

## What's in a Name?

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In every example of 19th century photography one of the first questions that is asked and which needs to be answered is: "Who was the photographer?" Historians love putting names to pictures. For the most enthusiastic, an unidentified photograph is almost a personal affront, and a challenge which leads to an obsessive urge to track down this elusive individual. Such historical research takes on all the aspects of a detective mystery.

In recent years this question of authorship, or attribution, has become no longer a simple case of scholarship. Attribution is now big business. With the sale of old photographs for phenomenally high prices, the difference in "value" between an unidentified image and exactly the same print by a famous name might be thousands of pounds. This fact leads to the inescapable conclusion that the high prices reached by Victorian prints are vested in the name of the photographer, not in the merit of the photograph.

Apart from the dubious concern of the collector for solely monetary reward, there are more important reasons for attributing the name of the photographer to any image. For example, we cannot assess the merit and influence of a particular Victorian photographer until a substantial body of work by that individual can be seen and studied. Each and every image that can be extracted from the thousands of prints in the "unidentified" pile and placed within the context of a specific photographer's life, contributes to our deeper understanding of that person's role in the history of the medium. In addition, the image itself becomes more meaningful when it can be seen through the intent and personality of the known photographer. Perhaps most relevant of all, 19th century photographs provide us with the richest documents for understanding the zeitgeist of the Victorian age. But a photograph is not a document until it is documented. No matter how explicit, and objective, the camera's view, the absence of words (name of the photographer, location, date, and so on) greatly reduce the image's value as a useful historical record. It is doubly dangerous when the words attached to a photograph are incorrect.

When we look at a painting, engraving, or even a poem, we are accustomed to accepting the signature as authentication. We bring the same trusting attitude to those neatly printed credit lines beneath 19th century photographs. But photography was different in those days. In many cases the printed name on a Victorian print is not that of the photographer. The photographer's name may be false or misleading, either by

accident or by intent. There are many reasons for this seemingly strange discrepancy between the name on the image or mount, and the true name of the photographer.

It was common practice in the 19th century for photographs to be displayed under the name of the person who contributed the print to the exhibition. This contributor could be the photographer's agent or publisher, or his employer, or his business partner. In these cases it would be the contributor who received the credit, and would accept a possible award for the image, and not the photographer. This was a cause for some controversy even in the 19th century. The *Photographic News*<sup>1</sup> published a lengthy editorial in 1862 asking "Who should receive the medals - artists or exhibitors?" Its answer was clear: "... there is no room for doubt at any time that the results of the skilful photographer are due to himself alone and that he alone should receive recognition in an award to merit." Yet the system persisted in awarding merit, and credit, to the exhibitor. In spite of its seemingly adamant stand on the issue, the editorial was not particularly concerned because "Skilled photographers are well known and recognised; their productions being more familiar evidence than their (signatures)."

That was all well and good when contemporaries were able to distinguish between the works of different photographers by stylistic appearance alone. After a gap of 100 years it is not so easy, and never accurate enough for a precise, certain attribution which would satisfy either scholars or collectors. And so the problem remains.

The photographs of George Washington Wilson were often exhibited by and given credit to Marion and Co.; William England's were credited to the London Stereoscopic Company; Valentine Blanchard's were credited to Elliott and Co.; W. Russell Sedgfield's were credited to A.W. Bennett; and so on.

The matter is considerably complicated when three different names are attached to a single photograph. For example, Valentine Blanchard's early examples of instantaneous photographs were often signed with his own name. In addition they were sometimes credited to Elliott, who distributed<sup>2</sup> the prints. Then again, they were often exhibited and distributed under the name S. Smyth. Smyth was a former business partner who, presumably, retained ownership of the negatives when the partnership was terminated.

This means that we now have three different names attached to the same series of photographs - the photographer, the distributor and the owner of the negatives. What if one of these photographs was given to another photographer? He could, and sometimes did, exhibit the photograph under his own name. For example, a photographer "of high repute" accepted an award in a major exhibition in the 1860s for an astronomical photograph which had been given to him by a friend "who was not less distinguished as a photographer."<sup>3</sup> So now we must add the name of the print's owner to the above list of names, any one of which could be credited as the photographer.

The matter becomes even more complicated. A photograph could be credited to the person who made the print as opposed to the photographer who made the negative. So now the printer must be added to the names attached to a 19th century photograph. There was a hotly contested dispute about this problem as late as 1885.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, if the photographer was in the employment of another photographer the results almost certainly would be credited to the employer, and not to the person who actually took the pictures. It is reasonably certain that Francis Frith took very few of the photographs which bear his name. He not only employed travelling photographers to add to his picture-lists but also bought negatives from his peers, all of which were printed and distributed under the familiar "Frith Series" or "F.F. and Co."

