The 'Peglar' Papers Revisited

Russell A. Potter

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The sight was truly a melancholy one. In the words of Francis Leopold McClintock:

Shortly after midnight of the 25th May, when slowly walking along a gravel ridge which the winds kept partially bare of snow, I came upon a human skeleton, partly exposed, with here and there a few fragments of clothing appearing through the snow. The skeleton, now perfectly bleached, was lying upon its face; and it was a melancholy truth that the old Esquimaux woman spoke when she said, that they fell down and died as they walked along.¹

And yet this skeleton, remarkably enough, bore with it one of the most enigmatic documents in the whole Franklin mystery. In the words of Allen Young, who published his separate account in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860, 'the Captain's party found a human skeleton upon the beach as the man had fallen down and died, with his face to the ground; and a pocket-book, containing letters in German which have not yet been deciphered, was found close by'.²

Whose was this skeleton? And what were these letters? As it turns out, they were not written in German, although the mistake was understandable, given the frequent occurrence of words such as 'Meht', 'Kniht', and 'Eht' – but on further examination, it was discovered that they were in fact in *English*, only written backwards (that is, with the letters in backwards order, *not* mirror-backwards). Why this would have been done is a difficult question – for my part, I can only suppose that there was some desire to conceal the contents of a sailor's letters from his shipmates, whose rudimentary literacy would have made transposing the letters a daunting task.

The ownership of the letters posed yet another question; because among them was the seaman's certificate of one Harry Peglar, they have been dubbed the 'Peglar Papers' for years, and the name has stuck. McClintock's description of the body, however, almost certainly rules Peglar out; on its being turned over, the uniform was found to be better preserved on the side that had faced the ground; his neckerchief was tied in the distinctive manner of a ship's steward – something Peglar, a senior seaman with the title of 'Captain of the Foretop', would never have done. McClintock added that 'in every particular the dress confirmed our conjectures as to his rank or office in the late expedition – the blue jacket with slashed sleeves an braided edging, and the pilot-cloth greatcoat with plain covered buttons'.³

So the assumption now is that this must have been a steward, likely a friend of Peglar's, carrying letters home for his since-deceased shipmate. An excellent candidate has been proposed in Thomas Armitage, who was the gun-room steward (servant of the junior officers) aboard HMS *Terror*, and had served alongside Peglar on an earlier voyage aboard HMS *Gannett* from 1834 to 1838. More recent research by Glenn M. Stein has shown that, at least as of 1826, Armitage was illiterate, although since ship-board schools were a feature of Arctic voyages, he could have acquired or improved his literacy there. Stein suggests William Gibson, a subordinate officer's steward aboard HMS *Terror*, as a candidate for the skeleton, and as both his and Armitage's height and hair color (brown) are consistent with McClintock's description of the body.

Backwards writing, it turns out, is only one problem facing anyone who tackles these papers – the paper is blotched and foxed, and has heavy folds, along which in many places bits of the pages have broken off. At some point, an attempt to darken the ink with a re-agent damaged much of the writing on the seaman's certificate, perhaps irretrievably. Most frustratingly of all, where they can be made out, the papers consist mostly of a sailor's reminiscences of warmer climes, particularly in Cumana, Venezuela, a source no

doubt of pleasure while trapped on board an ice-bound ship in the Arctic zone, but of little value in solving the Franklin mystery, and offering scant insight into the state of mind of Franklin's men. That the *Gannett*, with both Peglar and Armitage aboard, called at Cumana would seem to corroborate he body's identity.

Nevertheless, scattered about in these letters are passages that are highly suggestive of events on board the ships. Like many writers with limited literacy, Peglar (or Armitage, if some or all of the writings were his) added in asides about current events in the midst of the old stories he was recounting. Thus we have phrases such as 'brekfest to be short rations', 'whose is this coffee', and 'the Terror camp clear', which – if only we could know more of their context – would seem to have enormous potential significance. Mixed in with these, alas, we have ample shares of doggerel verse, including a mildly obscene parody of the poet Barry Cornwall's well-known ditty 'The Sea', accounts of tropical parties and turtle soup, and a paean to someone's dog.

