

## Bedford and Bertie

The historical context for an otherwise indecipherable cartoon in *Punch*, 1862

---

Bill Jay

Many references to photography in 19th century periodicals are puzzling, and even indecipherable, to contemporary audiences due to a lack of “context.” This is particularly true of cartoons which relied for their audience appeal on circumstances which were immediately understood by their original viewers but which are no longer associated with the drawing. Stripped of the surrounding cultural, social and political trends of the period, with which the cartoon is inextricably linked, the punch-line loses its significance. To some degree, the cartoon can be given back its reference by supplying the historical background. The *Punch* cartoon (June 1862) depicting a photographer polishing a glass plate while studying a Sphinx with an obviously specific face is a case in point. No clue is offered as to the identities of photographer and subject.

The cartoon begins to make sense, however, with the knowledge that in the spring of 1862 the Prince of Wales (Bertie) was engaged in an educational tour of the Middle East accompanied by the photographer Francis Bedford (1816–1894). Comparing likenesses with contemporaneous photographs it becomes ever more evident that the photographer in the cartoon is indeed Bedford and that the face on the Sphinx is Bertie’s. An understanding of the import of this tour, and therefore of the significance of the cartoon, is immeasurably enhanced by an understanding of the events which led to Bedford’s Royal Command.

On February 10, 1840 Queen Victoria was married in great splendor to Prince Albert, from the small, but politically influential, principality of Coburg. For 21 years the Royal couple lived in marital bliss – the only blight in their otherwise unsullied home life was the frivolous temperament of their oldest son, Bertie, the Prince of Wales. Late in 1861 the problems between the Royal couple and their errant son reached a climax. Bertie spent a night with a young actress, Nellie Clifden. Albert was thunderstruck and wrote to his son that the news had caused him “the greatest pain I have yet felt in this life.”

The news of the Prince's escapade could not have come at a worst time. Prince Albert was exhausted from overwork, and was going through a particularly bleak spell of depression. During November, he became progressively more ill – he was dying with typhoid fever. The Royal doctors, blundering once again, assured the Queen that “there was no cause for alarm,” so Bertie arrived at the death bed in a rather gay mood, which did not help to cement affection with his mother. Albert died on December 14, 1861. In her distress, the Queen blamed the Prince of Wales: “I never can or shall look at him without a shudder...”

The Queen went into mourning for her dead Albert, and never recovered. Wherever the Queen slept, a photograph of her husband on his deathbed hung over the empty pillow beside her. Victoria's relations with Bertie – never very close or happy – became painfully strained and even bitter. She believed that Bertie's affair had dealt Albert a mortal blow from which he had no chance to recover. Lord Palmerston talked of the Queen's “unconquerable aversion” to the Prince of Wales. It irritated her to see Bertie in the same room. Both must have been relieved when he left on 6 February 1862 on his educational tour of Egypt and Palestine, an expedition that had already been planned by Albert before his death.

The Prince's companions had already been chosen but in the emotional turmoil of the past month, the idea of having a photographic record of the tour had been forgotten. On 22 January Francis Bedford was hastily summoned into the presence of the Queen, at Osborne, the Royal residence in Scotland, and requested to accompany the Prince of Wales and his party. Bedford was given two weeks only in which to prepare himself and his equipment for the most important assignment of his life. This may well have been the first overseas Royal tour accompanied by an official photographer.

However, this would not be the first time that Bedford had worked for the Royal Family. In 1854 he had photographed many items in the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle. In addition, Bedford had been commissioned to travel to Coburg and make photographic views of the area in the summer of 1857. Taken specially for the Queen, the photographs were a gift to the Prince Consort on his birthday. Francis Bedford's reputation for moderation in all things may have been a small factor in the Queen's choice, bearing in mind Bertie's rather frivolous tastes. Perhaps he would add to the quiet decorum of the expedition. Further, it is possible that it was Bedford who had previously taught the Prince of Wales the rudiments of photography, and he would be an acquaintance of the Prince and, therefore, an acceptable traveling companion, without the risk of

friction which might have resulted from an unknown photographer.

