

Valentine Blanchard 1831-1901

a once-famous but now forgotten Victorian photographer

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Valentine Blanchard was one of the most prominent and respected Victorian photographers. By the turn of the 19th century he was considered the last surviving member of the "brilliant band of the sixties," a group which "did so much to raise (photography's) status and lay the foundations of what it has become today," said one of his obituaries in 1901. (1) Other members of the "brilliant band" included Francis Bedford, Oscar Rejlander, T.R. Williams, James Mudd, H.P. Robinson, and a name which is now as forgotten as Blanchard's: Robert Falconer. All these photographers rose to prominence in the 1860s, setting standards in both the art and science of photography which would not be surpassed, and rarely equaled, in the following decades.

Valentine Blanchard is particularly interesting in that his life and career not only spanned the invention of photography and the introduction of the hand camera, but also included the practice of practically all techniques and processes during the 19th century. He began his photography with the daguerreotype, switched to the calotype, adopted the collodion/albumen process, and ended with dry gelatine plates. He was renowned for his stereoscopic pictures, cartes-de-visite, "quality" portraits, instantaneous views, and art studies in platinum. In addition he wrote frequently and lucidly on all photographic topics, from technical advice to personal anecdotes. In light of these facts it seems astonishing that his name has been so neglected in all histories of the period.

Valentine Blanchard was born in 1831 at Wisbech, Cambridgeshire. Very little is known of his early life except that he was apprenticed to a local printer. During the latter years of his apprenticeship he became enamored with the new art. He wrote of those years: "I had passed through the cigar-box-and-sixpenny-lens struggles with photography, and was rewarded by most complete and entire failure ..." (2) It is evident that Blanchard was not from a wealthy family and had to subsist on his meagre earnings as a printer's apprentice. He continues: "... the fearful price of the chemicals cleaned out the shallow pocket of the apprentice, and there were long and serious waits until sufficient funds enabled me to replenish my photographic stores." In those days, hypo was sixpence per ounce, which was a considerable sum of money for the working man. Although these remarks by Blanchard are undated, by following odd clues throughout his writings, it is

possible to estimate that these initial flirtings with photography took place in the late 1840s and the first years of the 1850s.

By 1852 Blanchard had completed his apprenticeship and had moved to London. Experiments with photography were no longer possible due to lack of cash. Often a biscuit, eaten in the National Gallery, was his midday meal. "The eye was fed, however, and that was something." Meanwhile he read every scrap relating to photography, "and thus theoretically got to know a great deal more about it," while he patiently waited for "happier times when I might hope to ripen theory into practice."

About 18 months after arriving in London, Blanchard struck up a friendship with a photographer who had recently arrived in Britain from America, where he had taken lessons in the daguerreotype process. Blanchard and his new friend shared a lodging house while the American looked for suitable premises and eventually opened a daguerreotype studio, which quickly became active. Valentine Blanchard's enthusiasm for photography was fired by this firsthand encounter with a professional and he was determined to take lessons in the daguerreotype process as soon as he could scrape together the necessary cash.

In 1853 or 1854 the long looked-for day came and he was able to begin his instruction. In his old age Blanchard wrote a long article in which he described the making of "My First Daguerreotype."⁽³⁾ This article is fascinating not only because it chronicles with pitiless clarity the difficulties of making a daguerreotype in those early years but also reveals the stubborn dedication that was necessary for anyone who intended to master the process. He describes the hour after hour, day after day, hard work of "buffing" the silver plates (polishing them with a long strip of wood covered with finest buckskin and jeweler's rouge), coating successively with the dangerous fumes of both iodine and bromine, and then the "development" of the latent image over heated mercury.

Eventually his lessons were concluded, and Blanchard was deemed ready to strike out as a professional photographer. Although he was an expert at buffing, and had watched all the other operations, he had never actually completed a picture without assistance. He searched far and wide for suitable premises, before renting a large room over a shop in the east end of London.

For many days I was busily employed in fitting up my darkroom, and in other ways getting ready for the serious operation of admitting the public, who would without doubt rush in with the money in their hand eager to pay in order to be practised upon.

