Review


Based on a series of extramural lectures at the University of Edinburgh, this is claimed to be, though some might differ, the first book to provide a full and coherent introduction to the photography of Victorian Scotland. We follow what must have been a very stimulating course, organised on a broadly chronological path, and starting with the origins of photography in the daguerreotype and calotype. It then charts its arrival in Scotland in the late 1830s and early 1840s, a phase when this was an enthusiasm only for the few, largely artistic and technical, an adjunct initially for portraiture. St Andrews was one centre of experimentation and discussion, and Edinburgh another where a Calotype Club was active from about 1841. In subsequent chapters we are then taken through photography’s spread and commercialisation: by c.1870 every Scottish town of any size had its local studio, for family and individual portraits, and cartes-de-visites. Some very much larger firms emerged, notably those of George Washington Wilson in Aberdeen and James Valentine in Dundee, which produced for the tourist market thousands of individual views (or ‘scraps’) for pasting into souvenir albums, collections in booklet form (e.g. ‘The Land of Scott’), and later both postcards and lantern slides. The position of these professionals came under threat at the end of the 19th century with the hand-held Kodak camera, which made photography a universal hobby: under the slogan, ‘you press the button, we do the rest’. 
Simpson reviews the work of Scottish born or Scots trained photographers outside Scotland: Kirk In Zanzibar, Burton in Japan, Carrick in Russia, Macpherson in Rome, John Thompson, whose work in China was the subject of a recent exhibition in Glasgow, and of course, Alexander Gardner from Paisley, whose (staged) picture of the dead Confederate Sharpshooter at Gettysburg is known to all. It is not just the big names whose work is assessed – Thomas Keith or Julia Cameron- but some of the lesser lights whose work is only now beginning to be recognised, such as Lady Margaret Matheson or Erskine Beveridge from Dunfermline. Not everything was shaped by the demands of the tourist trade. Simpson examines the many and varied uses of the camera both to record advance – the building of the Forth Bridge in the 1880s-and to document what was going to be lost through demolition and improvement: Thomas Annan’s photographs (1858-1871) of the closes in the centre of Glasgow, and Burns’ similar project in the Old town of Edinburgh. There is a remarkable view from 1870 of an old ramshackle house in the Cowgate awaiting its fate; a whitewash sign ‘removed to Horse Wynd’ confirms that it is emptied of its inhabitants. Some of the human portraits speak strongly even now: for example, the sad post mortem image by an unknown photographer (from the 1870s) of a dead infant. Did people really use these as cartes-de-visite?

The breadth and calibre of the photographs which are used to illustrate each chapter is stunning; Simpson has been able to persuade archives to allow reproduction of material some of which has previously been jealously guarded. It is, therefore, a very useful guide to what is held where. Other strengths are that Simpson understands and explains the technology well whether that of the camera, the paper or the stereo viewer, and that he also brings a practitioner’s eye to bear on composition. He has read and researched widely; tracking down, for example to the University of Michigan, an
album with Valentine views of a tour made in Scotland in the summer of 1869 by a French family. What I found especially interesting were the tales of how much early work was rescued at the last moment. When in 1945 R.O. Dougan approached the then owner of the Rock Studio in Edinburgh, a premises which had been used over a century by a succession of photographic enterprises, he found thousands of negatives and other items, some going back to Hill & Adamson from the 1840s, which he purchased and in due time passed to Glasgow University. A City Councillor in Edinburgh on his own initiative in 1950 saved boxes of Thomas Begbie glass negatives which were on their way to the dustcart. Even since then much sadly has been lost. But we now have a very different appreciation of the value of the photograph to the historian of place and time, and we do have the splendid Scottish National Photography Collection at the National Portrait Gallery, which acts as a focus for preservation and interpretation. This study, therefore is a real asset and most welcome, a delight to read and to view. There are two cavils, however. References are needlessly repeated in full and the prose could have been improved with just a light editorial touch. Both of these relate to that function – as obsolete as the box brownie – which publishers used to exercise, but seems increasingly to have fallen victim to hard times, that of editing. But its absence is a false economy.

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