

## What Ever Happened to Humor?

Wordplay in the 19 century photographic press

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One of the small pleasures I receive from life is tearing up photography journals. This is not done in pique. For most of my life in the field I have been collecting information on photographers and all aspects of the medium, past and present. A principal source of contemporary matter is, of course, the photographic press. Individual articles are torn out of the magazine, the pages stapled, the magazine cited (if the journal's name and date do not appear on every page and filed away for future reference).

A few days ago I noticed that I had neglected this pleasure for a while, and a stack of intact journals was awaiting dismemberment. As I joyfully ripped them apart it occurred to me how deadly serious were all the features. Even the most popular journals read like a cross between a sales catalogue and the Bible. The specialist journals, with limited circulation, had an even more limited sense of humour, as if a measure of intellect was the ability to write turgid, unintelligible prose. (Actually, the opposite is nearer the truth, but that is another article.) Writers on photography today might love pictures (although this seems doubtful in many cases) but they do not love words. If they did, they would not only use words as tools of communication but also as playthings. If you love something/someone then it seems natural to want to play with it/him/her. Some of this fun with words has evaporated from the photo-press leaving behind the dust of mere data.

By comparison the 19 century press is full of wordplays, cartoons, conundrums, aphorisms, caricatures, ditties and appalling jokes. At least they tried. There's a feeling of life in these musty old pages, even when the humour is as light as a lead balloon. Undoubtedly tastes in humour have radically changed in the past 100-plus years, and wordplays which were hilarious to the Victorian now appear merely silly. But that is not the point. These 19 century magazines seemed able to inculcate in their pages a sense of delight in and enthusiasm for the medium without sacrificing the hard information. Here are a few examples of photographic word games from the hundreds available.

Conundrums were popular in the photographic press throughout the 19 century. Typical of the type was: Q. What is the difference between photography and the whooping cough? A. One makes facsimiles and the other sick families. (1) When you have all stopped rolling around the floor in uncontrollable merriment, you can read a few more. (2)

*Q. What is the difference between a sailor in trouble and hyposulphite of soda? A. One is a salt in a fix, and the other is a fixing salt.*

*Q. What is the difference between a blind man with a good dog, and a darkroom lamp? A. One is led right and the other is red light.*

*Q. Why is the end of a lecture like a pneumatic bulb? A. Because it's a release.*

*Q. What is the difference between a Chicago pork factory and the carbon process? A. One is a pigment process and the other a process meant for pigs.*

*Q. When should silver be used in the dark? A. When it's nit-rate.*

*Q. Why should a photographer use a rolling press? A. To make his portraits flatter.*

*Q. What chemical is like a concealed donkey? A. An ass hid.*

*Q. What photographs are like the heir apparent? A. Prints of Wales.*

*Q. What photograph should a young lady never give her intended? A. A negative. Q. But if he gets a negative, what should he do? A. Take a little sigh an' hide (cyanide).*

And so on, ad nauseum.

With a little more wit, Dr. Wendell Holmes, the brilliant American author, inventor and photographer, used to sign his prints: "Taken by O. W. Holmes and Sun." (3) But even such a smart man could sometimes come unstuck with words. His definition of a negative leaves a lot to be desired: "everything is just as wrong as it can be, except that the relations of each wrong to the other wrongs are like the relations of the corresponding rights to each other in the original natural image." (4)

It has a sort of bizarre logic, which is more than can be said for this description of a plaque to be given as a prize in print competitions by The Amateur Photographer in 1906: "The subject represents Photography seated at the feet of Art, having laid down for the moment she too must go, where, above the liar to her craft, whilst her sister points the way, the camera and other appliances pecutemple of knowledge, the sun shines." (5)

Presumably this text was unintentionally funny; others aimed a barb with deliberate accuracy, and at the same time give us a sense of the concerns and obsessions of the 19 century photographer. For example, the passion of the 1890s was for instantaneous action pictures. Rarely did a week go by without another miraculous high-speed picture being claimed. One magazine summed up this mania with a simple "news" item. The complete announcement reads: "A German photographer has succeeded in stopping a bullet in flight. No scientific results are likely to be gained, however, as he stopped it with his leg." (6)

Another regularly occurring news item was the announcement of yet another invention of a colour process. It is astonishing how many 19 century photographers claimed to have perfected a system of colour photography, few of which had any value or could even be demonstrated. Again, a photo-journal in 1887 gave the following deadpan news item: "A Chinese gentleman, bearing the simple name of Azurizawa Ryochi Nichone Sanjukanbez Kiobashi-Ku, has discovered the secret of photographing in natural colours." And then adds: "It is sincerely to be hoped that he will not, in imitation of Daguerre, christen the new process with his own name." (7)

Similarly The British Journal of Photography in 1904 announced the formation of a society in New York which had as its aim the study of the properties, and the application, of silicate compounds for photographic purposes. Its journal was to be called: The Silicatephiscognoscophographer. The magazine succinctly commented: "We understand that the actual idea of the society is to study glasses, but whether full or empty is not said." (8)

