

## Footnotes to Fame

*The Victorian photographers best known to us today were not necessarily those who were best known in their own day.*

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A fact which needs constant emphasis is that we know very little about Victorian photography. This is both remarkable and disturbing when we remember that the medium is only 150 years old.

There are several reasons for our paucity of knowledge about early photography:

- 1.) There have been very few historians who have shown any interest in photography. Names like Beaumont Newhall, Helmut Gernsheim and Arthur Gill spring to mind, and there are a number of young enthusiastic researchers whose names have been emerging in recent years. On the whole, however, the medium has been bereft of scholars.
- 2.) Until recently, very few institutions incorporated the history of photography in their courses. Generations of photographers have passed through these schools without any knowledge of, or interest in, their medium's past.
- 3.) Most active photographers have a temperament at odds with scholarly research. This is also true of most other professions – the majority of doctors, archaeologists, astronomers, botanists, geographers et al are equally ignorant of the rich history of their specialized fields. Why should photography be any different?
- 4.) There are no rewards for studies in photographic history. The field does not have the academic prestige of, say, art history, and there are few journals in which to publish the results of research. Teaching positions are rare and books, even if published, sell in pitifully small numbers.

It is no wonder, then, that we know so little of the past.

What is more surprising is that we know a great deal about a few photographers, who may not deserve such special attention, and next to nothing about other photographers whose names were household words in their own day. There has been an interesting, almost arbitrary, fickleness about the individuals whom we have picked out of relative obscurity for canonization in our textbooks and exhibitions.

I say "almost arbitrary" for good reason. There are three factors which have led to certain names being heavily researched and therefore remembered: 1.) they have left

behind a reasonable number of decent images; 2.) their biographies and opinions are readily available; and 3.) both images and words are easily accessible in a major, public museum, library or collection. All three factors must be in place before the research is conveniently and quickly accomplished.

Through whatever reasons of luck or good judgement, the Victorian photographers who are represented in this manner have become the Big Names of the past. And these names often would have surprised their contemporaries.

Most of the famous (in their own times) Victorian photographers worked long and hard but for some quirk of fate their images did not survive; or their images survived but no details of their life, or their biographies and articles survived without their photographs; or, everything survived but not in an accessible location.

Perhaps it is time that we divert our attention away from Talbot, Fenton, Rejlander and their ilk, and concentrate on the forgotten Victorians who deserve equal prominence. This is not to disparage the considerable achievements of these pioneer photographers (nor the accomplishments of their researchers) but merely to suggest that it is time to move on, make new discoveries, and fill in a few more areas of the map now marked terra incognita.

In order to demonstrate my point, I conducted a simple, but certainly not definitive, experiment. I took a single volume of a typical mid-Victorian photographic journal and noted every time a photographer's name was mentioned. I then compiled a top-ten popularity list of these photographers in order to provide a rough and ready guide to those individuals who were being talked about by their peers in 1868. The results might surprise you.

The clear "winner," with 59 mentions, was the American Carey Lea. A distant second, was W. H. Davies, with 32 mentions, followed closely by the French portraitist, Adam-Salomon, with 31 mentions. Way behind these front-runners was Valentine Blanchard with 20 mentions, trailed by J. R. Johnson (18), W. Woodbury (18), J. Traill Taylor (17), A. Claudet (16), George Wharton Simpson (16), and Thomas Ross (15).

I am not suggesting that all these individuals necessarily deserve special research effort. Some are photographic chemists, for example, who had little interest in picture-making, although their contributions to the technology/ process of the medium should be much better known. Also, it can be argued, many of the better photographers did not contribute to, and were not noticed by, the photographic press. This is debateable, and will only be demonstrated by documented research, not by general assertions. But I do agree that the list is not conclusive of anything; it only serves to illustrate the notion that some of the best known names in Victorian photography have been totally ignored and forgotten – and that until these names are researched we cannot say whether or not they have been justly by-passed in history.

And don't forget that Lea, Davies, Adam-Salomon and Blanchard were contemporaries of Rejlander, Robinson, Frith, Bedford, Wilson, and all the other "greats," who did not even make the top ten most mentioned names.

Just in case this particular year was a fluke, I repeated the experiment for the year 1860 – with similar results. In that year the most mentioned photographers, in descending order of names, were: T.F. Hardwich, Alfred Wall, John Cramb, C. Jabez Hughes, A. Gaudin, Samuel Highley, J. Rothwell, James Martin, M. Davanne, Thomas Grubb and G. Wharton Simpson.

In this list the only well-known name is Francis Frith, and he is joint 17th with eleven other, more obscure, individuals. All the other photographers on the list are so much forgotten that I could not provide an off the cuff two-minute speech of all their accomplishments, even though I have been an avid student of 19th-century British photography for 30 years. More interesting to point out is that the only name which appeared on both lists was George Wharton Simpson.

I suspect that every other year would reveal similar disparities between who is best known today and who was best known then, assuming, and it is a big assumption, that the journals accurately reflected peer acceptance and acknowledgment of achievement.

The fact remains that many important individuals in our photographic past have been ignored through lack of research effort. Is this important? It certainly is. Until these biographies and images are available, we have a very lop-sided and shaky foundation for assessing the medium's history. In a very real sense, whatever our level of knowledge of the past, it is based if not on a lie then on a lack of facts, which is equally as damaging. We cannot assume we know the picture on the puzzle until all the pieces are in place.