Before opening the door to his customers, Blanchard decided to test out his equipment and processing, which was just as well because he found it impossible to obtain an image. After dozens of practice exposures on a plaster copy of "The Greek Slave" (a Hiram Powers sculpture which was the rage of the Great Exhibition of 1851) the daguerreotype plates remained blank and Blanchard sat down, in despair, with a cup of tea and a book, forgetting that a plate had been left over the heated mercury. Suddenly, he remembered the plate, rushed to the fuming bath, and to his joy saw his first daguerreotype. The secret of success was revealed - his mercury bath had been made too thick and the spirit lamp was giving insufficient heat to vaporize the mercury through the cast iron. Blanchard's first great photographic trouble was at an end, and he was ready for business.

Blanchard was never happy in the grime and squalor of the east end, and decided to move to the smarter, west side of London. Although he was lucky to have a single customer on his first day of business in the new location, he was rapidly running out of money. At that point his career was saved by an old navy commander who hired Blanchard to teach him photography. Blanchard later discovered that his first pupil was an eccentric Lord who was renowned for his kindly acts to the poor. "My First Pupil" was written (4) by Blanchard towards the end of his life and it, like "My first daguerreotype," is suffused with the ethos of the early years of photography.

Gradually, throughout the next ten years, Blanchard's business and reputation were increasing. During this time he changed from the slow, expensive daguerreotype process to the collodion/albumen combination, which allowed him to make many prints from a single negative. He was also engaged in the dangerous business of manufacturing collodion. (5) This substance comprised gun-cotton in alcohol and ether, and had a tendency to explode. Blanchard described these beginnings of his career as "the nine years I have spent in wading through the slough of despond in my desire to reach the portals of success." (6)

He not only reached the portals, but passed through them. His prints were winning medals at exhibitions (even though they were often credited to his dealer, C.E. Elliot, and not to him, a common enough occurrence in the 19th century), and the photographic press began to publish his letters and articles as well as reviews of his work.

Without doubt, Valentine Blanchard's major success in photography during the 1860s was his instantaneous views for the stereoscope. These series of photographs were extraordinary for the amount of life and action revealed in the pictures. Blanchard was not the first photographer to make stereoscopic "snapshots." Although there had been

attempts to capture movement with the daguerreotype process they were not very practical due to the long exposure times as well as the difficulty of viewing the mirror-like surfaces. More successfully, some stereo views of Paris streets had been made by Disderi in 1854 but the first popular and effective street views were taken by George Washington Wilson, of Princess Street, Edinburgh, from a first floor balcony of a hotel in 1859. In the same year Edward Anthony made similar stereo street scenes of Broadway, New York. The following year, both Adolphe Braun and William England photographed the streets of Paris. There were many other experimenters in action pictures with the stereoscopic camera at this time. The small format of the stereo necessitated short focal length lenses, which allowed for wider aperture lenses, which in turn permitted shorter exposures. With the introduction of the stereo camera, the dream of successful pictures of people caught in natural walking postures, and of street traffic with all the flux and motion of city life, became a reality.

Blanchard began experiments in instantaneous work in 1861; in June 1862 he issued his first series of photographs for sale to the public: "Instantaneous Views of London." The series received enthusiastic reviews in the photographic press and the "new and successful worker," Valentine Blanchard, was encouraged to produce more. (7)

Another reviewer described each image and marvelled at "the cabs, omnibuses and pedestrians, in motion, some right in the foreground, all perfectly defined... a man wheeling a barrow across the road being perfectly caught with uplifted foot as he proceeds." He concluded:

As pictures, they are brilliant and harmonious, and as accurate portrayals and valuable souvenirs of the daily street life of the busiest metropolis of the world, we have seen nothing at all to equal them.

