

Nelson King Cherrill

Cherrill, one of the most respected names in Victorian photography, is now largely forgotten

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Any one who approaches the history of photography, as it is now understood, is immediately aware of a striking incongruity: photographers who were relatively unknown in their own times are now accorded excessive attention while major figures in the 19 century are today unknown, ignored or relegated to passing mentions and footnotes.

On first encounter, this is very puzzling.

One obvious cause of the discrepancy is the ready availability of biographical data, or lack of it, about the individuals. Historians can only write down information from surviving documents. Whether or not these documents were made, or have survived in one cohesive body, seems to have depended more on chance and whim than on any sense of merit invested in the individual. Hence we now face an inevitable fact: if, by luck, details of the photographer's life were written down and have remained accessible, then the individual is known; if, by caprice, the photographer's biography was not recorded, or has been lost, then the name has been forgotten - irrespective of the photographer's contribution to the medium.

In the same way, a surviving body of work by the photographer encourages more earnest digging by historians to unearth biographical information. Therefore it is no coincidence that the most famous names in Victorian photography happen to be those who, fortuitously, have left us with both information and images. Those photographers of the 19th century, whose pictures and data have disappeared, have been ignored even though they were considered major figures of photography during their own lifetimes.

A good example of this principle of past reputation vs. present recognition is Nelson King Cherrill. Few today would recognize this name, although most would recognize the name of his partner: Henry Peach Robinson, the doyen of Victorian art-photography. Yet in the days of their partnership the renowned and

frequently exhibited combination prints were often signed Robinson *and* Cherrill. It seems extraordinary, and so unfair, that one member of the partnership should have retained such prominence and acclaim while the other member languishes in obscurity. The only explanation is that Cherrill's biography is largely a mystery.

We do know that Nelson K. Cherrill was a prominent member of the photographic community, in both Great Britain and New Zealand, a prolific writer on photography, a partner in Henry Peach Robinson's studio, an expert on combination printing and on photographic enamels, and a civil engineer of attainment. Yet he remains an enigmatic figure in 19th century photography. His name appears on the credit line of scores of articles and essays in the photographic press between 1865 and the early 1890s but solid facts about his life and career are few and far between.

It is not known when or where Cherrill was born although it is evident that he was originally trained as a civil engineer. (1) Soon after completing his articles, he decided to commence his professional career as a photographer.

Exactly when, why or where this occurred is also unclear although circumstantial evidence would indicate that Nelson K. Cherrill was a fully practicing and expert photographer by 1865. The reason for this assumption is that from early 1866 he began to contribute a regular stream of letters, columns, technical articles and aesthetic essays to the photographic press, mainly The Photographic News, one of the most important journals of record of Victorian photography.

Subjects of his contributions included: "On Printing Density"; "Photographing Non-Actinic Colours"; "Carbon Printing" - a four-part series; "Cutting glass under water with a pair of scissors"; "A Few Considerations on the Connection between Diffusion of Focus and Pictorial Softness"; "A Suggestion for the Better Ventilation of Darkrooms"; "M. Adam-Solomon's Portraits"; "Distilled Water in Photography"; "The Wrong Path - Artificial Versus Natural Clouds in Landscape Photography"; "Mr. McLachlan's Discovery"; "Short Essays on Photography and Art - North or South"; "On the Relation Between Intensity and Tone"; and so on. It should be emphasized that this selection of articles by Nelson K. Cherrill from The Photographic News (2) were from a two-year period, from 1866 to 1868.

Many of these articles are very technical and sophisticated, and not the products of a rank beginner in the medium. This impression is confirmed by a critical notice of a series of pictures depicting the English Lake scenery which Cherrill published in October 1866. The reviewer was more than enthusiastic:

Few of the young and rising photographers of the day have evinced a juster appreciation of the relation of the various parts of our photography in producing a perfect whole, as art and science, than Mr. Nelson K. Cherrill. (3)

The writer continued his effusive praise by favorably comparing the young man's work to "many of the experienced masters of the art," in spite of "working in a dark tent, in remote mountain passes, with all the inconveniences attaching to landscape photography in a somewhat rugged district."