New inventions were always good for a chuckle. Throughout the medium's history someone was constantly announcing a miracle emulsion or wonder developer which might reduce the tediously long exposures of the collodion process. There must have been an uncommonly large number of these claims in 1875 to prompt a correspondent to write: "looking at the leading topics that have engrossed the attention of the photographic fraternity during the past year, the

subject of shortening the camera exposure seems to offer a field for 'another important discovery.'" His contribution was "Mr. X has discovered a method by which the exposure in the camera is reduced one-half.... Dr. Z has invented a solution which, added to the ordinary iron developer, also reduces the exposure one-half.... Now, then! Attention! Here is the brilliant idea! Use X's process and Z's developer...and we can do without any exposure at all!" (9)

Another invention which led to a lot of facetious comment in the photographic press was the announcement of the Kodak system, in 1888, and particularly its advertising slogan: "You push the button, we do the rest." Like the stranger who said to the clerk in a temperance hotel: "You don't seem to have any bar here?" Clerk: "No, sir; but all our rooms are fitted with electric bells. You can go up to your room...and have a Kodak drink." Stranger: "A Kodak drink! What is that?" Clerk: "You press the button, we do the rest." (10)

My favourite of the Kodak parodies took the form of a poem which appeared in several journals with slight variations throughout the 1890s:

*Picturesque landscape,  
Babbling brook,  
Maid in a hammock  
Reading a book;  
Man with a Kodak  
in secret prepares  
To picture the maid,  
As she sits unawares.  
Her two strapping brothers  
Were chancing to pass;  
Saw the man with the Kodak  
And also the lass.  
They rolled up their sleeves  
Threw off hat, coat, and vest -  
The man pressed the button  
And they did the rest!*

Photographers could have fun with words when devising their own studio advertisements. Alliterations were particularly practical and pleasing for portrait picture-makers to proudly present their progressive photographic parlors for preserving personal physiognomies. A good example of the genre was published in *The Photographic Times* of 1880 as an advertisement for the

business of Andrew H. Baldwin. The complete text is too long, but one paragraph will give the gist:

*Friend Andrew H. Baldwin, the famous, fortunate, and favorite fellow, furnisher of fine fotograf and ferrotype fixings and findings; the friend of the friendless, friend to all. Not a false faced, fribbling, and futile friend to the Fotographer. This famous Fotofactor, for fifteen years a furnisher of the 'forementioned fixings, faultless, fadeless, and full fledged, feels fully and firmly fixed in fancy, face, form, and feature for following faithfully, fearlessly, frankly, and fondly his favorite 'fession for fifteen future years, should fortune favor and friends forsake not, and energy fail not, and death foreclose not. This famous and fortunate fellow finds himself not "fat, fair, and forty," but hale, strong and fifty-five, as fleet of foot, fresh in face, frank and free, and fully fitted for furnishing faultless foto fixings as formerly. He selects such Lenses, Apparatus, and Chemicals as will produce perfectly charming pictures, not showing the subject as flat-faced and forbidding, ill-favored and ill-formed, false-hearted and fretful, freckled and frowsy, flippant, foolish, and flaunting, but fine-featured, fine formed, free from freckles, fair, fairy, frank, frolicksome, and full of fun. (11)*

It is impossible to read the 19 century photographic press without encountering these word-games, jokes and poems; they are an integral part of the "spirit" of Victorian photography. In addition several journals published regular columns of humorous items, by writers who specialised in the light touch on photographic matters. One of the best was known as "The Magpie" who wrote a column called "Causerie". (12) I do not believe that these humorous touches diminished the stature of the journals. In fact, the opposite is true. They suffused the columns with enthusiasm for the medium, a characteristic which is all too often absent from contemporary magazines, which tend to take themselves too seriously and merely end up boring the reader. Our predecessors could have a healthy laugh at their own antics and aspirations.

There was another advantage to the wry and amusing items about photography in the 19 century press. Incidental to the original intent, these items hold interesting and important messages for the social historian of early photography. It is important that historians today are doing the serious pedantic factual research into the important names of the medium but, in the process, they must not neglect the trivia which often reveals the *feeling* of the past.

References:

1. The British Journal of Photography, 19 March 1875, p. 143.
2. The Photographic News, 3 January 1868; The Amateur Photographer, 12 December 1905, p. 462.
3. The Amateur Photographer, 12 August 1898, p. 630.
4. From Holmes' Soundings from the Atlantic. Quoted in The British Journal of Photography, 15 March 1864, p. 101.
5. The British Journal of Photography, 4 May 1906, p. 356--which wrote that this description is "as beautiful a thing in its way as any writing on art in photography which we have had the pleasure of perusing."
6. The Amateur Photographer, 15 November 1895, p. 316.
7. The Amateur Photographer, 18 February 1887, p. 78.
8. The British Journal of Photography, 18 November 1904, p. 997.
9. The British Journal of Photography, 5 March 1875, p. 120.
10. Detroit Free Press. Quoted in The British Journal of Photography, 25 July 1890, p. 480.
11. The Photographic Times, Vol. X, 1880, p. 36.
12. Appeared weekly in The Amateur Photographer for many years around the turn of the century.

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