The Victorian Traveler

and the accompanying camera

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Photography and travel have always been closely linked. At precisely the time when the new art of photography was capturing the public's imagination, travel was becoming quicker, cheaper and safer. This was not an historical coincidence. Photographs fanned the desire to travel. Pictures of exotic people and peculiar places instilled in the Victorian imagination the urge to experience a changing horizon. This expansion of possibilities was provided by the railway and the steamship.

It must be emphasized that the "unknown" did not necessarily mean foreign lands, naked savages, exotic beats and otherworldly monuments. The average Victorian was equally ignorant of the people and places a few miles from his home village. Until the advent of the railways, the opportunity of traveling from place to place was the prerogative of the wealthy, who could afford a coach and horses and the servants to look after them. Men of slightly lower rank might travel on horseback and the self-made merchant might be pulled by a lumbering wagon. The majority of the population either walked or stayed at home. It was common for the villager to live in his birthplace until death, without ever having ventured more than a few miles in each direction and never experiencing the strange customs and exotic sights in a neighboring county. A journey of a hundred miles was a costly, risky adventure and only attempted by the foolhardy after making a will, requesting prayers of the local congregation and taking solemn leave of friends and family. The expedition was considered with greater apprehension than any journey to a distant land today.

Even for the rich, travel by stagecoach was fraught with risk; it was also extremely uncomfortable, time consuming and expensive. At the time when Nicephore Niepce was experimenting with his bitumen/oil of lavender process, Sir Walter Scott was journeying from London to Edinburgh in a post-chaise at a cost of 50 English pounds. This was a considerable amount of money; a man, wife and three children could be housed, clothed and well (though plainly) fed on one and a half pounds per week. Many families existed on less than one pound per week and Scott’s journey, therefore, represented close to a year’s income.

By 1890, thanks to the railroad, the cost of Scott's journey was one twentieth of the cost of the same trip by stagecoach, with a vast increase in comfort and speed. Sir Walter was well aware of the immense advantages of the railroad and, in 1825, invested 1,500 pounds in a railway company - not, it might be added, because he saw its future as a passenger conveyor but because it would "double the rent of the arable part of my property." To be fair to Sir Walter Scott, not many people did see the railway in terms of passenger traffic. The first railway, the Stockton and Darlington, was opened in 1825 for the conveyance of goods, not people. However, so many viewers wanted a ride that a passenger coach, named appropriately "The Experiment" was built to accommodate them. It was pulled by horses, not a steam locomotive. G. R. Porter in his Progress of the Nation (1851) remarked: "that of all the railways constructed, or contemplated, up to the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester line, not one was undertaken with a view to the conveyance of passengers."

The railway from Liverpool to Manchester, the first line specifically for people, was opened on 15 September 1830 - the boom in travel had begun, as evidenced by the following figures. This first passenger line was 23 miles and in its first year carried nearly one-half million passengers; nine years later, when photography was first announced to the public, 2,300 miles of railroad were in use. By 1851, the year of the introduction of the wet-plate (collodion) process, nearly 11,000 miles of track had been laid; by 1888, the date of the introduction of the first Kodak camera, nearly

200,000 miles of railroads were available for travel by the Victorian public. In 1839 five and a half million tickets were sold; by the 1880s over 700 million passengers used the railways.

The immense popularity of the railways encouraged other countries to follow Britain's lead until lines of rail became as common as highways throughout Europe. In some countries, such as America, the railway preceded the road. (Interestingly the first transcontinental railway across the USA. was completed in 1869 but the first transcontinental highway, Route 60, was not finished until the 1930s).

Photographers, like the rest of the population, availed themselves of this new means of transport. By the time photography was firmly established and had released the shackles of both Daguerre's and Talbot's patent restrictions, there were enough railway lines to take them to all parts of the country and the Continent. After 1844 the costs of travel had been further decreased, and the convenience increased, with the introduction of an act of Parliament which obliged railway companies to run cheap trains everyday. A cheap train then meant that passengers were not charged more than a penny per mile.

