

The Camera Fiend

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Photography in general received a “good press” throughout the wet-plate era, from the early 1850s to the 1860s. The profession was considered an honourable one; it was useful, enjoyable, and educational. Its applications to both the arts and the sciences were growing, and its public image was held in high esteem. A growing number of well-bred young ladies was entering the profession which was renowned for its lack of sexual discrimination, its rewarding of social skills, and its encouragement of the Victorian virtues of patience, tact, and enterprise. The photographic press neverfailingly upheld the respectability of the profession and berated those individuals, or aspects of the trade, which were inconsistent with good manners and a sense of social responsibility.

It is true that an individual photographer would occasionally sully the reputation of his profession with eccentric, or even criminal, behaviour, but he would be ostracised from the fraternity of photographers and his actions severely condemned in the photographic press. The rigid Victorian code of ethics remained intact. But there were exceptions. Three types of photographers were particularly abhorred by their peers, who would denounce their activities with a righteous pomposity for which the Victorian language seems ideally suited.

There were those who recognised in the believability of the photographic image an ideal medium for erotic arousal. In an age when an exposed ankle was considered an erotic encounter, the potency of a photograph of a naked woman was understood and used. Editorials constantly lamented the difficulty of escorting a wife or daughter down certain London streets in which shop windows displayed these “lewd and lascivious productions.” In an age of rigid public propriety, pornography flourished – much to the continual shame of the average, decent photographers.

Another breed of reviled photographer was the backstreet operator who did not conform – to put it mildly – to the high standards of quality and civility expected of a studio portraitist. As one article described the situation: these “human skunks” whose “low dens of cheap photography” have “infested” the streets, execute “vile libels on humanity” and are “the very scum and offscourings of humanity,” and so on. ¹

The third type of photographic outcast was the messy wet plate operator who spilled chemicals over clothes, carpets, and furniture. Many hotels refused to give lodging to itinerant portraitists or travelling landscapists; as soon as landlords spotted a tripod in the luggage of prospective guests, all rooms were conveniently taken. One writer,

under the heading "Cleanliness is next to Godliness," suggested that "Justices of the Peace be empowered to grant licenses, on the applicants proving their fitness, by bringing all necessary materials to the Justice's house, converting his library into a darkroom, and taking at least six good collodion pictures without making a spot, the police being instructed to put in jail any photographer travelling without a license."²

The alternative was that notices would appear at the entrance to every village: "All vagrants and photographers entering the village will be prosecuted with the utmost rigour of the law."

But apart from these three types, the wet-plate photographer was generally considered to be a respectable member of society. This image of respectability was quickly lost, never to be recovered, with the advent of the dry-plate and hand camera. Perhaps if we could have the history of photography all over again, we might decide that the conveniences of the instantaneous picture were outweighed by the trouble it caused; we might decide to stay with the cumbersome, messy, inconvenient wet-plate process. But that is a discussion for another occasion.

The fact remains that in all the essays and books on the history of photography in which the introduction of the hand camera is extolled, rarely, if ever, do they recount the social approbation and general distaste directed towards the snapshot. They might point out that the hand camera was scorned by most serious photographers; they do not point out that it was almost universally criticised by every intelligent non-photographer as a major social nuisance. They might discuss the large numbers of amateurs who entered the medium for the first time; they do not reveal that these snapshotters were generally derided as camera "fiends." They occasionally mention the competition for already dwindling markets between the professional and the amateur; they do not pursue the idea that the late 19th century amateur brought photography into such disrepute that it has taken nearly 100 years for the status of the medium to recover.

At this point we should clearly define when and what we are discussing. The transition from collodion emulsions (wet-plates) to gelatine emulsions (dry-plates) took place with great rapidity around 1880. The first true dry plates which rivalled wet collodion in sensitivity were introduced in 1877. By the spring of 1878 there were four firms in Britain producing gelatine dry plates. Quickly, production was increased along with the plates' sensitivity. Truly instantaneous photography was now the rule rather than the exception and the photographer was freed from his tripod as well as his darkroom. The rank and file photographer grasped dry plates with alacrity, as illustrated by the following facts. In the 1880 annual exhibition of The Photographic Society, only two years after reliable dry plates were available, slightly more than half the entries were taken on gelatine; one year later gelatine dry plates outnumbered collodion by 5 to 1; by the following year, gelatine outnumbered collodion by 70 to 1.

