The Andaman Islands are a small and relatively isolated island archipelago in the Bay of Bengal, closer to Burma than to India. Uncolonized during the eighteenth century, by the turn of the nineteenth century the Islands were at the centre of increasingly important trading routes between India and China. In 1793, the East India Company moved to occupy the Andamans as a penal colony, directing the transportation of all Bengal life convicts there to work on land clearance, cultivation, and other projects. It shipped about three hundred convicts to the Islands, but the settlement was ravaged by disease and within three years the British had abandoned it. The Company transferred the surviving convicts to its penal settlement in Penang. We know little more of this ill-fated attempt at colonization; most particularly with respect to the nature and extent of contact with the Islands’ indigenous peoples. Indeed, dating from Marco Polo’s travel writing in the thirteenth century there was a widespread belief that the Andamanese were at best savages and at worse cannibals.

Forty or fifty years later, during the 1840s and 1850s, Andamans inhabitants made a series of attacks on distressed seamen and passengers. In the context of the significance of eastward sea routes through the Bay of Bengal, the British decided that if they could not be ‘pacified’, they had to be ‘colonized’. After one especially violent incident in mid-1855, the government of India asked the commissioner of Arakan (Burma), Henry Hopkinson, to journey to the Islands and report back. Hopkinson’s analysis is worth citing at some length, for it reveals some of the strategic thinking that informed his pro-settlement report:

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1 This collection was first presented as part of a panel at the British Association of South Asian Studies annual conference, University of Leicester, 26-8 Mar. 2008.
2 Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library (OIOC) P.128.7 (Bengal Judicial, 20 Dec. 1793): H. Barlow, Register Nizamat Adalat, to E. Hay, Sec. to Gvt Bengal, 20 Nov. 1793.
3 OIOC P.128.12 (Bengal Judicial, 25 July 1794): J. Duncan, Resident Benares, to G.M. Barlow, Sec. to Gvt Bengal, 10 July 1794.
The relation in which the Andamans shall henceforth stand with reference to our commerce in the Bay of Bengal … [and] to our commercial settlements on its coasts … form a subject which I certainly do think deserves most earnest attention … Looking on the map at the magnificent situation of these islands, their proximity to such seats of trade as Madras, Calcutta, Akyab, Rangoon, Moulmein, Penang, and Singapore, considering their extent, which must comprise an area of not much under two thousand square miles, their many fine harbours, and the prospect … of the abundant fertility of their soil, it does seem astonishing that their condition on the present day should be such as to make us wish that they could be blotted from the face of the ocean or sunk a thousand fathoms deep below its surface. That instead of offering a refuge to the miserable storm-driven vessel, they should be a snare in her path leading to utter destruction, and in place of engaging the enterprise, and furnishing subsistence to thousands of industrious colonists, they should be left in the possession of a handful of degenerate negroes, degraded in habits and intelligence to a level little above the beasts of the forest with which they dwell.⁵

Though Governor-General Canning had his doubts about the viability and expense of colonization, the government of India and the East India Company’s court of directors were broadly in favour of it.⁶ Their view was strengthened when shortly after Hopkinson returned to Arakan a group of Andamanese killed eight Chinese traders after they went on shore in search of water.⁷ Magistrate of Tenasserim J.C. Haughton wrote: ‘[I]t appears highly discreditable in a civilised Government to allow such a state of things to exist within a sea, one may say, bounded by its own territories and on the high road to many of its chief emporia.’⁸

But the immediate background to colonization was not the desire for relations with the Andamanese but the Great Revolt, a widespread military and civilian uprising that spread across the north of the subcontinent during 1857-8. Jail breaking was a central element of the Revolt, and rebels completely destroyed or badly damaged dozens of prisons and set thousands of prisoners free. Though the British crushed the rebellion, it was left with a dire shortage of prison accommodation for recaptured or newly convicted felons. At the same time, fearful of ‘politically dangerous’ rebels, the East India Company’s penal settlements in Burma and the Straits Settlements turned away the usual shipments of transportation convicts from

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the Indian mainland. This constituted an unprecedented penal crisis, and so the
government turned its attention to the Andamans for a second time. It transported the
first shipment of convicts to the Islands in March 1858; tens of thousands followed
during the period to the 1920s.9

