects, such as the object seen in Figure 5, an irrigation scoop about which he wrote within a long letter to Smithsonian Assistant



Figure 3 (left). Fish trap, collected 1896, Ethnology catalog # E176033 (any bits of plant fiber that fell off during re-housing of the collections were saved in the plastic bag affixed to the trap).

Figure 4 (below). Original handwritten label, with later added label and currently used barcode label referencing the digital database of ethnographic objects, Ethnology catalog # E176033. "Trap for small fish. Siamese name Kóng cha plá. Trong, Lower Siam. The bait is put in the inner basket, then trap is stood upright in shallow water."



Secretary G. Browne Goode on August 9, 1896 about the boxes of materials he was then sending from “Trong, Lower Siam.” The second page of this letter is shown in Figure 6 and it has a small hand-drawn image of the object. (The difficult-to-read handwriting in this sample letter will also indicate the importance for our project of properly transcribing these documents as part of the study of this collection.)

I made a mistake (in part) in one of the labels, upon one of the fishing implements or scoop it is the one shaped as [see Figure 5] in section, a basket open on top & at the larger end & with a stick running lengthwise above it. The label states it to be a fishing implement, but it is also an instrument for raising water. It is slung beneath a tripod of 3 sticks & the water scooped up & “chucked” into the paddy fields. It is only used when it is unusually dry, like the present time, & the paddy field stands a few inches above the water level. A few traps have been taken apart to make them pack closer, but I have tried to explain on the labels how to put them together again. If no one can understand the explanations, they had better remain until I can put them together myself. The cases are to be forwarded by T. L. Gosling & Co. Penang, who will send you the Bill of Lading.




Figure 5. Irrigation scoop, collected at “Trong [sic], Lower Siam”, 1896. Basketry with wooden frame. Length 80 cm.

There are many other such examples of new information about collection objects contained within the archival correspondence, but among the most important are the indicators of why Abbott chose to selectively collect, or was able to preserve and send, the kinds of material that now form the museum collections he assembled. This can perhaps best be summarized within the brief description of the chronology of his expeditions in southern Thailand.

Of the 135 cataloged “objects” in the collection, 33 were listed in the registrarial

2/ descriptions, & I am looking forward to it with great anticipation. So far I have certainly been disappointed in the country, but I have not been the right place.

I made a mistake ^(in part) in one of the labels upon one of the fishing implements, it is the one shaped as  in section, a bucket open at the top & at the large end & with a stick running lengthwise above it. The label states it to be a fishing implement, but it is ^{also} an instrument for raising water. It is slung beneath a tripod of 3 sticks & the water scooped up & "chucked" into the paddy fields. It is only used when it is unusually dry, like the present time, & the paddy field stands a few inches above the water level. A few traps have been taken apart to make them pack closer, but I have tried to explain on the labels how to put them together again. If no one can understand the explanation, they had better remain until I can put them together myself.

The cases are to be forwarded by J. L. Gosling & Co. Penang who will send you the Bill of Lading.

I send very truly
W. L. Abbott

To Prof. G. Browne Esq
Asst. Sec. Smithsonian
My address remains Penang, Straits Settlements. S. London

Figure 6. Extract of letter from Abbott to Smithsonian Assistant Secretary G. Browne Goode, dated August 9, 1896.

process as having more than one "specimen". This can cause confusion when a single object contains more than one component. For example, the aforementioned "irrigation scoop" (one catalog number E176057) is listed as containing two specimens, but there is in fact only one scoop made up of two parts: the scoop and the wooden handle. Other examples of this confusion include the two sets of poisoned arrows: E202848 is listed as a single "specimen" as well as a single catalog entry (though described in documents as "Quiver Full of 33 Arrows, Poisoned") while E202849 is listed as two "specimens" (described as "Quiver, Full of 22 Arrows, Poisoned"). So the object and specimen counts in these online records must be treated like a bad index in a good book – useful, but not to be relied upon. The collections include fourteen listings for baskets, including five described as "box basket for Betel and Siri" [sic] (all with individual entries), two fish-catching baskets (not to be confused with the nine "fish traps"), and two bird snares. The vast majority of the entries do not list a culture group in the database (often information contained in the catalog cards is not included), although six entries are listed as "Lao (Laotian)",

two “Malay”, fifteen “Siamese”, and six “Negrito”. Further, five entries are listed as coming from the Province/State of “Trang” or “Trong”.