It is particularly interesting to note, in light of Cherrill's later partnership, that the critic singled out for praise the excellent cloud effects in the views, "introduced by skillful double printing."

In addition, the notice included glowing remarks on Cherrill's views of Folkstone Harbour, with sea and shipping, and "his very fine" photographs of machinery, especially some of the interiors of the engine works of Messrs. Penn and Co., Greenwich, for which Cherrill was awarded a bronze medal at a later exhibition.(4) He also received a silver medal for a landscape view of Rusthall Common. The first prize, incidentally, was won by H.P. Robinson, for a picture entitled "Sleep" (which depicted two girls, "evidently sisters," sleeping together with "perfect unconsciousness.") (5)

It is in a review of this exhibition that another clue to Cherrill's life emerges; he is listed as living in Tunbridge Wells whereas Robinson is noted as residing in London. The significance of this fact will emerge later.

On 17 October 1868, Nelson K. Cherrill was invited to deliver a paper (6) before the North London Photographic Association, admitting that he had never "resided in the metropolis, and having but seldom visited the locality in which we are now assembled." In spite of this fact, Cherrill was elected a member of the society and copies of his prize-winning print, "Rusthall Common," were selected as presentation prints for the members.

All the articles by Cherrill up to this point are written in the first person singular. From the latter part of 1868, the articles introduce the words "our" and "we". The plural pronoun indicates that sometime in 1868 H.P. Robinson joined Nelson K. Cherrill as senior partner in the latter's studio at 1 Grove Villas, Tunbridge Wells. This is confirmed in a long letter (7) in which Cherrill described an occasion

"sometime back" when the celebrated photographer Antoine Adam-Salomon "paid us a visit at Tunbridge Wells," and Robinson took his portrait. Also, the partnership advertised its studio in a Tunbridge Wells guidebook which is dated 1868.

It is likely that their collaboration began early in the year because an article by Cherrill which described "Our Printing Room" (8) referred to the partner's practice of printing large composition pictures outdoors during the summer months.

Perhaps the most important paper delivered by Cherrill during this period was "On Combination Printing," which was read at a meeting of the London Photographic Society (later to become The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain) on 12 January 1869.(9) This paper, which gives fascinating details of the production of Robinson's combination prints, implies an intimate knowledge of the techniques which it is difficult to believe were obtained secondhand. The implication is that Cherrill printed them himself. He certainly was able to exhibit a collection of original prints to illustrate his points. A confirmation of this idea is that several prints during this period were in fact credited to both Robinson and Cherrill. An example was the controversial "Seascape with Kittiwakes."(10) Both Robinson and Cherrill were also jointly credited with "charming examples" of carbon prints on enamel, (11) a variation on the eberneum process invented by J.M. Burgess. (12) Again it seems likely that Cherrill was the partner who actually made the prints, since he gave full details of the process on a subsequent occasion and was credited with being the expert on the technique.

The Robinson/Cherrill partnership was not only successful in terms of the praise, and medals, lavished on their art-productions, but also financially rewarding. In 1872 they announced their occupation of a brand new studio, "of very magnificent proportions," occupying part of the recently erected Public Hall in Tunbridge Wells. It was proclaimed "one of the finest establishments of its kind in the country."(13) An extremely long article, "Messrs. Robinson and Cherrill's Studio at Tunbridge Wells,"(14) written three years later, gives a vivid description of the studio, its operation and the reputations of its principals.

It is in this article of 1875 that confirmation is found of the beginning of the partnership and the reason for Robinson's move from London to Tunbridge Wells:

Ten years ago the over-exercise of this unceasing energy produced a degree of debility which rendered rest imperative [in 1865 Robinson was

only 35 years old], and having acquired a competency, Mr. Robinson retired from business for a time, and, after a rest of two or three years, recommenced professional life in Tunbridge Wells.