To this date the history of photography had never experienced such a shock wave of change. No longer was photography the prerogative of the trained professional or reasonably well-educated and wealthy amateur. Now photography was “child’s play” which “a person of average intelligence could master in three lessons.” Thousands upon thousands of amateurs now became their own photographers – and wreaked havoc in the medium. By 1900 it was estimated that there were four million “camera fiends” who were “kodaking” everywhere and creating a major social nuisance of themselves in the process of filling their albums.

But what was it exactly to which people objected in snapshot photography that they had not opposed with earlier processes? The answer is straightforward: for the first time people could be photographed surreptitiously. Of course clandestine pictures had been made with wet-plates (notably in the case of photographing uncooperative prisoners), but these had been the exceptions, necessitating a great deal of prior planning. With the snapshot camera, anyone at any time could be the victim of an embarrassing or even incriminating picture. Sad to relate, the snapshot photographer knew and capitalised on the fact and it became the rage to capture the unposed person in awkward situations. The layman feared and hated the amateur with his ubiquitous camera. And the snapshooters ignored the restraints of common decency and good manners. The problem rapidly reached such proportions that for the first time the act of taking, or not taking, a picture was less an aesthetic consideration and more a moral or ethical one. All the endless debates about the photojournalist and his integrity (or lack of it) during the 20th century up to the present day have their roots in the uninhibited and unconstrained actions of the amateur of the 1880s. It is worth repeating for emphasis that, contrary to popular assumption, the snapshot photographer was loathed by the vast majority of right-thinking citizens during the final decades of the 19th century. Why this fact has been ignored or overlooked is difficult to understand because a plethora of articles, news items, diatribes, and irate correspondence is evident from even a cursory scanning of late Victorian publications.

The amateur was hated by everyone – by the public who was likely to be snapped in a compromising pose without his or her knowledge, by the photographer’s family and friends who saw in his snapshot craze a change in behaviour bordering on lunacy, by the serious photographer who was affronted by his atrocious productions, and by the professional whose business was already in decline but now had to compete with the freelance amateur. No wonder that the amateurs banded together in camera clubs as a form of mutual protection and support. In 1880 there were 14 photographic societies in Britain; in 1890 the number had leaped to 131; by 1900 there were 256 amateur clubs in the country.

A few examples of the antipathy of the public to the amateur photographer will illustrate these remarks. I have selected those that I find most typical, amusing, or instructive from the hundreds available, and placed them in a rough chronological order, from the early 1880s, when the problem became acute, through the turn of the century.

A good one to start with is an incident reported from the seaside resort of Broadstairs in 1881. It has all the ingredients of the problem in one succinct paragraph. Several young ladies were enjoying themselves in the sea when a young man “with the inevitable camera” came along. A large wave struck the bathers and spun one of them around until, breathless but laughing, she was flung on the sand. The force of the wave had pushed the strap of her costume off her shoulder, and just as she noticed it and hurriedly replaced the strap, she heard the click of the camera and saw the man’s grin. The girl jumped up from the water and, without saying a word, snatched the camera and flung it out to sea.³

This is the classic confrontation between a member of the public and the snapshot enthusiast which will be repeated hundreds of times in the succeeding years and is therefore worth analysing. First, such a picture could never have been attempted just two or three years earlier. The collodion process would have necessitated the setting up of a darkroom tent and the coating of a glass plate prior to the exposure. The presence of this bulky darkroom and the activities of the photographer would have been clearly evident to a prospective “sitter.” In addition the exposure times would have been so long (commonly ten seconds) that the active cooperation of the sitter in staying still for this time would have been essential. The subject would have had to be a willing and active co-operator in the production of the picture. But with dry plates and instantaneous exposures this photographer could make a picture without the agreement or participation of the subject. He was now an intruder. Perhaps the most important element in the story is that the girl heard the click of the camera and saw the man grin. He was satisfied that he had taken the shot at the expense of an unwilling subject, that he had triumphed at the cost of her embarrassment. If he had immediately seen her annoyance, quickly apologised, and offered her the offending plate, no doubt the story would have had a happier ending and been a salutary lesson to the photographer on future occasions. But no – the lady stiffened into a pose of righteous indignation, and the photographer alienated himself with his self-satisfied smirk. In this circumstance the legal rights are irrelevant. The photographer’s act prompted hate and violence. When such instances are multiplied by the thousands, it is not difficult to understand why the amateur photographer was a social outcast.