The most intriguing passage of all is one identified early on by David C. Woodman and other researchers as possibly having some reference to life on the ships just prior to their abandonment: 'We will have his new boots in the middel watch ... as we have got some very hard ground to heave a... shall want some grog to wet houer wissel ... all my art Tom for I dont think for ..r now clozes should lay and furst mend 21st night a gread'. The 'new boots' are assumed to be boots such as those found by McClintock and other searchers, which had been modified onboard by the addition of nails or cleats – these were clearly meant for the sledge-haulers. 'Hard ground to heave' may be a reference to hauling sledges – or perhaps to digging graves (one thinks of the sailor buried by Parry near Igloolik, in the clearing of whose grave six pickaxes were broken on the frozen gravel). The '21st night a gread' is most tempting of all; might this be the 21st of April 1848, four days before the amended record was left near Victory Point?

Richard Cyriax, the founding father of Franklin studies, spent considerable time studying these papers, and wrote an article on them for the *Mariner's Mirror*, a draft transcript of which accompanies them in their archival box at the Caird Library of the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. In myself have spent countless hours going over the original papers, which have been covered in archival gauze to preserve the fragile material, but have rarely been able to improve on Cyriax's readings; indeed, some of the text readable to him has since faded away. It may be possible someday, by use of ultraviolet light or computer-enhanced imagery, to recover something of what's now illegible, but even then, the enigmatic quality of these papers is likely to remain. Their writer never imagined that they would be among the very few written materials ever recovered from the Expedition, and there are uncertainties in their contents that will probably never be resolved. Nevertheless, they add a further sense of wonder to the larger mystery of the final fate of Franklin's men. There seem to me to be three lines along which our understanding of these papers might possibly be advanced: 1) The identification of the intended recipients – for all the papers seem to have taken the form of letters; 2) Identifying which parts of which papers refer specifically to events during the expedition, and what they can tell us about them; and 3) Any insights into the identity, and the state of mind, of their author(s).

1. Possible Correspondents

One of the most curious aspects of the 'Peglar' papers is that much – perhaps all – of them consist of real or seeming correspondence. That many of the sheets were meant to be entrusted to the post can be inferred by their folding, by the remaining bits of red sealing wax, and the presence of addresses on the outside corner or flap of several. None of the documents themselves seem to take the typical form of personal letter, however – there is no salutation, no signature, or any other such indications – and so the assumption is that these were stories, songs, or other works that the sender wished to have forwarded to friends or family, perhaps accompanied by some sort of cover letter since lost. Nevertheless, the fact that there *are* addresses offers at least a glimmer of hope that the intended correspondents might shed some light on the larger mystery. Here I'll draw from my own research, as well as from R.J. Cyriax and A.G.E. Jones's original studies.

The most sensible, and – as it turns out – meaningful address is the notation 'In care of Mr. Heaithfield, a Squier, no 10 Pelmell West, London' – Cyriax and Jones readily identified this from a London Directory

for 1845 as a Mr. William Eames Heathfield, a chemist whose shop was at 10 Pall Mall; he thus has the honor of being the only definitely identified correspondent of Peglar or Armitage. And, as it happens, he turned out to be readily traceable; by using online resources such as Google Books which were unavailable in Cyriax's day, I have found out a great deal about our Mr Heathfield. He was a party to a lawsuit in 1851 against one Robert Nelson Collins, a bankrupt drug wholesaler; by this time his address had changed to 'Princes Square, Wilson Street, Finsbury'. The quality of his preparations having evidently been challenged, he was defended by several eminent colleagues in the pages of *The Chemist* in 1853, and in 1856 he was party to a bankruptcy suit listed in the *London Gazette*. More notably for our purposes, in 1863 he was elected a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, a rather unusual honor for a chemist, at a meeting presided over by Sir Roderick Murchison himself. This suggests to me that he must have had some knowledge of, or connection with, Arctic exploration, but alas there is nothing in these records that gives us anything more specific. For a person such as the author of these 'Peglar' letters, Heathfield was certainly an unusually distinguished correspondent, although since the direction on the letter was 'in care of', however, it may simply be that the writer wished to reach someone he knew through him, rather than Heathfield himself.