The writer remarked that it was "Mr. Robinson's good fortune" to become associated with Nelson K. Cherrill whose "career ... is still before him, and photographers will yet hear more of him."

And so they did - but under peculiar circumstances. One year after this expression of confidence, Nelson K. Cherrill left England. There is evidence that Cherrill had already abandoned the partnership by the time the article appeared. His name appears in a Tunbridge Wells directory for 1874 as an independent photographer at 1 Fern Villas, Queens Road, Tunbridge Wells. On the other hand, Cherrill may have been Robinson's partner until two months prior to his emigration. In the 24 March 1876 editions of both the Tunbridge Wells Gazette and the Kent and Sussex Courier the business was advertised as the Robinson and Cherrill studio. One week later, in the 31 March editions, the business appeared as "H.P. Robinson (late Robinson and Cherrill)."

Contradiction is added to confusion.

The only certainty is that by the spring of 1876 Cherrill had resigned his partnership and was planning to leave England. No reasonable explanation has been uncovered for this precipitous change in course. Cherrill had gained an enviable reputation among his peers, he was partner to one of the most famous personalities of the day, and he was reaping the material rewards of managing one of the most magnificent, and successful, studios in Britain. Yet in late May 1876 he set sail from Plymouth on the S.S. Whampoa, bound for Australia and New Zealand.

Cherrill had not intended to continue practicing photography during the voyage, but once the idea occurred to him, he was irrepensible. He borrowed a camera from a fellow passenger, rigged up a darkroom from the mate's cabin, and scrounged the collodion and processing chemicals from the ship's stores and the doctor's office. The results, by Cherrill's account,(15) were very successful.

He arrived in Melbourne, Australia, on 9 July (the voyage took six weeks) and explored the photographic scene in the city during the following ten days. In a fascinating letter to The Photographic News,(16) Cherrill gives an insider's glimpse into the studios of Australian photographers of the 1870s, commenting

on the quality of their work, the wages of their operators, the prices of the pictures and similar professional details.

From Melbourne, Nelson K. Cherrill continued his journey to Christchurch, New Zealand, where he bought a plot of land in the heart of the city at Cashel Street on 21 October 1876 and began the construction of a photographic studio, and quickly opened for business. During the next few years, Cherrill established himself "at the head of his profession" in Christchurch, and continued writing technical articles back to The Photographic News, giving advice on such matters as painting studio backgrounds, tips on recovering silver after "exciting" the collodion, an underground storage vault for collodion, making enamels, insurance rates on exported collodion, and albumenizing glass plates. Incidentally, in reference to the last technique, Cherrill made it clear that by 1878 he had abandoned collodion in favor of albumen plates, and, he said, "I believe every other photographers would do the same if he gave the thing a fair trial."

Nelson K. Cherrill was also active in city affairs.⁽¹⁸⁾ He became Honorary Secretary of the Philosophical Institute in 1879 (and a member of its Council in November 1880) and was elected to the Christchurch City Council, North-West Ward, September 1879. In addition, Cherrill was people's church warden at St. Michael's.

Cherrill's early training as a civil engineer was put to good use in that his last official work in Christchurch was the design of a water-works system for the city.

In August 1881, after five seemingly successful years, both professionally and socially, Nelson K. Cherrill closed his studio, sold his house at Riccarton (a fashionable suburb close to the heart of Christchurch) for 650 pounds, and set sail for England. The cause of this second, sudden change in location was given merely as "domestic affliction" but the suggestion is also present that Cherrill lacked professional challenge in such a small (then) place as Christchurch - he was a big fish in a very tiny pond, and did not have room to grow towards his ambitions.⁽¹⁹⁾ Cherrill arrived back in England in November 1881.

The remainder of Cherrill's life is hazy to say the least. A few clues remain to indicate his continued involvement in photography, but not as a professional studio photographer.

Two years after his return to England, in June 1883, Cherrill accepted the position of Paris manager to the Swan Electric Lamp Company. ⁽²⁰⁾ This was

not such a break with photography as might be assumed. Sir Joseph Wilson Swan, the company's founder, was also the inventor of a carbon printing process at which Cherrill was an acknowledged expert.