Abbott’s travels in Thailand

After considerable traveling in Africa, Abbott had begun a series of expeditions in northern India and Central Asia in 1891, returning however to Madagascar in 1895 where he fought alongside the Hovas against French colonialists, before coming back to Kashmir in the Fall of 1895. By November of that year he was longing to return to the tropics, and to begin the visits to Southeast Asia where he later spent most of his time as a naturalist collector. In a letter written at Nagmarg, Kashmir in November 1895, he complained that he was tired of the place, and that he intended to:

stick it out here until the first of the year & then I am off for the tropics again & I hope I may never be ass enough ever to leave them again. I might be down in the Malay archipelago in Borneo or Celebes [...] where existence itself is paradise & here I am fool enough to waste time up here in this infernal northern climate. There is very little chance of my coming to America this spring. I am never going to leave the Tropics again. This is simply wasting time in Kashmir. Life is easy & pleasant & healthy, but shooting is done for as far as I am concerned. I have never had any decent sport here from some cause or other. Hot climate always suits me & makes me energetic while cold always sucks the life & energy right out of me.

He adds, “Most Europeans do not do well in the Tropics because they will not keep clear of alcohol & dont take sufficient exercise”; he recommends that his family should read the “new book just out,” *Malay Sketches* by F. Swettenham (1895), if they “want to know something of the land where I am going.”

From many of his letters, it is clear that Abbott preferred the most unexplored localities for his collecting activity. In a letter to Smithsonian mammalogist True, dated February 18, 1896, he wrote:

I left Kashmir in January & came down to the Malay Peninsula. My intention was to go into Perak & Selangor, but it is too much civilized there now, railways, roads, & planters, so I determined to come up here to Lower Siam. As far as I know, no naturalist or collector has been in the country lying between Kedah (near Penang) & the isthmus of Kra. Besides it is drier here, while lower down in the peninsula it rains every day in the year. [...] Shall probably be able to shoot *Rhinoceros sondaicus* & *Bos gaurus* here, but how I can preserve the skins is another matter unless the weather is unusually dry. I have no casks with me, & cant get them in this place. There is a great tract of country lying to the

north all the way up to Siam proper that seems very little known, & shall be able to make good collections particularly in Ethnology.

Writing to his sister Gertrude Abbott, in a letter from sometime in January or February 1896, he is more specific about how he came to the decision to enter Siam:

The Supt. [Superintendent] of the Penang botanic gardens advised me to go to Siamese Territory near the isthmus of Kra. Yesterday I called on Mr. Wray the curator of the Perak Museum in Thaiping. The collection of mammals & birds is ruined by bad taxidermy—but the collections of ethnology especially those of Malay Krises & other weapons is simply magnificent. It made my mouth water to get off among the wild tribes again in the jungles. The workmanship of the Malay Krises was wonderful, fully equal to that of any Damascus blades, a fine Kris is worth anywhere from 50 to 200 dollars. However nowadays since the British occupation, the carrying of arms is forbidden & the making of Krises & swords is becoming a lost art. I shall still find plenty up in Lower Siam. The old Malay embroidery & the ornamented mats & silk sarongs (petticoats) are very beautiful, but also becoming things of the past.