This was not unusual, or even considered dubious behaviour. Most photographers with flourishing business employed photographers. Francis Bedford, for example, hired such prominent photographers as Robert Hayward, T.C. Belton, George T. Harris, Henry Reynolds, and others. All the prints were signed "Bedford" - except those, just to confuse the issue, which were signed "C. + P." These were the initials of Catherall and Prichard, a firm in Eastgate, Chester, which distributed Bedford prints under its own name. As Bedford grew older, his son William became more actively involved in his father's photographic work. It is impossible to distinguish the son's work, or the individual work of the employees, from those by Bedford himself. Similarly, we know that Nadar's son, Paul, continued his father's studio long after the former had retired from photography, even though Paul continued to sign all the studio's work with the distinctive flourish which was his father's trademark.

We also know that Matthew Brady took very few, if any, of the American Civil War photographs which bear his credit line: "Photograph by Brady." He sent photographers into the fields of battle whose negatives were printed and sold under the Brady name. Two of these employees objected. James Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan wanted credit for their own productions, but they had to split from Brady before this was possible.

Other photographers issued prints under their own names with the active support of the cameramen who made the negatives. Beaumont Newhall once asked William H. Jackson, last of the photographers of the American frontier, if he knew Timothy O'Sullivan, the official cameraman on the King and Wheeler Surveys from 1867 to 1875. "Yes, indeed," he replied. "I exchanged many a plate with him."<sup>5</sup> Jackson went on to explain that after he had lugged his photographic paraphernalia to an all-but inaccessible vantage point, he would often shoot an extra plate for his friend: O'Sullivan would return the favour the next time he scaled a mountain peak in some wilderness location.

Such friendly exchanges were common. Therefore many 19th century prints are credited to a photographer whom we know could not possibly have made the picture. In Britain there were several exchange "clubs." Photographers belonging to the scheme

would regularly swap negatives, prints or lantern slides. Others would advertise in the columns of the photographic press with announcements that might read: "Will exchange four slides, Thames Views, for four taken on the beach at Hastings."

Up to this point all the cases of misattribution, the incorrect name of the photographer on a print, have been the result of fair, or at least condoned, 19th century practices which were understood by all the parties concerned. They were working within a system of etiquette which might seem odd from a contemporary viewpoint, and which causes a great deal of difficulty for today's historian, but which was morally and legally aboveboard for the Victorian age.

Other photographers were less scrupulous or honest. In the 19th century there were many cases of outright piracy, thievery and chicanery. For example, there is the case of the person who bought a print by Frank Sutcliffe, and entered the photograph in a competition under his own name. He won first prize. Sutcliffe, with typical generosity, was more amused than insulted. The famous name photographers were more prone to this sort of piracy, especially if the image was not signed within the negative. Often these photographers would have card mounts preprinted with their names on which would be mounted the final prints. Therefore, another photographer or dealer could obtain the mounts and add their own prints, which would now be "signed" by the famous photographer. William England was once asked about his photograph of the Gross Glockner glaciers. "Never was there," replied England. "Yes, you were, and I can prove it, for I purchased a photograph of the glacier, taken by yourself." England examined the picture and discovered that only the mount was by him; the print was by another, less well-known, photographer.<sup>7</sup>

It must not be assumed that such flagrant fraud occurred infrequently, with little harm to anyone. In 1863 Alexander Bassano wrote that "the evil is so notorious and extensive that the law of the land should be changed to protect the photographer." The Photographic News agreed that something should be done about "suppressing the disgraceful piracy which has hitherto been as a cankerworm injuring the art."<sup>9</sup> These are strong words, indicating that the problem was real and rife.

Also, it must not be assumed that only the lesser photographer pirated the work of more famous names. The best known photographers were not above such practices. Recent research has shown many discrepancies among the prints and their captions by even established photographers of national stature. For example, it is evident that Carleton S. Watkins, famous for his views of Western landscapes, often issued the work of William H. Jackson under his own name, sometimes with outrageously incorrect captions. Ironically, Watkins complained that his negatives were being stolen and fraudulently issued by Isaiah West Tabor, his next-door neighbour.<sup>10</sup>

Next time you look at a 19th century photograph which is signed, it is as well to ask: "What's in a name?" The answer might be "Not much." The signature, initials or printed name might be that of the photographer. Or, it might be the name of the distributor, or

of the negative's legitimate owner, or of the owner of the print, or of the person who made the print or enlargement, or of the photographer's employer, or of the name of the person who continued the photographer's business. Or it might be a completely misleading name, a case of friendly exchange between photographers. Or, just as frequently, it might be an admission, if the truth is known, of a wilful act of fraud, piracy and thievery.

## References

1. The Photographic News, 6 June 1862.
2. In the 19th century most of the better known photographers had agents who would publicise and sell the prints. These agents were known as "publishers," which is a little bit misleading. They were close to the agents whom today we would call "distributors."
3. The Photographic News, 6 June 1862.
4. The Amateur Photographer, 17 July 1885, p. 226.
5. Image, Vol. 14, No. 3, June 1971.
6. The Amateur Photographer, 2 January 1891, p. 4.
7. The Photographic News, 9 April 1880, p. 176.
8. The Photographic News, 6 February 1862, p. 71.
9. Ibid.
10. Image, Vol. 14, No. 3, June 1971.

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