



Dean Worcester's Photographs and American Perceptions of the Philippines

By Mark Rice



Photo from the Dean C. Worcester Photograph Collection, University of Michigan, at <http://tiny.cc/jrpaq>.

When the US acquired its overseas colonies in the aftermath of the Spanish American War, photography quickly established itself as part of the colonial project. Photographs in magazines and newspapers brought the war home to American readers. Postcards and stereographs were popular consumer objects. Illustrated travel books, detailing the landscapes and peoples of the new colonies, were bestsellers. Photographs could provide visual evidence of the supposedly backward state of the colonies, which, in turn, could help to bolster arguments that the US was acting in the benevolent interests of the newly colonized peoples.

For a variety of reasons, photography played a more prominent role in affirming the US colonial agenda in the Philippines than it did in Cuba, Guam, or Puerto Rico. For one, the distance of the Philippines from the United States made it seem more exotic than either Cuba or Puerto Rico. The Philippines also contained a sizable non-Christian population, including Muslims in the southern part of the archipelago and animist groups in many of the mountainous regions of the islands, whose customs and costumes seemed both odd and fascinating to many Americans. In addition, there was the active resistance of Filipinos to US colonialism, making that colony more problematic than the others and helping to pique the interest of many Americans about the Philippines.

One other reason why photography played such a prominent role in US colonialism in the Philippines was that Dean Conant Worcester, one of the most prominent American colonial administrators working in the Philippines, realized photography's ability to sway public opinion. What follows is the story of how, in his publications, in numerous public speeches, but most importantly, in his photographs, Worcester successfully influenced substantial numbers of Americans to share his beliefs that Filipinos were much too backward for political independence and that the US should control the archipelago for a long time.

Worcester (1866–1924) served as the secretary of the interior for the US Insular Government in the Philippines from 1901 to 1913. As the longest-serving member of the colonial administration in the Philippines in the years before the first world war, he wielded enormous influence in developing



The Second Philippine Commission, from left: Dean C. Worcester, Henry Clay Ide, William Howard Taft, Bernard Moses, and Luke Wright. Source: *Philippine-American War, 1899–1902* by Arnaldo at <http://tiny.cc/zrjkk>.

Worcester used his photographs in government reports, in two books he published at either end of his career, and in a great many magazine articles, most significantly in *The National Geographic Magazine*.

official policies and procedures for governing the colony. As historian Peter W. Stanley writes:

Apart from education, transportation, and the original modification of Philippines legal codes, Worcester had responsibility for every key program of the American civil government. Public health, public lands, agriculture (until 1910), ethnic and religious minorities, forestry, mining, fisheries, and even government laboratories and the implementation of the American Pure Food and Drug Act fell under his authority.¹

Firmly committed to the American colonial agenda in the Philippines, Worcester believed that Filipinos were unfit for self-government, and he used his authority to exert as much influence as he could to ensure that the US would maintain control in the Philippines for as long as possible.

These facts of Worcester's career are generally known. What is less known—but no less important—is that Worcester was a prolific and skilled photographer who amassed and controlled an archive of several thousand photographs. Worcester's archive contained his own photographs as well as photographs by some of the people who worked for him, the most significant of who was Charles Martin. (Martin would later become the first director of the photography lab for *The National Geographic Magazine*.) While many historians have noted the substantial amounts of photography in books and magazine articles about the Philippines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, few have realized the extent to which Worcester was instrumental in influencing what kinds of photographs were made there and what kinds of photographs of the Philippines were published in the United States. Worcester used his photographs in government reports, in two books he published at either end of his career, and in a great many magazine articles, most significantly in *The National Geographic Magazine*.

