

## Beaumont Newhall

*A visual snapshot*

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Bill Jay

Beaumont Newhall, the preeminent photographic historian of the 20th century, was a proper Bostonian gentleman. Tall and gangly, with a slight stoop, he was topped by a cone of baldness fringed with a monk's tonsure of white hair. He looked like an exotic but genial uncle from the better side of the family. And that is how he behaved to younger enthusiasts; he was attentive, sympathetic and generous with his knowledge, and his food.

There was a time, young reader, when the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, was a powerhouse of scholarship and inspiration. Beaumont was its Director (scholarship) and Nathan Lyons, his indefatigable assistant, was in charge of exhibitions (inspiration). As a young magazine editor in London I was anxious to visit the House, which I mentioned to Beaumont on one of his visits to England. Before long he had sent me an air ticket and an invitation to stay with him and Nancy, his wife, for three weeks. After a day of foraging in the files and archives, I would walk home with Beaumont and help him prepare dinner, which is to say that I watched and washed up.

It is not generally known that Beaumont Newhall was quite renowned as a gourmet cook; he probably wrote as many articles on cooking as he did on photographic history. (Hint to aspiring researcher: collect these articles and publish the Beaumont Cookbook) His kitchen was gleaming with copper-bottomed pans neatly arranged in hanging rows and was immaculate in its order and cleanliness, and I was to discover how it was kept this way. As each pan or utensil was used it was imperative that it was washed immediately and hung in its appointed place. That was my only contribution to the meal and just as well. All his talk of the culinary arts was lost on me, whom friends referred to as a bottom-feeder. The resultant meal, I have no doubt, was a gourmet's delight but what it gained in quality it lacked, as far as my own ignorant body was concerned, in quantity. On occasion, therefore, I guiltily admit that I would excuse myself and plead an appointment with a local photographer which was a ploy so that I could pop down to the nearest hamburger franchise.

Most of the time, however, it was the after-dinner conversations which held me spellbound and not even the direst hunger would have dragged me away from the table. Fueled by tumblers of alcohol, Beaumont and Nancy would deluge me with wondrous and often salacious tales of the photographers whom they knew. Edward Weston, Ansel

Adams, Paul Strand, Alfred Stieglitz et al, jumped vividly to life in these personal recollections of eccentricities and infidelities. (Another hint to aspiring researchers: the sexual history of photography and, no, I do not mean nudes but how personal liaisons, to speak euphemistically, have determined the course of photo-history. Rich pickings here).

But I digress. One after-dinner conversation drifted towards metaphysics, especially the notion that the mind of the photographer can affect the image. We chatted about Henry Moore's conviction that if he took the photographs of his sculptures himself then he could "will" the pictures to be better. And Bill Brandt's belief that the camera is much more than a recording apparatus, "It is a medium via which messages reach us from another world."

I was rather surprised, and intrigued, that Beaumont, this paragon of academic rectitude, would be so interested in and knowledgeable about a subject which was tainted with a whiff of magic. But I was not prepared for his "proof."

A short time earlier Ansel Adams had stayed in the same house. "He got out his view camera," said Beaumont, "and made a large number of photographs of the architectural detail. . . .

He was using Polaroid film, and of course I was curious and looked at the results as soon as he peeled the positive away from the negative. One picture I liked: it was of our Victorian front door. I asked Ansel if I could make an exposure and might keep the print. He answered "Of course" and so – using Ansel's camera exactly as he had set it up and focused, I simply repeated what he had done. There was no change in the lighting, no change in shutter and stop settings. I developed the film for exactly the same time – as I recollect he even timed it with his own stopwatch.

The result was not identical to Ansel's print.

The print had the same cropping, identical tonal range, and was exact in every detail – but there was no doubt that the mind of a thinking, intent photographer had imbued one image with a special and recognizable "something." Beaumont remarked: "We were both surprised."

I also expressed surprise. So Beaumont left the table and returned with two Polaroid prints depicting the front door of the house. "Compare them," he said. I checked all eight corners to make sure the framing was exactly the same; I compared tonal value in various regions; I looked for discrepancies in sharpness, lighting, contrast and viewpoint. "Both prints are identical," I said. "Now," said Beaumont, "just stare at both prints and let your mind go blank, and then tell me which one Ansel made and which one was mine." With some skepticism I agreed to try – if nothing else I had a 50:50 chance of being right. Within a minute or so I could say with assurance, not guesswork:

“Ansel made that one.” With triumph Beaumont turned over both prints. On the back of each one was either Beaumont’s or Ansel’s name. I was right. And there was no doubt that one image was more powerful than the other.

This experience lodged in my mind for years and was one of the catalysts when I decided to conduct a serious study on the links between photography and parapsychology. During this project I was subject to the disdain of many colleagues who prophesied that it would destroy my reputation and halt my academic career. So I asked Beaumont for his advice.

He replied with a wonderful letter, which included the Ansel episode (which I had asked him to do so that my memory of the experience would not slip during the retelling) and another example from his own experience. He was emphatic about the issue’s importance and relevancy. He concluded:

I think your project is an excellent investigation; I know that some force beyond our comprehension guides the photographer. I am absolutely convinced of it as a writer: coincidence is so frequent that it cannot be called happenstance; it should be referred to as spiritual contact.

Talk of the spirit is no longer fashionable in photography. But there is a wealth of evidence, historical, anecdotal and experimental, that this medium of ours is directed by mind as well as by matter.

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