This was high praise indeed for a young and relatively unknown photographer. In later lectures and articles, Blanchard revealed how the pictures had been made. He felt that the previous street views from lofty windows were unsatisfactory because few people ever saw the streets from such a viewpoint. He worked to make pictures from the streets "as nearly all the best views were quite inaccessible from any other place." (8) Early in the summer of 1862 he had hired a cab, set up his darkroom on the inside, blocking up the windows with yellow calico, and directed the driver to park in the correct position. Blanchard then erected his tripod on the roof of the cab. From this precarious position he made many beautiful pictures of the hustle and bustle of the city. Several amusing incidents occurred due to the strange sight of a photographer in such an unusual location. Apart from the crowds who gathered to watch, the police were also concerned, then as now, about parking restrictions. Once, while Blanchard was inside

the cab preparing his plate he heard his driver being challenged by "the over-officious stupidity of an Irish policeman." Blanchard emerged from the cab and found the policeman "excited, vociferous, apparently drunk and deaf to explanations." (9) Blanchard insisted that they proceed to Bow Street police station to settle the matter with the inspector on duty. The policeman was reprimanded and Blanchard went back to his photography.

All Blanchard's instantaneous pictures were made with collodion of his own manufacture, but which he also sold to the public through press advertisements. The exposures were made with a mechanical shutter, situated behind the back lens of the camera, and designed to give a longer exposure to the foreground than to the sky (which would otherwise be over-exposed). The shutter was released by pushing a rod that projected through the top of the camera. As the rod could be pushed slowly or rapidly, the exposure times could be varied at will. The shutter was invented by an unidentified workman employed by C.E. Elliott, Blanchard's publisher. Later, he changed to the drop-shutter, invented by William England, which operated immediately in front of the plate.

Following the success of his first series of instantaneous views of London, Blanchard issued a further set early in 1863. These, too, met with an enthusiastic response. (10)

Blanchard was not content to restrict his instantaneous views to London streets. At the same time as his first London series he issued a half dozen instantaneous views for the stereoscope depicting a country fair. Taken in the spring of 1862, these pictures included "hundreds of medley figures in surging confusion amongst stalls, booths, raree-shows, etc." and, on a stage were a "clown, pantaloon, sprites, and others, gentlemen in tights and ladies in spangles, and all in motley." (11)

The years 1862 to 1865 were busy years for Valentine Blanchard. At the beginning of this period he was a "new" worker; by the end of the three years his name was as famous as any photographer of the age. Apart from his instantaneous pictures of crowds, the photographs which led to this rapid rise to fame were river views and seascapes.

Marine views had been included in Blanchard's series on London, and these stereoscopic pictures had often been singled out by reviewers for special praise. They noted "the varying effects of water, and shipping, and cloud" which "possess a charm, that never palls or wearies."

Valentine Blanchard gave credit to George Washington Wilson who produced "the

greatest number of really beautiful pictures that have yet been secured by photography." Blanchard was particularly impressed by Wilson's sunrise and sunset pictures, many of which were over water: "The boldness of the idea which prompted him to turn the daring gaze of his lens at the sun - and coming suddenly, too, upon our old notions about the necessity of keeping the sun *out* of the lens - almost took my breath away." (12)

Several of Blanchard's river views in the London series included clouds rimmed by sunlight, and light reflected by foreground water. These images were so successful that he issued several other series featuring river and marine views. For example, a couple of months after his first London group, he published "Instantaneous Views of the Inundations of the Fens," in August 1862. (13) These series included several sunset views, featuring light reflections on water.

By the end of 1863 Blanchard had prepared a series of stereoscopic views of a popular south coast resort: "Instantaneous Views of Brighton." Again, the series combined "motley crowds" with tranquil sun and sea views. The photographic writers were ecstatic:

We have here some of the most perfectly rendered instantaneous views of animated life as seen in the streets and on the beach of a fashionable watering-place, and some of the most picturesque effects of sea, and shipping, and cloud, and sun, and atmosphere which have ever come under our notice. Amongst the latter we have two or three perfect gems which have certainly never been surpassed, perhaps never equaled. (14)

The reviewer remarked that "Mr. Blanchard has long since taken prominent rank amongst the most skillful and artistic of instantaneous photographers," which is some measure of Blanchard's rapid rise to fame in that his first published pictures were issued only 18 months previously.