I called upon the Siamese Consul in Penang & asked him about going into Siamese territory. The consul (a German or a Belgian I think) questioned me particularly as to my objects, & finding that I am an American & a naturalist & not a geologist he said there would be no difficulty at all. You see the Siamese are like other oriental races they dont want their country grabbed by foreigners. They are being squeezed by the French now in a most scandalous manner. Well a geologist finds mineral wealth in a place & there is no keeping foreigners out after that information gets abroad. The consul sent me to see the Governor (he was on a visit to Penang) of Trang—a Malay state lying north of Penang about 100 miles & belonging to Siam. I found the Governor to be a Chinaman, but a Siamese subject. He spoke a little English & was very decent—said I would find no difficulty—that I could easily get about on elephants & carry my baggage in the same way—that there were plenty of tigers & other game. So I have made up my mind to go there. I have a virgin land before me. Here in Perak until within a few years all travel was upon elephants, now there are roads pretty generally except in Upper Perak, which is still in statu quo [*sic*]. You see it is just as easy to work a new place as a well known one, & the results in a new place are far more valuable. [...] Say nothing to anyone particularly in Germany about my plan of going into Siam. I dont want any other naturalist or collector coming near me. Another advantage of being further north is that the rainfall is less & it is comparatively dry at this season, partly due to the mountains being lower as one approaches the isthmus of Kra. Here it is so wet at all seasons, as to make the preservation of natural history specimens a matter of extreme difficulty.

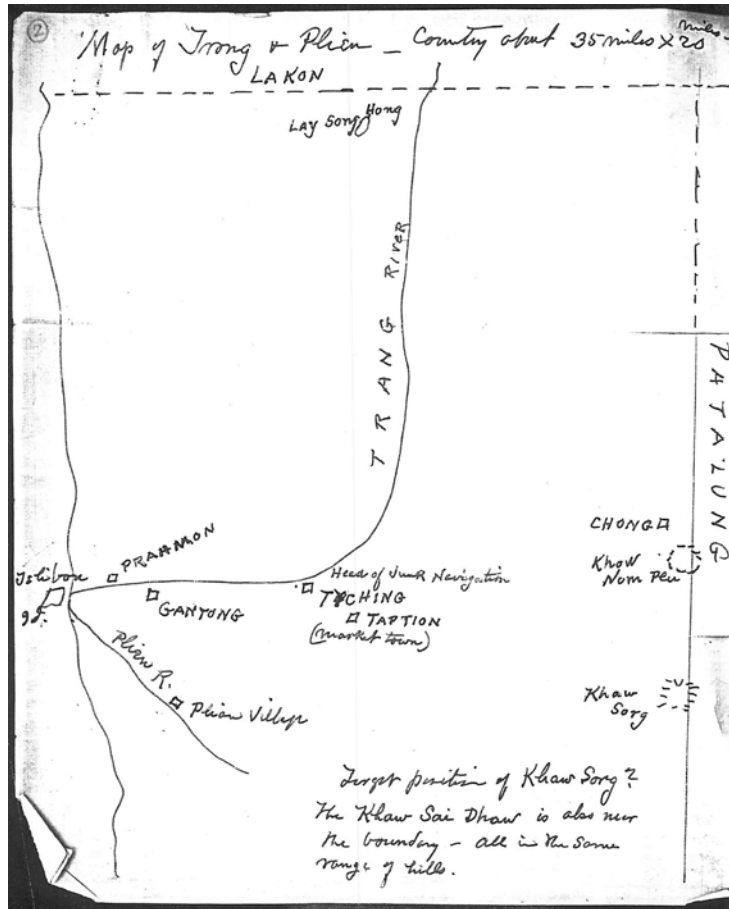


Figure 7. This “sketch map of Trong [Trang], with my collecting stations marked” is likely the map referenced as being enclosed in Abbott’s June 5, 1897 letter to ornithologist Richmond.

We can piece together the sequence of Abbott’s travels on his two Lower Siam expeditions from the archival correspondence, from observing date and locality information (where available) on objects collected, and from his own summaries – especially, for his first expedition, the June 5, 1897 letter to ornithologist Richmond describing his travels in Trang, and enclosing what he referred to as his “sketch map of Trong, with my collecting stations marked.” He writes: “As is the case with the whole of the Siamese part of the Malay peninsula, the country is unsurveyed & unmapped. Although the country is populous and anything but a wilderness, it is terra incognita to Europeans.”