Another seemingly valid address is 'Mr John Cowper, No. 47 John St., Commercial Road, London', but here, alas, there is considerable ambiguity – according to Cyriax, there were no fewer than six 'John Streets' in London's East End, as well as two 'Commercial Roads', and in any case no 'John Cowper' is listed as residing in any of them. One alternative reading of the name – as 'Cooper' – is attractive, but yields far too many matches. Another address of which the ambiguities are difficult to resolve is also written backwards: 'IM E.q Evarglleb Raauqs, Ocilmip, West'. Here it's the name which is ambiguous; while 'Bellgrave Squaar, Pimlico, West' is certainly valid, the other letters are far less clear. They might very well be someone's initials; the 'M' might be a 'W', 'I' may be 'F', and the whole phrase might or might not be backwards; one possible reading (if forwards) is 'F.W., Esq'. Cyriax tried out all of these, and apparently there was no match for either in the 1845 Directory. The only additional candidate I have located is a 'John Walter' who would match if we read the letters as 'J.W.'; he is listed in the 1846 London Medical Directory at 11 Chester-street, Belgrave, but I have been unable to locate any further details.

Last comes the most enigmatic, which Cyriax thought might be a 'crude form of will': 'Mr Father all to Miss down fall no 6 Old free Street and a clear couarse'. The names are clearly fanciful, and so, apparently, is the address as there is no 'Old Free Street' known in London or elsewhere at the time. One further name is discernable in the text but not given an address, and this is 'John Faithfull'. At first, it might seem as fanciful as 'Miss down fall', but a search of UK directories and newspapers has revealed a number of men with this name, among them the head of the Christian Union Institute in London, as well as several men with other variations of the name, such as the barrister William John Faithfull of Brighton; Charles John Faithfull, a member of the fire department at the University of Cambridge; and John Faithfull Fleet, a colonial officer in Bombay and author of an 1888 monograph entitled *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and Their Successors*. It would appear that, without further information, the identity of this particular John Faithfull is impossible to determine.

2. Events During the Expedition

We can be fairly confident that the papers in this case were written aboard one of Franklin's ships during the expedition that departed in May of 1845. There are no written dates prior to that of the ships' departure, and the events in Venezuela and Trinidad are consistently described using the past tense, e.g. 'a Party wot happened at Trinidad'. Cyriax and Jones found that Peglar and his shipmate Armitage had been on vessels that called on Trindad and at Cumana, Venezuela, and the recollections are doubtless those of one of these men. Some of the place names, such as 'laying in asham Bay' don't seem to correspond with any known place, although since 'asham' is also name of a variety of corn flour used in Caribbean cuisine, 'laying in asham' might simply be glossed as 'taking on grain'. There is also a reference to 'Comfort Cove', which might be taken to refer to a graveyard on Ascension Island where sailors who had died while quarantined on the island for illness were buried; though that was its name in the 1830's and '40's, it is now known as Comfortless Cove. Cyriax found that indeed Peglar and Armitage had been on ships which had called at Ascension, so this name could be what was meant – but,

importantly, the recollection of this place could have been the cause for a sailor's newly applying the name to a place in the Arctic, perhaps a graveyard adjacent to an onshore sick-camp for Franklin's men (this possibility will be examined in a moment).

There are other lines which self-identify as having been written while on the expedition, such as the date 'September 1846' or the inscription 'Lines writ on the North' - though in both cases these are on the reverse side of pages containing other text, and thus have no contextual information and indeed could have been written before or after the text on the rest of the page. Similarly on its own is a small drawing of an eye with an eyelid, and the words 'Lid Bay,' which suggests a place encountered and named on the expedition on account its eye-like shape, though we have no way of being sure of this surmise. Lastly, there is the aforementioned reference to 'new boots' and the need to wet one's 'wissel' -which at first seems quite promising, as it's in the present tense and can be correlated with a known event. Oddly, though, the context of this passage is in the past tense and seems to describe very different events; prior to the 'boots' passage there is a reference to someone of whom the writer says 'I think he navil officer'. while the section immediately after carries on about another man who 'made his appearence and 'wos a marine by the cut of his big ...' In both phrases, one has the sense of identifying a stranger by the cut of his clothes or outward appearance, something that would never have happened on the Franklin expedition on which crew members would have known each others' ship, rank, and branch of service quite well. My best explanation for this is that, as I've suggested above, a relatively naïve and untutored writer might break into the midst of a past-tense recollection with some present-tense news, then 'return' to his story without making any clear division.