The problem was as acute in America as in Europe. In 1884 The New York Times featured a story on “The Camera Epidemic”⁴ which was one among many, in which it likened the snapshot craze with an outbreak of cholera which had become a “national scourge.” Even people in perfect health, it said, are constantly harassed by those who have contracted the camera disease. No one can walk down the street or sit down in the woods with a young lady without a dozen or fifteen cameras trained on them by “camera lunatics” concealed somewhere close by. Another article in the same newspaper⁵ took up the theme of the “lunatics” and asserted that “it has not occurred to a single medical man that the first noticeable increase in the percentage of lunatics in this country and in England took place about a year after the introduction of dry plate photography... We need search no further to find out why our lunatic asylums are crowded.”

These and other facetious articles in prominent newspapers of the period serve as a reminder of how widespread was the distaste for the amateur photographer. The situation was not helped by the growing number of blackmail cases involving snapshots,⁶ with curates and prominent society people as the prime targets.⁷ In fact, actresses were always fair game for the snapshot photographer. The Amateur Photographer, the organ of the hand camera worker, wrote that “we must especially regret that Mdme. Sarah Bernhardt was not photographed the other day as she fell down the night of stairs at a theatre”!⁸ Because of attitudes like this it is evident why the amateur photographer was held in disrepute and why the public began to retaliate.

A somewhat forthright answer to the amateur was published in 1885: *“There is but one remedy for the amateur photographer. Put a brick through his camera whenever you suspect he has taken you unawares. And if there is any doubt, give the benefit of it to the brick, not to the camera. The rights of private property, personal liberty, and personal security – birthrights, all of them, of American citizens – are distinctly inconsistent with the unlicensed use of the instantaneous process.”*⁹

In England “several decent young men” were reported to have formed a Vigilance Association “for the purpose of thrashing the cads with cameras” who take pictures of ladies at the seaside. The writer wished them “stout cudgels and much success.”¹⁰

The seaside was a favourite haunt of the snaphooter. A Texas newspaper warned its readers that “there is something at the seaside this season worse than sharks. It is the amateur photographer.”¹¹ The lay press was in unanimous agreement, asserting that the snapshot “adds yet another to the terrors of modern existence”¹² and that amateur photography is “one of the perils of life.” In 1880 public indignation was aroused by a snapshot of Queen Victoria laughing. It was considered to be in bad taste and “most loyal subjects ... heartily commiserated Her Majesty on account of [this] unfortunate incident.”¹³

By the late 1880s the snapshot enthusiast, after displaying an utter lack of integrity or even common good manners, was feared and hated. The problem was exacerbated by the introduction of the first Kodak camera in 1888 which provided a fully self-contained system – the amateur no longer needed to know anything about photography. As the Kodak advertisements proclaimed: “You push the button – we do the rest.” The Kodak craze swelled the ranks of the amateur snaphooters and of the social pests by hundreds of thousands of irresponsible camera fiends. Violent reactions to the surreptitious use of the camera was not only condoned but applauded, as epitomised by this verse which parodies the Kodak slogan:

*Picturesque landscape,
Babbling brook,
Maid in a hammock
Reading a book;*

*Man with a Kodak
In secret prepares
To picture the maid,
As she sits unawares.
Her two strapping brothers
Were chancing to pass;
Saw the man with the Kodak
And also the lass.
They rolled up their sleeves
Threw off hat, coat, and vest
The man pressed the button
And they did the rest!*

The situation was no laughing matter for the majority of pedestrians. Press reports encouraged the citizen to fight back. In an article titled "The Camera Fiend" The Chicago Tribune¹⁴ wrote that "something must be done, and will be done, soon ... A jury would not convict a man who violently destroyed the camera of an impudent photographer guilty of a constructive assault upon modest women." It recommended that the pedestrian should "fight for his rights" by attacking photographers while hoping that the legislature would pass a law to protect citizens against insult and arrogance from snapshot photographers.

The plea for a law against public photography had been heard on many occasions since the introduction of the hand camera. A typical example is the following letter from "Pater," Folkestone, published in the Daily News in September, 1895:

Sir – Cannot Parliament do something next session to abate the annoyance caused by men who carry about what are called detective cameras? Photography affords a very nice pastime to certain people, but the multiplication of instantaneous cameras has become a perfect nuisance to the general public. A lady cannot bathe at the seaside now without being focused by some impertinent fellow who ostentatiously takes a snapshot at her. You cannot multiply copies of a man's photograph without his consent. Why should it be lawful to take a snapshot of him without his consent? Snapshots are a comparatively new invention, or I am sure the subject would have been dealt with by the legislature long before now. I hear of many cases of ladies who are positively afraid to emerge from the tents in which they don their bathing dresses, on account of the nuisance to which I have referred.