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Figure 1: Tagbanua women harvesting rice, Calaminanes Islands, from *The National Geographic Magazine*, May 1903. (Photo: Dean C. Worcester)

It is hard to overstate *The National Geographic Magazine's* importance as a primary source of information about the world for middle class American readers through much of the twentieth century. First published in 1888, the magazine printed its first photograph in 1890, a move that led some readers to believe that the magazine risked losing its reputation as a serious journal for scientific and academic elites. Photography proved popular with readers, however, and at the turn of the new century, the magazine saw its readership increasingly rapidly, especially among middle class professionals. In 1900, the magazine had around 3,000 subscribers; by 1915, that number had risen to over 400,000. During that same period, more than thirty articles about the Philippines appeared in *The National Geographic Magazine*, many of which were extensively illustrated with photographs from the Worcester archive. By way of comparison, only eight articles were published about Puerto Rico in the same period, most of which were not illustrated at all. Significantly, when *The National Geographic Magazine* established its official policy to approve the publication of photographs of bare-breasted “native” women—photographs that became a staple of the magazine through much of the twentieth century—it was a Worcester photograph of two Tagbanua women standing in a rice field that set the precedent. That photograph appeared in a May 1903 article in the magazine (Figure 1), titled “American Development of the Philippines.”²

Worcester was born in Thetford, Vermont, and attended college at the University of Michigan, where he majored in zoology. His first exposure to the Philippines came in 1887 when he traveled to the islands as a student member of the J.B. Steere zoological expedition. He finished his degree when he returned to Ann Arbor the following year. In 1890, he headed back to the Philippines as one of two members of the Menage zoological expedition, returning to the US in 1893. Because of these expeditions, Worcester was able to assert himself as an authority on the Philippines at the onset of the Spanish-American War in 1898. Indeed, he quickly found himself in demand as a lecturer about the Philippines in 1898, and he penned a number of magazine and newspaper articles in which he asserted the importance of the US assuming control over the islands. He expanded on that theme in his book, *The Philippine Islands and Their People* (1898), the book that propelled him to his career as a colonial administrator.

The Philippine Islands and Their People is illustrated with photographs made on the Menage expedition, but his partner, Frank Bourns, was the primary photographer of that expedition. Prior to his return to the Philippines in

early 1899 as a member of the first Philippine Commission (also known as the Schurman Commission), Worcester purchased his own camera to bring with him. In a letter to Douglas Flattery of the Loews Theatre Company, dated November 13, 1912, Worcester noted, “photography has been my recreation during the past fourteen years,” explicitly linking the start of his photographic activities to the same year that he embarked on his government career.³

When he accepted a position on the Schurman Commission, Worcester left his academic career behind. He didn’t have a clear sense of what the future held for him, but he certainly had no way of anticipating how long his career in the Philippines would end up lasting. Having enjoyed the taste of fame that his lectures brought him in the months leading up to his appointment, it is possible—perhaps even likely—that he took up photography in order to get images for future lectures. Indeed, he resumed lecturing about the Philippines when he returned to the US in 1899. In a letter to his mother dated December 21, 1899, Worcester wrote:

*You are quite right in your surmise that I have been busy since my return. As you know, I had to prepare for a lecture on “The Peoples of the Philippines” for the Geographic Society. I had some fifty new lantern slides made, and spent a large amount of time in translating a Spanish monograph on the manners and customs of many of the wild tribes with which I never came in contact. Finding that it would be impossible to bring all that needed to be said within the limits of a single lecture, I arranged for two.*⁴

In the same letter, Worcester hinted at what would become his standard practice in describing the Philippines—highlighting divisions based on language and religion, rather than viewing the Philippines as a single country. The first of his two lectures was on “the pagan tribes,” and he reported that the auditorium, which held over 1,200 people, was full. The second lecture, scheduled for January 5, 1900, was to be on “the Mohammedan and Christian tribes.”

Worcester returned to the Philippines in 1900. He was the only member of the Schurman Commission who was appointed as a member of the Second Philippine Commission (also known as the Taft Commission). While assuming his new responsibilities as secretary of the interior, Worcester also resumed his photographic activities. These photographs made their way into numerous publications, including Alfred Jenks’s influential 1904 book, *The Bontoc Igorot*. The historian Alfred McCoy argues that “Jenks did more to create lasting im-

ages of the Philippines and Filipinos than any American scholar of his generation”—more than any other scholar, perhaps, but certainly not more than Worcester, for whom Jenks worked as assistant chief of the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes, which was housed within Worcester’s Department of Interior.⁵

By 1905, Worcester had amassed an archive of roughly 8,000 photographs, the majority of which took non-Christian Filipinos for the subject. That year, he sold an edition of around 5,000 of his photographs to Edward Ayer, a timber tycoon from Chicago who met Worcester in Manila. Ayer, who was part of the Board of Trustees of Chicago’s Newberry Library, placed the photographs in the Newberry, where they remain available for researchers. He also made copies of the photographs for Chicago’s Field Museum.