But the most significant lines in the entire 'Peglar' collection are surely those that begin with the couplet, 'O Death wheare is thy Sting / the Grave at Comfort Cove'. These lines are without question part of an account of, or eulogy for, some one who has died and has or is to be buried, as the first phrase is from the Service for the Burial of the Dead in the *Book of Common Prayer*, an official COE text with which every member of the ships' crews would have been familiar – not to mention they'd each been supplied with a personal copy prior to the voyage. The mention of a 'Grave' makes the meaning quite clear, as do other phrases on this leaf, such as 'thy right hand', and the enigmatic but all-important line '[the] Dyer was and whare Traffalgar'. Since Sir John Franklin, the commander of the expedition, had been at the Battle of Trafalgar, we have strong though circumstantial evidence that the burial described was his own.

But who is the 'Dyer'? There was no one of this name among Franklin's men, but there was a William Dyer at the Battle of Trafalgar, aboard HMS *Temeraire* just astern of Nelson's *Victory*. The line remains enigmatic, as the definite article in 'The Dyer' would seem odd if it refers to a specific individual; the following word could be either 'saw' (if read forwards) or 'was' (if backwards). Still more intriguing, a man of that same name – perhaps the same man – was responsible in 1849 for forwarding a packet of letters from Mrs. John Peddie, whose husband was acting surgeon on HMS *Terror*, to James Clark Ross prior his departure in search of Franklin's ships. In his 'cover letter,' Dyer expresses the hope that 'that you may very soon have the good fortune to fall in with the Erebus and Terror' and so deliver the letters – but adds no details as to its writer; it survives at the Scott Polar Research Institute, but SPRI has no biographical information on this William Dyer.⁸ It's just faintly possible that the writer of this passage in the papers may have known Dyer, known he was at Trafalgar, and thus observe that 'dyer was' there – other than that, the line seems almost impossible to make sense of.

What follows is a series of riddles wrapped within enigmas – I give here my best transcription of this leaf, in its entirety, with a few new readings, suggested by William Battersby, which I have put in italics to distinguish them from my own; as I will throughout this essay, I've also underlined any words not spelled backwards.

O Death wheare is thy sting
The Grave at comfort cove
For who has any douat how
Nelson (?) look
The Dyer was and whare Traffalegar
as .s.. Of him
and ... to .. frends a. Laitor. a. Cors. (?)

Best
and w.. ... addam and eve
a Nother
Death ... right hands
... new (?) grave
I ..ham ... to(?) will be a veray
signed ... me yes and a splended
And
That [m]akes trade Florrish
That the way the world
... round
Florrsih

The conjectural reading 'Nelson', offered by Battersby, is certainly an exciting possibility, but if correct only amplifies the mention of 'Trafalgar' in the following line, which already links the text to that event. Sir John Franklin himself, as is well-known, was the only veteran of the Battle of Trafalgar on the Franklin expedition, and his Nelson memorial ring is in the collections of the National Maritime Museum.⁹

The reference to Adam and Eve may also point to these words being part of, or notes on, some eulogy or homily given at a memorial service – they were often mentioned in the context of man's fall from grace – as does the reappearance of "Death" – and although the reference to Christ sitting 'at God's right hand' would also fit such a source, there is definitely another letter, which seems to give 'right hands', a far less clear reference; 'rigid hands' is also a possible reading, and would make sense in this context. Just after this, the mention of a 'new grave' seems promising, but again we are defeated by a series of vague lines with references to something 'signed', something 'splended' and the phrase 'That makes trade (or trad.) Florrish' which seems out of keeping with a memorial service; Battersby has suggested it refers to how the Royal Navy made trade flourish, but again the tone is wrong. The final few lines, 'That the way the world ... round' suggests an absent 'goes' and the repetition of 'Florrish' suggests a 'flourish' – perhaps the earlier phrase was meant to stand for 'trad[itional] flourish', which could refer to a showing of swords or (less likely) the blowing of a trumpet or similar instrument in honor of the dead, though neither was a usual part of a Naval funeral.