Within Abbott’s archival correspondence, this sketch map (Figure 7), along with another map apparently made in part from it (Figure 8) have been located.

Abbott arrived in Trang during a time when Siam had entered a period of dramatic change under the “Great Modernizer,” King Chulalongkorn. This was also a period of great westernization, from the creation of ministries mirroring European style government, to increasing influences of globalization visible even in Thailand’s

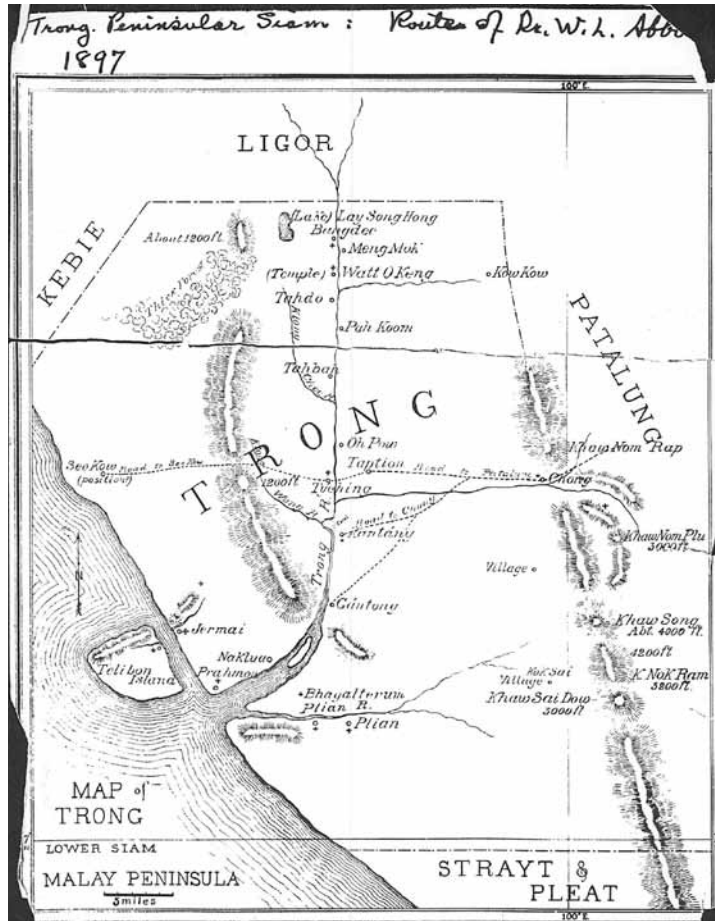


Figure 8. Ink-drawn map of “Trong, Peninsular Siam: Routes of Dr. W.L. Abbott, 1897” (Smithsonian archives.)

most remote localities. This was also a time of significant external pressure on Thailand from European powers. These were all influences that Abbott observed and wrote about in his correspondence with his family and with museum scientists.

He was immediately impressed by Thailand’s western influences, from his first arrival from Penang, at Trong’s capital whose name he usually writes “Gantong” (as on the sketch map). For example, he writes in a letter of February 18, 1896 to his mother (whose dateline reads “Canton. Province of Trong” illustrating a few of his many spelling variations, e.g. “Trong” in the dateline but Trong in the letter’s text below):

Passing a large island on our left (north), we then entered a large river, with mangrove swamps on both sides. A few miles up passed a small village & a rather trim looking gunboat, flying Siamese colors, was anchored opposite to it. She looked, externally at least, very neat & clean & a Marine stood sentry at the gangway. We had to anchor an hour or so for the tide, & then came on

up to this small place. It is a brand new village, the residence of the Governor of Trang. It stands partly in a swamp, but has wide embankments, the future streets, running at right angles across the swamp. The governor has been in Hong Kong & India, & imbibed Western ideas. I found the Governor standing on the pier when we tied up. (I had called on him 2 weeks ago when he was in Penang). So he was very friendly. He is a Chinaman & speaks English. I gave him my letters from the Siamese consul, & told him my difficulties about servants. He said he would fix everything all right for me, & he has done so. [...]