At Ayer’s request, Worcester prepared an index for the photographs that he sold Ayer, and this index provides important insights into Worcester’s belief in cultural hierarchies and his perceptions about how different culture groups in the Philippines could be placed on a continuum. Ayer requested that Worcester’s index of photographs be based on the thirty-six linguistic groups that Worcester said he had identified in the Philippines, and that the first group of photographs should be the Tagalog-speaking Filipinos—the majority group in and around Manila. Worcester describes the Tagalogs as “one of the most important, if not the most important, of the civilized tribes of the Philippine Islands . . . The Tagalogs were largely responsible for the recent insurrection against the United States.”⁶

Worcester did not fully comply with Ayer’s request regarding the index. Instead of the Tagalogs, he placed the Negritos as the first group. For Worcester, the Negritos were the most primitive people in the Philippines. Indeed, Worcester frequently expressed his opinion that the Negritos were destined for extinction. In the index, he writes:

*They are dwarfish in stature, with very dark skins and closely curling hair. They come practically at the bottom of the human series . . . At present they have entirely disappeared from most of the islands of the Philippine Archipelago.*⁷

Worcester’s index then goes on to categorize more than thirty distinct groups, culminating in Spanish, Chinese, and German *mestizos* in the Philippines.

Despite his belief in the inherent inferiority and declining numbers of Negritos, Worcester frequently made use of photographs of Negritos to support his arguments that the Philippines needed a strong US presence in order to become civilized. Take, for example, the photograph in Figure 2. Taken in 1901, the photograph exists in the Newberry Library as number “1A1,” making it the very first photograph in the set of prints that Worcester sold to Ayer. It shows Worcester standing next to what he describes as a “typical Negrito man” and is intended to emphasize the size disparity between Worcester (who was well over six feet tall) and the Negrito man standing next to him. The difference in clothing and posture reinforces what Worcester and many other Americans would have seen as a wide disparity in the degree of civilization between Negritos and Americans.

Worcester returned to this photograph repeatedly in his career. It was included in the September 1912 issue of *The National Geographic Magazine*, in an article written by Worcester titled “Head-Hunters of Northern Luzon.”⁸ He used the photograph in lanternslide format in lectures given in cities throughout the US on the same topic in 1913 and 1914, and he included it in a press release, which resulted in the photograph being published in newspapers around the country. Indeed, the photograph is prominently featured on a brochure prepared in 1913 by the Philippine Lyceum Bureau to promote a series of lectures that Worcester was prepared to deliver. Included on the list of nine lecture titles were “Among the Wild Tribes of the Philippine Islands,” “Head-Hunters of Northern Luzon,” “What the United States Has Done for the Wild Tribes of the Philippine Islands,” and “Is Philippine Independence a Present Possibility?”