Also, in 1891, Nelson K. Cherrill designed a hand camera, strongly advocating viewfinders through which the subject is viewed directly "and not from an inverted image [on a ground glass screen] seen with a blanket tied round one's head." (21)

A lecture on "Control in Photographic Printing" (22) was given by a Nelson R. Cherrill at the Camera Club, London, in February 1904. As seems likely, this may have been a misprint for Nelson K. Cherrill. If so, Cherrill would have been an elderly man. When and where he died is unknown.

H.P. Robinson continued to operate the Tunbridge Wells studio until his retirement in 1888; he died at his home in the town in 1901.

As a photographer, a partner of Robinson, and a prolific journalist, the name of Nelson K. Cherrill was well known for 30 years. It is now largely forgotten. It is hoped that these brief notes will contribute towards a reappraisal of his work and life, and they are offered to any reader who wishes to pursue further research.

References and Footnotes:

1. The Photographic News, 3 September 1875, p. 429.
2. All the listed articles are from The Photographic News between 1866 and 1868 - the diligent researcher will find many more contributions from Cherrill in these pages.
3. The Photographic News, 12 October 1866, p. 482.
4. The Photographic News, 30 August 1867, p. 423. The second silver medal was won by William England for his Swiss views. The exhibition was the 35th annual report of The Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society.
5. The Photographic News, 1 May 1868, p. 209. Robinson also exhibited photographs titled "The Sisters" and "Ralph," a portrait of his son who was later to become a photographer.
6. "On the Relation between Intensity and Tone."
7. See The Photographic News, 6 November 1868, p. 536. In the 1 June issue of the same magazine, a writer refers to "the studio of Messrs. Robinson and Cherrill at Tunbridge Wells." This fact is confirmed by Miss J. Mauldon, Divisional Reference Librarian at the County Library, Kent, to whom I am indebted for much of the information concerning Cherrill's activities in Tunbridge

Wells.

8. The Photographic News, 13 November 1868, pp. 542-544; The Photographic Journal, 17 November 1868, pp. 176-178.
9. Reprinted in several of the leading photographic journals of the day, including The Photographic Journal, 16 January 1869, pp. 203-209.
10. See the editorial, The Photographic News, 21 January 1870. Other examples of combination prints credited to both individuals are: "Watching the Lark," "Edge of the Wood," "The First Hour of Night," "The Trusting Tree," "Waiting at the Stile," etc.
11. The Photographic News, 13 May 1870, p. 218, for an explanation of Cherrill's technique see The Year Book of Photography, 1870, p. 37.
12. John Middleton Burgess (not E. Burgess as one textbook claims) invented the eberneum process while a professional photographer in Norwich. He died in 1873 at the age of 31 years.
13. The Photographic News, 23 June 1872, pp. 311.
14. The Photographic News, 3 September 1875, pp. 427-429.
15. Cherrill communicated his shipboard experiences in a letter to The Photographic News, published on 8 September 1876, pp. 430-431.
16. 1 December 1876, pp. 572-573. Cherrill's conclusions regarding the state of photography in Melbourne were subsequently (18 May 1877, p. 238) challenged by a resident of the city. Cherrill responded in the issue of 21 September 1877, pp. 453-454.
17. The Photographic News, 13 September 1878, p. 439.
18. The following notes regarding Cherrill's activities in Christchurch are taken from Dictionary of Canterbury Biographies, by G.R. MacDonald. These handwritten filing cards were transcribed for me by John B. Turner, to whom I owe a debt of gratitude.
19. The Photographic News, 11 November 1881, p. 535.
20. The Photographic News, 22 June 1883, p. 392.
21. "Some Proposed Improvements in Cameras of the 'Tourist' Type," English Mechanic. See The Amateur Photographer, 26 June 1891, p. 457.
22. Reported in The Amateur Photographer, 11 February 1904, p. 116. See also The Photo-Miniature, Vol. VI, April 1904.