All the low lands near the sea & rivers are thinly inhabited. I suppose because of the attacks of Malay pirates who until within the last 50 or 60 years used to ravage the coasts & even attack European ships throughout the Eastern archipelago. These low lands are very fertile, for that reason they have put this new capital here, to try & induce the people to settle in the lowlands. [...]

The Chinese Governor tells me that 5 years ago, everything was unsettled, robberies & murders of daily occurrence [*sic*] & the place full of dacoits. Now crime is unheard of & property is absolutely safe. He is very proud of what he has done. I asked him if there was any fighting with the dacoits. He said no. Every village headman has to report the presence of any strangers, no man can go about, without giving an account of himself, so that it is simply impossible for a robber to hide in the country. It is practically the English system in Burmah. That is the advantage of the Governor having been a travelled man.

Regarding Siam's pressure from encroaching European colonies that surrounded the country, Abbott's anti-missionary and anti-colonial stance is clear from his writing, just as it had been when he joined the independent Hovas in Madagascar to fight the French colonialists, then left that country after France's victory lest he be captured and shot for his aiding the enemy. His collecting on behalf of America's national museum seems connected in his mind with increasing his nation's prestige, not its imperialist expansion. In fact when America acquired the Philippines from Spain after the Spanish-American War of 1898, Abbott opposed America's governance and never went there.

From his collecting station at Tyching, where he received international news sent by his family, he wrote on May 6, 1896 to his mother, using an unacceptably derogatory slang word "Dagos" (meaning Italians or Spaniards):

Was immensely pleased with the news of the defeat of the Dagos in Abyssinia. I wish every white man in the continent of Africa was butchered the same way—none of them have any business there—only to rob, plunder & steal—& what is more nearly every one who has been in Africa admits the truth of it when he is cornered up—unless it be some lying hypocrite like Stanley. [...]

Every European power is looking for some weaker nation which it may bully & rob with impunity, & the Monroe doctrine² is to prevent this same process being extended to America.

Similarly, he had earlier (March 16, 1896) written to his mother from Prahmon, opposite Telibon Island, Trang (underlining of the Anglo-Indian slang expression “puckro” meaning “seize” is in the original):

There is no doubt but that the English will grab the rest of this peninsula in a few years, allowing the French to puckro the rest of Siam. It is a beastly shame & not a shadow of excuse. It is far pleasanter here under a native ruler than under British or any European government—& you see why I am such a believer in Monroe doctrine. I dont want to see any of this land grabbing which has been going on all over the East, applied to any part of America.

Abbott’s collecting method and his motivation

Today it does not seem unusual to search the archival record for information on Abbott’s motivations for this extraordinary life of self-financed collecting and donating, partly because his life was so extraordinary and partly because understanding the collector then helps us interpret the collections now. Yet in Abbott’s time the unpaid volunteer spirit of naturalist collectors was considered an American ideal in itself, something worthy of great respect among the wealthy classes in this rapidly growing nation with a universal high regard for the sciences. Given that Abbott had the means to become a great collector and donor (especially since he never married and had no children to provide for), his contemporaries might have critiqued him or speculated on his “motivations” only if he failed to collect and to donate.