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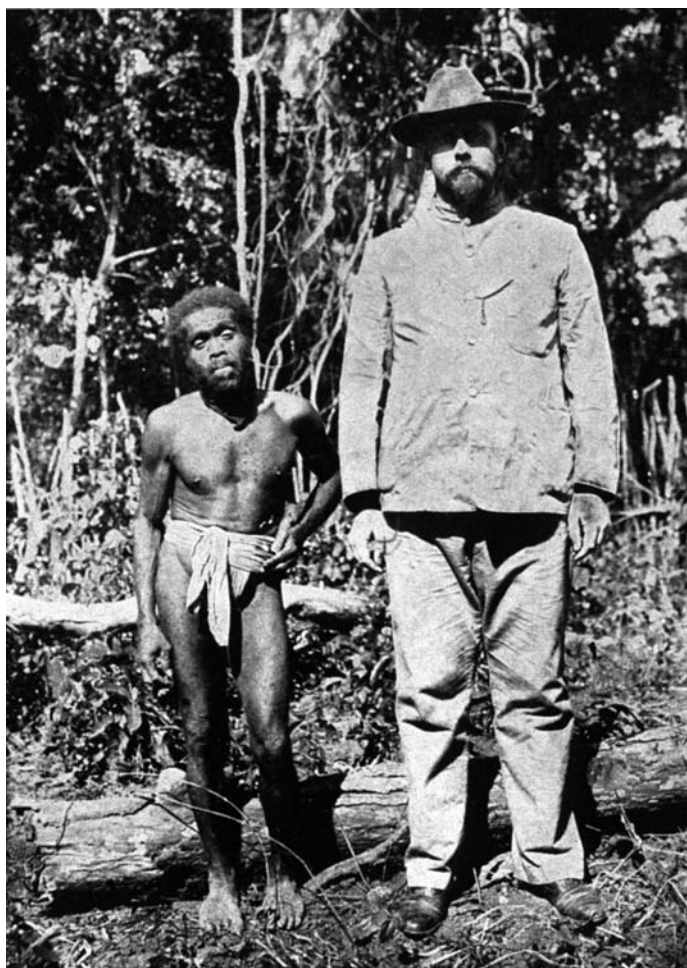


Figure 2: Dean C. Worcester standing next to what he describes as a “typical Negrito man,” from *The National Geographic Magazine*, May 1912. (Photo: Dean Worcester)

For Worcester, the answer to the question in that last lecture title was a resounding “no,” and he used his photographs to make that argument to whoever would listen—including members of Congress in December 1914 when he gave a slide lecture as part of his testimony against the Jones Bill, which would have paved the way for Filipino independence. This testimony came near the end of Worcester’s period of most active use of his vast photographic archive.

Although Worcester had made regular use of his photographs during his entire time as secretary of the interior, his use of photographs became more obviously ideological and strident around 1910. Responding to increasing pressures that he relinquish his authority over the non-Christian Filipinos to the Philippine legislature, Worcester used his 1910 annual report as an opportunity

James H. Blount, a former judge in the Philippines and an active member in the Anti-Imperialist League, referred to Worcester as the “P.T. Barnum of the ‘non-Christian tribe’ industry.”



Figure 3: Taken from Frederick Carleton Chamberlin, *The Philippine Problem, 1898–1913* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1913).

to vigorously defend his continued control of those people. As historian Rodney Sullivan writes, “Worcester’s 1910 annual report must rank as one of the most divisive and impolitic public documents in the history of colonial administration. It was subversive of Philippine national and territorial integrity and grossly exaggerated the division between lowlanders and mountain dwellers.”⁹

In that report, Worcester interspersed his main argument—that allowing Christian Filipinos to assume authority over the non-Christian tribes would result in a violent undoing of the effects of US colonial policy—with carefully selected images showing what he presented as the benefits of US colonialism. The photographs showed Igorot girls working on a modern weaving loom, a schoolhouse built for Igorot boys, Ifugao constabulary soldiers standing in formation, and old-style and new-style Manobo homes. He also included one of the most famous sets of photographs from his archive—a three-part sequence of images that claims to show the transformation of a Bontoc Igorot man from savagery to civilization because of enlistment in the Philippine Constabulary (Figure 3). The series was republished in Frederick Carleton Chamberlin’s 1913 book, *The Philippine Problem, 1898–1913*, and has since achieved an iconic status as a photograph revealing the impact of US colonial policies on Filipinos.

Between the 1910 report and his testimony before Congress, Worcester continued to make his argument with photographs in a series of articles published in *The National Geographic Magazine* between 1911 and 1913, in his best-selling 1914 book, *The Philippines Past and Present*, and in his lecture series. The Igorot sequence was shown to many different audiences and seemed to have a powerful impact. More than one newspaper review of Worcester’s lectures singled out those photographs as one of the most compelling images demonstrating the benefits of US control over the Philippines. Worcester was well aware of the power of photography to shape public perceptions. In a memorandum typed on the official letterhead of the Department of the Interior of the Philippines for a lecture held on January 20, 1913, at the Grand Opera House in Manila, he wrote, “I believe in the teaching value of pictures. Camera can be made to tell the truth.” As I have argued elsewhere, the “truth” of Worcester’s photographs was often remarkably deceptive.¹⁰