The Royal party left London on 6 February 1862. Bedford, no doubt, was worried about any forgotten items in his photographic impedimenta.

His short notice of the tour and his necessary hasty preparations would have irked the meticulous photographer. The logistics of organizing enough glass and chemicals for a five months expedition into unknown climatic conditions and transporting such fragile materials all over the Middle East “by every mode of transit” were formidable enough. He left England with an overabundance of cameras and chemicals, in fact he assured success by taking duplicate sets of apparatus and a chemical “army of reserve.”

Once the expedition began in earnest, the Prince was affability itself, and the life and soul of the party – but obviously bored silly at the endless classical and biblical sites to be explored in a perfunctory manner. Bertie much preferred to float down the Nile shooting crocodiles. When he was urged off the boat to see a temple he “treated the pillars, and the sculptures...with the most well-bred courtesy, as if he were paying a visit to a high personage.” There seemed no point in attempting to enthuse the fun loving Prince with the spiritual delights of old ruins.

Meanwhile, Bedford was struggling with technical obstacles. Rapid travel from site to site permitted: “no opportunity for the examination and selection of localities, points of view, or conditions of light...he never had the opportunity of going twice to the same view, such selection as he could make at once, under conditions of light as might then exist, was alone possible.”

But there were compensations. Under the patronage of Royalty, Bedford obtained ready permission to photograph in many places not otherwise accessible to artists. The Prince frequently interrupted the progress of the company to allow Bedford the opportunity of making a photograph. The Prince also suggested subjects for photography. Of course this was a mixed blessing. It was gratifying that his Royal Highness took such an interest in Bedford’s work, but it was also doubtless irksome for an artist to be told what to photograph since a Prince’s suggestion has the flavor of a command.

At Hebron, the Prince asked Bedford to remain behind to finish his photography and insisted on a guard of fifty soldiers to keep the photographer and his equipment from harm, and to help with the transportation problems. From

Palestine the Royal entourage traveled to Syria, Constantinople, Athens, and several of the Mediterranean islands. Bedford's time was largely occupied loading and unloading his equipment onto mules and into boats, with frustratingly little time to make pictures which were taken in haste so as not to delay the Royal Progress.

News of the expedition trickled back to London at frequent intervals and was duly reported in the major newspapers. The readers of *Punch* magazine would have had no difficulty in identifying the individuals in the cartoon.

The Royal party arrived back in England on 14 June: the Prince to make his peace with his mother, Bedford to make prints from his 200 10 x 12-inch plates. At his home/studio in Camden Road, London, Bedford selected 172 of his plates from which to make albumen prints. One month after his return, on July 1862, Bedford was invited to Osborne to show the photographic results of the expedition to the Queen. Final prints were made from these plates and prepared for exhibition at the German Gallery, Bond Street, London. The show opened around 20 July 1862 for a private view by Bedford's friends and for members of the press.

Francis Bedford's Royal tour prints were issued to the public as albumen prints, published by W. Day and Sons. The entire series of 172 pictures was published in 21 parts, each containing eight or more prints. These prints were divided into sections, consisting of the Holy Land and Syria, of Egypt, and of Constantinople, and the Mediterranean. The cost of the entire series was 43 guineas. This was a handsome sum in those days – a lot of workers would have been happy if it was their annual income. Copies of these pictures were later published, in reduced form, and edited (48 prints) in The Holy Land, Egypt, Constantinople, Athens..., with a descriptive text and introduction by W. M. Thompson.

Now an internationally known and respected photographer, Francis Bedford did little to capitalize on his fame. He seemed content to return to his home and garden in Camden Road, attend the weekly discussions at the Photographic Society, and to tour the British Isles for his growing documentation of the English landscape.

Bertie, the Prince of Wales, was married to Princess Alexandria of Denmark on 10 March 1863. The Queen took no part in the ceremonies. (Francis Bedford was waiting at Gravesend in order to photograph the Royal couple as they left England for their honeymoon.) The Prince of Wales settled down to an

undemanding life of leisure, and occasional whiffs of scandal. On the death of his mother he was crowned King Edward VII in 1903.

*1986*