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# HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

DISPLAY



NOVEMBER 2009



# HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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Cover: Camille Silvy, *Self-portrait*, 20 August 1861. National Portrait Gallery, London.



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so that the book functions as more of an oversized *amuse-bouche* than the cheese plate at the end of the meal. If *Foto* had more pages, I would have one wish. In addition to the photographs, the exhibition included a wonderful film program, curated by Sonja Simonyi, that was truly an eye-opener to the cinema of this region. This aspect has not, for the most part, been translated into the book, and it would be extremely useful to have lasting documentation and analysis of these films, even in a separate volume.

The rich material presented and so cogently analyzed in *Foto* is sure to inspire significant research into this new field of study, for this volume asks nothing less than that we completely rethink our understanding of European photography in the interwar period. Judging from the images assembled here, it will surely be a great pleasure to begin the task.

Elizabeth Otto

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## Narratives of Nation

### Scottish Photography: A History

Tom Normand. Luath Press, Edinburgh 2007. 192 pages, with 142 illustrations in colour and black & white. Hardcover £29.00, ISBN 1-9063-0707-3.

One of the most conspicuous developments in photography scholarship and publishing in recent years has been the proliferation of national histories of photography. Tom Normand's book takes its place alongside new histories dealing with photography in Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain and numerous other countries. Books like Normand's mark a significant departure from earlier national histories in the methodology employed. *Scottish Photography: A History* abandons the once dominant emphasis on technical innovation, chronology and individual artists, adopting a thematic approach instead. Normand's national history shares its relatively modest size with others published recently; it is conceived as an introduction to the field with no pretensions to comprehensiveness. Normand stresses that his is a first account, 'circumscribed and partial', which will provide a foundation for future research.

The motivation for Normand's history also relates to particular Scottish circumstances. He notes that while histories of photography from America, Japan, Germany and England abound, no sustained consideration of photography from Scotland has been available. This is even more surprising given the pre-eminence of Scottish photographers in photography's earliest decades. Normand's task therefore is to map the course of Scottish photography, identifying its peculiar characteristics and countering its invisibility in the international arena. He provides a cultural and national context for photographs by the few Scottish figures that are well known – Hill and Adamson, John Thomson, Thomas Annan, James Craig Annan, Thomas Joshua Cooper and Calum Colvin being the most obvious – and brings to light a great deal of work that will not be familiar to many readers. This is one of the great pleasures of *Scottish Photography: A History*, encountering new imagery by the likes of William Donaldson Clark and Evelyn Carey from the nineteenth century and Robert Moyes Adam and Peter Cattrell from the twentieth.

Normand's approach to what constitutes Scottish photography is broad, encompassing work made in Scotland but not necessarily by local practitioners, as well as work made outside Scotland by Scottish-born photographers. Hence the inclusion of Paul Strand who visited the Western Isles in 1954, securing a stunning series of portraits in the process, and of Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert who photographed a Romani community in Romania in the 1990s. Normand's rationale is logical enough in pivoting on the universality of photography and the ongoing dialogue between photographs and photographers across the globe, but it varies in usefulness, especially in a relatively small book. In the chapter on land and landscape the argument is diluted and confused by including a section 'Other lands', which focuses on nineteenth-century Scottish photographers working in India and Egypt. Normand sometimes also stretches his parameters to extreme lengths to include a photographer such as Clementina Hawarden. Though born in Scotland Hawarden produced her photographic work after leaving Scotland, either at her family's estate in Ireland or at their home in London.

The conceptual framework for any history is of course crucial and Normand develops some compelling ideas about the specific qualities of photography in, and from, Scotland. He argues that the documentary impulse is dominant, using the term 'documentary' in the broadest sense to describe realist approaches rather than the self-conscious documentary movement per se (the latter apparently did not gain a foothold in Scottish photography). The pervasive interest in the 'ordinary' world is related to the legacy of the Scottish Enlightenment, to empiricism and pragmatism in particular.