One year after the Brighton series, Blanchard issued "Instantaneous Views of Dover, Ramsgate, Margate etc." By now, Blanchard seems to have left behind his competition as one reviewer remarked: "the field of instantaneous and marine photography appears to be left now to one man." (15) The review continued with a list of superlatives about the photographs "but in the presence of such pictures as these, we feel that we could not do less, and do justice." Other reviewers were no less complimentary. (16) Valentine Blanchard's reputation as a major figure in "the brilliant band of the sixties" was now assured.

At this point one further note about Blanchard's instantaneous views must be

mentioned. During the 1860s all photographic materials were sensitive only to blue light. This meant that blue sky was recorded with the same density as white clouds. The result was blank sky areas on the final print. The most common method of overcoming this problem was to make two exposures on the printing paper: one from the foreground negative and the other from a cloud negative, separately exposed for the purpose. Although Blanchard was not averse to combination printing, he normally did not need to make the effort. As previously stated his shutter was designed to give less exposure to the sky than to the foreground. More important, however, was the fact that Blanchard had no inhibitions in aiming his camera into the sun. The backlit clouds were revealed with a single camera exposure.

At the time this effect was as surprising as it was novel. Blanchard may not have been the first photographer to utilise backlighting or make views including the sun in the picture area (G.W. Wilson, as already noted, had taken many pictures in this way, as had other workers of the period, notably Charles Breese) but the popularity of his instantaneous stereographs had given the idea national prominence. One writer remarked: "The white washed skies, which had so long been a reproach to our art, may now fairly be set down as a thing of the past; for public taste has been so educated by the 'instantaneous' workers of the class of the artist (Blanchard) whose pictures are now under review, as to render a natural sky a *sine qua non* in a high-class photograph." (17) Valentine Blanchard described his techniques for improved skies in photographs in an 1863 article, "On the Production and Use of Cloud negatives." (18) Later, he wrote "A Useful Method for Hiding Defects in Skies," (19) which advocated hand retouching with a soft pencil on the negative.

While on the subject of technique, the darkroom tent used by Valentine Blanchard is also worthy of a short note. In fact, it was not a "tent" but, as he described it, a "manipulating box." It comprised a wooden box, 20 x 7 x 14 inches in dimensions, which contained all the necessary chemicals. In use it was folded out and placed on a tripod. A hood fitted over the open end and the operator placed his hands into the box through elasticized sleeves, watching the manipulations through a yellow glass window in the top of the box. This was certainly more convenient than erecting and entering a full-size tent full of ether fumes. Blanchard fully described and illustrated his manipulating box in the 25 September 1863 issue of *The Photographic News*.

A review of all Blanchard's successes in the field of instantaneous photography is not possible, but it should be emphasised that these early years were the most productive and rewarding of his whole career. For example, a royal procession in March 1863 was attended by dozens of photographers but due to the poor light very few images were secured; the best of these were taken by Blanchard. (20) In 1867 Blanchard issued a

series of "Photographs of the Naval Review," the only photographs of the fleet obtained, again in poor weather and in action.(21) This assignment not only provided Blanchard with unique photographs but also with memories of high adventure. The difficulties of transporting his equipment in a small boat, and operating the collodion process in winds of salt air, were chronicled in a long article(22) which attests to Blanchard's tenacity and determination. The risks were so great that he retained a strong memory for the events when, 30 years later, he again described the difficulties of marine photography with the collodion process,(23) at a time when this inconvenient cumbersome "wet" technique had been superceded by dry plates and hand cameras.

The culmination of Valentine Blanchard's achievements during the early 1860s was his illustrations for Annals of Christ's Hospital, by "A Blue," published in 1867 (according to the title page, although it was reviewed in the photographic press in 1866). The text of this book holds little interest for the photographic historian; it is a history of the hospital from its origins in the 13th century Order of St. Francis through its founding under Henry VIII and up to the 1860s. Much more interesting are the six full-page albumen prints pasted into the pages and illustrating various aspects of Christ's Hospital. Architectural photographs of this period rarely included people yet groups of figures inhabit Blanchard's prints, giving scale and a sense of life to otherwise drab stone.

This book acts as a convenient dividing point in the career of Valentine Blanchard. Prior to 1867 Blanchard was renowned for his instantaneous stereoscopic views of street scenes and seascapes. Although he continued stereoscopic work, and was an ardent supporter of the Holmes stereo viewer in Britain,(24) the emphasis of his photography had radically changed direction, towards the production of pictorial portraits.