The sum of these lines, I feel, is that they do not constitute in their entirety any kind of funeral poem or oration, although they may have been rough notes taken upon the occasion of hearing such a eulogy; this could explain their fragmentary nature. Perhaps a witness to such a ceremony would have written down just the phrases he liked, and added a few notes of his own (several of the words seem to have been added interlineally) as his time and inclination allowed. If that is the case, the funeral most likely was Franklin's own – there seems no other reason such a service would have mentioned Trafalgar, or Nelson if that reading is correct – but we are left with a view of this service which is very far from satisfactory. And yet, even when compared to the many enigmatic phrases in these curious notes, the roundel on the opposite side of the same leaf is still more confounding.

This, the crux of the papers as such, and the only mention of Peglar outside of his seaman's certificate, was drawn, or written, over the fold – the paper seems to have been meant as a letter, and bears a small fragment of red sealing wax. A circle was evidently drawn, either by tracing or using a compass, and two texts were then added: the first round about the edge of this circle, and the second in straight lines within it; the circular texts seems to read 'any W. bouat the harmonic he l..ent wander money a night in' while within the roundel we find:

HMS Erebus
tell The ca ...
you are [or "and"] peglar
on bord onn hay
The Terror Camp
[is?] clear

William Battersby reads this somewhat differently, suggesting 'Oh Lord our God' in the place of 'on bord onn hay' and 'be clear' instead of 'is clear' in the final line; he also fills out 'Captain from 'ca ...' in the second line. The header, and the word 'tell', strongly suggest that the roundel was a communication between the crews of the ships, from *Terror* to *Erebus*, presumably after at least the former ship's crew was ashore and formed into a 'camp'. The exclamation 'Oh Lord our God' suggests some horror, and yet the round writing seems a playful and enigmatic device, hardly appropriate for conveying bad news, or the transcript of a funeral oration. The shift from 'is' to 'be' in the last line would seem to make it an example of the concessive or even imperative mood, which as one period grammar notes is 'a sign of wishing and consequently occurs often in prayer,' i.e. 'let us hope that the Terror Camp is clear. This again is consistent with the earlier reference to God, if that's the reading one adopts.

The surrounding line, with its phrase 'I wander many a night," seems almost like a snippet from a poem or elegy, and indeed this exact phrase occurs in a translation of Adam Oehlenschlaäger's Danish work *Axel and Valborg*:

Here shall I wander many a night alone, And think upon my darling dream, and on Thy coming home, and on our cruel fate. Then shall my heart lift up itself to God In prayer and holy song.¹¹

Alas, the correspondence is chimerical; although *Axel and Valborg* was published in 1810, this translation was not made until 1874. The other odd word is 'harmonic', possibly part of the phrase 'a bouat the harmonic'. It's an unusual phrase, and seems to suggest that the harmonic is what is being wandered (or perhaps wondered) about. The word has musical implications, and it's been suggested that it refers to the singing of hymns; it's also a phrase found in scientific treatises about vibrating bodies, though its use there seems far too technical and remote for it to have been used in a note by a writer with student-level literacy. The capital 'W' near 'bouat' has also been suggested as an abbreviated form of 'whale boat', and this, though promising at first, has no sensible relationship to any interpretation of the rest of the line. William Battersby has suggested that the lines constituted a sort of wordplay or cryptic message between the ships' captains, and that's certainly possible, although if so its underlying significance remains unclear. One final, intriguing possibility: since Harry Peglar, William Gibson, and George Henry Hodgson, had all served aboard HMS *Wanderer* in the years just before the expedition, could, the 'W' or the word 'wander' refer to that vessel in some way? It remains at best an enigmatic possibility. ¹²

3. States of Mind

So in terms of what insight these texts give to events during the expedition, or to the state of mind of its writer or writers, we have at best some suggestive but inconclusive observations: that there was a bay dubbed 'Lid Bay', that there was a camp on land where the crew of the *Terror* lived for some time, perhaps adjacent to a graveyard dubbed 'Comfort Cove', that there was a burial, possibly Franklin's, at which it's possible that some of the crew spoke (or else wrote down what others spoke), and that there were 'letters' sent from ship to ship.

Cyriax also felt, as did McClintock when he first saw it, that the doggerel version of 'The Sea', as it was on the same leaf that bore the date 'April 21, 1847', meant that, at least as of that date, the mood on board the ships was good, and even jovial. Other playful and idle elements on other leaves seem to corroborate this sense; who, if dying of exposure, scurvy, or lead poisoning, would compose ditties about dogs and sea-turtles, accounts of bygone parties, and idle references to land-bound matters such as 'the grog shop opporsite'? They may well have been composed to fend off boredom in the long winter months, and preserved by the writer's shipmate as giving some account of the life lived by his deceased companion, long after these idle moments.