Many of Abbott’s motivations, however, are replete with contradictions. Abbott was uncomfortable in his own country, and often caustic in his observations of his countrymen. Yet patriotic duty was certainly Abbott’s motive for adopting the U.S. National Museum as the recipient of his collections, and for Abbott’s lifelong efforts to help that museum compete with its European rivals such as the British Museum. Abbott (who had studied in England and lived in many European countries, and whose mother and sister annually made their summer home in Norway) could resoundingly denigrate his own government and people, but still insist on nationalism as a motive for action. For example, Abbott rushed to fight in the Spanish-American War, and tried (unsuccessfully, due to his age and health) to volunteer for the First World War. He stopped payments in wartime to military-aged American collectors

² Abbott refers to U.S. President Monroe’s 1823 address to Congress expounding a foreign policy in which European countries should not be allowed to colonize America or the western hemisphere, in return for which the U.S. would remain aloof from European quarrels.

for the Smithsonian, insisting it was more proper that they volunteer their services for war. Abbott's own beloved nephew Awley, to whom Abbott had always been the source of fatherly advice as well as financial support, was killed in battle when Abbott insisted he volunteer for combat at the outbreak of the First World War. No principles other than patriotism were involved. Abbott similarly expected the nationals of every other country to do their duty, and he respected all who did. Just as he expected them to build their own museum collections.

While Abbott often seems to assess himself and his accomplishments harshly, he nowhere admits any failure to perform his duty to his country or to his family members. Other goals, though, were Abbott's choice, not his duty. One of his chosen goals, for example, was obviously the development of science through collecting. Yet even here, one might argue that science would have been better served by placing collections where they could best be studied, which at that time would have meant a larger European museum. From Abbott's choice of repository we can infer that national duty was a motivating factor of higher importance than his goal of helping science. Similarly, science would better have been served by writing more about the collections rather than leaving unpublished material for others.

In 1903 he assured Mason he had "tried to give as full labels to objects as possible." "The Malays," he added, "are now much more communicative on the subject of their customs and superstitions than they formerly were when I first came." Yet he adds, "At least 10 years steady work would be necessary for a decently thorough investigation of the first tribes of the Peninsula." That steady work was not for Abbott.

Other explanations for Abbott's lifestyle of constant travel and collecting might be found in "push" factors rather than "pull" factors. On the one hand, in almost every place he visits he longs to be elsewhere. In Africa he cannot wait to get to India; in India he lusts for the Malay archipelago, and so on. This is the traveling counterpart to his unease in America and even Europe. He unfavorably compares distant places to America with the same thoroughness he uses to condemn aspects of his homeland. He alternates between the joy of his own camp in a new place, and being "sick of camping & traveling day after day." By 1899, he found the solution to his dilemma by outfitting and "settling" in his own schooner in which he traveled through the Netherlands East Indies for the next ten years.

Yet Abbott's archival record is replete with evidence for his enthusiasm and sheer delight at travel, at new places, at hunting or searching for new trophies. The nature of those "trophies" changes in important ways as Abbott matures. In his early travels in East Africa and Central Asia, big-game trophy-hunting is the primary focus of his attention, the goal to which other activities are subordinated. He chooses the "nullahs" or valleys of the Himalayas for good "sport," seeking charismatic species like rare mountain sheep or snow leopards. Trapping small game and collecting anthropological artifacts are secondary activities. Over time, though,

he becomes more dissatisfied with the unnecessary killing of big game by hunters, writing that he has become “positively Buddhist” about that. His interest turns to discovering forms that are *new* to science. Such finds are of course more likely among the small mammals, indiscreet birds, and the manufactures of little-known peoples. As a mature scientist, then, Abbott saw his role as one of “filling in gaps” in the developing natural sciences, and found joy in being the first to find new species or indigenous manufactures. His transformation from the gentleman sportsman and hunter into the naturalist collector and donor was complete.

As a naturalist collector, the biological model prevailed in his anthropological collecting (and in fact he simultaneously assembled biological and anthropological collections everywhere he traveled, though sometimes emphasizing one kind over another). This may partly explain his general failure to “write up” his finds, other than as expanded labels. Abbott clearly seems to have thought that it was the job of museum anthropologists to “describe” (meaning, by implication, “describe within a classificatory and interpretive system”) the basketry, carvings, shields, charms, weapons, musical instruments, personal ornaments, clothing, and other artifacts he sent them. This was, after all, the case with the vertebrate and invertebrate zoological specimens collected, from which extensive published discussions and many new, previously unrecorded species did result. He, by contrast, tried to “document” each kind of collection in the ways specialists of the time required.