Two major factors influenced this decision. First, the market in stereoscopic views was declining. They had reached the zenith of their popularity in 1862, a fact which is vividly illustrated by the following figure. In that year the number of stereo slides sold by one company, The London Stereoscopic Company, of one subject, the International Exhibition, was nearly 300,000. Five years later the stereo craze was finished; the public's enthusiasm had switched to cartes-de-visite and "cardomania" swept the country.

The second reason for Blanchard's change of style and subject matter was the inspiration of another photographer. In the same way that he had been overwhelmed by G.W. Wilson's instantaneous street scenes and backlit seascapes, Blanchard was equally struck by the portraits of Antoine Samuel Adam-Salomon. He was a French sculptor who brought to his portraiture the approach of a professional artist. One critic enthused:

After admiring the portraits caught in a burst of sunlight by Adam-Salomon, the emotional sculptor who has given up painting, we no longer claim that photography is a trade - it is an art, it is more than an art, it is a solar phenomenon, where the artist collaborates with the sun. (25)

The Times simply referred to his photographs as "the finest photographic portraits in the world." By today's taste his portraits seem contrived and melodramatic. He swathed the sitter in velvet draperies, employed props and painted backdrops, and used 'Rembrandt lighting' effects. At the time, they were a sensation. Adam-Salomon's work first astounded the world of photography when it was displayed at the Paris Exhibition of 1867. It is an interesting coincidence that Valentine Blanchard displayed portraits at the same exhibition, including "The Zealot" and "A Praying Monk." He had also issued for public sale in the same year a "study from life," a 10 x 12 inch carbon print portrait entitled "The Scholar" (at a price of 7 shillings and 6 pence). Blanchard's portraits were described as "large heads with much of the old-master-like effect - to coin a phrase - of Mrs. Cameron's productions, without the slovenliness of execution." (26) From this, and other descriptions, it is evident that Blanchard's portraits owed a great deal to the work of Adam-Salomon by 1867. It is possible that Blanchard had seen the Frenchman's work a year or so earlier; a few prints had been previously exhibited in London. The effect was immediate. Blanchard "recognized their epoch-making value, and was the first to follow in the footsteps of the talented Frenchman. From this time henceforth Valentine Blanchard was an adherent of the forcible style of portraiture..." (27)

From this time on, Blanchard concentrated on studio portraiture, and achieved a major reputation in this branch of photography which was so different from his stereoscopic snapshots. However, it must have been irksome, at times, when his portraits were constantly compared to those by Adam-Salomon. Throughout the rest of his life, Blanchard never shook free from his French "ghost." Writers would invariably introduce Blanchard as the photographer who was "under the inspiration of the works of M. Adam-Salomon" (28) or was "a disciple of Adam-Salomon" (29) and so on. Of course, the writers would usually cushion their comparison with an emphasis on Blanchard's individuality. For example: "His work is like that of the great Frenchman in many respects, but with a difference; the difference being marked by distinct individuality." This might seem to be a case of damning with faint praise but Blanchard's portraits were renowned and highly valued. They were regularly exhibited at the annual exhibitions of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain (as the society was later known), and formed a permanent exhibition at the prestigious Whitefriar's Club in London. The latter comprised about 50 portraits of famous men, all contact prints on albumen paper from 12 x 15 inch collodion plates. These large heads were very simple in style - close-up,

vigorous, characteristic and direct. They contrast with his other style of portraiture which is better described as *genre* studies. In these costume pieces, Blanchard gave freer rein to his "artistic" effects of lighting, posing, drapery and hand retouching. Typical of these studies were "Rebecca at the Well," "Greek girl," and "Miss Furtado as Esmeralda." The two strands of Blanchard's work - direct portraits and costume studies - is again reminiscent not only of Adam-Salomon but also of Julia Margaret Cameron.