By the mid-nineteenth century the railways had transformed the publics' attitude towards travel, but several major problem remained before the Victorian would feel secure in leaving England: How would he cope with the "foreigners" encountered across the Channel? Were would he stay the night; how would he pay for his services; who would know the best routes and travel connections?

One man solved everyone's problems. His name was Thomas Cook. The father of organized mass tourism, like so many moralistic Victorian entrepreneurs, approached his business with missionary fervor. In fact, Cook was a Baptist preacher who was traveling to a temperance meeting in 1841 when he was inspired with the idea of hiring a special train to take his "friends of temperance" to another meeting a few weeks later. The idea worked; 570 travelers made the journey by railway at a specially reduced rate. Quick to see the profits available in this revolutionary idea, Cook organized tours to England's beauty spots, followed in 1846 by a tour of Scotland. Cook was ambitious: "I had become so thoroughly imbued with the tourist spirit that I began to contemplate foreign trips, including the Continent of Europe, the United States and the Eastern Lands of the Bible."

These tours were now practical due to the rapid increase in the railways and steamship lines (a regular service across the Channel was operating by 1821). Cook's tours were in Paris in 1862; Switzerland in 1863; Italy in 1864; America in 1866; Egypt and the Middle East in 1868; Scandinavia and Russia in 1875; Spain and Portugal in 1877; Australia and New Zealand in 1887. In 1872 Cook made his first round-the-world tour, and remarked: "This going round the world is a very easy and almost imperceptible business..." By 1890 it was estimated that the total miles of railway in the world was 360,495 - and that Thomas Cook would supply tickets for 344,739 of them. In addition, he would issue tickets for steamers which ran over 1,479,220 miles of water. Perhaps these figures are exaggerated. Perhaps not. But the fact remains that Thomas Cook had effected a revolution not only in tourism but in the Victorian's attitude to travel. Anyone, intent on traveling anywhere, called on Cook. As Mark Twain declared with unfeigned enthusiasm:

> Cook has made travel easy and a pleasure. He will sell you a ticket to any place on the globe, or all the places and give you all the time you need and much more besides. It provides hotels for you everywhere... and you cannot be overcharged for the coupons show just how much you must pay...

Who, being of sound mind, would *not* consult Cook? His importance in the history of Victorian travel cannot be overestimated. It is not possible to estimate the numbers of photographers who availed themselves of Thomas Cook's services. But it seems most likely that the majority of photographers considering a tour of foreign lands would have availed themselves of his knowledge and experience; not to do so would have been peculiarly perverse. A small and inconclusive clue is

provided by the numbers of articles in the 19th century press which report photographic expeditions to foreign lands. It seems more than coincidence that there is a marked interest in specific countries after Cook had opened the routes to travelers. This is particularly true as more and more amateur photographers entered the field. They did not have the primary interest of taking pictures for mass distribution to the Victorian armchair public; they wanted clear, accurate views of their travels for personal memory-jogging, as well as proud proofs that they were "there."

These amateur photographers/travelers did not begin with the hand camera and the dry-plate of the 1880s. As early as 1862 a Professor Pole (a fellow of the Royal Society) had encouraged tourists to make their own photographs while traveling. His article "Photography for Travellers and Tourists" was published in the lay periodical MacMillan's Magazine (Volume VI). Pole writes:

> Doubtless, the idea must often have occurred to almost every traveller, what an advantage it would be if he could himself take photographs, where he likes, of what he likes, when he likes, and how he likes. But such an idea must soon have been dismissed, from the supposed incompatibility of this with ordinary travelling arrangements. The usual notion of photographic operations comprehends a fearful array of dark rooms, huge instruments, chemical paraphenalia, water, and mess, which no sane person, out of the professional photographic guild, would think of burdening himself with on an ordinary journey, and which only a practised adept could use if he had them; and so the idea of a traveller's taking views for himself on his tour is generally dismissed at once as an impracticable chimera.