The collector and his museum

To what extent was Abbott influenced by the museum’s collection policies and research priorities? To what extent were the museum’s research and collection policies influenced by Abbott and his collections? We can examine these questions thanks to the extensive record of correspondence from the 1880s to the 1930s between Abbott and scientists in the museum’s various “departments.”

Those who collect biological specimens, as Abbott did, have always been dependent on public museums as repositories. Unlike artworks, most zoological specimens require regular and careful attention to their physical preservation. A few exceptional forms (shells, some fossils, some easily dried and colorful specimens like butterflies) have extensive amateur collecting traditions outside the museum environment, but the physical storage and preservation requirements of most biological taxa make it difficult for amateurs permanently to store their own collections.

Perhaps more importantly, collectors depended on museums because each specimen’s value to science derived largely from its placement within an ever-growing taxonomic system. “Identifying” each specimen (i.e., placing it in that system) required that the specimen be compared to those in other collections. The taxonomic status of specimens from little-known areas requires regular re-assessment by specialists as collections throughout the world acquire more and more specimens

of any particular taxon. This same process of revising the taxonomy was used to identify new species, based upon “type specimens” in a collection. Each new species can only be described on the basis of a “holotype,” the defining individual used in describing that species. Holotypes make up the most valuable part of a biological collection, and large numbers of new species were indeed named at the Smithsonian using Abbott’s specimens as holotypes.

The encouragement for ethnographic collecting was not only from Mason to Abbott; each encouraged the other. Mason, the elderly museum scholar in poor health, was very attracted to Abbott’s adventuresome travels in the tropics. This mutually satisfying relationship, carried out through regular correspondence between Mason in his office and Abbott in the field, undoubtedly contributed to the great increase in Abbott’s Indonesian ethnology collecting after 1903, as well as to Mason’s abandonment of American Indian for Southeast Asian studies. In 1907 he told a colleague that his heart was “now in Malaysia, with my proto-Americans” (Hinsley 1981: 114). Yet Mason’s individual change also reflected the internationalization of America’s interests, after a war in the Pacific and Caribbean, and the acquisition of the Philippine colony (1898). In a January 1905 memorandum urging that an appropriate Smithsonian honor be bestowed upon Abbott, Mason wrote that the value of Abbott’s Southeast Asian collections “cannot be overestimated. Since the United States Government has come into possession of the Philippine Islands, the Abbott material will serve for a comparison of the peoples living in different portions of the same great ethnic area.”

In searching for the criteria Abbott used to form his collection, it is clear he considered that even the simplest technology could be either poorly made or *well* made, and he preferred only to collect the latter. It often seems that his goal of “completeness” in a series of manufactures requires only one of each type -- *not* an example of the range of quality nor even an example of the “median” or “most common” of a particular type. So, for example, he writes of his Nicobar collection:

The Nicobars proved very interesting indeed. I obtained a pretty complete collection of their household goods, etc., at Kar Nicobar, but not models of their houses or canoes. Those which were made were so badly constructed as to be worthless. In some ways, the Kar Nicobarese are the least interesting of the group, inasmuch as they are not artists in wood carving which the natives of the central group are. In the central group, (Nankauri, Kamata, Trinkut, and Kachal), every house is a perfect ethnological museum. Figures of men, women, crocodiles, dogs, devils, birds, *pictures*, besides spears, fish trays, nets, baskets, cooking utensils. I have never seen anything like it. The figures are life size downwards. These figures are not idols. Every man and woman has one or more life sized human figures which he calls himself. These he watches over and takes care of, for he says should any harm come to the figure, he himself would die.