Valentine Blanchard had eschewed instantaneous pictures of people in the streets for contrived, controlled studies in the studio. He was successful. He won the first prize in the 1873 Crawshay competition for 12 x 15 inch portraits(30); second prize went to H.P. Robinson. His colleagues in the medium highly praised his work, photographic writers lavished superlatives on his prints, and the public was lining up to be immortalized by this famous photographer. His fees were higher than most of his fellow portraitists of the period. For example, a 12 x 15 inch portrait cost about 5 pounds sterling. Some measure of the value of this figure can be obtained by the fact that it would be adequate to house and feed a family of four for one month.

In addition to his high-priced portraits and art studies, Valentine Blanchard introduced a new standard size for mounted photographs - the Boudoir, which was a 4 3/4 x 7 1/2 inch print on a 5 x 8 1/8 inch mount. The market in cartes-de-visite had been declining for several years and although the larger Cabinet format was still popular Blanchard felt the time was ripe for an even larger standard format. The Boudoir Portrait was introduced in 1875. Both *The Photographic News* and *The British Journal of Photography* supported the idea and Messrs. Marion and Co. manufactured albums, cases, frames and mounts for the new size.

Throughout these years Blanchard was busy with both business and technical experiments, not always with success. In 1869 his studio was totally destroyed by fire when a six gallon barrel of collodion exploded, blowing Blanchard into the garden, from where he watched his business go up in flames. (33)

More successful enterprises included the use of enlarged paper negatives. In 1875 he began to produce enlarged transparencies, from small wet collodion originals, which were then printed onto ordinary albumen paper. This was waxed, in order to render it more translucent, and used as a contact negative. The paper negative was more manageable than a glass plate and the softer definition was considered more artistic. (34) Blanchard was opposed to microscopic sharpness in portraits (although this had been his aim in the earlier instantaneous work) and he created "a sensation" when it was discovered that his print, "The Zealot," had been taken with a simple, single element lens. The slightly fuzzy image was considered "a step in advance towards the

plane of art." (35)

Blanchard also experimented with various processes. He made portraits in carbon, produced platinotypes with a personal variation in the technique, and worked with the powder process to produce pictures on opal. His studio was unusual in that it was darker than thought practical. Blanchard preferred to work with a minimum of illumination as he considered the effect more artistic. (36)

Throughout the 1880s Valentine Blanchard found it harder to keep abreast of new developments in both the aesthetics and techniques of photography. He was considered a photographer of "the old school," respected as a master but now rather an anachronism. Dry plates had replaced collodion and the darkroom tent; hand cameras had eliminated the tripod, and a horde of amateurs was invading the medium; photographic "artists" were creating gloomy, excessively fuzzy, manipulated works that no longer looked like photographs. Blanchard began to reminisce, writing articles about the good old days of wet-plates, when photographers were adventurers and not mere snaphshooters. His "Afield with the Wet Plate," written in 1891, (37) remains one of the most vivid reminiscences of what it was like to operate the collodion process. It is a classic of its type.

Yet these remarks are not meant to imply that Blanchard was wholly antagonistic to the new secession movement in photography. He had served as the Vice-President of The Royal Photographic Society but was also a member of The Brotherhood of the Linked Ring, the group which advocated the fine art nature of photography in opposition to the Royal's preoccupation with (so it believed) the more utilitarian aspects of the medium. He exhibited his own photographs at the Ring's "Salon", as its annual exhibitions were called, for the first few years of its life, beginning in 1892.

In that year Blanchard was 61 years old and decided to give up professional photography. He sold his London studio and retired to Harston in Cambridgeshire. (38) During his retirement, Blanchard was able to indulge in his hobbies - flowers, literature and old buildings - but he continued to write articles for the photographic press. He also wrote a textbook, A few plain words on carbon or pigment printing, which was published in 1893.

One reason why Blanchard chose Harston for his retirement may have been the fact that his nephew had a professional studio in Cambridge. This is worth mentioning because the nephew's name was also Valentine Blanchard, a possible source of misattribution for photographic historians. Blanchard Junior is best know for his introduction of electric light into the studio, in 1887. (39)

In 1896 Valentine Blanchard moved to Meadow Lea, Herne Common, near Canterbury, where he died "after a long and painful illness" on 14 November 1901, a few days before his 70th birthday.

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