Despite the glowing reviews that his books and lectures received, Worcester—and his imperialist agenda—had critics both in the US and in the Philippines. The Anti-Imperialist League that formed in 1898 was no longer as vigorous as it once had been, but League members continued to argue against US colonialism. For example, in his 1912 book, *The American Occupation of the*

Philippines, 1898–1912, James H. Blount, a former judge in the Philippines and an active member in the Anti-Imperialist League, referred to Worcester as the “P.T. Barnum of the ‘non-Christian tribe’ industry.” Blount tried to get readers to recognize that Worcester’s use of photography (what he referred to as “Worcester kodaks”) could be viewed as propaganda designed to persuade Americans that the US needed to maintain its control of the Philippines for as long as possible.¹¹ In the Philippines, too, critics tried to limit the impact of Worcester’s photographs. In February 1914, the Philippine Assembly passed a law that prohibited the taking, exhibiting, possessing, or using of any photographs of nude or semi-nude Filipinos. A second law outlawed the taking of non-Christian Filipinos out of the Philippines for the purposes of exhibiting them in expositions and fairs.

In what appears to be a description of Worcester’s photographs, one Manila newspaper article commenting on the proposed legislation read, “Woe betide the amateur or professional photographer who dares to take a picture of Igorot, and Ilongot, Negrito, Tinguiane, or any member of the non- or semi-civilized tribes of the Philippines, of a Christian Filipina woman bathing in the river semi or entirely nude, or of a rice-bellied Filipino youngster, or of any subject in the nude, semi-nude and not altogether clothed.”¹² A different article was even more explicit in condemning Worcester. Writing about a 1914 exhibit organized by Dr. Victor Heiser, Director of Health in the Philippines, the article read, “The impression we had of the recent health exhibit of the recent Philippine exposition is that Dr. Heiser is a worthy disciple of ‘non-Christian’ Worcester, in his abhorrent propaganda which tends to make the people of the United States believe that the Filipinos are still in a semi-civilized state, geestranged and without any idea of hygiene.”¹³

Despite such resistance to Worcester’s photography, his influence over American perceptions of the Philippines continued long past his death in 1924. A revised edition of *The Philippines Past and Present* was republished in 1930, bringing his photographs to a new generation of readers. During World War II, the Smithsonian Institution published a series of books called “War Background Studies.” The fourth volume in the series, *People of the Philippines*, was published on November 13, 1942. Written by Herbert W. Kreiger, curator of ethnology at the US National Museum, the book was amply illustrated by Worcester photographs. By this point, the photographs were thirty to forty years old, but they were printed as though what Worcester photographed continued to be an accurate representation of the Philippines. In general, those photographs reinforce an image of the Philippines as inhabited primarily by

non-Christian tribal minorities living a primitive existence. As recently as the 1970s, this image of the Philippines persisted in the supposed “discovery” of the stone-age Tasaday people living on the Mindanao, a discovery later revealed to be a hoax.

Even today, historians frequently turn to Worcester’s photographs as accurate representations of conditions and culture in the Philippines, even if they are critical of the colonial system that gave rise to those photographs. For example, the Igorot sequence has been reproduced in several books as “evidence” of the impact of US colonial policies on non-Christian minorities even though the sequence was a fabrication that Worcester created for specific political purposes.

There are a couple different reasons why many historians continue to view Worcester’s photographs as accurate. First, as the historian Lawrence Levine points out, “The photograph is beguiling. . . it seems to be the quintessential objective document—reality in black and white—and thus makes a greater claim on our credulity than other types of documents.”¹⁴ The second reason is that historians generally are better trained at critically analyzing text-based sources than image-based sources. As a result, they are tempted to accept that photographs actually show what they seem to show.

It is important that we resist being beguiled by Worcester’s photographs and recognize the extraordinary influence he had in shaping American perceptions of the Philippines for much of the twentieth century. ■

NOTES

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11. James H. Blount, *The Occupation of the Philippines, 1898–1912* (New York: GP Putnam’s Sons, 1912), 578.
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