Pole goes on to explain what is necessary for the taking of pictures with what he calls the "dry" process. In fact dry-plates were not available and Pole is recommending collodion plates and preservatives - an equally ungainly and far more unreliable process than the wet-plate. It is difficult to believe that many of his readers were convinced and they were probably wiser to purchase published views of the scenic spots previously taken by professional photographers.

It is fashionable, and excusable, to bemoan the high value of these prints today, but it should be borne in mind that these photographs were never cheap. It is impossible to give the exact prices paid for these prints by the Victorian travelers as they would have varied with size, process, the reputation of the photographer and the decade in which they were purchased. However some generalizations can be made. The average price of a whole-plate albumen print during the 1860s and 1870s was around one pound, with a high of three pounds and a low price of 10 shillings (half a pound). It was considered sensational that one photographer (Adam Salomon) received as much as four pounds for one 8 x 10 inch print. Some idea of the value of these figures can be gauged by the previously mentioned statistic - a family could exist on one pound per week. Therefore, the value of an albumen view in the 1860s was the equivalent of a week's wage today. A quick calculation will show that these albumen prints have approximately the same value to us today as they did to the Victorian purchaser.

There were exceptions; cheap foreign labor tended to undercut prices charged by the British, much to the photographers' annoyance. In 1868 The British Journal of Photography lamented:

> To such a ruinous extent has an unhealthy competition in views brought our art in Venice that...fine views of a size about 15 x 12, are sold for a sum equivalent to fifteen pence of our money. Truly, bad as matters are in this country, they have not fallen so low as in old aesthetic Venice.

Fifteen pence was about one-tenth of the price charged by British photographers. As late as 1888, the same magazine was singing the same song, this time about the extremely low prices of Italian views. Unmounted albumens, "and good ones too," were sold at most of the principal towns for the small sum of 3 pence to 5 pence, with a liberal discount for a dozen or more. The editor was baffled how the Italian photographers could produce prints of such good quality for such trifling

costs. The answer to the puzzle was cheap labor; the response to the competition was the production of collotype reproductions, later as postcards, which could be photo-mechanically reproduced with enormous savings in the cost of materials (particularly silver).

In such a short essay as this only generalizations are appropriate. The average photographer would travel by train to the picture-making vicinity and hire a horse and carriage to take him, and his equipment, to the various locations. It is impossible to be more specific as this would require a lengthy solution to the problem of transportation applicable only to each individual. For example, when Francis Frith made his first expedition to the Middle East in 1856 he wanted personal transport up the Nile. He teamed up with Frank Wenham who had invented a small steamer which incorporated his own improvements. The most radical of these was that the boiler operated at a pressure of 300 Ib. per square inch instead of the average maximum of 60 Ib. common at that time. The boat was escorted from its moorings on the Thames, down to the south coast and around Lands End and up the west coast of England to Liverpool. There it was loaded onto a Mediterranean steamer for its journey to Alexandria and the mouth of the Nile. The small boat was then lowered from the deck of the mother ship and used as transportation, living accommodation and floating darkroom for Frith and Wenham up to Wada Haifa and the second cataract, 800 miles up the Nile. (Incidentally, Wenham was a first class photographer who made many pictures on this expedition, all of which are credited solely to Frith.)

For tours around Britain and the Continent the more successful photographers, such as Francis Frith and Francis Bedford, designed and had custom-built extremely lavish coaches which functioned as independent transport, living space and darkroom facilities. While Frith was preparing his illustrations for Hyperion his whole family, as well as servants, traveled across France, Austria and Switzerland in such a giant luxury wagon. Other photographers designed and fitted coaches for their own particular needs, and the 19th century photographic press includes many descriptions of these horse-drawn hotels and darkrooms. A wonderful illustration of such a carriage is a Woodburytype frontispiece in the book The Cruise of the Land Yacht "Wanderer" by Gordon Stables (1886). It was the Victorian's ideal mobile home.

The Victorians were on the move and 19th century landscape photography both reflected this spirit and fueled its desire. Tourism had begun, with all its benefits and banalities. Travel was no longer the preserve of peripatetic aristocrats and eccentrics; tourism, largely due to Thomas Cook, was now a major industry, with photography its faithful proselytizer.

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