There are other aspects – the funeral text, the enigmatic roundel, the references to 'new boots' and 'hard ground to heave', which are suggestive of activities – either the abandonment of the ships, or perhaps the

departure of a burial detail – of a less pleasant nature. There's nothing, however that directly speaks of sorrow, no last words to families and loved ones, indeed hardly anything personal at all, unless perhaps 'All my art Tom' transcribes a dialect in which initial 'h' is silent, and can be read as 'All my heart, Tom'. Without salutations or signatures, and yet folded as letters and in several cases given London addresses – and even the memo 'Paid' – these seem a very strange sort of letters indeed, ones which would no doubt have posed a problem to the Post Office, had they ever reached it. It's indeed possible that all, or nearly all, were written prior to the very last march of the doomed men, and thus can tell us very little about their state of mind when they realized that, despite their exertions, they were nearing the end of their journey, and their lives.

It is to be hoped that, in the near future, the papers might be subjected to the kinds of multi-spectrum scans that have enabled, for instance, the reading of Livingstone's later journals, which were written crosswise in berry juice upon old newspapers, and had long defeated decipherment. But even if we had as perfect a transcript as possible, I very much doubt that it would clear up all the cruxes of a series of pages that have aptly been dubbed 'the Dead Sea Scrolls of the North'.

¹ Francis Leopold McClintock, *The Voyage of the 'Fox' in Arctic Seas* (London: John Murray, 1908), p. 209.

² 'The Search for Sir John Franklin, from the Private Journal of an Officer of the "Fox", *Cornhill Magazine*, Vol. 1 (January – June 1860), p. 117.

³ McClintock, *Voyage of the 'Fox'*, p. 210.

⁴ Armitage is offered as one plausible candidate by Cyriax in his original paper in *The Mariner's Mirror*, and I'm reliably informed by Ernest Coleman that Cyriax's secretary, A.G.E. Jones (whom he knew), eventually came to the firm conclusion that the remains had been Armitage's. Jones says as much in a follow-up essay detailing Peglar's career, 'Henry Peter Peglar, Captain of the Foretop (1811-48)', in *Notes and Queries*, December 1984, pp. 463-68.

⁵ Glenn M. Stein, 'Scattered Memories and Frozen Bones: Revealing a Sailor of the Franklin Expedition, 1845-48', *Orders and Medals Research Society Journal* (December 2007, Vol. 46, No. 4). Although Stein's focus is on medals, his account casts new light both on Peglar's career and the possible identity of the skeleton.

⁶ Cyriax and Jones, 'The Papers in the Possession of Harry Peglar, Captain of the Foretop, H.M.S. Terror, 1845', *The Mariner's Mirror*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (March 1954), pp. 186-95.

⁷ Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London, Volume 7, account of the meeting of Monday, 9 February 1863, p. 64.

⁸ Scott Polar Research Institute, MS 1226/11; DYER, WILLIAM; correspondence with Naomi Boneham, archivist at SPRI, 18 April 2013.

⁹ The ring was described as Franklin's in the catalog of the 1891 Royal Naval Exhibition (entry 19A), which reads 'Sir J. Franklin's Nelson's Memorial Ring'; the current entry for this object at the National Maritime Museum adds that 'he attended Nelson's funeral although his name does not appear on the list of recipients of mourning rings sent out by Earl Nelson'. *Official Catalogue and Guide* (London: W.P. Griffith, 1891), p. 7.

¹⁰ Goold Brown, *A Grammar of English Grammars, with an Introduction Historical and Critical* (London: Delf and Trübner, 1851), p. 347.

¹¹ Axel and Valborg, A Tragedy, and Other Poems, translated from the Danish of Adam Oehlenschläger, by Pierce Butler, M.A. (London: Trübner, 1874), p. 84.

¹² Stein, op. cit.

¹³ See 'Livingstone's 1871 Field Diary', part of the David Livingstone Spectral Imaging Project, at the UCLA Library: http://livingstone.library.ucla.edu/1871diary/index.htm.