Finally, Abbott seems to have been interested in the conceptual importance that Mason gave to man's ingenuity in inventing objects to satisfy human wants, and his frequent search for examples of a kind of "convergent evolution" of human technology, in which like needs produce like inventions, without diffusion or borrowing. In 1902 he wrote from Singapore:

I got some Jakun traps for catching squirrels, etc., but unfortunately they are too dry and broken to show anything. They were quite ingenious and very similar to some I observed amongst the Antanala in Madagascar. A case of a similar *want* producing a similar *result*. Still, their *blowpipes* were also similar. I expect to go among the Jakuns again this next trip and will get some better specimens.

Such examples of convergent evolution were important to evolutionary theories espoused by Mason, and used as the basis for exhibits of the time at the Smithsonian. They indicated that mankind passed through stages of evolution everywhere, and that the laws governing evolution could be sought apart from the particular historical circumstances of each people. Though such ideas can be recognized in passages such as the one quoted above, they are never developed in Abbott's correspondence into any theoretical system. Yet they clearly provided the theoretical underpinning and justification of his vast collecting.

More fundamentally, the fact that evolution could be studied through material culture reflects a basic presumption of Mason (and other Smithsonian ethnologists): material culture and ideational culture evolved together as one passed from savagery to barbarism to civilization. Both could be studied through the establishment of typologies, and the study of the cultural-historical sequences in which those types developed throughout the world. Information about material culture could predict ideational culture, and vice versa. Abbott realized that, if he could gather one representative example of every product of technology of every people, the data required to quite fully study the pressing ethnological scientific issues of the day (the regularities in the sequence of human evolution around the world) would be "complete." *Others* (like Mason) could draw and argue over conclusions; Abbott would provide the data they needed.

Yet Abbott himself (like his ethnologist correspondents at the Smithsonian, Otis Mason and Walter Hough) seems to have misunderstood the changing research priorities within contemporary anthropology, especially the strong movement away from the study of material culture that had begun by the turn of the century (as measured, for example, by the proportional decline in practicing museum anthropologists, and the rapid decline after 1900 of the percentage of American published papers on ethnology concerned at least in part with material culture—see Sturtevant 1969: 623-7).

The usefulness of Abbott's information and collections for research today

With regard to his collecting activities, and the collections he sent to the Smithsonian from Thailand, a very productive mode of recent scholarship places objects in historical and ethnographic context by taking images and information about legacy collections back to the descendants of those who produced them, engaging descendants of the peoples who created museum objects with their interpretation and presentation (e.g. Ames 1980, 1990, 2003, Dudding 2005, Rosoff 1998, Sagita 2008, Smith et al. 2010). “Re-visiting” historic expeditions now (Taylor 2006a) provides opportunities to ask the descendants of peoples such as those whom Abbott visited to help interpret objects, photographs, and archival narratives—a technique successfully used in many of the recent studies listed above. Studies of how indigenous technologies change through time can benefit from the comparison of collections Abbott made with technologies in use today. It is, of course, highly unlikely that any modern study of material culture would revive Mason’s typological methods or have as its goal the establishment of culture-historical sequences like those Mason posited. But many studies of Southeast Asian material culture (e.g. Adams 1969; Barbier 1977; Davenport 1988; Feldman 1985; Gittinger 1979, 1980; Hamilton 1994; Holmgren and Spertus 1989; Schefold 1980; Rodgers 1985; Taylor and Aragon 1991; Taylor 1995, 2006b) and other studies have illustrated the importance of relating historically documented museum specimens to locally obtained ethnographic information, or have emphasized the importance for this purpose of local museums such as those within Indonesia (Taylor 1994). Bringing together museum artifacts and the “missing” ethnographic information about them serves partly as a means of improving documentation of the old museum artifacts. It is also a rich source of data on indigenous systems of beliefs and symbols, on the history of indigenous technologies, and on intercultural contacts of all kinds. For this reason, the material Abbott collected for his own purposes can be reconsidered, in light of new information. The publication of Abbott’s collections (e.g. Taylor and Hamilton 1992) and his archival records (Taylor *in press*) should contribute toward these goals.

It is my hope that contemporary ethnographers in Thailand, and descendants of the people Abbott visited and studied, will also use this information in the field.

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