A similar letter from an irate correspondent appeared in The Daily Telegraph¹⁵: "The law takes cognisance of what are termed technical assaults, for which the perpetrators may be fined or imprisoned. Is it not possible to extend this principle and make it an assault to photograph a person without his consent? If this could be done, it might have some effect in checking a practice which has grown to be one of the chief terrors Of private life." (Although anti-photography laws were never introduced in Britain and

America, a law prohibiting photography without permission was introduced in Germany on 1 July 1907.)

Responding to these demands, Punch issued its own "Regulations for Camera-Fiends." 16

1. All possessors of hand-cameras and other photographic apparatus shall in future take out a yearly Game Licence, obtainable at Scotland Yard on passing an examination of proficiency in the practice of snap-shooting.
2. The aforesaid Game Licence may also, in exceptional circumstances, be awarded to sportsmen of proved incompetency, such that they invariably misfire or aim wide of their object.
3. There shall be a close time in London during the Society pairing season, i.e., from the Opening of Parliament to the end of Goodwood, and at other fashionable resorts as prescribed by the local authorities.
4. No person carrying a photographic weapon shall discharge the same within fifty yards of a public highway or place, unless with the consent of the victim or victims, in writing and duly attested.
5. Infants under the age of twenty-one, free-lance journalists, certified lunatics, American tourists and Smart Set hangers-on, shall in no case be permitted to take photographs.
6. All other snap-shooters at large or on ticket-of-leave shall report themselves at stated intervals to the Censors in camera, on pain of having their licences endorsed.
7. It shall be held a felony, and punishable without the option of a fine, to obtain, purvey, reproduce or cause to be reproduced, any blurred and surreptitious presentment of a celebrated lady-novelist (stepping, for instance, out of a cab) who has hitherto set her face against such publicity and outrage.
8. Biograph operators who attack a large assemblage of persons with a wide-angle lens in broad daylight shall be guilty of constructive assault and battery, and shall be liable to three years' imprisonment in a dark room.
9. Every individual shall have the copyright in his own face for his lifetime and seven years, or for forty-two years, whichever period shall be the longer.

In a more serious vein, The Amateur Photographer proposed its own rules for the snapshot photographer. Although this journal had earlier defended the rights and activities of the camera fiend, it had later recognised the severe damage that this type of photographer was doing to the reputation of photographers in general.

The magazine advocated these six, self-imposed guidelines:

- 1) Never photograph a man in such circumstances as you yourself would not like to be photographed in.
- 2) Certain classes should be tabooed:
 - a) Public personages travelling incognito.
 - b) People labouring under physical deformities.

- c) People suffering from temporary accidents, e. g., the occupants of a Channel steamer after a stormy passage.
- d) In general, people who implicitly or explicitly express a dislike to be photographed.
- 3) Never use an expedient to prevent a person knowing he was being photographed, when, if he did know, he would probably resent it.
- 4) Never let the fact that the victim “didn’t know” excuse a violation of good taste.
- 5) Never use a camera as a medium for “a thundering good practical joke.”
- 6) Finally, remember that though you may escape without penalty, your misdoings will be held against the brotherhood in general.

This was sensible advice – but it was too little, too late, like attempting diplomatic negotiations between opposing trenches. The photographer was more likely to heed the advice of those writers who advocated “that a small revolver may on occasion be a not altogether undesirable addition to the [photographic] kit; or perhaps some enterprising inventor will ‘combine’ a shooting instrument with a shutter”!¹⁷ Snapshot enthusiasts were encouraged to “take the precaution to carry a thick stick as part of their equipment, otherwise they may find their cameras reduced to a wreck in consequence of their inability to defend themselves.” Another suggestion was the formation of a Photographic Defence Association in order to act as bodyguards to amateur photographers while they were shooting in public. This and similar suggestions might seem an overreaction today, but they were seriously considered in the late 19th century, particularly when prominent writers were merely reflecting public sentiment by asserting that because “the hand camera fiend ... respects nothing except the exercise of muscular Christianity upon his carcase, there are cases when damage to person and property would not only be pardonable but meritorious.”¹⁸