Drawing on a relatively rich colonial archive, histories of the Andamanese
have centred on the devastating effect of colonization and on nineteenth-century
debates around their supposed ‘racial’ origin, for contemporary scientists thought that
they could provide clues to the origins of humankind.10 The articles presented here
seek to build on this dual interest through an analysis of the representation of the
Islands’ indigenous peoples over time – photographic, lithographic, three-
dimensional, and textual - in the context of the parallel social meanings ascribed to
landscape, space, and community. Further, they seek to open up discussion on the
multi-layered relationships between images, objects, and texts, most particularly with
respect to the slippages between text and image/object, and the nature and context of
their reproduction, distribution, and consumption. The authors focus on these
interrelationships in order to suggest the centrality of visual and discursive
representation for the production of historicity. Finally, moving through and beyond
trajectories of historical change aligned typically with colonialism and post-
colonialism, the papers coalesce around the issue of representation to focus on the
Andamans as a connected – rather than isolated - space, geographically, culturally,
and imaginatively.

The volume opens with Anderson’s discussion of the first ever photographs
taken in the Andaman Islands, by the photographer Oscar Jean-Baptiste Mallitte (c.
1829-1905). Mallitte accompanied the survey party sent by the government of India to
the Islands in 1857-8, its brief to find the best site to situate a penal colony for
mutineers and rebels sentenced to transportation after the Great Revolt of 1857. The
Mallitte prints have long since been assumed lost or destroyed, but recently a curator
at Windsor Castle identified them as an uncatalogued set in the Queen’s Collection.

9 Clare Anderson, The Indian Uprising of 1857-8: prisons, prisoners, and rebellion, London, Anthem,
2007.

(ed.) Anthropology and Photography, 1860-1920, London, RAI, 1994, 108-21; Zita van der Beek and
Marcel Vellinga, ‘Man the Collector: salvaging Andamanese and Nicobarese culture through objects’,
Journal of the History of Collections, 17, 2 (2005), 135-53; Sita Venkateswar, Development and
Anderson opens up the photographs as representations of the landscape and peoples of the Andamans shortly before permanent colonization, and focuses on a deeply affecting set of images of an Islander kidnapped by the survey party and taken back to Calcutta in 1858. As the photographic process was described in some detail in various contemporary publications, and because the photographs were widely copied and published as engravings, she shows how the images enable us for the first time to interrogate some of the textual and visual interconnections and slippages that were implied during the written production and visual transformation of the earliest photographs and engravings of the Islands. She suggests that the photographs are of huge significance as visual signifiers of the violence of colonization, as evidence of some of the ambivalences that characterized colonization through penal transportation, and as a sort of ‘missing link’ that enables us to examine some of the ways in which the Islands and its peoples were constructed and represented both discursively and visually through the trope of colonial ‘tropicality’.

In her fascinating analysis of the colonial exhibitionary complex, Wintle’s article takes the theme of representation further, exploring the production of Andamanese and British identities and histories in the decades following colonization. She shows how the British reinvented imaginatively Andamanese ‘identity’ in a variety of guises. For the government of India officials posted on the Islands, Andamanese peoples became part of an everyday working and living environment. Others, including readers of anthropological journals and miscellanies in the UK produced them as scientific ‘evidence’ central to socio-evolutionary debates of the period. For the wider population, the Andamanese became part of what Wintle terms the ‘tangible fantasy’ of how Britain imagined Empire. By examining representations of Islanders as three-dimensional statues at Victorian international exhibitions, she explores how the Andamans were positioned in the mechanics of the exhibition paradigm and how this positioning intervened in the popular imagination, thus lending new understanding to how the ‘colonial exotic’ was employed as dynamic visual entertainment for and infiltrated into the psychology of a metropolitan audience.

The final article presented here, by Vishvajit Pandya, shifts the focus to the present day. He unpicks some of the complexities of contemporary representations of the Andamans through an analysis of Bourdieu’s invocation of intent and surplus in photographic meaning. Pandya focuses on events in the Andamans in the aftermath of the 2005 tsunami as a means of examining the overlapping textual and visual
production of the ‘hostile’, ‘stone age’ people of North Sentinel Island. He shows how this politics of representation has been constituted historically and consolidated politically through an often-unacknowledged collaboration between the state, media and non-indigenous Andamans settlers. His paper is an important reminder of how the construction of news from the Andamans is itself a cultural subject that requires an ethnographic, semiotic, and analytical focus to comprehend fully the complex tensions between different forms of representation. With the Sentinelese the only Andamanese tribe not yet incorporated into the mainstream nation-state, Pandya brings the papers full circle. He shows how text and image form a specific relationship in the visual depiction of subjects as ‘constant’ over historical time, in the face of evidence of the Sentinelese as a connected and far from timeless community.