Another key idea concerns the role of memory which Normand sees underpinning photographers' responses to people and their environment, and to landscape and history. He notes the Scottish predilection for photographs of cemeteries, of monuments and memorials, opening the book with Hill and Adamson's *The Dennistoun Monument, Greyfriars Churchyard* (1840s) which he regards as a remarkably prescient image. Not only is it a

meditation on mortality but it is also an investigation of a complex web of memory. Normand contextualises landscapes as memory places that are resonant in the nation's history, discussing their symbolic role and contribution to the formation of national identity.

Some of the preoccupations evident in Scottish photography – for instance, with identity and with the photograph as object – parallel that in other countries. But Normand draws attention to some remarkable differences too. Chief among these is the startling fact that, 'any aspect of modernism was absent from the Scottish scene, at least until the late twentieth century'. This begs more development. Normand explains the absence of radical modernist practices including formalist abstraction, photomontage and surrealist experimentation in terms of the dominance of commercial photography in Scotland. He also emphasises the widespread suspicion about photography as an art form and lack of market and institutional support for independent practitioners. And yet in other countries modernism and commerce enjoyed a very productive (though often problematic) relationship, with photographers finding employment in the fields of illustrative and advertising photography, often with outstanding creative results. Because of the exclusion of commercial work from *Scottish Photography: A History* the modernist period remains invisible – assuming that modernist illustrative and advertising photography was in fact produced.

Normand suggests that the failure to engage with modernism has had far-reaching effects, remarking that contemporary photography demonstrates little taste for Postmodern, conceptual or neo-conceptual practice. Instead it is conventional approaches that have found most favour. There are other 'omissions' in the Scottish photographic tradition. Normand identifies the lack of nude studies, noting that they are also extremely rare in Scottish art generally. However, what is also striking is the under-representation of work by women photographers. This warrants more sustained consideration. If women were not particularly active in the Scottish photography scene as Normand implies, both in his text and choice of illustrations, why was this so?

*Scottish Photography: a History* introduces a range of interesting historical facts. Underscoring the alliance between English and Scottish gentlemen and scientists, William Henry Fox Talbot exhibited twenty of his photogenic drawings in Edinburgh as early as December 1839 and in 1844 he travelled to Scotland in to create 'Sun Pictures'. Normand reminds us that Alexander Gardner, known for his photography of the American Civil War, was in fact a Scot (represented in this book with his portrait of Abraham Lincoln). And he points out that the renaissance of Scottish photography did not begin until the late 1970s with Scottish art museums becoming involved as late as the 1980s. The latter seems more surprising given that the Photographic Society of Scotland had been established as early as 1856.

Tom Normand has made many sensible decisions. His text is not burdened with endless lists of names but focuses instead on a relatively small number of practitioners, some of whose work is considered in different thematic contexts. Photographers regarded as the most significant are represented with multiple illustrations (too many, in my view, in the case of Calum Colvin). In some of the early chapters the text is over reliant on quotations from the work of theorists – including Gilles Lipovetsky's views on the hypermodern and Roland Barthes' on memory. Unfortunately the index is confined to photographers and would have been far more useful in an expanded form. But *Scottish Photography: A History* is a fine production, generously illustrated with more than one hundred and forty reproductions. While Scottish photographers have been engaged from the outset in a dialogue with photographers and photographs from other parts of the world they have also created distinctive work. The overwhelming impression gained from Normand's text and illustrations is of seriousness and earnestness, with no recourse to frivolity.

Normand's aim to elaborate on the themes, attitudes, ideas and emotions played out in photography in, and from, Scotland, is realised. He has ensured that both the specialist and general reader will know, and appreciate, far more about Scottish photography and its complexities than was possible previously.

Helen Ennis

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## Technologies of Photography

### A Century of Colour Photography: From the Autochrome to the Digital Age

Pamela Roberts. André Deutsch, London 2007. 256 pages, with 305 colour illustrations. Hardcover £30, ISBN 1-0-233-00220-0.

### Holographic Visions: A History of New Science

Sean F. Johnston. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006. 518 pages, with 93 black & white illustrations. Hardcover £96, ISBN 0-19-857122-3.

Recently there has been a growth of interest in the history of photographic techniques, or in the study of categories of images defined according to technical criteria. The historiography of photographic technique isn't new. But what distinguishes the latest scholarship is that treatment of technically defined subjects is less and less limited to purely technical issues. Social,