The amateur photographer was not only avoided on the streets but also considered an undesirable guest at any home or hotel. There were many complaints about the slovenly habits of the snapshotters. They used the mirrors as glazing sheets for the POP prints, dripped water and chemicals over water and furniture, stained the carpets, curtains and sofas with developer and fixer, and converted the bathroom into a shambles of a darkroom. “Not long ago,” said one writer after listing the above problems “all churches and cathedrals were closed to photographers, because they used to allow the silver stains (from wet-plates) to drop from their dark slides on to the marble pavements. If amateur photographers turn their lodgings into darkrooms, no respectable landlady will admit them into her house.”¹⁹ The amateur was no more welcome in his own home. A particularly angry account of living with a photographer was written by a housewife, obviously at the end of her patience:

Some day, when the punishment is fixed to fit the crime, the worst thing that can befall a criminal will not be death by electricity or hanging or even by drawing or quartering. No, the most heinous of offenders will be punished by no such mild processes as these. He will be doomed to dwell under the same roof with an amateur photographer, and the worse the crime, the more enthusiastic will be the amateur photographer and

*the smaller will be the roof that covers them. It is only under conditions limited as to space that the amateur photographer rises to his full powers of diabolical annoyance. He is not a pleasing companion at any time, this amateur whose talk is all of plates and processes, whose fingers and clothes are fearfully, wonderfully, and chemically affected, and whose mind is all on one topic. But when he is at close range he is particularly and unspeakably awful. Every room in the house is turned into a dark-room, should he so demand it, bathrooms preferred, as having running water and being especially inconvenient for the rest of the household. Furniture and hangings are looked upon as merely so many scenic accessories. Many a time entrance is denied callers because the halls and drawing-room are in the act of being taken, and must not be disturbed or disarranged. The valuable utensil, the clothes horse, is no longer available for laundry service. When draped with curtains, there's nothing like them for a background, says he of the camera. The worst and most humiliating time of all, however, is when the amateur photographer is seized with a passion for portraiture, and insists upon perpetuating the features of his unfortunate family in a manner as revolting to art as it is to vanity. He thinks nothing either of displaying these awful likenesses upon all occasions, his mind being concerned only with their technical instead of their personal aspect. Only the strongest ties of affection can render his presence at all supportable. He is simply an infliction and a torture. His true place in society is beside the thumb-screws, the gallows or the whipping-post, where he would at least be of some practical service.*²⁰

Another wife wrote a long and scathing letter about her husband, an amateur photographer who had been "stricken with the amateur photographic plague" about three years earlier and "up to that time I always considered him reasonably sane." The letter is too long to quote, but it is a perfect evocation of the photographer's plight when living with an unsympathetic woman: "I tell you that amateur photography was invented to drive a poor woman crazy who has a husband that is a victim of the villainous practice."²¹

Perhaps it is only fair to point out that a high percentage of camera fiends were women. When Prince George of Greece was travelling to America in 1891, he was "pursued by 150 ladies, all armed with cameras, who persisted in photographing him, despite his protests and his attempts to cover his face. This is really a social nuisance, which ought to be sternly repressed."²² The writer continued, "but who can effectually guard against the pertinacity of a lady photographer?" Punch magazine published many cartoons lampooning the insensitivities of the amateur photographer and of the lady snapshot enthusiast. In one, four women photographers with their cameras are stationed at intervals down a twisting hill, waiting for a male bicyclist to make his descent. The caption runs: "Caution! This hill is dangerous!"²³ In another, an elderly gentleman is hanging from a tree branch over a stream while three ladies with their snapshot cameras are taking their camera club monthly assignment: "A Study of Action."²⁴ The callousness of amateur photographers was renowned; they responded to a fellow human being's danger, embarrassment or difficulty merely by seeing the

opportunity for a snapshot. Interestingly, the photographer depicted in this situation was just as often female as male.

It is true that a woman's independence was often linked to photography and the other craze of the age, bicycling. A free spirited young woman escaped from the confines of the home, a stern father, and a dull chaperone by taking up photography. In order to travel to picture locations, she used a bicycle. The bicycle was not suitable for ankle length dresses and layers of petticoat, so she experimented with more masculine attire such as bloomers. An interesting article would be the close relationship during the 1890s between woman's suffrage, the bicycle, fashion, and photography.

To return to the main theme of this contribution, the public indignation over the use of the inconspicuous and surreptitious use of the hand camera prompted a good many discussions, for the first time, on the morality or ethics of street photography.²⁵ Issues were raised at this period which have never, and perhaps never will be, resolved due to the infinite varieties of motives from which the pictures are made and of the complexities of personal integrity. However, as a topic of debate I would offer this 1910 assertion:²⁶ "Our moral character dwindles as our instruments get smaller "

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